

Councillors gather in Dhaka with high expectations

HASAN JAHID TUSHER and RASHIDUL HASAN

Awami League councillors from across the country join the party's national council today with high expectations.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, a number of AL councillors said they want to elect the party's top leadership through direct votes for ensuring intra-party democracy and the central leaders' accountability to the grassroots.

They would ask the council to replace corrupt and opportunist leaders with dedicated, trusted and honest ones in the central leadership to brighten the party's image.

More than 6,500 councillors, who hold important positions in AL's grassroots units, are taking part in the party's 20th council at Suhrawardy Udyan.

This newspaper talked to more than a dozen AL councillors, mostly presidents and general secretaries of different district units.

The councillors said they would urge the council and the party chief to ensure that coordination is maintained between the lawmakers and grassroots leaders.

According to the AL constitution, the councillors will elect new leadership of the party, which has been led by Sheikh Hasina since 1981. Syed Ashraf Islam has been holding the post of general secretary since 2009.

The councillors, however, said they would accept whatever decision party President Sheikh Hasina would make regarding the new committee.

In the two-day council, the main focus would be on the election to the post of general secretary.

There is speculation that Syed Ashraf would be elected as the party's general secretary for the third consecutive time.

"In the council, we want honest leaders, who are friendly towards party workers," said Dharendra Debnath.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 5

| Who led AL, when | | |
|------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| | PRESIDENT | GENERAL SECRETARY |
| 1949 | Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani | Shamsul Huq |
| 1953 | Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman |
| 1955 | Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman |
| 1957 | Maulan Abdur Rahman Tarkabagish | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman |
| 1964 | Maulan Abdur Rahman Tarkabagish | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman |
| 1966 | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman | Tajuddin Ahmad |
| 1970 | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman | Tajuddin Ahmad |
| 1972 | Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman | Zillur Rahman |
| 1974 | AHM Qamruzzaman | Zillur Rahman |
| 1977 | Special Council: Syeda Zohara Tajuddin (Convenor) | |
| 1978 | Abdul Malek Ukil | Abdur Razzaq |
| 1981 | Sheikh Hasina | Abdur Razzaq |
| 1987 | Sheikh Hasina | Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury |
| 1992 | Sheikh Hasina | Zillur Rahman |
| 1997 | Sheikh Hasina | Zillur Rahman |
| 2002 | Sheikh Hasina | Abdul Jalil |
| 2009 | Sheikh Hasina | Syed Ashraf Islam |
| 2012 | Sheikh Hasina | Syed Ashraf Islam |
| 2016 | | |

Her finest hour

FROM PAGE 1

subsequent meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Goa. Her strategy for balancing relations with India and China and her success in handling it well has been demonstrated for the world to see.

Relation with USA is now much better than what it was in early 2014. It was reflected in US Secretary of State John Kerry's latest visit to Dhaka last August.

Ties with other global players like Russia, UK and Japan are also in good standing.

And now all eyes are on her as the ruling Awami League opens today its two-day triennial national council in the capital. Her party men in public campaigns with billboards, banners, placards and posters, are lauding her leadership in leading the country on, what they say, the development highway.

A new chapter has been proposed for inclusion in the AL declaration paper lauding Hasina's leadership and

the list of international awards and degrees from different universities she received in the last two decades for her contribution to different fields including food safety and women empowerment, according to its draft changes.

"In contemporary politics, Sheikh Hasina is both strength and asset of Awami League. She has taken Bangladesh to a new height globally with dignity and honour," says the proposed change in the AL declaration paper which will be placed at the party council for approval.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the draft declaration paper which also highlights major development activities-- both at planning stage and under implementation--by the government--led by Sheikh Hasina.

The proposed chapter with the headline "Universal recognition of impressive leadership of Sheikh Hasina for development, democracy, peace and equality," also says, Sheikh Hasina is now a unique statesman for the third world.

As Awami League councilors from around the country gather today at the council venue at the Suhrawardy Udyan to elect new leadership, it now depends on her whether she wants to take her records to a new height by accepting the party's president post for another three-year term.

