

Japan set for general polls

BBC ONLINE

Hundreds of candidates vying for a seat in Japan's parliament made their final pitches yesterday in an election expected to see the return of the country's old guard.

The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) appears poised to oust the Democratic Party (DPJ) after only three years in office, with former PM Shinzo Abe likely to return to the top job.

Abe told voters outside Tokyo he would restore economic growth and restore pride in the country.

But many voters remain undecided, amid disillusionment in Japan over politics.

Abe's centre-right LDP was swept from office by the DPJ in 2009, ending more than 50 years of almost unbroken rule.



Yoshihiko Noda Shinzo Abe

The DPJ promised more welfare spending and a better social safety net, but struggled to deliver amid the economic downturn and 11 March 2011 earthquake and tsunami.

It has also seen multiple leadership changes - Yoshihiko Noda is the third DPJ prime minister since 2009.

Abe served as prime minister from 2006-2007 before stepping aside amid plummeting poll numbers, citing illness.

But 40% of the electorate have yet to decide who to vote for, according to recent polls.

"All the candidates are speaking out ahead of the election, but I'm not so sure they'll carry out any of their promises," the Associated Press news agency quoted Hiroko Takahashi, 51, a resident of a Tokyo suburb, as saying.

"I'm hopeful about the new parties, but I also wonder if I should trust one of the older parties."

All 480 lower house seats are up for grabs in the election.

Criminal Bikash out with a mission?

FROM PAGE 1

Bikash was released on a court order and that there was no strict rule about jail authorities informing law enforcement and intelligence agencies about an inmate's release, his release remains mysterious.

Someone around 7:30am on Friday, the weekend when the court should be closed, delivered the court order to the jail authorities and Bikash was out in 45 minutes.

Supreme Court lawyer Masud Ahmed Talukder told The Daily Star that it was not possible for the jail authorities to verify the records of over 15 cases against Bikash within the 45 minutes.

"It will take at least five hours to verify the documents," he added.

He also said in the case of a top criminal, like Bikash,

the jail authorities usually take extra precaution and inform different intelligence agencies and local police.

Local police deny that they were informed about Bikash being released but a number of high-ranking police officials were at the jail gate as Bikash walked out.

A source in Gazipur's Kashipur Jail-2 said the jailer, the jail super, and additional superintendents of police of Gazipur and Dhaka were there at the gate when Bikash was released.

Superintendent of Police Abdul Baten of Gazipur yesterday said, "We did not have prior information regarding his release. Our intelligence deployed at the jail gate could not recognise Bikash as they did not know him."

The home ministry sees

nothing unusual in the matter.

Home Secretary CQK Mustaq Ahmed yesterday said, "There is no hard and fast rule for the jail authority to inform police of the release of inmates."

"Jail authority acted as per law. I enquired and they informed me that Bikash was released upon court order."

An additional secretary to the ministry preferring anonymity said if necessary the criminal could be arrested again if there was a specific allegation and warrant against him.

Bikash was released in 2009 but he was arrested at the jail gate and later shown arrested in a murder case filed with Tejgaon Police Station.

This time around, the law enforces did not take any

step to arrest Bikash at the gate even though intelligence agencies had information that over 100 gang members of Bikash were active in city's Sheorapara, Kazipara and Kalyanpur areas.

Intelligence agency sources said Bikash used to control his gang from jail and his men collect toll from traders on monthly basis.

Among other cases, Bikash was accused in a double murder in Agargaon and a murder in LGED Bhaban.

Bikash, now 46, has a brother called Prokash Kumar Biswas, who is also a top criminal accused of several murders in the capital. Prokash is on the run. He allegedly fled the country before the then government published a list of 23 top criminals on December 26, 2001.

Our epic victory

FROM PAGE 1

been a phenomenon we waited for in the preceding nine months.

In those nine months, three million of our citizens fell prey to the predatory instincts of the Pakistan occupation army and its local goon squads; two hundred thousand Bangalee women were raped; hundreds of villages were burnt and, indeed, an entire country was put to the torch.

