

New voters put candidates' quality over party symbol

PORIMOL PALMA AND
RAFIQUE SARKER,
from Rangpur

Sudipta Shaheen, a fresh voter, was very enthusiastic about the polls because he thinks his single vote is no less important for victory of an honest and competent candidate.

An honours student of Dinajpur Government College, Shaheen was under pressure for his study, but he came to cast vote in Rangpur-6 constituency.

Similar was the case for most first time voters in the region, who believe casting votes by them will help to bring a change in the traditional chaotic politics of the country.

"New voters are very much interested about this year's polls. We want to see good people in parliament. That is why I considered competence of the candidate, instead of the symbol or the party," he told

The Daily Star after casting his vote at Pirganj Government High School polling centre yesterday noon.

This year around 31 per cent of over 8.10 crore voters are new who were expected to make a change in politics by voting the candidates with no records of corruption.

Chief Election Commissioner ATM Shamsul Huda at a recent programme in the capital had said that fresh voters could make a dramatic change in the political culture of the country by voting for the honest candidates.

He also reminded the new voters of the example of the USA that young voters played a very important role in the victory of Barack Obama, the first non-white president in the history of the USA.

Awami League in its manifesto put special emphasis on the young generation by declaring that they would build

a digital Bangladesh by 2021 if voted to power, while BNP and other political parties also announced various programmes to woo the new voters.

Interviews with a number of new voters in several polling centres in Rangpur yesterday, however, suggest that they considered personality and competence of the candidates instead of particular party or symbol.

"We the young people want the candidates who will really work for the development of the society, instead of their self interests," Shaheen said.

Housewife Rasheda Begum, who was standing in a very long queue of the women at Pirgachha Degree College polling centre, said, "This is the first time I am going to cast vote. I am ready to wait long tiring hours for it," she said.

Asked about her considerations in casting vote, Rasheda

said, "It is the candidates' quality and attitude towards people of the region. I know the contribution of a few politicians in this area. I have considered their activities in choosing the candidate."

The change in attitude was witnessed not only among the new voters, but also the elderly people, especially among the women voters, whose presence in polling centres was noticeable.

"Now people are much more aware than ever before about selecting candidates as the media has played a very good role, urging the people to vote for honest and competent candidates," said Manzil Ara, a housewife.

"We are casting vote considering the candidates' honesty, not the symbols. I hope the new government will truly work for prosperity of the country forward instead of creating conflict on the streets," she said.

UPDF cadres drive out polling agents of opponents

JASIM MAJUMDER, Khagrachhari

Armed cadres of the United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF) drove out polling agents of other candidates from at least 31 polling centres in the hill district during polling hours yesterday.

Grand alliance candidate Jatindra Lal Tripura has lodged a complaint in this regard with Khagrachhari Deputy Commissioner AKM Khairul Alam, also returning officer.

Jatindra also claimed that the UPDF men warned voters not to vote for any candidate other than UPDF's Uzzal Smrity Chakma, threatening the voters of dire consequences otherwise.

Mohalchhari Upazila Nirbahi Officer Mohammad Abul Hossain denied the allegations saying he did not receive any such written complaint. The allegations were however substantiated by our correspondent during visits to different polling centres, including Ullachhari and Keyanghat in Mohalchhari upazila.

Biharis embark

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Coming out of the polling centre, Md Yusuf, 63, said, "We are well past our time. We had suffered a lot for our decisions in the past. However, it's better late than never. We are happy that as proud citizens of this country our children can now stake out claims to better days."

Mithun, a 20-year-old Bihari, said, "Never in my wildest dreams did I think I could have the right to vote."

As the old-timers went to vote with the hope of a better life for their next generations, the young ones sought to choose representatives they trust would work for their social and economic rehabilitation.

Azad, a 22-year-old butcher in Geneva Camp of Mohammadpur, said, "We hope the inhuman conditions we live in will be over gradually."