She has already been elected president in the past seven consecutive councils since 1981 and running the AL, one of the oldest and major political parties in South Asia, for around 36 years.

It still looks certain she will remain at the helm of the party for at least another three years through this national council.

Since the birth of the party about 67 years ago in 1949, none of the previous leaders, including her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, stayed at the party's helm for so long. Before her, Bangabandhu was the longest serving president of AL for seven years from 1966.

It is difficult to find such a track

record in other democratic countries in the world.

During her leadership, Hasina had to face very little opposition within the party. She also had to handle little intra-party conflicts, except for the period of the last military-backed caretaker government when a good number of central leaders had moved to reform the party curbing her absolute power.

However, an unchallenged position helped Hasina emerge as the supreme leader of the party and her cabinet during the tenure of her past government between 2009 and 2013.

She had resigned as the AL chief on March 3, 1991 after her party's defeat in the fifth parliamentary elections in February the same year to BNP. But she had to return a couple of days later, on March 5, under immense pressure from her party leaders and activists.

Sheikh Hasina came to her party's aid at a crucial time. She was made the AL president at a time when the party was facing an uncertain future follow-

The legacy of Awami League

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

There was an announcement that the by-election to south Tangail constituency would be held in April 1949.

A group of young leaders, mostly from then Muslim League, decided to request former party leader Shamsul Hoque to contest the election against the then ruling party candidate.

Hoque agreed to run the election, but the problem was managing funds. He went to Tangail from Dhaka while his supporters started collecting whatever amount they could.

They collected several hundred taka. Students and Hoque's supporters sold their watches and pens to give some money to him.

On the other hand, Muslim League ministers and MLAs reached Tangail with money, cars and everything else that they needed to support their candidate Khurram Khan Panni.

A large number of the voters were subjects of Panni, a famous zamindar in the district. He was a very strong candidate as his party was in power

and he had financial might.

Hoque and his supporters were not financially sound, but he had dedicated workers who believed in an ideology. At that time, there was no political organisation to back Hoque financially and organisationally. His workers started electioneering on foot and they even did not have enough food.

Hoque defeated Panni in the by-election to the constituency (Nagarpur Mirzapur and Basail) on April 26, 1949.

The Muslim League's debacle was blamed on misuse, repression, torture and lack of proper planning in the economic sector.

People in the then East Pakistan were frustrated. The ruling party leaders failed to feel the common people's pulse.

After the defeat, the Muslim League announced that Hoque would not be allowed to sit in parliament. It filed a case over the election.

Hoque was accorded a huge reception in Dhaka by students and common people. Later, a meeting was

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

Eyes on polls

FROM PAGE 1

under implementation -- have been described in details, party sources said.

The paper many also include the AL government's achievements during its 1996-2001 tenure.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Health Minister and party Presidium Member Mohammed Nasim said, "Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh is marching towards development in every sector and we will underscore it to our leaders and workers so that they can convey the message to the people."

In addition to doing just that, Hasina is likely to play up the "destructive activities" carried out by archrival BNP over the last few years as well as the "bad governance" during the 2001-2006 four-party government rule and the 2007-08 caretaker government tenure.

Party sources said their aim is to drum up public support in their favour for the next national polls, expected at the end of 2018 or early 2019.

The AL, one of the oldest political parties in the Indian subcontinent formed in 1949, holds its national council every three years. Its current committee, formed through the last

council on December 29, 2012, expired on December 28 last year.

The party first decided to hold the council in December last year but failed. After changing the dates twice more since, it settled for October 22-23.

In her address, Hasina is likely to urge party men to prepare for the next election.

"Start working for the 11th parliamentary election from now. Based on the opinion of the grassroots, competent candidates will be given nomination. Everyone must work together to ensure victory for the 'boat,'" according to the draft of the speech the PM is expected to deliver.

The party top brass would also give the grassroots a guideline to strengthen the organisation, said Nasim, also the convenor of the reception sub-committee of the council.

"Youths will get priority in the next committee," he added.

