

Polls violence on the rise

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

With the municipality elections drawing nearer, violence among supporters of mayor candidates has risen sharply, raising concern over holding a free, fair and peaceful elections on December 30.

At least five incidents of violence were reported yesterday in different areas, including Comilla, Savar and Natore. Most of the attacks were led allegedly by the ruling Awami League activists.

Besides, mobile courts yesterday fined several mayor candidates, councillors and their supporters various amounts for violating electoral code of conduct.

Meanwhile, the AL yesterday suspended three rebel mayor candidates for participating in the polls, while the BNP expelled six party men for working against party candidates.

COMILLA

At least 20 people were injured in clashes between supporters of the AL mayor aspirant and rebel candidate yesterday afternoon in Chaudhagram.

Of them, Abdul Hannan, a minor boy, and Khalid Hossain, a Chhatra League activist, suffered bullet injuries. They were admitted to Comilla Medical College Hospital.

At least seven motorcycles and a microbus were torched and 20 shops were vandalised and looted during the clash that broke out around 4:00pm, said locals.

Vehicular movement on Dhaka-Chittagong highway came to a halt for about three hours. Later, police brought the situation under control.

Witnesses said AL rebel candidate Mohammad Imam Hossain's supporters attacked the activists of ruling party candidate Mizanur Rahman while they were returning to their camp at Chaudhagram Bazar after campaigning. They torched seven motorcycles and threw a petrol bomb at a microbus parked in front of the ruling party candidate's camp.

Both candidates, however, blamed each other for the clash.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday expressed the party's strong condemnation over the attack on the party men.

SAVAR

At least 10 activists and relatives of BNP nominated mayor candidate in Savar municipality, Mohammad Bodiuazzaman, were injured in an attack at his house at Bank Colony in Savar.

At that time, he was having a meeting with party activists and his relatives over election campaigning.

Bodiuazzaman, who got three months' interim bail from the High

Court yesterday, claimed that AL mayor candidate Abdul Goni's son Faruk Hasan Tuhin along with 150-200 men, carrying sharp weapons and firearms, swooped on them at his house.

Tuhin, however, refuted the allegation.

NATORE

Unidentified men vandalised Lalpur upazila unit AL's office at Gopalpur Bazar yesterday.

Meanwhile, a mobile court led by Executive Magistrate Shafiqur Alam fined Jubo League leader Zaharul Islam Tk 50,000 for creating panic in the locality by beating the supporters of the opponent during campaigning.

Zaharul was campaigning for Ruksana Mortuza Lili, AL mayor candidate in Gopalpur municipality.

JAMALPUR

In Sarishabari municipality, at least seven people were injured in a clash between supporters of BNP candidate Fayzul Kabir Talukdar and rebel candidate Ruhul Amin Selim at Aramnagar Bazar around 12:00pm yesterday.

NARSINGDI

A cocktail was blasted at a meeting of AL candidate Mosharraf Hossain in Madhabdi municipality on Sunday night. No one was injured.

KUSHTIA

Executive Magistrate Rahat Manna fined AL rebel candidate Asrafat Islam Tk 10,000 for using colourful posters, AL candidate Ahmad Ali Tk 5,000 for using sound system before 2:00pm and BNP activist Selim Uddin Tk 5,000 for pasting colourful posters of BNP candidate Insarul Islam.

KISHOREGANJ

Several mobile courts have fined 23 candidates, including seven mayor aspirants, in Kishoreganj Sadar, Hossainpur and Karimganj municipalities for violating code of conduct.

Executive Magistrate Abu Taher fined six councillors candidates in Kishoreganj Sadar Tk 10,000 each for violating electoral codes on Sunday night. In Hossainpur, five mayor candidates and 10 councillors were fined a total of Tk 41,000, while in Karimganj, AL candidate Kamrul Islam Chowdhury and rebel candidate Abdul Kaiyum were fined Tk 15,000 and Tk 30,000.

PARTY MEN EXPELLED, SUSPENDED

The BNP yesterday expelled six party men including Chittagong Chhandanish municipality BNP unit president and secretary. On the other hand, Jessore district AL yesterday suspended three AL rebel aspirants as they were participating in the polls defying the party decision.