Many other youths echoed his words.

Throughout the day yesterday, the city's Bihari camps pulsed with excitement. The day was to usher in a new era for the Biharis, who once were known as stranded Pakistanis.

In the past elections, voting would mean nothing to them. This all has changed after the caretaker government granted them citizenship--to be registered as voters-- following a High Court order in May.

"This time we were very busy campaigning for the candidates of our choice," said Selim, a voter of the camp.

Locals in the camp alleged that some community leaders had tried to dissuade them from being enrolled as voters.

They sought to convince the community that they would lose the provision for free water and electricity supplies and even be evicted from the Geneva Camp if they accept Bangladeshi citizenship.

However, their campaign misled a few like Abul Quasem, 55, who opted not to register as voters.

Quasem said, "I chose not to be a voter, and now I regret the decision."

Mismanagement mars

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deputy election commissioner in the hands of irate voters who failed to cast their votes in a compound of polling centres in Dhaka-12.

Abdul Awal, a freedom fighter of sector-2 during the liberation war, now living in North Begunbari of Tejgaon area under Dhaka-11, had to return home without casting his vote to form the next government of the country he had risked his life for.

He tried all through the day to find his number on the lists in numerous polling centres, but in vain, despite having a national ID card with his voter number printed on it.

"My name was not found on the voter lists and I could not vote being a freedom fighter. Nothing could be more disappointing," he sadly said adding, "I travelled from Chittagong last night to cast my vote, but not a single polling officer nor any presiding officer could find my name on the lists, they could not even tell me what to do."

Finally, whenever he saw a media person he was pouring his heart out.

Awal was not alone. Similar incidents were seen all over the capital.

There were five polling centres in the joint compound of Dhanmondi Government Girls' High School, and Quamrunnesa Government Girls' High School with a total number of 14,400 voters. But no less than a thousand voters had to leave the compound without getting a chance to cast their votes in any one of the five centres, according to many who could not vote.

Many came there as a last resort for exercising their right to franchise after being ridiculed from centres to centres while many others waited there since the start of voting at 8:00am.

Many government and EC high officials visited the compound situated in the heart of Dhanmondi, a posh area where many influential people of the city reside, according to voters who were outside the centres around 3:30pm still waiting to cast their votes.

Many of them gave the aggrieved waiting voters assurances that they would convey the predicament of the voters to the EC, so measures could be taken to solve the problem before it was too late.

In the meantime, tempers were rising high on both sides of the ballot boxes, with altercations breaking out among the waiting voters and polling officials.

Finally, the voters could not stay calm in the face of what they felt was nothing but an indignation for them by that time.

And the timing was terribly wrong for Deputy Election Commissioner Biswas Lutfur Rahman's arrival at the compound, as his vehicle was instantly surrounded by howling angry voters who waited all day to vote, in vain.

He assured the voters of his willingness to try solving their predicament and went in. Soon there was a call for waiting voters with national ID cards to line up in front of one of the centres, with a promise that they would be allowed to vote, after crosschecking their numbers with an army database over the telephone.

Instantly about 500 to 700 voters lined up with clock ticking way past the 4:00pm deadline for stopping the polling, while none was yet called in to vote.

Voters started getting angrier, and at one point when the deputy election commissioner was trying to leave the compound with people still lined up, he got pushed back by them into a room, with police guarding the entrance.

The siege went on for about two hours with the deputy election commissioner having repeated conversations with the EC, while angry voters were chanting slogans out side the room.

By 7:00pm most of the despondent failed voters left the compound, and the election commission official came out of the room, and apologetically told the remaining small number of waiting people that he was unable to help them realise their right to vote in the 9th parliamentary election, ending the tension peacefully, before leaving the compound hurriedly and unaccompanied.

Outside a very small group of people was still locked in an altercation with police who were keeping their calm, as a daughter of a liberation war martyr said at one point, "We were insulted today."