A thousand miles away, the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in solitary confinement, was on secret trial before a military tribunal set up by the junta; and in Mujibnagar, a brave political leadership comprising a quartet of Tajuddin Ahmed, Syed Nazrul Islam, M Mansur Ali and A H M Quamruzzaman, devised battlefield and political strategy toward the attainment of freedom.

Thousands of young men from our villages and our towns had trooped off to join the Mukti Bahini, with many eventually sacrificing themselves in battle. Ten million Bangalee refugees eked out a living in camps in India. At home, in internal exile, were sixty five million other Bangaleess hoping and praying for liberty to dawn.

On December 16, 1971, the waiting came to an end. It had been a wait of nine months. You could call it a wait of a lifetime. Our struggle drew the attention of the world. India under Indira Gandhi went out on a limb to make sure we emerged as a free nation; the Soviet Union ensured, at the United Nations Security Council, that all efforts to prevent Pakistan's defeat in Bangladesh were nullified by the vetoes it cast on resolutions aimed at giving Islamabad a face-saving way out of the crisis.

The Nixon administration in Washington turned its face away from us; the Chinese made it obvious they would not abandon their friends the Pakistanis. In Britain, its government, its media and its people sympathised with us in our plight. Americans, despite Nixon-Kissinger, wished us well.

Across large swathes of the globe, people read about our misery and our struggle and clearly expected us to win the war. In France, the scholar Andre Malraux offered to lead a brigade in the war against the Pakistanis. Pandit Ravi Shankar and George Harrison sang for us in New York, to give a boost to our war for justice based on freedom.

We won that war, though the sacrifices of millions, through the martyrdom of our Muktijoddhas on the war fields. We were helped immensely in the attainment of liberty by the sacrifices of thousands of Indian soldiers who had come to defend a nation in distress. On the eve of victory, it was scores of the nation's leading lights -- academics, writers, doctors, journalists -- who were frog-marched to death by the murder squads of the quislings of the enemy. These brave men and women died in order for us to breathe free in a land of liberty.

And then there were the men who, prisoners of the occupation army in cantonments across Bangladesh, were subjected to regular torture, to a point where they eventually succumbed to death.

This morning, forty one years after the state of Pakistan surrendered to the Bangalee nation, it is time to recall the old struggle, the ancient yearning for liberty. Heritage is all, for it contains the values one generation must hand down to the one succeeding it. And then heritage must be passed on, again and again, to generations that arise in the passage of time.

Our heritage is one of poetry creating lilting music in the expanses of our hamlets and villages and towns. It is one of healthy politics constantly adding newer substance to our democracy. History has been ours to mould. And because it has, we caused a revolution in 1971.

It is this heritage, encompassed in the militant song of Joi Bangla, that we uphold once again this morning. We celebrate ourselves today, even as we mourn those who made December 16 possible for us through walking to death without flinching, without batting an eyelid, without complaint.

This morning, it is time to remember the past, to reinvent ourselves -- through rededicating ourselves to the ideals on which we waged and won an epic war many winters ago.

Worry for democracy

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Prof Barkat said Bangladesh had turned into "Banglastian" [in the manner of Afghanistan] after the provision of Islam as the state religion was included in the constitution.

Fundamentalism in the economy has to be uprooted through nationalisation of economy, he said, adding that criminalisation of politics had taken place due to fundamentalism in the economy.

Workers Party President and lawmaker Rashed Khan Menon said Jamaat-e-Islami had allied with the

BNP and there was no scope for detaching BNP from it. The main target of the two parties was to foil the ongoing war crimes trials.

He alleged that their [BNP-Jamaat] movement was not for holding the next election under a caretaker government.

SSA President Ajoy Roy said, "A civil war is knocking at the door and it may enter into the House any time." He urged all to remain alert and united to face any political disaster.

Bangladesh Krishi Bank Chairman Khondker Ibrahim Khaled said international rights organisation Human Rights Watch had reportedly demanded that the war crimes trial be started afresh after a judge of the International Crimes Tribunal-1 had resigned.

The organisation must have received money for making such illegal demands from a quarter trying to foil the trial, he alleged.

Fundamental reform of the country is not possible without uprooting religion-based politics, said Khaled.

