

Who are the candidates in the municipal elections?

BADIUL ALAM MAJUMDAR

ON December 30, 2015, voters of 234 Paurashavas will elect, from among the contesting candidates, their representatives who will run these municipalities for the next five years. And how these institutions will be run in the coming years will determine the effectiveness of our democratic system, as our Constitution mandates the creation of a democratic polity in the country by requiring institutions at all administrative units to be run by elected representatives. Thus, the question of who is running in the coming municipal elections has far-reaching implications.

Candidates contesting in municipal elections are required by law to disclose, in the form of affidavits, their antecedents, including their educational qualification, profession, criminal records, assets and liabilities of their own and their dependents. They are also required to disclose their tax returns. The purpose of these disclosures is to empower the voters with information to help them make informed decisions.

In this year's elections in 234 municipalities, 923 candidates are contesting for the post of mayor, 8,589 for councilor and 2,533 for women's reserve seats. According to the EC website, of the total 904 mayoral candidates contesting in 232 municipalities (except Mongla and Matlab), AL's nominated candidates are 221 and BNP's 206.

Because of party-based elections, the number of final mayoral candidates in the coming elections has gone down to an average of 3.94 candidates per municipality as many non-partisan, honest and locally popular candidates did not dare to contest. This compares to an average of 5.11 and

7.66 candidates in 2011 and 2008 municipal elections, respectively. Fewer candidates lower the range of choice for the voters, and they are deprived of the opportunity to pick the best representatives.

Six mayors and 134 councilors got elected uncontested in 234 municipalities - a record of sorts in municipal elections. In three municipalities of Feni district, 44 out of 48 representatives got elected unopposed allegedly because of intimidation by the ruling party, which prevented the candidates from submitting nominations or they were forced to withdraw. EC's silence in this matter raises serious doubts about its neutrality.

The two major parties of the country claim that they are committed to women's political empowerment. Nevertheless, only 15 women were nominated by these parties for the post of mayor in the municipal elections. Such a record does not speak well for our two major parties.

Another disappointing aspect of this election is that the two major parties nominated a large number of candidates with criminal records. Of the 904 candidates, 219 (24.22 percent) currently have criminal cases pending against them, and 321 (35.5 percent) had criminal cases in the past. Of them, 36 have and 61 had murder cases against them. Among AL's 221 candidates, 33 (14.93 percent), and BNP's 206 candidates, 96 (46.6 percent) presently have cases charged against them. It is claimed that many cases against BNP candidates are a result of political harassment, but it is difficult to make similar claims regarding AL candidates. Although having cases pending against one does not make someone a convict, some of the accused could ultimately be

convicted. Thus, the nomination of people who are potential convicts does not speak well for the commitment of the political parties towards clean politics.

Our analysis shows that BNP candidates have had cases filed against them - including charges of murder - when compared to AL candidates, both in the past as well as present. However, although more cases are currently pending against BNP candidates, the number of past cases against candidates of both parties is nearly equal.

Of the 904 mayoral candidates, 341 (37.72 percent) have Bachelor or higher degrees. Ninety (40.72 percent) AL and 83 (40.29 percent) BNP candidates have graduate or post-graduate education. 224 (24.38 percent) of the mayoral candidacy have less than a high school education. 40 candidates of AL (18.1 percent) and 40 candidates from BNP (19.42 percent) could not even graduate from high school. It may be noted that both AL and BNP candidates have similar educational qualifications.

Like other elections, municipality elections are also mostly dominated by businessmen - 652 (72.12 percent) candidates are businessmen; of this, AL's 165 (74.66 percent) and BNP's 162 (78.64 percent) candidates are businessmen. It is thus clear that our politics is now largely under the thumb of businessmen, which is contrary to the idea of plurality. It also indicates depoliticisation.

Among the mayoral candidates, 634 earn Tk. 5 lakh or less per year. Of the AL candidates, 125 (56.65 percent), and BNP candidates' 144 (69.9 percent) have similar levels of income. Only 8 out of 904 mayoral candidates apparently have a yearly income of Tk. 1 crore or more, which is

hard to believe. Of these rich candidates, five belong to AL and two to BNP.

With respect to wealth, out of 904 candidates, 490 have declared their wealth to be worth Tk. 5 lakh or less. Among these, AL's 79 (36.57 percent) and BNP's 99 (48.77 percent) candidates have a similar level of wealth. Among all mayoral candidates, 47 (5.19 percent) - AL's 20 (9.04 percent) and BNP's 13 (6.31 percent) - have declared wealth worth Tk. 1 crore or less.

