

FROM CAMPAIGN TRAIL

KHULNA, SATKHIRA

# Voters skeptic about EVM use

SHARIFUL ISLAM and DIPANKAR ROY

Confusion remains among many over casting votes using electronic voting machines in Satkhira-2 and Khulna-2 as they have no practical knowledge of the machines.

Besides, rumours have been swirling around in the two constituencies that there would be irregularities in the use of EVMs on the polling day.

Moksed Ali, a rickshaw puller from Satkhira's Bhomra, said, "Many people have been saying that the EVM will help officials identify who cast his vote for which electoral symbol."

Mentioning that they were still in the dark about the EVM, voters said the Election Commission didn't conduct enough publicity campaigns to make them aware about the machine's use.

They expressed concern that unschooled voters might face difficulties in casting votes.

According to Election Commission documents, EVM displays have so far been held in eight out of total 22 wards in Khulna-2. Such programmes will be organised in five more wards tomorrow.

Doly Khatun, a worker at a fish processing firm, lives in Khulna city's WAPDA slum -- home to over 8,000 low income people in ward-22.

Talking to this newspaper last week, she said, "EVMs should be used in polling centres of some specific areas inhabited by educated people as we are not well aware of their use."

Like Doly, some other slum dwellers, mostly females, expressed worries about using voting machines.

"I am worried about casting my vote using an EVM because I know nothing about it. I will be ashamed if I cannot operate the machine properly. In that case, I will leave the polling centre without casting my vote," said Roksana.

At least 10 other women voters echoed the worries of Roksana.

For the first time in the country's history, the Election Commission is going to use EVMs in the coming parliamentary election. For this, the EC has selected six constituencies by a lottery.

EVMs will also be used in Dhaka-6 and 13, Chattogram-9 and Rangpur-3 during the voting on December 30.

In Satkhira-2 (Sadar), 698 polling booths will be set up in 137 voting centres while Khulna-2 (Sadar and Sonadanga) will have 720 booths in 157 centres.

Talking to The Daily Star a few days ago, Satkhira Returning Officer SM Mostafa Kamal, also the district deputy commissioner, said people generally get worried whenever a new system is introduced. "We will conduct publicity campaigns to make people interested in EVMs."

M Majharul Islam, senior district election officer in Khulna, said the EC would try to hold EVM display and mock voting in all the polling centres in Khulna-2.

Mir Mostak Ahmed Robi, ruling Awami League candidate in Satkhira-2, said votes could be cast promptly and maintaining transparency by using EVMs.

BNP nominee Nazrul Islam Monju said Khulna-2 is one of the risky constituencies in the Khulna division.

The AL men were accused of stamping ballots and rigging polls results during the last city corporation polls, he added.

Azizur Rahman, publicity secretary of Satkhira Jamaat-e-Islami, alleged that the government was going to use EVMs "to rig the polls results digitally."

Khulna Mayor Talukder Abdul Khaleque, also the city AL president, said his party wants that the election should be held in a transparent and acceptable manner so that no one can raise any question about it.



Awami League President Sheikh Hasina addresses a rally at the Gulshan Youth Club ground yesterday in support of party candidates of eight constituencies under Dhaka North City Corporation.

PHOTO: PID

## Hasina pledges modern capital

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In her 30-minute speech, Hasina also promised that if her party returns to power, subway train service would be launched in the capital to end the nagging traffic congestion.

A survey is being conducted regarding underground metro rail, she added.

Dhaka North AL organised the rally at Gulshan Youth Club ground as part of electoral campaigns for the party candidates in eight constituencies under Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC).

Coming down heavily on the BNP and its chairperson, the AL chief said Khaleda Zia and her two sons -- Tarique Rahman and Arafat Rahman -- were involved in large-scale corruption when the BNP-led alliance was in power.

"Sheaf of paddy" (the BNP's electoral symbol) means militancy, money laundering, corruption and misappropriation of orphans' money. On the other hand, "boat" (the AL's electoral symbol) means peace, progress and prosperity of people, she mentioned.

"We didn't indulge in corruption

by creating Hawa Bhaban ... We will not do that. Our aim is not to make fortunes for ourselves like the BNP.

"Our aim is to bring prosperity to the people. We didn't misappropriate orphans' funds like Khaleda Zia did.

"You [voters] have to cast your ballots, considering this."

The rally was scheduled for 2:00pm. AL leaders and activists started arriving at the venue since noon.

Party supporters in their hundreds gathered there with placards, festoons, and portraits of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Hasina. They also carried posters, banners and photographs of the eight AL candidates in Dhaka North.

The venue became full to the brim before Hasina arrived there around 3:40pm.

Addressing the rally, the AL president said if her party is voted to power again, it would construct flats for low-income people and put the electricity lines underground.

Amid cheers from party leaders and activists, she said her government resolved the acute crisis of water and electricity in the capital and other parts of the country after coming to

power through the 2008 election.

Now the city is free from power cuts and water crisis, Hasina mentioned.

All the roads in the capital were in a poor condition when the AL took office in 2009. The city was also reeling from problems, including terrorism, militancy and mugging.