Presidium member of

Gono Forum Pankaj Battacharya saw in the recent violence by Jamaat a bad omen for the country and stressed the need for an efficient leadership to face the problem.

Prof Syed Anwar Hossain, one of the discussants, asked whether the victory of 1971 would be set at naught in 2012.

SSA's General Secretary Tabarak Hossain demanded that the government take appropriate steps against corruption and nepotism, and arrest and punish the killers of Bishwajit Das.

US in tears

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bangs," said Brendan Murray, 9, who was there with his fourth-grade class.

"We heard someone say, 'Put your hands up!' " Brendan said. "I heard, 'Don't shoot!' We had to go into the closet in the gym."

In the library, Yvonne Cech, a librarian, locked herself, an assistant and 18 fourth graders in a closet behind file cabinets while the sound of gunfire thundered outside.

Witnesses said later that they heard as many as 100 gunshots, but saw next to nothing in their hiding places. What was happening?

The shooting finally stopped. Most teachers kept the children frozen in hiding. Some 15 minutes later, there was another sound, coming from the school intercom. It had been on the whole time. A voice said, "It's OK It's safe now."

Brendan, in the gym, said, "Then someone came and told us to run down the hallway. There were police at every door. There were lots of people crying and screaming."

The officers led children past the carnage. "They said 'Close your eyes, hold hands.'" said Vanessa Bajraliu, 9. Outside, a nightmare version of the school was taking shape. Police officers swarmed with dogs and roared overhead in helicopters.

Inside, the librarians and children had been hiding in the closet for 45 minutes when a SWAT team arrived and escorted them out.

Word spread quickly through the small town. At nearby Danbury Hospital, doctors and nurses girded for an onslaught of wounded victims. "We immediately convened

four trauma teams to be ready for casualties," a spokeswoman, Andrea Rynn, said.

Nurses, surgeons, internal medicine and imaging specialists, as well as staff members from pathology and the hospital lab, rushed to assemble in the emergency room to receive an influx of patients from the shooting. An influx that never arrived. Only three victims came to the hospital, two of whom did not survive. The rest were already dead.

"I've been here for 11 years," Feinstein, the teacher, said. "I can't imagine who would do this to our poor little babies."

Survivors gathered at the Sandy Hook Volunteer Fire and Rescue station house, just down the street. Parents heard -- on the radio, or on television, or via text messages or calls from an automated, emergency service phone tree -- and came running. In the confusion, there were shrieks of joy as mothers and fathers were reunited with their children.

The parents whose children were unaccounted for were taken to the separate room, and a list of the missing was made. The pastor of St Rose of Lima Church, Msgr Robert Weiss, saw the list. "It was around, obviously, the number that passed away," he said.

The Rev Matthew Crebbin of Newtown Congregational Church was there, too.

A woman named Diane, a friend of a parent whose child was missing, said a state trooper had been assigned to each family. "I think there are 20 sets of parents over there," she said.

In another room of the firehouse, there were the oddly joyous sounds of the

cartoons. There were plates and pans of pizza and other donated food. No one touched it.

"There was a multifaith service with people sitting in folding chairs in a circle," said John Woodall, a psychiatrist who lives nearby and went to the firehouse. "And after that, people milled around and waited for news."

Outside, reunions continued. News, good and bad, was borne on the faces of the people around the school. Three women emerged with their arms around the one in the middle, protecting her. "We just want to get her home," one said.

A few minutes later, a mother and father practically ran past in relief, a little girl in a light blue jacket riding on her father's shoulders.

Brendan's father had been at home about a mile

Ailing democracy lets people down

FROM PAGE 1

them the supreme authority over all powers of the State.

The constitution, which was framed within a year of the country's independence, sought to establish a welfare State for all citizens. It represented the vision and values of its framers and was based on the social, political and economic ethos and faith and aspirations of the newly born nation's people.

In its preamble it pledged that the high ideals of nationalism, socialism, democracy and secularism would be its fundamental principles as these ideals had inspired our heroic people to dedicate themselves to, and our brave martyrs to sacrifice their lives in, the national liberation struggle.

