

No doubt about fairness of polls

Says EC, some defeated candidates tell of influence, use of money

STAR REPORT

The first-ever Zila Parishad elections held yesterday were free, fair and peaceful, said Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad.

Except for those defeated by party rebels, the ruling Awami League-backed candidates expressed no doubt about the fairness of the polls.

Zila Parishad elections are different from other elections. Here voters are elected representatives of local government bodies.

"As voters were few, it was a challenge to maintain the secrecy of the voting. That's why special measures were taken. Directives were given so that voters didn't stuff ballots openly and take pictures of their ballots," the CEC told journalists at a press conference at the Election Commission.

The EC, as requested by the Speaker, had asked local lawmakers to leave their constituencies to ensure that they could not influence the polls.

During his visit to two polling centres in Dhaka, he saw the polls were held in a free and peaceful manner, Rakibuddin said and thanked law enforcers, election officials, journalists, observers and other stakeholders for cooperating with the EC.

"Today's Zila Parishad elections were free and fair. Through these local government elections, the practice of democracy will continue," said Dipu Moni, joint secretary general of the AL, at the party's Dhanmondi office.

However, those defeated had complaints.

Among them, AL-backed chairman candidate Md Shah Alam was defeated in Pirojpur by 121 votes by party rebel Mohiuddin Maharaj, district unit organising secretary.

Shah Alam alleged that local lawmaker and AL district unit President AKMA Awan and Minister Anwar Hossain Manju had worked for Maharaj. He also

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Super security

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Unprecedented security measures were taken in the maiden Zila Parishad elections and its reflection was there at many centres where law enforcers outnumbered voters.

Let's take the example of Sylhet's Modon Mohon College centre. As many as 300 law enforcers, including police, Rab and Ansars, were in and outside the centre to facilitate peaceful casting of votes by 104 voters.

About the deployment of such a huge number of law enforcers at the centre, Sylhet Metropolitan Police's Additional Deputy Commissioner Jeden Al Musa said the arrangement was made so that voters could feel secure to come to the centre.

For just 75 voters at Pabna Zila School centre, more than 100 law enforcers were deployed in the polling station.

Hundreds of supporters of different candidates also gathered in front of the centre around 9:30am.

Harunur Rashid, presiding officer of the centre, told The Daily Star that the number of law enforcers inside the centre was not more than 30, but around 100 more were deployed outside to maintain law and order.

"There is a peaceful atmosphere inside the centre. A good number of law enforcers are deployed outside so that they can keep the situation under control if there's any chaos," he said.

Siddikur Rahman, additional superintendent of police in Pabna, said, "We stepped up security in the district so that voters can come to the centres freely."

Some 721 law enforcers, including 446 policemen, 177 Ansar members, 48 Rab men and two platoons of Border Guard Bangladesh, were deployed in Natore where the number of voters was only 586 in 11 polling stations.

Sources in the Election

Correction

In a report headlined "TIB finds anomalies, illegal transactions" published in The Daily Star on December 19, it was mistakenly said that deans and departmental or institutional heads were among the beneficiaries of financial transactions during recruitment of lecturers at several public universities. However, the TIB report didn't mention these stakeholders as the beneficiaries of illegal transactions. We regret the error.

Mob beats two robbers to death

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

A mob in Tangail's Mirzapur upazila early yesterday beat two alleged robbers of a gang to death.

One of the deceased is Komol Das, 53, of Kola village in Natore's Gurudaspur upazila. The identity of the other could not be known.

Police and locals said a gang of 10 to 12 robbers committed robberies at several houses at Agdhalla, Katora and Ufukli villages in Jamurki union in the early hours of yesterday. The gang took cash, gold ornaments and other valuables from the houses holding the occupants of the houses at gunpoint.

As they were committing robbery at a house in Agdhalla, the family members screamed for help. Locals then surrounded and chased the robbers who fired shots in the air to make a getaway.

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Voters in queue at the Banbelgharia Govt Primary School polling centre in Natore Sadar yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Rebels stun AL in chairman posts

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Mahbub alleged that many of his party leaders were "sold out for some Tk 2 crore" on the night before the election. Ali dismissed the allegation as false.

Syed Ayub Ali, the AL-backed candidate in Narail who lost to party dissident Sohrab Hossain Biswas, claimed that some local party men, led by district AL President Shubash Chandra Bose and local MP Kabirul Haque Mukti, worked against him.

