



Supporters of Maldivian joint-opposition presidential candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih celebrate on the street at the end of the presidential election in Male, Maldives yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Surprise victory for opposition

FROM PAGE 1
the opposition sparse and monitors and the opposition predicting vote-rigging.

There had been concerns Yameen might not accept the result given what happened after the last election in 2013.

The Supreme Court annulled that result after Yameen trailed former president Mohamed Nasheed -- giving Yameen time to forge alliances and win a second round of voting that was postponed twice.

Results released by the electoral commission showed Yameen on 41.7 percent of the vote, well behind Solih on 58.3 percent -- the only other name on ballot papers.

The final official result will take up to a week to be published.

Yameen stayed quiet overnight after the outcome became clear. But signs grew yesterday that he would throw in the towel, with a foreign ministry statement saying Solih had won and state media showing him claiming victory.

Nearly 90 percent of the 262,000 electorate turned out to vote, with some waiting in line for more than five hours.

Celebrations broke out across the archipelago on Sunday night, with opposition supporters waving yellow

flags of Solih's Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) and dancing in the streets.

The situation was calm yesterday. The US State Department, which had warned of "appropriate measures" if the vote was not free and fair, had called on Yameen to "respect the will of the people".

Regional superpower India said the result marked "the triumph of democratic forces". But China was yet to comment, with yesterday being a public holiday there.

Beijing loaned Yameen's government hundreds of millions of dollars for infrastructure projects like the new "China-Maldives Friendship Bridge" from the airport to the capital Male, which opened in August.

The loans stoked fears among Western countries and India about China's growing influence under its "Belt and Road Initiative" stretching from Asia into Africa and Europe.

MEDIA FEARFUL
Solih had the backing of a united opposition trying to oust Yameen but struggled for visibility. The local media was fearful of falling foul of heavy-handed decrees and reporting restrictions.

In February Yameen imposed a 45-day state of emergency, alarming the international community, in what was seen as an attempt to block a push by his opponents in parliament to

impeach him.

A crackdown saw former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom -- Yameen's half-brother -- jailed along with the Chief Justice and another Supreme Court justice.

Independent international monitors were barred from Sunday's election and only a handful of foreign media were allowed in to cover the poll.

The government had used "vaguely worded laws to silence dissent and to intimidate and imprison critics", some of whom had been assaulted and even murdered, according to Human Rights Watch.

Solih pledged on Twitter before the election that he would open investigations into the disappearance of journalist Ahmed Rilwan, missing since 2014, and the fatal stabbing of blogger Yameen Rasheed in 2017.

He also promised to repeal anti-defamation legislation and "ensure press freedom".

Foreign monitors said Yameen's supporters failed to carry out any large-scale fraud thanks to intense international and local scrutiny from civil society groups.

"In the face of massive pressure, they had to abandon their plans," Rohana Hettiarachchi of the Asian Network for Free Elections told AFP.

Alarm raised over Digital Security Act

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have been included in the Digital Security Act 2018 which directly undermines Section 3 of the RTI Act. Section 3 stipulates that the RTI Act will prevail over any Act that may create obstacles in providing information or is conflicting with provisions of the RTI law.

The Digital Security Act not only contradicts parts of the RTI Act, but also raises questions about the government's capacity to be consistent in law-making, the forum observed.

It also lamented that the Digital Security Act creates wide opportunities to restrict the space for raising informed public opinions and ensuring transparency and accountability of public institutions, reducing corruption, and establishing good governance as outlined in the preamble of the RTI Act 2009.

The forum further observed that the Digital Security Act is clearly inconsistent with the fundamental constitutional rights to freedom of speech and expression as per Article 39 of the Constitution and, therefore, undermines democracy and human rights, which are among the fundamental principles of state policy.

Bangladesh's commitment under Sustainable Development Goal 16.10, that obliges the government to pro-

mote free flow of information, will also become nationally and internationally questionable, the forum further added.