Md Shahrir Bhuiyan, a 26-year old voter of Dhanmondi Road 11 said seven members in his family voted in that compound of centres, but his name was not found on the list. He tried for over two hours and then gave up, as it was already too late.

Dr Khalid of Dhanmondi Road 14/A said he waited since 8:00am to cast his vote, but to no avail. After forwarding slowly through a long queue of voters, the authorities on the scene noted down his ID number and said there was nothing they could do to help him.

Belal Hossain, a New York resident, planned his holiday matching it with the election date, just to be able to vote. But after waiting for hours, he had to leave the centre with his family without voting and feeling extremely frustrated, while saying it felt worse because, before his travel, he had been assured by government officials that he would be able to cast his vote peacefully.

Hundreds of voters had to return home from Mirpur Government High School polling centre too without voting.

"Officials at the polling centre asked us to collect the voter serial numbers from outside, but we don't know from whom and where we can get it," said Rina Begum at Gulshan Model School and College polling centre.

Many others also returned home from polling centres in Hazaribagh, without voting due to the same mismanagement.

Asked about the mayhem of mismanagement in polling centres in the capital, Chief Election Commissioner ATM (CEC) Shamsul Huda at Gulshan Model School and College centre said they asked the voters to collect their serial numbers from the campaigners for local candidates.

"We requested the voters even last night that they should collect their voter serial numbers from candidates' representatives," said the CEC adding, "They have set many counters outside the polling centres."

Samira, a first time voter, criticised the role of the EC, saying it should have been the EC's responsibility to make sure that no voter would return home from polling centres without voting, the onus should not have been on the candidates.

Many questioned, what is the point of having a perfect voter list, if so many voters in a city cannot find their polling centres, and fail to vote?

Meanwhile, it was a mess all day long in Narayanganj Govt Girls Primary School too.

The situation continued even after the scheduled voting ended at 4:00pm.

A few thousand voters were still waiting there to exercise their voting rights as the non-stop 8 hours voting time could cover only 30 per cent of the total 16,000 electorates.

Voters were queuing up in the centre till filling of this report at 6:30pm, and the chaos also continued.

There was no proper indication about how to stand in a queue. The voters were confused about in which line they should stand to cast votes. They blasted the EC and the local administration for their miseries.

Afaz Uddin of West Masdar came to the centre before voting began and it was about 1:00pm, he was still searching for his voter number. In between, he took several desperate attempts to cast his vote showing the national ID card only to be rejected. Polling officials asked him to bring the voter number from political party volunteers sitting outside the centre.

"I will continue trying until the vote casting ends," a desperate Afaz told The Daily Star, adding, "No one from presiding officer to party volunteers in the polling centre is helping me."

Even he sought help of on duty policemen and journalists.

Finding no way, the aggrieved voters staged a demonstration protesting the mismanagement which was subsequently brought under control by law enforcers.

The deputy commissioner and police superintendent also rushed there around 12:00 noon.

Law enforcers were seen struggling to control the huge number of voters, who were becoming agitated queuing in lines for hours. The voting was disrupted several times.

At a polling booth only 90 voters were able to cast votes until 1:30pm whereas the booth was supposed to take votes from 540 persons until 4:00pm. Scenes at other booths were similar too.

"We are not giving ballot papers on the basis of national ID cards. We are giving ballot papers against the voter list numbers," said Shah Alam, a presiding officer in the centre.

Voting fair

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of Chittagong and Rajshahi divisions," said Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, a member of EWG, at a press conference in Dhaka yesterday.

The survey findings were based on the happenings in and around 651 polling centres in 125 constituencies of 64 districts.

However, they said the survey focused on polling process. It will release a comprehensive appraisal on January 3.

According to the survey, there were no report of violence or disruption inside or outside the polling centres and no voter was given out money or goods during the polling day for motivating them.

However, the polling process was halted because of clashes between polling agents at some centres of Naria in Shariatpur and Begumganj in Noakhali, the observers said.