The vast majority of the candidates in the municipal elections - 80.64 percent - pay taxes, of which 181 (81.9 percent) candidates belong to AL while 169 (82.03 percent) candidates belong to BNP. This is definitely a good sign.

The disclosure of information by candidates and their analyses are important for creating awareness among voters to help them make informed decisions, but the information disclosed must be accurate. However, there are serious allegations of hiding information or disclosing inaccurate information by candidates in their affidavits. It is therefore important for the EC to take the necessary steps in the future to verify the accuracy of the disclosed information and cancel the nomination of those who file inaccurate affidavits or certify those who were elected previously with false affidavits. At the same time, the Commission will have to, based on experience, redesign the affidavits and promptly make them available to the relevant stakeholders. Then only will the voters get the full benefit of the disclosure requirements, which have been instituted with a lot of persistent efforts by civil society and various non-government organisations.

The writer is Secretary, SHUJAN.

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The case against the Islamic Military Alliance

C. RASHAD SHABAB

TWO days before Bangladesh celebrated its 44th Victory Day, Saudi Arabia's deputy crown prince and defence minister, Mohammed bin Salman, announced that he had conscripted the military of our sovereign state into the service of the so-called 'Islamic Military Alliance'. The prince announced that 34 states had "joined" this coalition. For the sake of our sovereignty, security, and even religiosity, Bangladesh must withdraw from this alliance.

In what can only be described as a testimony to Saudi incompetence, immediately following the announcement, a number of countries declared they had agreed to no such thing. Speaking about the coalition, a senior official of the Pakistani Foreign Office was quoted as saying "We came to know about it through news reports". Malaysia and Lebanon have given statements to similar effect. The Government of Bangladesh has neither given such statement, nor has it made a public announcement about the country's participation.

It speaks volumes about the Saudi sense of entitlement that they did not even bother to secure the consent of sovereign states before announcing their membership in the 'Alliance'. Coupled with the overtly Arab-supremacist structure of the Saudi state, this entitlement does not bode well for the level of regard that will be shown for the lives of soldiers from non-Arab countries such as Bangladesh, who according to the Prince's announcement are to be placed under Saudi command. Doing so would unnecessarily risk Bangladeshi lives, and draw us into a sectarian fight that we have no part in.

Unlike Saudi Arabia, one of Bangladesh's founding principles is secularism, something that is enshrined in our Constitution. Any move by the state to join a military alliance that is founded on religious grounds, would therefore be of questionable legal standing. But setting legality aside, the alliance makes little sense. Its purported goal is to fight ISIS. Where Islamist militancy is the problem, how can an 'Islamic Military' be the solution? It is every bit as preposterous and



Mohammed bin Salman, the Saudi defence minister, announces the formation of a military coalition to fight terrorism.

ill-conceived as the 'war on terror' was.

Why then are the Saudis proposing this force? Because it is 'Islamic' only in name: in everything else it is Saudi. The headquarters will be in Riyadh, and the force will be under Saudi command. Conspicuous in their absence are Iran and Iraq - two large, important, Muslim majority states which would have been indispensable to any authentic fight against extremism - but which also happen to be Shi'ite majority. Their absence transparently betrays Saudi Arabia's sectarian vision for its 'Islamic' army, and serves to illustrate the dubious Islamic credentials of the House of Saud's military undertakings.

It is common knowledge that the Saudis have long exported a particularly intolerant interpretation of Islam under the banner of 'Wahhabism'. It is less well-known that Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, whose scholarship the Saudis claim to extol, within his lifetime refused to endorse the plunderous military campaigns of his

contemporary Saudi chieftain, Muhammad Ibn Saud. The scholar also forbade the deliberate destruction of property and the slaughter of civilians, a prohibition wholly violated when Ibn Saud's son, Abd al-Aziz Ibn Muhammad sacked the holy city of Karbala in 1801, slaughtering thousands of civilians, including women and children. The terror that ensued from this wanton massacre precipitated Mecca's surrender in 1803. That is how the Saudis came to control Islam's most holy site. What legitimacy then, does the House of Saud, which usurped control of Islam's holiest site by the slaughter of civilians, have to command a multinational Islamic army? The military history of this family has been anything but Islamic, even by the standards of the scholar who they claim their perversion of Islam is based on.

Saudi global influence rose with the price of oil in 1973. As oil prices have plummeted from a high of \$105 as recently as July 2014, to under \$36 per barrel in

December 2015, Saudi foreign exchange reserves have nosedived, and are projected to keep declining. Permanently reduced spending capacity implies that the recruitment of migrant workers from Bangladesh will never return to earlier levels, whatever our government's response to Saudi military conscription.