The AL-led government solved those problems one after another, she pointed out.

The AL chief further said her party's foremost goal is to change the lot of people, not to help its supporters make fortunes.

Once, Dhaka Medical College and Hospital was the only hospital for the city residents. The AL-led government set up hospitals in many parts of the capital for providing them with modern healthcare services, she said.

Hasina further said her government has already taken a project to build multi-storey buildings for slum dwellers and people from low and middle-income groups. They will be able to live in those flats on the basis of daily, weekly or monthly rents.

She mentioned that work on the metro rail and elevated expressway has been going on. An elevated ring

road would also be built around the capital.

Dhaka city was divided into two parts, and all unions of Gulshan, Banani and a part of Dhaka North were brought under the DNCC to provide citizens with all civic amenities, she said.

At one stage of her speech, Hasina wanted to know from the audience whether they would cast votes for the AL. In response, the audience said "yes".

Hasina said, "The tide is in favour of boat ... Boat will win, Inshallah.

"We will form a government again and serve you."

The AL chief introduced the eight party candidates to the audience, urging voters to cast ballots for them.

The contenders are -- AKM Rahmatullah in Dhaka-11, Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal in Dhaka-12, Sadeq Khan in Dhaka-13, Aslamul Haq in Dhaka-14, Kamal Majumder in Dhaka-15, Ilias Uddin Mollah in Dhaka-16, actor Akbor Hossain Pathan popularly known as Farooque in Dhaka-17, Sahara Khatun in Dhaka-18 and Salman F Rahman in Dhaka-1.

## Violence part of election culture

Election Commissioner Rafiqul says in Rajshahi

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Violence during election campaign is part of the country's political culture, Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam said yesterday.

"In our normal culture beyond politics, we are accustomed to fight and exchange of hot words, and when it comes to politics, things get heated up. It doesn't feel good if there is no heat," he said while responding to queries by journalists at Rajshahi Shilpakala Academy auditorium.

His comment came at a time when the rift between Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda and Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar has deepened over the issue of level playing field for the December 30 national polls.

Rafiqul compared the ongoing

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## Job, transport, education

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strategy, communications and empowerment at Brac, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"The new government, whoever it is, must take up massive measures to create jobs by engaging the private and non-profit sectors."

He said there had been a jobless growth over the years, and that it was predicted that the job growth might come down in future with automation in industries.

"Therefore, we really need to think differently how to create more jobs for our huge number of youths joining the labour force every year.

"Quality education here is another top issue. We need to focus more on some foundational aspects so that students become analytical and efficient in communications. It will help them be competent in the changing jobs scenario," he said.

He also said the transport sector, being a public priority, has been really "surprising". This proves that the mobility of people is growing fast and that they want road safety, he added.

PEOPLE'S PRIORITIES

For new (aged 18-23), young (aged 24-35) or middle-aged voters (36-60), the priority is more or less similar with the top being employment followed by transport and education. But for old aged (60 plus) people, transport infrastructure development is the highest priority, the survey said.

The top three priority areas are same for both male and female, but the number of male who think that employment generation should be the top priority in the election manifesto is higher than that of the female.

On the other hand, education is more important for females than males (24.6pc versus 23.1pc).

Young female participants' priority choices are different from the "usual priority list". For them, number one priority is transport (27.7pc), followed by employment and education.

At least 38.8 percent of those surveyed in the city corporation areas think employment should be the highest priority, while it was 28.9 percent for the people in rural areas. At least 28.3 percent respondents in rural areas think transport should be the top

priority.

People with higher level of education prioritised employment and education, according to the survey.

For farmers and labourers, the most important issue has been found transport. But for the employed and unemployed people as well as students, the most important issue is unemployment.

For the people in Cox's Bazar, the highest priority is fair election, followed by the Rohingya crisis.

KNOWLEDGE ON MANIFESTO

More than two third or 68.6 percent respondents have heard about election manifesto and the knowledge about it is higher among the male participants compared to their female counterparts.

People in Barisal division (81.8pc) and Mymensingh division (81.6pc) know more about election manifesto whereas people from Dhaka division (59.1pc) know about it the least.

Not surprisingly, rural people heard less about election manifesto than those in urban areas. Knowledge about the manifesto is much higher among better educated people.

Though 82.8 percent respondents

consider election manifesto as important documents, only one out of four respondents has ever gone through one. But the percentage is significantly low among females than males.

Forty nine percent respondents said candidates' acceptability and qualifications were the key factors that govern voting decisions. And, 30.6 percent respondents said they were influenced by electoral symbols of the parties. Only 6.9 percent respondents consider manifestos before making a voting decision.

But for nearly 53 percent females and middle-aged people (36 to 60), qualification of the candidates are more important in making voting decision, while political party is important for farmers (38.4pc) and businessmen (37.2pc).

For 69.1 percent respondents, commitment towards resolving pressing national issues govern voting decisions, while 25.1 percent respondents said promises to deal with local or regional issues matter most to them.

Interestingly, people living in rural areas, labourers and farmers are more concerned about the local problems.

