

AL heads for 2/3 majority

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Interestingly, these parties are facing the AL in these constituencies though they need the AL support to win in other seats.

Asked, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad told journalists last night, "The candidates have withdrawn their nominations on their own. We have noting to do here. The election will be held for the contenders who still remain in the race."

There are allegations that returning officers in different districts forced many candidates to withdraw their candidacies on instructions from government high-ups.

"We have heard that candidates in some constituencies were forced to withdraw their nominations even after the deadline for withdrawal. That is why it took so much time to complete the list of lone candidates, total contesting candidates and others," a deputy secretary of the EC told The Daily Star, requesting anonymity.

Pressed, the CEC did not make any comment on the allegation, but said, "Information related to nominations came to the commission via email and telephone. It took sometime to compile and finalise those."

A total of 1,107 nomination papers were filed for the January 5 election. After scrutiny and withdrawal of nominations, 540 candidates are in the race.

Amid widespread criticism over a large number of single candidates, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Saturday said her party had reached a "compromise" over sharing seats with other parties that are in the polls-time government.

The AL, she added, would have conceded a "walkover" to the BNP in some constituencies if it had joined the polls-time cabinet.

In the last parliamentary polls held on December 29, 2008, the AL under Hasina won a landslide victory by defeating its archrival Khaleda Zia-led BNP.

In the country's first parliamentary election in 1973, the AL under Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had won a landslide by bagging almost all the 300 seats. At the time, there was no strong opposition party to challenge the hugely popular AL.

But this time, the already big win has put many senior and mid-level AL leaders in an embarrassing situation. Talking to this newspaper, some of them said they did not feel at all proud of their victory as the election would suffer from credibility.

"It has already tainted the long history of the Awami League," an AL leader said, requesting anonymity.

The whole saga has boosted the opposition leaders, who say it will be very difficult for the government to portray this election as acceptable to all.

"The government's evil design has been exposed through this farcical election. Leaders of the opposition parties will

TWO-THIRDS MAJORITY IN PREVIOUS POLLS

YEAR	PARTY	SEATS
1973	AL	293
1979	BNP	207
1988	JP	251
1996(Feb-15)	BNP	278
2001	BNP-led alliance	216
2008	AL	230

life," he said.

According to political analysts, Hasina's landslide victory in the one-sided election will yield no positive results for democracy though it is being held in the name of upholding the constitution.

They note that competitiveness in an election is fundamental in a democracy, but the coming election is in no way participatory.

"It will be very bad for the constitution and democracy," said parliamentary affairs expert Nizam Ahmed, a professor of public administration at Chittagong University.

Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, a professor of government and politics at Jahangirnagar University, agrees and says parliamentary democracy can never be effective without a vibrant opposition.

"For protecting democracy, the two major electoral alliances should reach a consensus anyhow so that the major parties can take part in the election," he observed.

Asked about the significance of two-thirds majority, Prof Nizam said: "History shows two-thirds majority in the parliamentary form of government always spells a disaster for the country, as it creates an imbalance in the House."

In six of the past nine national elections in Bangladesh, the winning parties or the alliances secured two-thirds majority.

Before the BNP under Khaleda's leadership won such a victory in 1996, the party under its founder General Ziaur Rahman secured two-thirds majority in 1979. Later in the 1988 parliamentary polls, Ershad's JP secured a similar feat.

The 1979 polls were held under the martial law regime headed by Zia. And the 1988 election was held amid boycott by the AL, BNP and other parties.

In the 2001 election, the BNP-led four-party alliance got two-thirds majority, though the BNP alone could not do so. It got 193 seats.

That election, however, was largely acceptable to all.

EC MEETING

The CEC, the other election commissioners and top EC officials held a series of meetings till 11:00pm yesterday to discuss polls preparation.

The CEC said they discussed allocation of polls symbol and printing of ballot papers.

be morally boosted by government's failure in holding a minimum credible election," said BNP leader Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman.