The RTI Forum, a coalition of more than 45 organisations, played a pivotal role in the enactment of the right to information law in 2009 and has been supporting the government its implementation and promotion since then.

Meanwhile, journalist's organisation Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU) yesterday expressed grave concerns over the Digital Security Act 2018 as well, saying that some harsh and objectionable provisions in the law would create obstructions in the way of independent journalism.

They also criticised the government for passing the law, while ignoring the concerns and recommendations of journalists.

The organisation urged the government to review the law with the light of the journalists' recommendations and revoke the objectionable provisions from the law.

In a statement, DRU president Saiful Islam and its joint secretary Moin Uddin Khan said that journalists had been expressing concerns over some provisions ever since the draft was approved in the cabinet meeting.

Journalist leaders demanded to scrap the much-debated provisions from the law after meeting with the ministers concerned and also sent their recommendations to parliamentary standing committee.

"The government also assured the journalists that there would be no such harsh provisions. But the bill was passed in the parliament ignoring the concerns and recommendations of journalists," the statement added.

The DRU observed that the existence of the RTI Act beside Official Secrets Act is conflicting and enabling the police to exercise unfettered power -- to search, seize and arrest anyone without a warrant -- may create the risk of harassment for journalists.

"Such provisions are against basic human rights and democracy," the statement added.

In the meantime, rights body Human Rights Support Society (HRSS) expressed solidarity with the human chain programme called by the Sampadak Parishad (Editors' Council) that will be formed in front of Jatiya Press Club on September 29.

The organisation requested President Abdul Hamid not to approve the law and urged him to return it for a review.

Scoring big with Avocados

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capital himself to market his goods to vendors in Banani, Gulshan and Kawran Bazaar.

It was during one such trip that he learned about the avocado.

In 2000, he brought back the fruit from Manik Mia, a fruit vendor in Dhaka, and tried to graft it. He planted two saplings on a piece of unused land near a pond on his property.

Much to his delight, the two trees matured and first bore the fruit in the year 2006. Ali now has 25 trees altogether.

"Last year, ten trees bore around 255 kilograms of avocados, which I sold for more than Tk 1 lakh," he said.

This year, he has already harvested 90 kilograms from five trees and sold those to his regular vendors in Dhaka on August 29 for Tk 35,000.

"This fruit enables a grower to reap returns every year with low investments," said Ali.

Ali mostly cultivates winter crops, leaving him relatively free for the rest of the year. The avocado trees bear flowers once a year in March and can be harvested around August.

The hardworking farmer is now a role model for his peers across Bangladesh.

"I purchased nearly 15 bighas of land from the proceeds of my sales."

On September 17, 2011, he was even awarded the Best Agro Entrepreneur of the year at the Citi Micro Entrepreneurship Award 2010 and he received the award from Finance Minister AMA Muhith and then Governor of Bangladesh Bank Atiur Rahman.

Abdur Rahim (horticulturist), deputy director of Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Bogura, said, "Anwar Ali was the first to cultivate this crop commercially in this region. Three years ago, I visited his field and brought back three saplings for research purposes at the institution as well."

"Demand for avocados in Bangladesh is increasing day by day due to its nutrition value. If farmers can make seedlings through grafting, it will not take long to bear fruit."

Saifur Rahman, deputy director of Chapainawabganj Horticulture Centre, said, "The fruit has 34 percent monounsaturated fats, which are beneficial for the heart. Saturated fat reduces bad cholesterol and triglycerides and increases the amount of good cholesterol."

"In the last few years, farmers have begun growing avocados in

Chapainawabganj, Dinajpur, Narayanganj and Bogura for commercial purposes.

"However, there is one technical aspect to growing this fruit. Avocado saplings need to be planted in a group of 4-6. Otherwise the yield will not be good due to pollination problems. For commercial purposes, it is best to plant more than eight trees on the same piece of land at a time," the horticulturist said.