LITTLE FOCUS ON DEMOCRACY

War crimes trial, implementation of the Bangabandhu murder case verdict, anti-militancy drive, trial of money laundering case against Tarique Rahman, among other things, are being touted as government's successes to ensure rule of law and god

WHAT'S ON THE MENU

SATURDAY LUNCH

50,000 councillors, delegates and invitees

Menu: Chicken pilau, Firni (cup), soft drinks, water, sweet betel leaves

SATURDAY DINNER

14,000 councillors and delegates

Menu: Shahi mutton Kachchi Biryani, Firni (cup), soft drinks, water, sweet betel leaves

SUNDAY LUNCH

14,000 councillors and delegates

Menu: Plain pilau, Chicken Masallam, Firni (cup), soft drinks, water, sweet betel leaves

SUNDAY DINNER

14,000 councillors and delegates

Menu: Shahi mutton Kachchi Biryani, Firni (cup), soft drinks, water, sweet betel leaves

Per packet food costs around Tk 300. Food will be distributed near Sikha Chiranton.

governance.

But the amended declaration paper is unlikely to come up with any significant proposals to improve the state of democracy and governance system, hinted party insiders.

After a gap of seven years, the AL returned to power by winning the December 2008 parliamentary election. It retained power through the January 5, 2014, "one-sided" general election boycotted by the BNP-led alliance.

THE SAME OLD FORMULA?

As a political party registered with the Election Commission under the Representation of the People Order 2008, the AL must have elected leaders at every level.

The party's charter also speaks for election to the posts of president and general secretary.

According to the party constitution, in addition to the party president and the general secretary, its 11 presidium members, one treasurer, 31 secretaries, including three joint general secretaries, and seven organising secretaries must be elected by the councillors.

As many as 6,570 councillors from 73 organisational district units and 460 upazila units of the party are the

electorates.

For the election, the AL formed a three-member Election Commission led by Mashiur Rahman, an advisor to the prime minister.

Asked, Yusuf Hossain Humayun, a member of the EC, said: "If a single name is proposed for each of the two top posts [president and general secretary], we will not go for vote."

"If there are multiple candidates for the two posts, we will first try to negotiate. If we fail, we will then go for vote," said Humayun, also a member of the AL advisory council.

He said ballot papers and transparent ballot boxes will be available there.

The EC would go for electing other party office bearers after electing the president and the general secretary, he said.

However, in recent councils, including those in 2009 and 2012, no voting took place.

In the last two councils, Hasina and Syed Ashraf Islam were elected president and general secretary unopposed.

And following their election, party councillors empowered Hasina to pick other office bearers.

The same may happen this time as well, insiders said.

54 foreign guests to attend AL council

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Fifty-four political leaders from 11 foreign countries would attend ruling Awami League's 20th national council today and tomorrow.

The 11 countries are: India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Austria, Russia, China, UK, Australia, Italy and Canada.

India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Vice-president Vinay Prabhakar Sahasrabudhe, MP, would represent his party, while opposition party National Congress leader Ghulam Nab Azad, also leader of the Opposition in Rajya Sabha, would represent his party. Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader Biman Basu would participate in the council as well.

Partha Chatterjee, education minister of West Bengal and All India Trinamool leader, Debabrata Biswas of All India Forward Bloc and leaders of other political parties of Tripura, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Mizoram would join the programme.

A five-member delegation, led by leader of Communist Party of China Zheng Xiaosong, would take part in the council, while former prime minister of Nepal KP Sharma Oli, also leader of the Communist Party of Nepal, would attend the event.

Among others, Canada Conservative Party leader Deepak Obhrai, Jenny Rathbone and Dilwar Ali of UK, Italy Democratic Party leader Ugo Papi, Dina Nath Dzungyel of Bhutan, Ernst Graft of Austria, Sergey Zheleznyak of Russia, Mohamad Hasheem of Sri Lanka would also attend the conference.

MEDIA COVERAGE

The AL has invited around 300 journalists from different local and international media outlets to cover its 20th national council.