Mahbub, a standing committee member of the main opposition party, said his party too had secured more than two-thirds majority (278 seats) in the February 15, 1996, election amid boycott by the opposition parties.

"That parliament lasted only 11 days. I believe the parliament that will be formed through the January 5 polls will have a shorter

Panicked, Hindus flee

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Rabiul Islam, an AL activist of Kafir Bazar village, said many of his party colleagues fled away with their family members fearing Jamaat-Shibir mayhem, though law enforcers assured them of tight security.

Sultan Miah, another AL activist who was still home, said "I don't know what will happen at night."

Other villages which were deserted include Awliar Hat, Bawra Bazar and Beltoli.

Upazila Chairman Ruhul Amin Babul said many identified ruling party men have abandoned their houses. Around a hundred local AL activists and members of the Hindu community received threats from Jamaat-Shibir men that their houses will be torched at night.

"I'm also not safe," Ruhul Amin said, adding that law enforcement agencies had increased patrolling in these areas.

Officer-in-Charge Sohrab Hossain of Patgram Police Station said he has information that Jamaat-Shibir men planned to commit atrocities against AL men and Hindu homes in these villages.

Also yesterday, a clash ensued when police tried to disperse Jamaat-Shibir men blockading the Lalmonirhat-Burimari highway in Patgram around 7:30am.

The blockaders threw four crude bombs at police, triggering an exchange of fire that left one Shibir man dead on the spot. Two injured Shibir activists died in hospital. The dead were Manirul Islam, 28, Abdur Rahim, 30, and Saju Islam, 24.

In retaliation, Shibir activists hacked AL activist Mintu Islam to death in broad daylight, dragging him out of his Kafir Bazar house around 12:20pm.

The highway clash also left at least 30 injured. They include seven policemen and 10 ordinary citizens.

At least 11 houses of AL men in Kafir Bazar and two belonging to Jatiya Party men were torched and looted.

Also in the upazila, 180-foot rail track was uprooted and a hundred fish plates were removed near Bawra Railway Station.

With 252 feet of railway tracks at Pirgachha upazila in

Rangpur uprooted, train services on Dinajpur-Dhaka and Lalmonirhat-Dinajpur remained suspended till around 9:00pm. A train also derailed in the district.

In Sirajganj, pickets damaged two bridges in Konagati and Bawoitara in the early hours of yesterday. They also vandalised a private car.

At least two cops were injured when Jamaat men hurled bombs at a police van.

In Joypurhat, Mohammad Firoz Hossain, 30, a rickshaw van puller, was killed being caught in a gunfight between Jamaat and law enforcers. Jamaat men Shamim Hossain, 24 and Insan Ali, 22, were also left dead.

After around a thousand Jamaat-Shibir men encircled patrol police team, BGB and Rab members rushed to spot and the gunbattle began.

Mirajul Islam, 22, a Chhatra League activist, was killed in Laxmipur. A group of Jamaat-Shibir activists attacked him on his way to a relative's house and slit his throat, our correspondent quoted the district Chhatra League president as saying.

In Sylhet, an AL man named Nazrul Islam, 35, was hacked to death early yesterday, while returning home from a procession.

A freedom fighter named Hazrat Ali, 55, suffered serious injuries in a Jamaat-Shibir assault in Shajahanpur upazila of Bogra yesterday morning, his family said.

In Pirojpur, alleged Jamaat-Shibir men torched the house of a union-level AL leader Bidhan Chandra Mistri.

They also dug up the roads leading to the closest fire stations in Pirojpur and Nazirpur, thereby preventing fire fighters from reaching the spot.

At least 25 were hurt in Rajshahi and Pabna during clashes between Jamaat-Shibir and AL and law enforcers.

In Khulna, police arrested district Jamaat Assistant Secretary Zahangir Hossain Helal.

Several bombs were exploded in front of the daily Sangram in Dhaka around 11:30pm yesterday, police say.

Goodbye Madiba

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Mandela's widow, Graca Machel, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief as she watched the proceedings.