## A situation

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opposition leaders and activists. This hampers the congenial atmosphere of the election."

Dr Kamal, also the Gonoforum president, urged the government and the law enforcement agencies not to turn the December 30 election into a farce.

"You should show a minimum of respect to the country's constitution and democracy. The constitution suggests that the police should play a neutral role. But we see they have been violating it."

The eminent jurist also called upon the government and the police to keep calm as the election was only a week away.

"It can't be called a victory if you win an election in such a way. If you do so, it will destroy the constitution and deprive people of exercising their franchise."

Urging the government to stop such activities immediately, he said it would be accused of violating the constitution if it did otherwise.

"If people cannot cast their vote freely, it will be a big blow to the country's independence."

Asked whether the Oikyafront would boycott the election, he said they would not want to quit the race no matter how worse the situation became.

About the silence of a neighbouring country over the recent attacks on opposition men, Dr Kamal said they expected that country to play its role in maintaining democracy in the region.

'POLICE MAIN RIVAL'

Reading out a written statement at the press conference, Oikyafront leader Jaglul Haider Afrik alleged that the police became their main rival.

A big group of the police force has been "behaving like party cadres violating their neutrality". The administration has been treating the Oikyafront leaders and activists as its opponent, he said.

The Jatiya Oikyafront expects the police administration to take the right path immediately, he added.

The Oikyafront also urged the Election Commission to reschedule the election in the constituencies where its nominees' candidacy got cancelled by the court.

As many as 15 Oikyafront candidates have got their election bid cancelled by the apex court.

The current situation indicates that there is no level playing field and the atmosphere is not suitable for people to cast their votes freely, it said addressing the EC.

The Oikyafront announced a grand rally at Suhrawardy Udyan on December 27.

## BANGLADESH POLLS UN closely observing situation

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The United Nations has said it is closely following the situation ahead of the upcoming general election in Bangladesh scheduled for December 30.

"We are following the situation closely and it is very important as a matter of principle that anywhere there are elections, that they be conducted freely and fairly and that the space be given for people to express themselves," said Stéphane Dujarric, spokesman for the UN secretary-general.

He made the comment on Thursday during the daily press briefing at UN headquarters in New York while responding to a question on free, fair and credible polls in Bangladesh in the context of crack-down on opposition candidates and supporters ahead of the polls.

On December 10, Dujarric made it clear that the UN does not send observers saying, "The UN has no

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## 24 injured as JP rally attacked in Chattogram

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Shahidul Islam Hasting, member of the candidate's campaign coordination committee, said local BNP-Jamaat men might be behind the attack.

Ataur is the father of incumbent AL lawmaker Amanur Rahman Khan Rana.

A group of unidentified people vandalised an election camp of BNP candidate for Tangail-2 Sultan Salahuddin Tuku in Bhuaupur upazila's Biramdi area around 12:30am.

The vandals were chanting "Joy Bangla", the slogan of ruling AL, during the attack, claimed Selim Miah, elder brother of Tuku who is

now behind bars.

In Chattogram, criminals torched and vandalised two polls camps of Chattogram-4 AL candidate Didarul Alam in Gozaria Dighir Par and Bhuiyanpara areas of Sitakunda upazila early yesterday, said police.

"It is not clear who attacked the camps. We're investigating the incidents," said Inspector (Investigation) Afzal Hossain of Sitakunda Police Station.

Sitakunda Municipality Mayor Badiul Alam, also the chief of the AL's election campaign coordination committee in the municipality, said they suspected that Jamaat-Shibir men might have carried out the

attacks to harm the election environment.

ARRESTS, CASES

Police arrested Jamaat leader Mohammed Abu Sayeed Shahadat Hossain from his residence in Jhikargachha upazila around 11:30am yesterday. He is running the national election in Jashore-2 on BNP ticket.

Shahadat has been facing several sabotage cases. On October 30, he secured bail from the High Court in one of those.

Abdur Razzak, OC of Jhikargachha Police Station, said Shahadat didn't appear in the court after expiry of his bail term.

## OC 'seeks vote', clip goes viral

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the Oikyafront candidate in Satkhira-1 constituency, submitted a written complaint to the Election Commission and demanded his immediate withdrawal.

"Some ruling party men, led by OC Maruf, have been carrying out violent attacks on the residents of BNP's leaders and activists for the last couple of

days," Habib told The Daily Star, adding that he had been staying outside of his constituency for the last few days due to security concerns.

"The minimum election atmosphere is even absent in Satkhira-1 constituency," he said, adding that the local returning officer did not take any steps in this regard despite repeated appeals.

OC Maruf, however, denied the allegation.

He told The Daily Star that he attended the programme for ensuring security and gave a welcome speech that was manipulated later by incorporating those words.

The video clip shows that Maruf asking all the audience to vote the AL-led government to power again for the con-

tinuation of the ongoing development.

Merina Akter, assistant superintendent of Police (Sadar Circle) in Satkhira said it was not appropriate for him to speak about politics.

District returning officer SM Mostafa Kamal said they already had informed the district superintendent of police to take steps against the police officer in question.