Our district correspondents contributed



Election campaign posters in transparent plastic bags hang overhead on a road in Dhamrai municipality. Though the use of plastic bags is prohibited, many candidates in the upcoming municipality polls are using them to save posters from weather. The photo was taken yesterday. PHOTO: RASHAD AHAMAD

Is EC helpless to stop violations?

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party nominated mayoral candidates in many areas. Supporters of the AL-nominated mayoral candidates allegedly have brought out motorcades and processions and obstructed campaigns of rival candidates.

All those activities have violated the electoral code of conduct and appeared as obstacles to fair elections.

Legally, the EC is powerful enough to ensure a free and fair election.

The present electoral laws for the municipality elections give the EC enough power to take various steps including cancellation of candidature on ground of gross electoral anomalies.

A candidate personally need not violate any electoral law to be punished. Under this provision the onus is on the candidate for the unlawful activities of his election agents and activists.

The Constitution, moreover, provides the EC with unlimited powers.

It can take any action required for the sake of fair elections.

Constitution expert and former attorney general Mahmudul Islam in his book "Constitutional Law of Bangladesh" writes: "The Constitution does not envisage anything else than free and fair election and any law which stifles the hand of the Election Commission in ensuring free and fair polls will not pass the test of Constitutionality."

The EC can also use its powers even after the election is over if it finds that the election was not a free and fair. This significant authority has been upheld by the Supreme Court in a number of cases.

Take for example the Noor Hossain versus Nazrul Islam case. In this case, the Appellate Division observed: "We cannot but reiterate that if there was contemporaneous report of allegations about disturbance, rigging of ballot papers or election not being

held justly, honestly and fairly then after being satisfied about the correctness of the report or allegations Election Commission would be justified to cancel the result of the election and direct re-poll."

What is needed for the exercise of such sweeping authority is a strong leadership. The present EC, led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, lack such leadership. Without a strong leader, the field level election administration can not act effectively.

Field level election officials do not feel confident to act against ruling party men as the weak EC leadership is unable to protect the field level officials.

In this atmosphere of weak leadership, unscrupulous officials make unholy nexus with the ruling party men in the election; they allow ruling party men to take undue advantages in the electioneering. This has been evident in previous elections to the city

corporation in 2015, and upazila elections in 2014.

All prevailing signs suggest the situation may keep deteriorating ahead and during the voting of the 234 municipalities on December 30 unless the EC shows its determination for a free and fair election.

Appealing to Sheikh Hasina may not work to improve the situation much due to partisan politics. Being the chief of the AL, Hasina wants her party men's overwhelming victory in the battle of ballots by defeating opponents nominated by her archrival Khaleda Zia led BNP.

The polls have turned into a prestige issue for both Hasina and Khaleda. So winning matters here regardless of the fairness of the polls.

At the end of the day, the onus for a free election lies on the EC. It still has time to make some game changing moves if it wants to prevent further loss of image.

Umrah visa

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foreign ministry of its decision to withdraw the ban, officials at the foreign and religious affairs ministries said yesterday.

A reliable source, speaking on condition of anonymity, hinted that Bangladesh's joining the Saudi-led 34-nation Islamic alliance to fight terrorism and extremism might have prompted Riyadh to lift the ban.

Wishing not to be named, a highly placed source at the Bangladesh Embassy in Riyadh, however, said the two issues were not related at all and that the ban had been withdrawn a week ago.

Besides, he added, only a few selected agencies would be allowed to send pilgrims for performing Umrah and there would be quotas.

"Actually, there are still some hurdles for Bangladeshis nationals in getting Umrah visa, though officially it is open. Due to some regulations, Bangladeshi agencies cannot directly get visa quotas. They have to collect those online in coordination with some Saudi agencies," the embassy source said.

Saudi Arabia stopped issuing Umrah visas for Bangladeshis on March 22 after its Ministry of Hajj had blacklisted 31 hajj agencies of Dhaka, Chittagong and Sylhet on allegations of human trafficking in the guise of sending pilgrims.

As many as 50,000 Bangladeshis went to Saudi Arabia to perform Umrah between December 2014 and March this year, official sources said.

Most of them returned home in time. Some 4,000 stayed back prompting Riyadh to stop issuing Umrah visas for Bangladeshis.

