

Test of hope as polls today after 7 years

INAM AHMED

A new dawn beacons as some eight crore voters walk down to polling centres today to elect a new government, a democratic one after seven years -- five years in political quandary and two years in a reverse reconnaissance and correction bid that many may find not up to the mark, but a worthwhile try.

By tomorrow morning, either of the two political alliances -- one led by Awami League and the other by BNP -- will walk victorious. But that will only be the beginning of a new journey to the searching question of how the body politics wants Bangladesh to be propped on the world map as a piece of land with the proud people who hold their heads high with justifiable cultural, economic and social achievements.

It is a difficult time for any political party to take over for many practical reasons of national and international origins.



Polling hour 8:00am to 4:00pm without break

No. of constituencies	299
No. of polling stations	35,263
Total voters	8,10,58,698
Male voters	3,98,22,549
Female voters	4,12,36,149
Total candidates	1,555
Contesting parties	38
Independent candidates	148
Female candidates	60
No. of law enforcers	Around 6 lakh
No. of observers	Over 2 lakh

The country today faces an ever-yawning gap between the rich and the poor, with the top 5 percent of the society taking a stake in 26 percent of the wealth

and the bottom 5 percent trying to hold on to their dear 0.77 percent of the pie. A society that splits deeply in wealth and education, in culture and values, in logic and reasoning, poses a high danger of going astray if not led to the right lighthouse. A society of divide and high contempt for pluralism soon finds itself in a dungeon. A country that cannot find its own breadth and depth -- that cannot find its treasure trove of history and valour -- will only swivel off the road into the wilderness.

Only a worthy leadership of honest and capable men and women, of visionaries and doers, can see the risks of staying too long on such a perilous edge and value the worth of going forward, pushing away all the inert inwardness of the dragging force. It is truly a time for political correctness.

It is also a time for going beyond one's self into the far-flung horizon of global affairs to fathom the depth of the

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A relaxed day well-earned

Khaleda to vote at Adamjee Cant School

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, who conducted a whirlwind electioneering in about 45 districts out of the 64 in 16 days, spent a relaxed day yesterday just attending a few informal view exchange meetings with journalists and poll observers after evening.

She visited the Jatiya Press Club and had the day's first such meeting with media persons.

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Call for change in the air Alliances face off today for people's verdict

SHAKHAWAT LITON

Political parties get locked in a battle for ballots today as the nation throbs at the prospect of a peaceful transition to democracy.

The contest this time will be confined mainly to two coalitions led by Awami League and BNP.

While 'change' was the central plank of electioneering by the AL-led grand alliance, the BNP-led four-party combine's campaign was run on the slogan 'save country, save people'.

The long wait of the public for an election to herald a change in the hostile political culture now comes down to how things pan out today.

Amid a growing political turmoil in January last year, the ninth parliamentary election then slated for January 22 was postponed and a state of emergency declared.

Besides, the Election Commission (EC) was reconstituted with the aim of bringing about much-needed electoral reforms.

A set of new provisions, introduction of a voter roll with photographs and transparent ballot boxes -- all reflect the commission's efforts towards a credible election.

The voters in this election will be able to register no-vote provided they find no candidates eligible to represent them. And if no-votes account for 50 percent or more of the ballot in a given

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Religious rituals mark her day
Hasina to vote at City College

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina spent most of yesterday reciting from the Holy Quran, praying and holding indoor meetings with foreign election observers.

She is to cast her vote at the Dhaka City College polling centre today.

She also spent a few hours talking to party candidates

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Looking back at events of last 2 years

RAKIB HASNET SUMAN

The country is ready to return to normal through today's election after a lot of dramatic turns of events during the last two years' rule under a state of emergency that resulted from confrontational politics.

The root of the crisis lies in the BNP-led four-party alliance government's passing the 14th constitution amendment bill on May 16, 2004 to extend the retirement age of Supreme Court judges to 67 from 65. The then opposition rejected it outright, terming it

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Cast your vote wisely

CA tells nation



Chief Adviser (CA) Fakhruddin Ahmed has urged the electorates to cast their votes wisely and appealed to the political parties to gracefully accept the results of today's crucial general election.

"Let us get united and participate in an appropriate democratic process. I hope tomorrow's parliament elections will be a classic example not only for our nation but also in the international domain," he said in his address to the nation over radio and television last night.