"Yours was truly a long walk to freedom. Now you have achieved the ultimate freedom in the bosom of God, your maker," an officiator at the grave site said.

Military pallbearers gently removed the South African flag that draped the coffin and handed it to President Jacob Zuma, who gave it to Mandela's family.

At the request of the family, the lowering of the casket was closed to the media.

Before making their way to the grave site, mourners attended a service in a tent set up at the family compound. They wept, sang and danced in what has become a familiar celebration of his life.

Mandela's coffin, draped in his country's flag, lay atop black and white cattle skins in front of a crescent of 95 candles, each marking a year of his life.

As the national anthem "Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika" or "God Bless Africa" drifted over the village, a giant picture of Mandela looked down with a smile. Mourners placed their fists on their chests, some with tears streaming down their faces.

"Today marks the end of an extraordinary journey that began 95 years ago," Zuma said during the ceremony. "It is the end of 95 glorious years of a freedom fighter ... a beacon of hope to all those fighting for a just and equitable world

order."

The president thanked Mandela's family for sharing him with the world and said his memory will live on.

"We shall not say goodbye, for you are not gone," Zuma said. "You'll live forever in our hearts and minds."

About 4,500 people gathered in the tent, including Machel, who sat next to Mandela's ex-wife, Winnie Mandela.

In other major cities including Johannesburg, crowds watched the funeral at special screenings in stadiums.

BNP warns of tougher

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forced disappearance and mass arrest of opposition leaders and activists, the party will have no alternative but to wage tougher movement to save the country," he said.

Fakhrul made the remark in a written statement conveyed by BNP assistant office secretary Abdul Latif Jony last night.

Pointing to the recent killing of his party men, he warned that the government will have to refrain from committing such act; otherwise, it would not have any escape route.

About the unopposed MPs-elect of the ruling Awami League, Fakhrul said, "The Election Commission has staged a drama of farcical polls through declaring 154 persons elected-unopposed with the help of election officials loyal to the government."

Newsmen not spared

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League as the opposition party was enforcing an endless number of hartals demanding introduction of a caretaker government system. There was anarchy and there were cocktail blasts. The hartals were imposed on people but still there were certain codes.

The press vehicles and the ambulances were allowed to ply and all groups of pickets were led by at least one leader of the party that was enforcing the hartal. If a journalist got hurt, he or she knew it was accidental, as nobody targeted any journalist.

FAST FORWARD TO 2013

Abu Habib, a reporter of the daily Dainik Janmabhumii based in Satkhira was taking photographs of Jamaat activists vandalising and setting fire to the office of Kaliganj upazila Awami League president in the afternoon of October 29. When Jamaat activists saw him, they attacked him and snatched his camera and mobile phone.

Then they cut off a finger of his left hand.

Such a trend prevailed throughout the year.

On January 5, four photojournalists of four media houses were assaulted and injured by Bangladesh Chhatra League activists in pre-hartal violence.

On April 6 and 7, five journalists including two female journalists were attacked and injured by Hefajat men in hartal and pre-hartal violence.

In October, the BCL, police, Jamaat-Shibir and BNP -- all alike -- beat up and attacked journalists among other targets. As many as 14 journalists became victims of targeted or random attacks, including an incident on October 29, where Jamaat men severed a thumb of a journalist in Satkhira.

And during the recent blockade enforced by the BNP, with the Jamaat men mainly carrying out attacks during November 25 to November 30, at least eight journalists were injured, including a woman journalist who became a burn victim. A few more journalists were assaulted by the police during their raid on the BNP central office in the capital.

Besides, the opposition's hartal-blockade enforcers hurled bombs on several TV channel offices just to spread their message of terror.

This list excludes a large number of journalists injured during clashes between the police, the ruling party men, and the opposition activists.

The journalists, who used to be newsmakers' friends, have now become enemies of the political parties -- not only the BNP and Jamaat but also the ruling party. But due to the nature of the profession, journalists cannot shy away from the streets when an event is taking place. The risk of becoming a victim of violence had always been there for a journalist but it has multiplied many times as the press has become a political target.