About 500 avocado seedlings are being produced under the project Year Round Fruit Production for Nutritional Improvement (YRFP) at the Gazipur Nurbagh Model Horticulture Center, said Rahman. "We will distribute it at threshold levels throughout the country by district horticultural centres to tackle nutrition deficiencies among the population."

On the main obstacle to farming seasonal fruits, Ali said there is a lack of cold storage facilities across Bangladesh. "I mainly grow seasonal crops, but there is demand the whole year round. If we could properly store these crops, we could get good prices throughout the year."

Five 'militants'

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His death sparked a wave of violent protests in the part of Kashmir administered by India.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan called it an "arrogant and negative response" to his calls for the resumption of peace talks.

India's Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj said Khan had written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi last week about a "readiness to discuss terrorism" but had shown his "true face".

India has long accused Pakistan of arming rebel groups in Kashmir, which has been divided between the two countries since the end of British colonial rule in 1947.

India also accuses Pakistan of financing the deadly 2008 militant attacks in Mumbai.

Rebel groups have since 1989 been fighting Indian police and soldiers deployed in Kashmir. They seek its unification with Pakistan or its independence.

Tens of thousands, mostly civilians, have died in the fighting.

Drug dealer

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Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

Rab claimed to have recovered two firearms, 10kg of cannabis and 1,000 yaba tablets from the spot.

With Asadul, at least 234 suspected drug peddlers or traders have so far been killed since the nationwide anti-narcotics drive began on May 4. Most of them were killed in so-called shoot-outs involving police and Rab.

In Madaripur, an alleged robber was killed in what police claimed was a shootout in Shirkhara area under Sadar upazila around 5:00am.

The deceased, Alim Mollah, 30, of Kalkini upazila, was accused in at least three cases, reports our Faridpur correspondent, quoting police.

Subrato Kumar Halder, superintendent of Madaripur police, gave almost similar narratives of gunfight and said bullet-hit Alim was declared dead after being taken to Madaripur Sadar Hospital.

Police claimed to have recovered a firearm from the spot.

PM blasts

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Manna was elected president and general secretary of Dhaka University Central Student Union (Ducus) time and again as he was in the good books of Ziaur Rahman and HM Ershad.

She, however, welcomed them for being able to come under one platform. "Let them join the election. If people cast their votes for them, they will come to power. I've no problem."

Last month, Bikalpadhara Bangladesh, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and Nagorik Oikya formed a new alliance called Juktofront, which recently forged unity with Dr Kamal's Jatiya Oikya Prokriya.

On Saturday, several top BNP leaders shared the stage with Dr Kamal and Badruddoza at a citizens' rally in the capital and extended full support to Jatiya Oikya Prokriya's demands, including formation of a polls-time neutral government.

The rally was also joined by leaders of nine other components of the BNP-led 20-party alliance.

ON DIGITAL SECURITY ACT
The PM said parliament recently passed the Digital Security Bill to prevent the bad impacts of social networks and digital devices.

Blasting journalists for criticising the law, she said they only think about their own interests, but they don't consider the social problems caused by the digital devices.

Hasina arrived in New York on Sunday to join the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly.

A British Airways flight carrying the PM and her entourage touched down at Newark Liberty International Airport, New Jersey, at 2:10pm (local time).

Bangladesh Ambassador to the US Mohammad Ziauddin and Bangladesh permanent representative to the UN Masud Bin Momen received her at the airport.

Italy government adopts anti-migrant decree

AFP, Rome

The Italian government yesterday adopted a security decree which will make it easier to expel migrants and strip them of Italian citizenship.

The new bill is "a step forward to make Italy safer," Interior Minister Matteo Salvini said on Facebook.

He added that it would help Italy "be stronger in the fight against the mafia and (people) smugglers".

Parliament has 60 days to vote the bill into law.

Salvini said the decree streamlines the rules for processing asylum requests and brings Italy into line with other EU countries.