Riyadh at the time informed Dhaka that the kingdom would not issue any Umrah visa if those Bangladeshis did not return and actions were not taken against the hajj agencies that had sent people impersonating hajj pilgrims.

Umrah visas are issued only for 14 to 28 days and do not require any police verification and ministry certification, leaving scopes for unscrupulous local and Saudi hajj agencies to take advantage of this, said people involved in the business.

Probe goes slow amid rampant rules violation

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Until yesterday, the EC received reports from only around 10 ROs. Most of them found the allegations to be false. Some even claimed that the media reports were not authentic.

Talking to The Daily Star, a deputy secretary of the EC secretary said the delay occurred as the ROs needed time to complete the enquiries.

However, election experts said the returning officers should have completed all the probes promptly as the December 30 polls were just a few days away.

"Each and every moment in the electoral process is important. The commission should have set a deadline for the returning officers and taken action against those who could not meet the deadline," said former election commissioner M Sakhawat Hussain.

An election commissioner expressed dissatisfaction with the reports of some ROs who found no evidence of electoral code violation. "They [ROs] should have probed the incidents more sincerely."

According to newspaper reports, Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu and Religious Affairs Minister Matuir Rahman joined a rally in Phulpur municipality of Mymensingh on December 3. The ministers, in

presence of the AL mayoral nominee, urged party men to remain united and work together to ensure victory for the AL candidate.

The RO in his enquiry report claimed that the ministers addressed the rally, but did not campaign for the mayor hopeful, said EC sources.

As per the electoral code of conduct, ministers, parliament whips and lawmakers cannot join any electoral activities.

CANDIDACIES OF 200

The EC yesterday decided to file appeals with the higher court challenging the High Court's verdicts that declared the candidacies of around 200 mayor and councillor hopefuls valid.

The decision was reached in a majority opinion as the chief election commissioner and three other commissioners favoured filing the appeals, EC sources said.

Returning officers and deputy commissioners had cancelled their nominations on different grounds including defaulting bank loans and utility bills.

An election commissioner opposed the decision saying that it would cause complexities in printing ballots. The court would take at least a few more days for disposing of the pleas. If some of the appeals were upheld by the court,

the commission will have to reprint the ballots with their poll symbols.

CHATKIL POLLS

The EC will decide today on the validity of the nomination of BNP mayor hopeful Mostafa Kamal in Chatkhil municipality of Noakhali, said an election commissioner.

In a letter to the EC on December 14, Kamal alleged that he was forced by ruling AL men on the previous day to affix his sign on a paper for withdrawing his candidacy.

BNP Joint Secretary General Mahub Uddin Khokon filed the complaint with the EC on behalf of the candidate. The commission later formed an enquiry committee that submitted its report to EC yesterday. The report said the allegation was not true, said sources.

Neither Kamal nor Khokon were present before the probe committee during the hearing on the complaint.

Khokon yesterday again went to the EC and submitted a letter saying that they provided the probe body with all necessary documents to prove the allegation.

OCs UNDER SCANNER

The EC has directed the superintendents of police of three districts to probe the allegations against the officers-in-charge of three police

stations that they worked in favour of the AL candidates.

The police stations are Jagannathpur of Sunamganj, Hatia of Noakhali and Ishwarganj of Mymensingh.

Earlier, the commission had asked the police authorities to withdraw the OCs of three police stations – Uttar Matlab of Chandpur, Kulaura of Moulvibazar and Kalkini of Madaripur – on the same allegation.

MP'S WARNED

The EC in separate letters to three AL lawmakers yesterday warned them of not to violate the electoral code of conduct in future.

Safiqul Islam Shimul of Natore-2, MA Malek from Dhaka-20 and Shawkat Hasnur Rahman from Barguna-2 had apologised to the EC for violating electoral laws.

'ENSURE LEVEL PLAYING FIELD'

The AL yesterday demanded the EC ensure a level playing field for all political parties ahead of the municipal polls.

"In the last few days, the Election Commission took actions against some Awami League candidates for allegedly breaching the electoral code of conduct which was unfair," AL Joint General Secretary Mahubul Alam Hanif told a press briefing at the party president's Dhanmondi office.

11 involved in mugging of 2 Indians

Ctg police so far arrest 6

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Eleven muggers were involved in stabbing and robbing two Indian nationals in Sitakunda upazila of Chittagong on December 7.