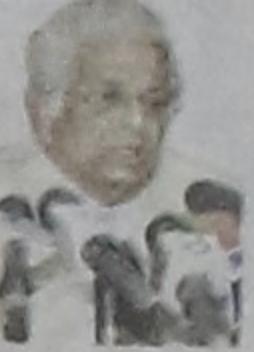
In his apparently last national address as head of the caretaker government, Fakhruddin told the voters that the stature of the

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Stern action for negligence

CEC warns poll officials again

UNB, Dhaka



Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda has urged the voters to cast their votes judiciously in today's national election.

"Don't vote at the instigation of anybody, cast vote by using your intellect and conscience to achieve your cherished dream," he said in a televised address to the nation last night.

The CEC also directed the presiding and returning officers across the country to discharge their election duties impartially and in accordance with the election rules and regulations.

"I ask all returning and presiding officers to discharge their assigned duties neutrally. If

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Past elections at a glance

UNB, Dhaka

The first national election in independent Bangladesh was held on March 7, 1973 where a total of 1,209 candidates, including 120 independents, contested 300 seats.

Of the total 35,205,642 registered voters, 19,329,683 (54.91%) voters exercised their franchise in the first election. Awami League secured 293 seats while the rest seven seats were shared by smaller parties and independents.

The election to the second parliament was held on February 28, 1979 with the participation of 2,547

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This alley in Madhubagh in the capital is decorated with posters of candidates running for the constituency in today's parliamentary polls. The photo was taken yesterday.



Police recover Tk 41.5 lakh from the car of BNP candidate Shamsul Alam's son-in-law in the port city last night. Inset, detained driver Khorshed.

Dhaka slums under vigil

Rival candidates active in thwarting vote buying bid

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK

Thirty-year-old Nurul Islam was standing casually with some friends at the entry to a Mohammadpur slum on the eve of election. No-one would suspect they were in fact 'guarding' the slum so that the rival candidate's men could not "buy" votes.

"We have installed many check posts here. Our men will stand on guard and patrol the slum to check any move to buy votes," he said yesterday afternoon.

His associate Jamal said they were working for Awami League candidate Jahangir Kabir Nanok of Dhaka-13 constituency.

"We have directives from the leaders to stay alert all night long until voting ends tomorrow," Nurul said.

Such an organised move was not visible from BNP candidate Moazzem Hossain Alai's campaign. But some slum dwellers supporting Alai claimed BNP campaigners are also vigilant to foil any attempt to buy votes.

Recalling past experiences a number of slum dwellers said electioneering is totally different this year.

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2001 still haunts Hindus in Barisal

EMRAN HOSSAIN, from Jhalakathi

Sixteen hours before polls, the Hindus in Shuktagar Union Parishad in Jhalakathi-1 constituency were still confused about casting votes as a new trend of intimidation has been introduced.

They have not forgotten the night before the eighth parliamentary election in 2001 which brought them some horrible experiences. The musclemen of former BNP lawmaker Shahjahan Omar, a graft accused, swooped on them with lethal weapons, trained guns on the men, assaulted the women and guarded their houses so that they couldn't go to poll centres.

The Hindus said those who dared to start for the polling centres were blocked on the way and beaten up irrespective of gender.

Alai, who made it to the polling centre, was stripped off his clothes in a public gathering during a victory meeting of BNP the next day, they added.

Shahjahan was so cruel to the community that even the poor among them had to pay his musclemen toll during wedding of their daughters to save them from being snatched from the bridal stage.

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Army personnel patrol the streets of Dhaka yesterday to ensure security for today's national elections. The photo was taken at a street in Paltan.

Experience The Daily Star smart poll coverage

We have planned an elaborate coverage of today's election to get you the latest news and the best analyses. We will cover the elections in three editions -- one for the remote districts, one for Chittagong and Sylhet and another with the most updated news for Dhaka.

We will also bring out two telegrams -- one at 12 noon and another at 4 pm.

The telegrams will be available with the hawkers.

Our website www.thedailystar.net will bring to you instant election results. So get ready for a new experience in election coverage.

Polls to witness record security

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has deployed about six lakh security personnel across the country to ensure the holding of a free, fair and neutral parliamentary election peacefully.

The security members include 50,000 army personnel, 70,000 policemen, 6,500 Rab members and 4,66,000 Ansars.

This is the first time that such huge numbers of security personnel are deployed across the country for holding the national polls peacefully.

Besides, Bangladesh Rifles members would keep guard in 70 of 87 frontier upazilas and army personnel in 16 upazilas to ward off any subversive act.

Moreover, 18 units of strike forces comprising members of Bangladesh Navy and Coastguard will remain

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