Humanitarian protection -- a lower level of asylum that is based on Italian rather than international law -- would be awarded based on six strict criteria.

These include whether there was urgent medical need or if the applicant was the victim of a natural disaster, Salvini told journalists.

Liaison body

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week of October.

Meanwhile, the BNP is considering whether to invite the unity leaders to its Thursday's rally, insiders said wishing anonymity.

Mahmudur Rahman Manna, convener of Nagorik Oikyo, said the unity will have joint leadership.

Other leaders of the unity process said BNP's participation in last Saturday's programme made it clear that a greater unity has formed, but some basic issues are not clear yet.

"We will sit with the BNP leaders soon and decide on the next course of action," Dr Kamal said, adding they will be able to finalise everything by September 30.

The unity leaders also decided to hold a meeting with professional bodies on Wednesday at the Institute of Engineers in the capital.

In Saturday's rally, Dr Kamal and Badruddoza demanded formation of a polls-time neutral government in consultation with political parties.

Meanwhile, BNP leaders think having all leaders of the unity on the same stage on Thursday will be a step towards forging unity.

The party sought permission for a rally either at Suhrawardy Udyan or Naya Paltan.

BNP Joint Senior Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi announced the event

at a press conference at the party's Naya Paltan office yesterday.

He said the rally will be held on various political issues. The last BNP rally was held at Naya Paltan on September 1.

Manna said the unity leaders expect BNP to finalise its strategy regarding the greater unity by Thursday. "If we are invited, we are likely to join the meeting."

BNP Standing Committee Member Nazrul Islam Khan said, "We hope we will get permission from the authorities concerned and we will decide [about inviting unity leaders] soon."

The BNP will place its seven-point demand and 12-point vision for the greater national unity at Thursday's rally, he said.

The seven-point demands include election under a non-partisan interim government, dissolution of parliament, deployment of army, no use of EVMs and release of arrested BNP men.

BNP standing committee members met and decided this yesterday night at the BNP chairperson's Gulshan office.

In Saturday's meeting at Mahanagar Natya Mancha, several top leaders of the BNP and its allies shared the stage with Dr Kamal and representatives of several parties and civil society members.

The Jatiya Oikya Prokriya leaders announced a plan to hold rallies across the country from October 1.

Govt curbing people's rights

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Sultana said those who ascended to power calling themselves part of the pro-liberation force are moving away from their position and making ties with anti-liberation forces and fundamentalists.

On freedom of expression, she said, "Our every word and steps are being criminalised ... are my writings, talking and movement crimes? where is freedom?"

Prof Gitara Nasreen of mass communication and journalism department at Dhaka University said, "I now worry all the time about how others would interpret my speech. I have begun to distrust the person beside me and I wonder if sharing a thing will cause me trouble."

Prof Anu Muhammad of department of economics at Jahangirnagar University said law enforcement agencies have been given unfettered power which they arbitrarily use to detain people.

He suggested that people should not be afraid of such repression. "The more we become frightened, the more the government will be successful."

Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), said people do not raise their voice against the government fearing it would be labelled "politically motivated".

She said the government only takes legal action against people who give opinions that go against the government.

Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum General Secretary Sanjeeb Drong said, "The repression began with the indigenous people after the independence and now the high-profile people of the capital are being repressed."

"If the government can treat a person like Shahidul Alam in such a manner, it can easily be inferred how brutally the government treats people in general," he said.

"Be it the Digital Security Act, police or Rab, these are not for serving the people, those are for frightening people," he said.

Human rights activist Hamida Hossain said the constitution guarantees right to life but the government could not ensure this. She suggested formation of "people's tribunal" where people would talk about their distress.

Prof Mesbah Kamal of history department at Dhaka University said, "I doubt whether the people in the government

understand what spirit of the Liberation War means, but they use the term."

Baki Billah, a blogger, said when he was reading the digital security act, it felt like the people were the opposition and that the state was using the act to protect itself.