"They went against me for several reasons. The candidate spent at least Tk 1.5 crore to buy votes," he alleged.

In Pirojpur, AL-nominated chairman candidate Shah Alam made a similar claim. He lost to the party dissident Mohiuddin Maharaj.

Alam claimed Mohiuddin spent a heavy amount of money to buy votes.

Comments from Sohrab and Mohiuddin were not immediately available.

In the run-up to the elections, different media reported that chairman and member candidates were allegedly distributing money and gifts among influential voters. A number of MPs breached the electoral code of conduct

by seeking votes for their favourite candidates in different districts.

The BNP did not join the polls race, knowing it doesn't have enough electorate.

Also, the party alleged that the polls were in conflict with the constitution as the general public cannot vote in this election.

The JP, the main opposition in parliament, also boycotted the polls.

The 11 districts where AL rebels became chairmen are Rajshahi, Sunamganj, Panchagarh, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Pirojpur, Brahmanbaria, Narail, Meherpur, Satkhira and Chittagong.

The sole independent chairman candidate won in Nilphamari and the sole JP aspirant in Gaibandha.

MEMBERPOSTS

AL men also bagged member posts in most districts.

In Feni and Bhola, the ruling party men secured the member posts unopposed.

A district council is comprised of a chairman and 20 members, including five female members (reserved seat).

UNUSUAL POLLS

Yesterday's polls were different in many

counts.

Unlike the main feature of any other election in the country when the polling areas see festivity and assemblage of enthusiastic voters at the polling stations on the voting day, the picture was starkly different.

There was no long queue of voters. Voting began at 9:00am in 57 districts and ended at 2:00pm. Common people showed little interest in the voting. In some areas, people did not even know about the polls and had no idea who the voters were.

Take Mahmuda Khanam of Andarkilla area in Chittagong city. She was surprised to see a lot of policemen in front of Dr Khasatir Government Girls' High School, a polling centre. A police official asked her to take another lane as she was passing by the college.

"Actually, I did not know about the election," she said shyly, after a reporter of The Daily Star told her about it.

Azizur Rahman of Rajpur village in Lalmonirhat Sadar said, "There was little enthusiasm as there were no general voters."

It was the select electorate and sup-

porters of the candidates who showed any interest.

However, the election was held peacefully save for a few stray incidents of violence.

A clash between the supporters of two member candidates at Teguria High School polling centre in Chandpur left 10 people, including chairman of a union parishad, wounded.

In Madaripur, tension ran high at a polling station in Rajoir upazila when some outsiders led by upazila AL President Motaleb Mia tried to enter the centre before voting began. Later police chased them away.

Rajshahi-3 lawmaker Ayan Uddin met voters at Kesharhat municipality on Monday night and sought votes for his preferred chairman candidate, violating electoral law.

He even stayed at his constituency yesterday, ignoring the instruction given by the Speaker.

In Kurigram, BCL activists allegedly attacked AL rebel chairman candidate Panir Ahmed's microbus and vandalised the windowpanes.

Panir said his vehicle came under attack in Ulipur upazila around noon.

8 incumbents suffer rout

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which helped me win the polls," AL rebel Mohammad Ali Sarkar from Rajshahi told The Daily Star.

In 2011, the then AL government had appointed administrators, mostly party leaders, to district councils. This year, many district administrators resigned from office after winning support from the party.

In Sunamganj, incumbent district administrator and AL favourite Enamul Kabir Emon was defeated by party rebel Nurul Huda Mukut by 380 votes.

AL dissident Shafiqul Alam of

Brahmanbaria won the polls against party-backed Emdadul Bari by 51 votes.

In Rajshahi, AL rebel Mohammad Ali Sarkar beat former district administrator Mahbub Zaman Bhulu by 325 votes.

The AL's favourite in Meherpur, Kazi Mianjan, lost to fellow party leader Golam Rasul by 23 votes while AL rebel Nazrul Islam won the elections in Satkhira against former administrator Monsur Ahmed by 475 votes.

In Panchagarh, AL rebel Amanullah Bachchu defeated ex-district administrator Abu Bakar Siddique by 13 votes.

Momtazul Huq, the AL-backed candi-

date in Nilphamari, was defeated by independent candidate Joynal Abedin while the ruling party's favourite Syed Shamsul Alam Hero lost the polls in Gaibandha to Jatiya Party leader Ataur Rahman by 18 votes.

Apart from the eight candidates, AL-blessed district administrator hopefuls also lost to party dissidents in Pirojpur, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Narail and Chittagong.