On the issue of migrant workers, there is a wide-spread fear among the Bangladeshi middle class that refusing to participate in this sectarian military farce would somehow endanger the livelihoods of the million or so Bangladeshi migrant workers who reside in the Kingdom. This perspective patronises our migrants as recipients of some form of Saudi charity. They are not. Rather, they are indispensable members of the Saudi economy.

Citizens of the Kingdom live off oil rents and are utterly dependent on Bangladeshis and other migrants for even the most basic services. That is why when Saudi Arabia imposed an immigration ban on Bangladesh in 2008, they did not expel existing workers,

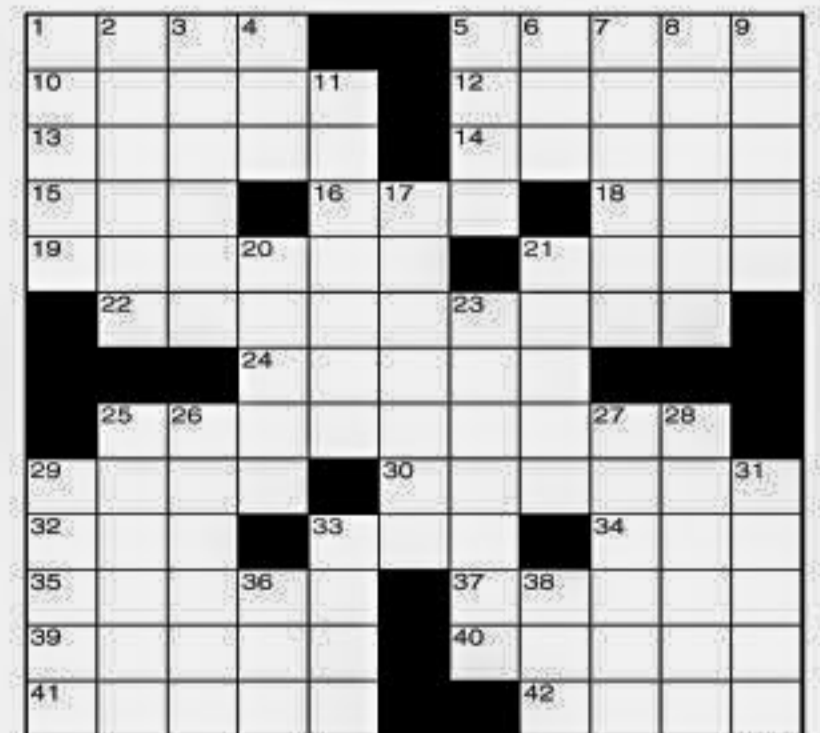
and it is why they cannot do so now. It is also why Indonesia and Pakistan, which have similarly large numbers of migrants in the Kingdom, have been able to state that they had not agreed to join the 'Alliance', despite the bungling Saudi prince's announcement to the contrary. Migrant Bangladeshis are productive workers, not hostages, and the military involvement of a sovereign Bangladesh must not be paid as ransom.

To the citizen, the conscription of our armed forces by a foreign power to wage its own sectarian war is a slap in the face of Bangladeshi sovereignty. To the religious, the violent and bigoted perversions of the faith that the Saudis would propagate using this force are an affront to the peaceful and tolerant religion that is Islam. And to the strategist, aligning oneself militarily with an incompetent, declining power, risking Bangladeshi lives and security is an insult to rationality. For all these reasons, Bangladesh must immediately extricate itself from this so called 'Islamic Military Alliance,' which is no such thing.