Police have arrested six people in a case filed in this connection.

Of the arrestees, Arif Hossain Joy, 18, and Arif Hossain Arif, 20, of Sitakunda upazila, gave confessional statements before the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate of Chittagong Mosaddek Minhaj on Sunday, said Kamal Uddin, sub-inspector of Sitakunda Police Station.

The two also admitted that eleven muggers were involved in the incident.

Four other arrestees denied their involvement in the incident, said Kamal, also the investigation officer (IO) of the case.

On the night of December 7, a group of Indians of the Sikh community were returning to Dhaka in four minibuses after visiting a temple in Chittagong.

A gang of masked muggers attacked one of the minibuses in Panthichhila area on Dhaka-Chittagong highway. The criminals then stabbed the two Indians and snatched Tk 50,000 and a mobile phone set from their possession.

Injured Bhupindor Singh, 68, and Mul Chand Singh, 63, were given primary treatment at a local hospital.

During interrogation, Joy and Arif said one Nabi and Jani were their leaders and they planned to conduct the mugging on the highway as they were running out of money, said IO Kamal, adding that on that night, they positioned themselves beside bean fields on both sides of the highway at Panthichhila.

"They did not have any idea that the Indian Sikhs were passing through the area [at the moment]," he said.

At random, the criminals targeted a microbus carrying the Indian people, and one of them hurled an iron rod at the microbus, the police official added.

As soon as the driver stopped the microbus, the muggers held him hostage at a sharp weapon.

"They then started looting valuables from the passengers," said IO Kamal quoting Joy and Arif.

Protest note, our reply

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that in line with the people's aspiration of that area, in the Deputy Commissioner's Conference held on 8 July 2014, the following proposal was discussed:

"Considering the availability of gas in Habiganj, a lot of industries have been set up there. If government takes initiative to set up one Export Processing Zone in Habiganj, a lot of export oriented industries will be established there that would help in reducing unemployment and achieving economic growth". One the basis of that proposal Hon'ble Prime Minister instructed all concerned to take necessary steps after thorough examination of the proposal.

As per the condition of land acquisition, since no tea was planted in 511.85 acres of land in the Chandpur Tea Garden by the Duncun Brothers, the Ministry of land has cancelled the lease

deed and handed over the land to BEZA to set up economic zone for generating more employment in the area. As the local people of Habiganj has been demanding for setting up an economic zone for long and inline with their aspirations, without hampering the interest of the tea garden workers and also of the tea garden owner, the government has taken initiatives to setup Economic Zone there.

Only 1692 workers are working in the Chandpur Tea garden not 16,000. Moreover, during discussion with the tea garden workers, local people and leaders, it was assured that Economic Zones Authority would ensure their housing, employment and health facilities as well as education and skill development for their kids.

The Habiganj Economic Zone will also be established to reduce poverty, hunger, unemployment etc, from that area and thereby ensure sustainable

development and also will bring more foreign investment, generating more employment, alleviating poverty and achieving higher growth rate in Bangladesh.

OUR REPLY

First of all, our report focused on the uncertain future of the tea workers who till the land where the SEZ will be set up. We have clearly mentioned that they have no legal right over the land which they have been using for generations. Any development initiative should be inclusive and address the concern of the disadvantaged group. The tea workers, mostly illiterate and the most backward ethnic group doing the same profession for generations, feel that they will not be benefited and rather negatively affected as they lack the skill and mindset to work in modern industrial environment. This is why the tea workers have started this movement against the

takeover of the land. Our report was in no way intended to undermine any development initiative, rather it was aimed at helping the project by trying to convince the authorities that it should be an inclusive process with special care to the disadvantaged. Unfortunately, BEPZA has not been able to grasp the essence of the report. About the number, BEPZA has only mentioned the workers of Chandpur garden. Over 1,000 families 'own' the land who have 'leased' them to numerous others in informal way. Thus the number of works actually living off the land is much greater than Bepza thinks. According to the Chandpur-Begumkhan Bhumi Rakkha Committee, 1,664 permanent workers of Chnadpur, BEgumkhan, Joal Bhanga and Ramganga tea gardens, arund 5,000 temporary workers and 10,000 seasonal workers till this land and eke out a living.

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