Many family members of AL leaders, ministers and lawmakers took part in yesterday's elections.

Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Sharif's daughter Mahzabin Shirin Piya

and Health Minister Mohammed Nasim's brother-in-law Mohammad Sayedul Huq contested for chairman of Pabna District Council ignoring the party's decision. However, none of them could win the polls.

Prithi Haider, wife of State Minister for Water Resources Mahbubul Rahman, contested for women (reserved) councillor while State Minister for Fisheries and Livestock Narayan Chandra Chanda's son Abhijit Chandra and AL lawmaker from Khulna Mustafa Rashidi Suja's son Khalidin Rashidi Sukorno ran for councillor posts. All the three became victorious.

declared war on Japan. Three days later, Japan's European ally Nazi Germany declared war on the United States in turn.

"Here at Pearl Harbor, America's first battle of the Second World War roused a nation," Obama said. "Here in so many ways, America came of age."

Three quarters of a century on, he added, the alliance between the United States and Japan "has never been stronger."

Only five of the USS Arizona's crewmen are still alive. While the memorial remains a tourist draw, in Hawaii -- Obama's home state -- the divisions of war have given way to a shared present.

"Hawaii has a very multi-ethnic population with a very large Japanese population," Stanley Chang, a Democratic state senator, told AFP.

"I don't think there is any feeling of antipathy toward the Japanese 75 years after the attack."

Abe makes Pearl Harbor pilgrimage

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Americans killed on December 7, 1941, delivering a wreath of peace lilies and standing in silence before a shrine to those lost on the USS Arizona -- roughly half of all those killed.

Abe's visit is a high-profile mark of contrition by a leader for whom Japan's wartime past is often a sensitive domestic issue.

"We must never repeat the horrors of war," he said. "What has bonded us together is the power of reconciliation, made possible through the spirit of tolerance."

Obama -- who last May made a solemn pilgrimage to Hiroshima, the target of a US nuclear bomb that effectively ended the war -- issued remarks that rang with history and America's current hypercharged politics.

"I welcome you here in the spirit of friendship," he told Abe. "I hope that, together, we send a message to the world that there is more to be won in peace than in war, that reconciliation

carries more rewards than retribution."

"Even when hatred burns hottest, even when the tug of tribalism is at its most primal, we must resist the urge to turn inward," Obama said against the backdrop of the USS Arizona.

"We must resist the urge to demonize those who are different."

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

The meeting comes as Obama prepares to leave office and with Abe leading Japan into uncharted waters after remarks by incoming US president Donald Trump clouded US-Japanese relations.

Trump, who takes office on January 20, appeared during his campaign to suggest Japan break a taboo and develop its own nuclear weapons.

He caused consternation again last week when he threatened to revive the global nuclear arms race.

The US president-elect has also declared his opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership, effectively killing a

major trade deal that Obama championed and Abe put at the heart of his economic strategy.

And -- on the campaign trail at least -- Trump called into question US security guarantees that shielded Japan through the Cold War and later the rise of an increasingly confident China.

What he will do in office is unknown.

Three Japanese prime ministers, including Abe's grandfather, visited Hawaii in the 1950s but Abe is the first sitting PM to pay his respects at the USS Arizona Memorial, which was built in the 1960s.

In an emotive speech on the waterfront, he imagined the long-silent voices of American victims chatting about their futures and their dreams, praying for as-yet unborn children before the carnage.

"All of that was brought to an end," he said in Japanese. "When I contemplate that solemn reality, I am rendered entirely speechless."

After Pearl Harbor, the US Congress

JAPANESE SHRINE CONTROVERSY
Meanwhile, in Tokyo, cabinet minister Masahiro Imamura offered prayers at the Yasukuni war shrine that has been a flashpoint for criticism by countries that suffered under Japanese aggression in the first half of the 20th century.

"I reported about work to the gods and prayed for our country's peace and prosperity," he said, according to the Asahi Shimbun daily, stressing that the visit had "nothing to do with" Abe's trip to Pearl Harbor.

Those honoured by the controversial shrine include senior military and political figures convicted of war crimes.

In 1941, the legendary Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto manoeuvred six aircraft carriers to within 240 miles (385 kilometers) of Oahu and unleashed two waves of dive bombers.

The US Pacific fleet, formerly Japan's main rival in the region, lost 21 warships and 328 planes.

After Pearl Harbor, the US Congress

Jewellery from human teeth