The constitution made these high ideals as fundamental principles of State policy. And it announced that the State shall be a

democracy in which fundamental human rights and freedoms and respect for the dignity and worth of the human person shall be guaranteed.

And for the realisation of secularism, the constitution provided special procedures for the elimination of communalism, abuse of religion for political purposes and granting by the State of political status in favour of any religion.

It also imposed a ban on the formation of political parties or organisations based on religion.

The constitution also sought to establish a limited government, upholding its supremacy as an embodiment of the people's will.

But the creations of the constitution, particularly the executive and legislature, launched brutal and systematic attacks on the creator--the constitution. Some changes were

brought into it only for narrow partisan interests. Even two martial law regimes were legalised by amending the constitution.

Within a year of the commencement of the constitution, the then government in 1973 amended it, introducing a provision for declaring a state of emergency, which had not been included in the original constitution. The amendment empowered the government to suspend many fundamental rights of citizens during an emergency.

The fourth amendment introduced in January 1975 altered the basic structure of the constitution and introduced one-party rule, curtailed the independence of the judiciary and introduced a presidential form of the government, led by an all-powerful president, by abolishing the long desired parliamentary form of government.

The violent overthrow of the then regime in August 1975 was the beginning of an unconstitutional dark episode in the country. The constitution lost its supremacy as the country was placed under martial law. The martial law regime made the constitution subject to its whims and brought about many changes in it by issuing proclamations.

During the martial law period, the principle of secularism was completely deleted from the constitution and replaced by absolute trust and faith in Almighty Allah. Even above the preamble of the constitution, the phrase "in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the merciful" was inserted. The ban on religion based politics was withdrawn, allowing the anti-liberation Jamaat-e-Islami and other Islamic parties to resume their activities. Thus, martial law ruler General Ziaur

Rahman finally made politics difficult for politicians.

Later, the second military dictator, Gen Ershad, completed the Islamisation of the constitution by making Islam the state religion through amending the constitution in 1988 in a parliament constituted through a rigged election. Gen Ershad, who seized power on March 24, 1982 in a bloodless military coup and put the country under martial law, also kept the constitution suspended for a few years.

Over the years, the situation has become so complicated that the present Al-led government, which brought about major changes in the constitution in 2011, could not bring back the original spirit of secularism despite a Supreme Court verdict in its favour. The Supreme Court declared illegal and void the fifth amendment through which all activities of the

first military regime had been legalised. The verdict paved the way for the restoration of secularism in full spirit. But in the prevailing political situation, the Al-led regime had to compromise. Now, in terms of secularism, the constitution is in a peculiar situation, with the restoration of secularism alongside Islam as state religion and politics based on religion.

And the other high ideal, democracy, has yet to deepen its roots. For fifteen years after the 1975 changeover, the country was governed either directly or indirectly by military rulers. After the collapse of the autocratic Ershad regime, democracy was restored in the country in 1991. The parliamentary form of government was introduced by amending the constitution. But within years lack of a democratic mindset gave birth to a confrontational culture in politics, diminishing hopes of democracy being made stronger. Politics was taken to the streets as a way of resolving disputes, and parliament was thus abandoned. The House boycott culture has crippled parliament. The ruling and opposition parties' mentality to retain and grab state power was to give birth to a caretaker government system, with a two-year long emergency regime as its latest manifestation.

Now, the political situation has become more uncertain after the abolition of the caretaker government system last year. People are living in constant fear of a possible political turmoil. And the latest violence on the streets during the opposition parties' hartals and road blockade indicate an escalation of street violence in the coming days with the next parliamentary election drawing closer.

Given the prevailing

situation, it is difficult to comprehend how true democracy will take shape. Doesn't the present situation make a mockery of the commitment to democracy made in the constitution of 1972? Are we honouring the four high ideals which inspired our heroic people to sacrifice their lives in the liberation war?

Despite many hurdles and political turmoil, the country has made many achievements in the economic, social and other sectors.

But a lack of democratic practice and the presence of a confrontational culture in politics still remain major hurdles to the realisation, through a democratic process, of a socialist society free from exploitation --- a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice --- political, economic and social --- will be secured for all citizens.