The observers also identified one case each of fake vote casting in Shibganj, Chapainawabganj and Feni-2 and seven cases in Bogra.

Despite having peaceful poll environment, some polls observers with valid Election Commission entry pass were harassed and barred from entering poll centres by authorities, EWG members alleged.

A total of 10 observers could not enter a polling centre in Tongi under Gazipur district despite having valid entry pass and the same thing happened in a constituency of Chandpur, said Mohsin Ali, a member of EWG.

Grand victory for grand alliance

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and power generation, instead focusing on consolidating all power in its hands and misusing the same for personal and political gain.

In its lacklustre campaigning around the country in advance of yesterday's polls, the four-party alliance failed to unveil a compelling vision to the voters for dealing with crucial issues in the future.

The four-party alliance candidates, and in particular BNP chief and ex-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, paid scant attention to the needs and aspirations of the voters, instead conducting a negative campaign based on identity politics.

Khaleda repeatedly invoked Islam, requesting that the voters vote BNP into power to "save Islam" and "save the country". It is believed that this kind of negativity and cynicism is what has been punished by the voters.

The near wipe-out of the Jamaat-e-Islami in the party's worst election showing since independence also lends credence to the notion that the voters, although religiously observant themselves, have totally rejected the misuse of religion for political purposes.

There is much conjecture that the victory of the grand alliance was the outcome of participation of first-time voters, who turned out in record numbers, and women voters, who outnumbered the men.

A key to the elections was information, both about the corruption of major candidates and parties, that had come to light due to media reports and the anti-corruption campaign of the past two years, and also about the individual candidates that was mandated by the election laws and made available to the voters by the Election Commission (EC), media, and civil society organisations.

It was an experience never seen before in independent Bangladesh: A record number of voters -- 70 per cent -- marched up to polling centres and waited for hours to cast their votes. Defying the winter chill in rural areas, men and women, young and old, some on crutches or in wheelchairs, queued up patiently for the opportunity to pick their representatives.

Young voters came out in droves, their eyes full of excitement, looking for their serial numbers, clearly eager to vote for the first time. Election bunting hanging from strings festooned the roads and walkways and brought a festive edge to the day.

The scenes were more of the same throughout the day as the elections to the ninth parliament finally ended after a gap of seven years from the eighth.

Held under tight security, this year's polls saw none of the deadly unrest that forced the January 22, 2007 vote to be cancelled and an army-backed caretaker government to take control.

Political rivals shuttered their sharp ideological divides, at least for a day, and smiled at each other, often helping identify voters.

Voters, rather than behaving in herd mentality, proudly swung their votes, saying they looked at candidate profiles rather than symbols. Reports of violence were few and far between and that too with less intensity than in the past. Fake voting was almost absent.

It seemed the long-tolling work on anti-corruption and political reforms had paid off -- at least to some extent.

The voters walked to the polling centres as traffic was ordered off the roads. One voter in Dhaka-6 constituency said in excitement: "It's a very pleasant day. I didn't have any hassles in casting my vote. I came in here by walking."

The words sounded as he was leaving Kamrunnesa Girls High School. The road past the school was teeming with voters -- all eager to exercise their right to franchise.

The distinctly festive mood of the election could not be marred by the voting mismanagement that was visible in some polling centres in the capital city and elsewhere.

Some voters were left out of the excitement as they failed to find their voter numbers or their respective polling booths. This prompted some people to stage peaceful protests in the capital and elsewhere, demanding the EC arrange voter numbers and polling booths for them.

There had been some reports of people splurging hard cash in a bid to buy voters in various parts of the country.

Yet, with a record number of first-time voters who represent 33 per cent of the 8.10 crore

voting population, the mood on Election Day was upbeat from early morning.