The opposition activists sometimes attack even journalists of newspapers that support the opposition, while the ruling party men or the police do not hesitate to attack journalists of a pro-government media house.

As the political situation in the last two years became volatile, journalists see a change in the way a hartal or blockade is enforced. Unlike in the past, these programmes are now enforced through terrorist acts like hurling bombs or setting fire to a vehicle on the previous day.

Then on the day of the hartal or blockade, no leader of any rank belonging to the main opposition BNP is seen on the streets. The programme is carried out by hired goons who do not care about what they are doing. As a result, anybody becomes the victim.

Politicians have leased out agitations to criminals who in return would ensure that these politicians go to power. They no longer need journalists to pass on their messages because they no longer even need people to vote them to power. Columnist Farhad Mazhar summarised their philosophy, saying in a television programme in late October that the media gave birth to terrorism in the country, and that journalists "deserved" to be bombed.

Peace, please

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districts from 11:30am to 12:15pm.

The FBCCI called the countrywide programme to protest against the current political impasse and the mounting losses due to continuous agitation by the opposition alliance.

Business leaders had already met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia urging them to hold talks with a view to resolving the stalemate, but to no avail.

"We gather here today at a critical moment of the nation. We want peace. We want a business-friendly environment," FBCCI President Kazi Akram Uddin Ahmed told the rally in Dhaka.

"We denounce the current political situation, as many people have been burnt to death. Today we hoist white flags, but if necessary, the business community will go for tougher programmes," he said.

Akram urged the government to write off bad loans of businessmen created due to the political deadlock.

"We welcome the dialogues between the leaders of the two political parties [Awami League and BNP] initiated by some foreign diplomats. If they [politicians] want they can hold a peaceful election," he said.

The FBCCI president also demanded immediate release of former president of the apex trade body Abdul Awal Mintoo, who had been arrested on November 8.

"If the politicians fail, we should be given the leadership. Today's programme is the first showdown. We will have to take to the streets if you [politicians] do not succeed in solving the problems," said former FBCCI president Salman F Rahman.

He said, "This kind of politics must stop. I am asking you [businessmen] to remain alert as businesses are in deep trouble."

Another former FBCCI president Annisul Huq said the Bangladesh now was a different Bangladesh that people were not supposed to come across with.

He said a country of huge potential had reached the verge of destruction due to unhealthy politics.

"Dead bodies are piling up everywhere. Is Bangladesh a country like Somalia, Syria, Iraq or Libya? The political leaders have turned the country into a land of corpses," said Annisul.

He urged political leaders to rise above their personal interest and agree to their demand of restoring peace.

FBCCI Former president AK Azad said, "You [politicians] do not feed us or clothe us, but are killing us."

He said if the situation did not improve soon they would take their demands directly to the prime minister and the leader of the opposition.

Atiqul Islam, president of apparel makers' platform Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said the backbone of the garment sector had already been broken.

"We do not want unhealthy politics. The industries are becoming sick due to this unhealthy politics," said Atiqul.

Like Dhaka, thousands of businessmen gathered in rallies in Chittagong, Sylhet, Narayanganj, Bagerhat, Sherpur, Satkhira, Gopalganj, Pirojpur and Narsingdi, report our district correspondents.

In Chittagong city, business owners urged all political parties to bring peace for the greater good of the country's economy.

They said businesses are on the brink of devastation due to political violence.

The traders formed a human chain carrying white flags and held a rally in front of Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI) office in Agrabad area.

CCCI President Mahbubul Alam asked political leaders of all parties to solve their issues through discussion, not through violence. "Politics will survive if the economy survives," he said.

Nasir Uddin Chowdhury, first vice president of BGMEA, Sagir Ahmed, general secretary of Khatunganj Trade and Industries Association, Syed Jamal Ahmed, vice president of CCCI, and leaders of various trade and business associations were also present at the programme.

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১৬ ডিসেম্বর, ২০১৩

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