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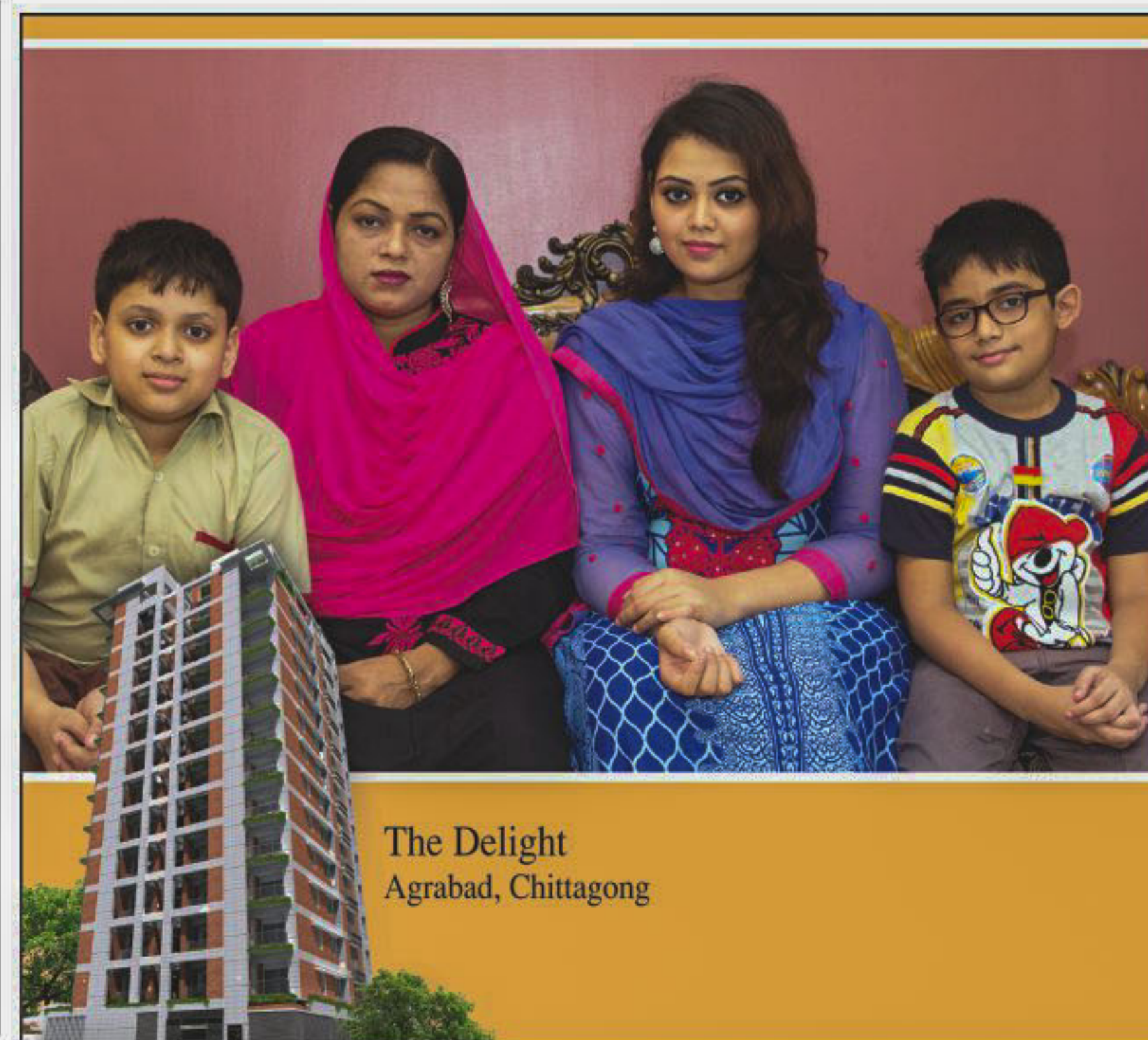
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Stare in disbelief
 - 5 Ties down
 - 10 Wise saying
 - 12 Computer data
 - 13 Europe's longest river
 - 14 Paris river
 - 15 Memorable time
 - 16 Campers' kin
 - 18 Reverent wonder
 - 19 Doesn't bother
 - 21 Headliner
 - 22 Apostrophe's neighbor
 - 24 French farewell
 - 25 Arch features
 - 29 Stock holders
 - 30 Low joints
 - 32 Granola bit
 - 33 Much of N. Amer.
 - 34 Favorite
 - 35 Roils
 - 37 Sycophant
 - 39 Doughnut's shape
 - 40 Stand for art
 - 41 Derisive look
- DOWN**
- 2 Took the trolley
 - 1 Court rapper
 - 2 Devotee
 - 3 Gourmet's sense
 - 4 Chick holder
 - 5 Overlook
 - 6 early hour
 - 7 Morphine, for one
 - 8 Model's spot
 - 9 Herd member
 - 11 Headphones alternative
 - 17 Harvard motto
 - 20 Remains
 - 21 Shut out
 - 23 Newborn baby
 - 25 Buster of comedy
 - 26 Undivided
 - 27 Rio Grande city
 - 28 Ranked, in tennis
 - 29 Fence supports
 - 31 Flair
 - 33 KGB's home
 - 36 Paris street
 - 38 Crew item



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

S M A S H C A J U N
 H O W I E A L O N E
 I R A N I S T Y L E
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