"I went to my polling centre in Uttara High School at 7:45am, thinking I would be the first to cast my vote," says school-teacher Rosie Rasheed. "The streets looked deserted at the time. But when I entered the school premises, I was surprised to see hundreds of people already queuing up."

Dhaka University student Erfana Sikdar was strong in her opinion: "I'm exercising my voting right for the first time and that's why this is an important election for me."

"I feel I have a role to play in deciding which party comes to power. While this election takes us back to democracy, I would have been happier if there had been more new faces in the race."

"I believe we will see a new political culture through this election," said Urmi, a first-timer from Mohammadpur.

"The caretaker government has done reform work for the last two years. Shall we not get any result from it?" said Razib Chakrabarti, a first-time voter of Dakkhin Jatrahari. "We will benefit from it, however small it may be."

A bulk number of votes were apparently cast by noon. "Out of 500 voters in this booth, around 350 votes had already been cast by 12:30pm," said a polling agent at Ispahani Girls School in Moghbazar.

Women made an overwhelming presence at the polling centres. The number of women voters stands at 4.12 crore, which is more than half of the total voters.

At the Meherunnesa School polling station, women voters in long queues appeared to be comfortable with the voting arrangement. The station has arranged game facilities for children. Some women left their children there, as they were waiting their turns to cast votes.

"More than 50 per cent of the voters in this booth have cast their votes. It has been smooth and there are no complaints," said a polling agent at Ideal School in Motijheel at 1pm.

"I have never seen such a smooth trouble-free election in a decade," said an election observer at New Model Degree College. He had previously worked for an NGO as an election observer in 2001.

Unlike the past elections, the 2008 polls included the provision of "No Vote" allowing voters to express their no-confidence in candidates on ballot papers. The percentage of no-vote casters appeared low.

Of such votes, many were first-time voters who were unsatisfied with their choice of candidates.

Rashed, a first-time voter who gave a "no vote" in Gulshan, made a point: "I don't like Hannan Shah or Ershad. Other candidates are unknown to me. I didn't want to waste my vote on people like them."

Md Shahidul Islam, another first-time voter, also settled for a negative vote at Kutubkhali High School near Jatrahari. His argument is: "Both the major parties deployed same old elements. Both of them (Salahuddin of BNP and Habibur Rahman Mollah of AL) are accused of corruption. If the parties had fielded new candidates, I would have considered a positive vote."

Then there were people who could not cast their votes due to lack of information at the right places.

"I wanted to cast my vote -- but I can't," said 70-year-old Zahura in frustration in Mohammadpur. She was looking for her polling booth in different schools of the area. Each booth told her to try out the next and none could be helpful. "This might be my life's last opportunity to cast vote. This is my last voting wish," she said on a sad note.

In Narayanganj, disappointed by not being able to cast their votes, a group of voters staged a demonstration in front of Narayanganj Girls High School around 11:00am.

"I came here with my national identity (NID) card before the start of voting. When I entered the polling booth to cast my vote after waiting in line for two hours, they asked me to straight away bring my voting number," Anwar Hossain Anu told The Daily Star.

Anu did not know that NID and the voting number were separate things.

Before leaving the polling centre, the disappointed voters made repeated bids to find out the voting serial numbers. They also sought help from the on-duty police and visiting journalists to get the numbers. But nobody could help them.

One killed in poll violence

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2:30pm after tendering vote at Janata Bazar polling centre of Nalwaser in Noakhali-6 constituency.

Voting was suspended at Mati Mia High School polling centre in Noakhali-3 constituency around noon following clashes between supporters of BNP candidate Barkat Ullah Bulu and independent candidate Minhaz Ahmed Javed.

Upazila Nirbahi Officer of Begumganj Manzurul Momin said the supporters of the candidates accused each other of influencing voters.

Constable Billal was injured while trying to stop clashes between Awami League and BNP in Noakhali-4 constituency.