Mrinal Kanti Das, deputy office secretary of the party, told The Daily Star that BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, Voice of America and other international media's Bangladesh correspondents have also been invited.

He, however, could not confirm the exact number of the media outlets as more than one person have been invited from a single media house to cover the event.

The Daily Star and the Daily Prothom Alo have not been invited.

BNP to send delegation to AL council

FROM PAGE 1

"We would also convey the BNP chairperson's message to the Awami League that it was walking in the opposite direction on democracy and tolerance. We would call upon the Awami League to return to the path of democracy," he added.

In 2009, a BNP delegation, led by then organising secretary Fazlul Haq Milon,

had taken part in the AL's national council while an AL delegation, led by Ashim Kumar Ukil, joined the BNP's council.

But no BNP leader attended the AL's council in 2012, said party sources.

BNP insiders said some senior party leaders on Thursday night discussed at the BNP chief Khaleda Zia's Gulshan office whether they should join the AL council.

Most of the leaders were of the opinion that the party should join the programme in a show of tolerance and moderate political culture. Moreover, this would help close the gap between the two archrivals.

However, a few leaders argued that the ruling party didn't attend the BNP's national council on March 19. Moreover, the government had created obstacles to

holding the council.

Speaking at a programme at the Jatiya Press Club yesterday, Moazzem Hossain Alal said: "You [AL] didn't join our council. You didn't even say sorry over the phone. But ours is not a narrow-minded party like yours and you will have the proof that the BNP is a moderate and democratic political party."

Earlier on Thursday, an AL delegation

invited BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir to its two-day 20th national council.

"We are happy that they invited us. We too had invited them to our council, but they didn't come. We will decide on attending the council after discussing the issue in the party forum," Fakhrul told journalists.

Trump booted in NY, assailed by Obama

FROM PAGE 16

OBAMA'S REBUKE

The 70-year-old billionaire is trailing badly in the polls, and his performance debate opened him up to a stinging attack from Obama at a rally in Miami.

"When you try to sow the seeds of doubt in people's minds about the legitimacy of our election, that undermines our democracy," Obama said.

"When you suggest rigging or fraud without a shred of evidence, when last night at the debate, Trump becomes the first major party nominee in American history to suggest that he will not concede despite losing... that is not a joke-

ing matter."

The unusually harsh comments suggest the White House believes this deep rancorous election is not just about defeating Trump or winning back control of Congress, but snuffing out his populist credo.

The reality TV star has defied political convention and brought far-right policies and conspiracies to the Republican mainstream.

The final 2016 presidential debate on Wednesday was dominated by Trump's refusal to say he would recognize a victory by Democrat Clinton, 68, who he accuses of conspiring to rig the vote

against him.

"There is no way to rig an election in a country this big," Obama fired back. "You are much likelier to get struck by lightning than have somebody next to you commit voter fraud."

His wife Michelle encouraged voters not to heed the Trump campaign's rigging allegations.

"They are trying to convince you that your vote doesn't matter," she told a Phoenix rally. "That the outcome has already been determined, and you shouldn't even bother to make your voice heard."

She added: "They are trying to take

away your hope."

Although Trump looks set to lose the election, his campaign sent into a tailspin by a stream of allegations of sexual misconduct, he is likely to garner as many as 50 million votes.

VOTE RIGGING

Despite isolated allegations of voter fraud, controversy over the tight 2000 vote and rampant gerrymandering, US elections have been regarded as free and fair.

Asked point-blank by a debate moderator on Wednesday whether he would accept the election result if he lost, the reality television star shattered that con-

sensus.

"I'll look at it at the time. What I've seen is so bad," he said, repeating unfounded allegations of vote rigging.

Asked again by the moderator, Trump said "I'll tell you at the time. I'll keep you in suspense, OK?"

His rival on the debate stage, and a phalanx of his fellow Republicans rushed to tell Trump it was not "OK."

Clinton declared herself "appalled" by what she said was an attack on 240 years of US democracy.

Trump's vice presidential running mate Mike Pence insisted "we'll accept the will of the American people."