

Turnout test for one-sided polls

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of over 35 percent despite their relentless efforts to this end.

Since the first parliamentary election in 1973, the lowest voter turnout was in the one-sided February 1996 election -- 26.5 percent -- amid boycott by the AL-led opposition parties.

The turnout was 51 percent in another one-sided polls held in 1988 during the Ershad-led autocratic government.

There are other factors that may result in a low turnout tomorrow. The BNP-led opposition's indefinite blockade since Wednesday will be in force on the polling day. On top of that, the alliance yesterday called a country-wide 48-hour hartal beginning this morning.

Moreover, the 18-party combine has formed committees in many constituencies to resist the election. In many areas, the opposition activists are discouraging voters to cast their ballots.

Osman Faruk, adviser to the BNP chairperson, told a press conference yesterday: "Party leaders and activists will be assigned at every polling station to make voters keep off."

Contacted, Piarul Islam, general secretary of Gaibandha Sadar municipality unit of AL, said: "Panicked, a large number of voters may not go for voting. We think the turnout will

be between 25 and 30 percent here.

"In Palashbari upazila of Gaibandha-3, where Jamaat-Shibir men attacked the candidate, the turnout may be less than 10 percent."

He added the Islamist party men have unleashed a reign of terror in the area over the past few months in the area. And things may be the same for Gaibandha-1 where Jamaat-Shibir men attacked police stations, killing four policemen in February last year.

Sadek Quraishi, general secretary of Thakurgaon district AL, said, "We did not need to do electioneering for a win. But we did a huge campaign to ensure a good turnout. If necessary, we will arrange transports for the voters."

He said they formed more than a 100 committees comprising local leaders and activists to bring voters to the polling stations and resist the opposition's attempt to prevent voters from casting votes.

Cox's Bazar district AL acting president AK Ahmed Hossain said they, too, expected a

YEAR	TURN OUT (%)
1973	55.6
1979	51.3
1986	66.3
1988	51.8
1991	55.5
1996 (February 15)	26.5
1996 (June 12)	75
2001	75.6
2008	87.13
SOURCE: EC	

poor turnout, though they were trying to encourage voters to go voting.

Bhola district AL President Fazlul Kader Majnu and Khulna district AL President Sheikh Harun-or-Rashid echoed his view.

"We've told our party men and supporters that they must vote. Now our target is to bring the neutral voters to the polling booths," said Afzalul Karim, general secretary of Barisal city AL.

Momtaz Uddin, president of Bogra AL, said the race in his district was between Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and Jatiya Party (Manju). "So you've to understand how the election will be, I needn't say anything."

In some areas, AL dissidents may emerge as blessings for the AL to ensure a good turnout.

However, AL Organising Secretary Khalid Mahamud Chowdhury said, "Conspiracies were hatched in and outside the country to foil the election. So our main target is to hold the election, not a high voter turnout."

Tomorrow's Polls Only 4 observers from abroad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Only four foreign observers from India and Bhutan will monitor tomorrow's national elections.

Two Bhutanese observers from its election commission arrived in the capital yesterday, while two officials from the Indian EC are due today, said Election Commission officials.

The commission had requested many international polls observers, but so far it has got response from only two countries.

Claiming that Bangladesh's major political parties have failed to reach a consensus and create an atmosphere for transparent, inclusive and credible elections, some 83 countries have decided not send observers for the January-5 election.

The European Union on December 20, the United States on December 22, the Commonwealth on December 23 and Russia on December 26 had officially informed the Election Commission and the

government about not deploying observers as "most political parties are not joining".

Meanwhile, the EC yesterday sent a letter to the home ministry, asking it to strengthen security at the EC secretariat.

The commission has also issued invitations to 12 political parties contesting the polls to be present at the EC secretariat during announcement of the election results.

In the ninth parliamentary elections in 2008, about 593 international observers had worked in Bangladesh.

On December 23, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad told reporters that local observers would oversee the polls in the absence of foreign observers.

Many local observers were staying away from the polls while several organisations decided to send a handful of staff.

"Around 31 local organisations will monitor the elections, and the total number

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All burnt trucker Jamaatul at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital after alleged Jamaat-Shibir men hurled a petrol bomb at his truck in Kansat of Chapainawabganj early yesterday. Goods imported through Sonamasjid Landport lay in ruins after another truck, *top right*, was torched in Kansat. Injured bus driver Babul at the burn unit of DMCH after his vehicle was torched at Paribagh in the capital yesterday morning.

PHOTO: STAR

AL, lawmen

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in this regard, sources said.

The government would also take additional precautionary measures tonight to maintain security and law and order in the "sensitive" areas and districts, a source said.

State Minister for Law Qamrul Islam said the government would take tough measures to contain possible violence and chaos.

AL lawmaker Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury told The Daily Star, "It is quite natural that Jamaat-Shibir will try to resort to violence in those districts during or after the elections as their last attempt to upset law and order."

He said AL men would remain vigilant in every corner of the constituencies to thwart any attempt of Jamaat-Shibir.