Our Madaripur correspondent reports: A total of 17 people including Baishakhi TV reporter Kamal Ansari and ward councillors Abdul Kader Khan Nilu and Majida Mostafa were injured during election violence in Madaripur-1 and Madaripur-3 constituencies.

Witnesses said supporters of independent candidate Kamal Jamal Mollah swooped on those working for grand alliance candidate Nur-e-Alam Chowdhury that left five peo-

ple, including the councillors, injured.

In Madaripur-3 constituency, supporters of independent candidate Shahidul Islam Chowdhury attacked grand alliance candidate Syed Abul Hossain's men which left 12 people, including Kamal Ansari, injured.

Our Shariatpur correspondent reports: Ten people were injured in a clash between supporters of Awami League and BNP at Naria upazila of Shariatpur-2 constituency. All the injured, including eight Awami League supporters and two BNP supporters, were admitted to Shariatpur Sadar Hospital.

The polling was stopped at Narshashan Govt Primary School polling centre for half an hour at 9:30am due to the clash.

Our Bhola correspondent reports: At least five people were injured in a clash between activists of four-party alliance and grand alliance at a polling centre in Charfashon of Bhola-4 constituency around 10:00am.

Our handpur correspondent reports: One policeman was injured after being hit by a

brick at Koraitoli High School polling centre. Locals started hurling brickbats at police after the result of the centre was released. Police had to fire five shots in the air to control the mob.

Our Kushtia correspondent reports: Two people were injured, one critically, as BNP and Awami League supporters clashed at Doulatpur in Kushtia-1 constituency.

Sources say that local BNP leader Farazullah was taking a number of female voters to a Monurapur polling centre allegedly to cast fake votes. Awami League supporters stopped them and a clash erupted. The injured, including Farazullah, were admitted to Kushtia Sadar Hospital.

Our Narayanganj correspondent reports: One person was injured in a clash between supporters of grand alliance and four-party alliance at Bailyrkhandi Government Primary School in Araihaazar of the district.

Kawsar Alam Chowdhury Selim, a BNP polling agent at Lalmai High School under Comilla-8 constituency, was beaten up by supporters of the Awami League candidate, our

Comilla correspondent reports.

The Comilla correspondent said a total of 22 hand-made bombs were recovered at Charshi at Chouddagram in Comilla.

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) retrieved the bombs and arrested Shibir leader Mainul Hossain in this connection.

Our Bagerhat correspondent reports: A man was arrested with fake ballot paper in his possession near Sundarban Women College Centre in Rampal upazila yesterday afternoon.

Police said locals caught Aminul Sardar around 3:30pm and handed him over to Rampal police. He was being interrogated, police said.

Our Kurigram correspondent reports: Five BNP activists including Kurigram-2 BNP candidate Tajul Islam Chowdhury's brother Shaiful Islam Chowdhury were arrested Sunday night in connection with violating the electoral code of conduct.

Locals said police arrested them while they were conducting campaign in Phulbari of Kurigram the day before polls.

Our Brahmanbaria correspondent says: Police arrested a BNP activist in Brahmanbaria-3 constituency while BNP activists were trying to rig votes at Narsingha Government Primary School polling centre. No Awami League agent was available at the centre, voters said.

A group of supporters of Awami League attacked BNP agent Haji Babul Rana outside Sabera Subhan polling centre in Brahmanbaria-3. He was admitted to Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital.

Our Gaibandha correspondent reports: A law enforcement agency arrested the presiding officer of Talukjamira Government Primary School polling centre in Palashbari upazila Sunday night in connection with stashing ballot papers in his subordinate staff's house.

Supporters of four-party alliance chased former lawmaker and Jamaat candidate of Gaibandha-1 constituency Abdul Aziz when he was visiting Shovaganj High School polling centre. They hurled brickbats at his vehicle and broke its windows.

me from coming to vote with this current state of my health. But I came here to express my opinion, although there is the risk of being ill," she said. "Now I am really very happy. I have been able to make it even though I had to undergo many painful hours."