The speakers at the dialogue demanded release of noted photographer Shahidul Alam. His wife and rights activist Rehnuna Ahmed called on people to unite and free the country from repression and ensure human rights.

Rights activist Ajoy Roy, Shirin Haque, Imran H Sarkar, and journalist Mafuz Ullah also spoke.

Tangail MP

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against the 21 to the Judicial Magistrate's Court in Tangail, Anarul Islam, court inspector in the district, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Rana, Awami League lawmaker from Tangail-3 (Ghatail) constituency, has been charged with ordering from jail to kill BCL leader Abu Sayeed Rubel, the then vice-president of Ghatail GBC College Chhatra Sangsad, he said.

Rana is in jail since he surrendered to a Tangail court on September 18, 2016, in Tangail district AL leader and freedom fighter Faruk Ahmed murder case.

The court will hear the case on November 18, Anarul added.

In the case statement, it was said some criminals hacked Rubel on November 9, 2016, leaving him critically injured.

The following day, his father Atab Ali lodged a case with Ghatail Police Station against 17 people.

Ghatail police later arrested two accused of the case -- Abdul Jabbar alias Kala Babu and Selim. Jabbar gave confessional statements before the court on December 20, 2016, and Selim on November 29, 2017.

The duo, in their statements, told the court that when they had met Rana in Kashimpur Central Jail in Gazipur, the lawmaker had expressed his anger at Rubel as he organised different programmes, demanding justice of Faruk murder. Later, they attacked Rubel to kill him, said police.

The investigation of the case was later handed over to DB police.

Licence of lies

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doctor certifying that you have a "medical condition" for which you need to drink.

It is now ubiquitously recognised that alcohol is always harmful to health and yet Bangladesh law permits a person to drink on medical grounds.

Alcohol may cause cancer, liver disease and damage kidney. It also leads to hypertension. The UK's chief medical officers say new research shows any amount of alcohol can increase the risk of cancer.

Once it was thought in the UK that a man could safely drink 21 units a week. But it was reviewed in 1995 and a new guideline said a person whether a man or a woman could take up to 14 units a week. Fourteen units mean 14 single measures of spirits or seven pints of average-strength (4%) lager beer.

According to the UK's National Health Service (NHS), a study of almost 600,000 drinkers showed that people who drank more than 12.5 units (100g) of alcohol a week were likely to die sooner than those who drank no more than this amount.

And yet Bangladesh allows a person to drink only on "medical condition".

Such an archaic law perhaps exists nowhere in the world except in India and Pakistan as a legacy of the 1909 Bengal Excise Act.

Based on this law, the Pakistan government had issued the drinking permit guideline in 1950. Later in 1990 a new Narcotic Control Act was made which said no Bangladeshi Muslim person will be given the per-

mit to drink alcohol without the written prescription of a civil surgeon or an associate professor of medicine of a medical college.

The doctor must mention in the prescription the disease for which alcohol is required to drink.

Anybody drinking without licence will be punished up to two years in jail or a fine of Tk 5,000 or both.

However absurd this law may sound, it is being used both to harass people politically or to make money out of the drinkers by the police.

Former communication minister Anwar Hossain Monju was jailed for five years and fined Tk 10,000 during the last army-backed caretaker government for possessing 21 bottles of foreign liquor in 2007. Similar charges were brought against BNP leader Moudud Ahmed during the purge against politicians. Moudud was arrested for possessing illegally a few bottles of wine and canes of beer in his residence. He was even placed on remand in this case.

But many people The Daily Star talked to have said they are often subjected to extraction of money by police at check posts if they do not carry the permit.

According to officials at the Department of Narcotics Control, around 13, 000 people have permit to drink foreign liquor while 28,000 have permit to consume local liquor. But the size of liquor market suggests the number of people who drink alcohol is many folds bigger than the number of permits. This questions the effectiveness of the system of permission.