AL sources claimed that another four-tier vigilance system would be put in place by the party men in the "vulnerable" constituencies so that Jamaat-Shibir or BNP men could not resort to violence on election day.

Bomb blows

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Police later arrested Jewel from Bogra Islami Hospital and sent him to Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College and Hospital for treatment. However, he was being taken to Dhaka under police protection for better treatment when this report was filed.

The Detective Branch (DB) of police also arrested the managing director, two doctors and four employees of Islami Hospital for "trying to treat Jewel Sarkar secretly and not informing police."

DB Inspector of Bogra Mizanur Rahman said the Shibir leader's left wrist and two fingers of his right hand were blown off in the blast while he was making the bombs in a student mess at Jamil Nagar.

On information, police raided Islami Hospital at Mofiz Paglar More around 12 noon but the hospital staffs denied Jewel's presence. When the police went to the Operation Theatre (OT), they found the room locked from outside while voices were coming from inside. Police then broke into the OT and arrested Jewel, hospital MD Selim Reja, Dr Mizanur Rahman, Dr Ashraf Ali, hospital staffs Mokhesur Rahman, Ramisa Begum, Tahera Begum and Rosy Khatun from there.

Meanwhile, Islami Chhatra Shibir gave two contradictory statements over the incident. When contacted immediately after the arrests, publicity secretary of Shibir's Bogra town unit Mizanur Rahman had said Jewel found a cocktail-like object in front of his mess and it went off when he took it in his hand.

However, in a press release signed by Shibir's town unit president Alauddin Soheli later in the day stated that two miscreants on a motorbike hurled a crude bomb at Jewel and the bomb blew off his wrist and fingers.

Superintendent of Police of Bogra Mozammel Haque said Jewel was a listed criminal and had six cases filed against him in connection with vandalism, arson and attacks

2 dead, 8 more burnt

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"They were inside the cabin, molten into the seats. We had to cut the cabin open to get the bodies out," said Dinajpur fire service officer Mohammad Shahidul Islam.

In the capital, three passengers sustained critical injuries when a bus was set aflame in front of Ruposhi Bangla Hotel near Shahbagh around 6:45am.

Of them, insurance company worker Shahina Akhter and fruit trader Farid Miah are fighting for their lives in the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital. The bus driver, Mohammad Babul Howlader, received eight percent body burns.

Meanwhile, police recovered a carton containing 16 petrol bombs and 29 crude bombs from a BNP procession in Mirpur-10 around 7:30pm. They have arrested three people from the procession in this connection.

In retaliation, the BNP men torched a bus in the area around 11:30pm.

Two more buses were torched in Abdullahpur around 6:00pm and another was set ablaze in Gুলستان in the evening. None has been reported hurt.

In Savar, on the outskirts of the capital, arsonists torched a bus near Boliarpur around 9:45pm.

In Chapainawabganj, three truckers were burnt

at Kansat of Shibganj upazila early yesterday when blockaders torched their vehicles.

The attackers hurled petrol bombs at the truck cabins. The injured are drivers Jamaatul Islam, 40, Azizul Islam, 50, and Mohammad Arif, 20.

In Magura, blockaders hurled petrol bombs at two running trucks on the highway in Pamanduaajali area around 1:45am.

One of the truckers received minor burn injuries while the other sustained injuries by jumping off his burning truck.

In Dagonbhuiyan upazila of Feni, attackers set fire to five schools, two of which were completely gutted, around 3:30am yesterday. The schools had been selected as vote centres for the January 5 parliamentary polls.

The schools are: Omarpur Sultana Memorial Girls' High School, Gojaria Adarsha Academy, Nayanpur Govt Primary School, Basiriah Madrasa and Karimullah High School.

Teachers and students broke down into tears when they came to visit the ruins of the schools.

Bakhtiar Islam, patron member of Omarpur school, said: "My mother spent her life savings to set up the school for village girls."

In sadar upazila of Comilla, criminals set fire to a makeshift Awami League campaign office in

Subarnopur bazar area around 3:30am. Five shops adjacent to it were also burnt down.

The affected shop owners have estimated the loss due to arson at Tk 3 lakh.

In Sitakunda, criminals burnt material for setting up a poll centre kept in the extended building of Alam Shafi Primary School in the municipality around 9:00pm. The school premises was selected as a poll centre.

Officer-in-Charge Iftekhar Hasan of Sitakunda Police Station said the school building was unharmed and that police would soon launch raids to arrest the culprits.

According to the OC, the arson was carried out to intimidate locals.

In another incident, arsonists set fire to a parked bus of a groom's entourage in front of a community centre on CDA Avenue in East Nasirabad of the port city.

They broke the rear windscreen of the vehicle and hurled a petrol bomb inside it. Locals almost instantly doused the fire.

No one was in the bus during the attack.

Arsonists also set fire to a truck on Nagarbari-Pabna highway in Pabna around 3:00am and to another at Kachua in Chandpur

4 workers killed in unrest

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"We condemn this appalling use of extreme lethal force by security forces", the group's director, Naly Pilorge, said in a statement. "Security forces must now put an immediate end to the use of live ammunition against civilians."

Spokesmen for the national police and military police said they could not verify the number of casualties.

It followed a crackdown on Thursday outside a Yakjin (Cambodia) Inc factory in another part of the city, when armed troops struck demonstrators with batons, wounding 20 people. Yakjin is a maker of clothing for Gap and Walmart.

The CNRP, led by former finance minister Sam Rainsy, has courted some 350,000 garment workers from nearly 500 factories across the country by promising to nearly double the monthly minimum wage to \$160 if it wins a re-run of the July election, which Hun Sen is refusing to hold.

The opposition alleges 2.3 million of its votes

were stolen to allow the ruling Cambodia People's Party (CPP) to return to office. The CPP won 68 seats in the election to the CNRP's 55, according to the National Election Committee, but the CNRP says the commission is one of many agencies under CPP influence.

The government is refusing to raise the wage beyond \$100 dollars a month and has ordered factories to reopen to prevent damage and job losses in an industry worth \$5 billion a year to what is one of the world's poorest countries.

Cheath Khemera, a senior labour officer at the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia (GMAC) told Reuters it was too soon to assess the cost of the strikes, but he estimated each factory could be losing \$20,000-\$30,000 a day.

"This really impacts the industry seriously," he said.

Until this week, security forces had exercised restraint to try to cool tempers as pressure mounted on a government facing some of the biggest protests ever seen in Cambodia.

The strikes and rallies represent a rare challenge to the 28-year rule of Hun Sen, who has been credited with attracting investment and creating jobs in what was once a failed state scarred by war and the bloody 1970s Khmer Rouge era.

He has also earned a reputation for being intolerant of opposition and rights groups say abuses are common.

Hun Sen's rule was tested last year when a once weak opposition of various parties amalgamated and won votes from Cambodians upset by low wages, graft and a substantial number of forced evictions from farmland and city slums.

Garment manufacturing is Cambodia's biggest foreign currency earner, a major employer and a vital source of income for many rural families who complain they can barely survive on the wages that are lower than neighbouring Thailand and Vietnam.

Many western brands outsource footwear

Let Khaleda

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"With this assurance, we will meet the opposition leader (Khaleda Zia) soon," Farroque said.

Earlier on Thursday, a delegation of eight BNP lawmakers met Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury on the same issue and submitted a memorandum, seeking her intervention.

During the meeting, the Speaker assured the opposition MPs of taking steps in this regard.

On December 24, Khaleda Zia declared "March for Democracy" to resist what the party calls the one-sided parliamentary elections scheduled for tomorrow.

A day later, security was heavily beefed up in front of the opposition chief's Gulshan residence and several sand-laden trucks were placed on the roads leading to her house.

NYT JOURNO BARRED FROM MEETING KHALEDA

Police did not allow Ellen Barry, the South Asia bureau chief for The New York Times, to meet BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday.

Barry and Reaz Rahman, an adviser to the BNP chief, went to Khaleda's Gulshan house in the capital around 8:15pm but police did not allow them in, Shamsuddin Didar, a media wing staff of Khaleda Zia, told The Daily Star.

A police personnel who was there at that time, seeking anonymity, said the journalists had no permission to enter the house.

Rats sniff out

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over the devices without detonating them.

They can also search much wider areas more quickly than humans at a fraction of the cost.

Working in Mozambique, once one of the most heavily-mined countries in the world, the rats have found more than 2,700 landmines and more than 1,000 bombs, along with over 13,000 items of small arms and ammunition, according to Apopo.

Apopo has received £60,000 from Britain's Department for International Development via the United Nations Development Programme.

Justine Greening, the International Development Secretary, said: "British funding has helped to destroy thousands of mines across Mozambique."

"This not only saves lives but frees up valuable, fertile land on which to grow crops and contribute to the economy."

Bart Weetjens, the founder of Apopo, came up with the idea of using rats to detect landmines. The animals are also used to sniff out tuberculosis in human patients.

He told The Times: "Utilising a sustainable local resource, our Herorats, and involving our beneficiaries in the technology design and implementation processes, have proven to be critical factors."

US again calls for talks

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in Bangladesh, she said, "As I said then and I still will repeat it today, we believe it's even more urgent than ever for the major parties to redouble their efforts to engage in constructive dialogue."

"They [parties] need to find a way forward, to hold free and fair elections that are credible, and violence is not acceptable, never accept-

able, because it subverts the democratic process," added the US official.

Asked whether the US would recognise the parliamentary polls results even after more than half of the seats are remaining uncontested amid a boycott by major political parties, Marie said she does not want to get ahead of what the US will say in response to the election results.

"As I've been clear, they haven't taken steps

to hold free, fair, and credible elections, so clearly that's not a good sign. But I don't want to prejudge the outcome or what we'll say afterwards," she mentioned.

On the "house arrest" of the leader of the opposition, the State Department official said, "I can check with our team and see -- I don't have anything on that."