

## Polls officials despite party affiliation

Awami League, Jubo League men given polls duty in Patuakhali-2

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Jahirul Islam Khan is the vice president of Keshabpur union Jubo League.

A Bengali teacher of newly nationalised Bauphal Degree College, he has been appointed as a presiding officer in violation of the Election Commission's guidelines.

He took training last week, but he was allegedly campaigning for Awami League candidate ASM Feroz in Patuakhali-2.

Another teacher of the college, Lutfor Rahman, is making preparation for his polls duties on December 30 as a presiding officer. He is the joint secretary of Bauphal municipality AL.

Jahirul and Lutfor are no exception. At least five more upazila- and union-level AL leaders and activists have been appointed as election officials in the constituency.

According to the EC's guidelines on the appointment, officials and teachers whose neutrality is doubtful cannot be appointed as election officials.

Sources at Bauphal upazila election office said 506 booths would be set up at 108 polling centres for the constituency's 251,858 voters. To conduct the polls, the upazila election office has appointed at least 114 presiding officers, 531 assistant presiding officers and 1,062 polling officers.

The office arranged training for these officers in the upazila town on December 16-17.

BNP candidate Salma Alam alleged that many of the enlisted officials were involved in AL politics. Some of them were also campaigning

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Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, Bangladesh ODI captain and Awami League candidate for Narail-2, campaigning in his constituency yesterday while people flock around to see him.

PHOTO: STAR

## For the love of the captain

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Narail-2, said Golam Mortaza Swapan, father of the pacer lovingly called "Narail Express".

Many of them are doing these with their own money, he said.

"A group of 11 came from Pirojpur today with posters and leaflets and sought vote for my son," Swapan told The Daily Star over phone on Friday. "Many youths are staying in hotels," he said.

He mentioned a young boy who came all the way from Bogura and was staying at a hotel in the district. The boy happily took the trouble only to see Mashrafe win.

Not only the leaders and activists of the ruling AL, commoners were

also holding rallies for his son, he added.

Narail-2 has 317,763 constituents - 157,084 males and 160,679 females.

During a visit to a number of key areas in Narail Sadar, these correspondents found that electioneering for Mashrafe was going on in full swing. Unlike campaigns in other constituencies, it was being conducted by people of all ages and political affiliations and they were campaigning spending their own money.

"Everyone, especially the youths, are raising funds to run the election camps and Mashrafe's campaign," said Azizur Rahman, who owns a pharmacy at Chachra-Gabtolta Bazar in Narail sadar.

Awami League ward-3 President Mintu Biswas said, "I don't know about other areas but in my area, even leaders and activists of Jamaat-BNP are up for Mashrafe."

On December 19, the correspondents visited Mashrafe's campaign office at Chachra-Gabtolta Bazar in the afternoon and talked to a number of people there.

Among them, Sher Ali Biswas said, "A few of us are bearing the expenditure. We will not take any money from Mashrafe even if he offers. People of this area love him a lot."

Mulia Union Parishad Chairman Rabindranath Adhikary made a similar statement when asked about the expenditure.

Narail Municipality Mayor Jahangir Biswas said, "I have been bearing all the expenditure for Mashrafe's campaign in the municipality."

Yesterday afternoon, Mashrafe reached Narail and started campaigning himself.

Mashrafe's main rival is AZM Fariduzzaman Farhad, who is contesting with "sheaf of paddy", the BNP's electoral symbol. Fariduzzaman is the chairman of National People's Party, a component of the Jatiya Oikyafront, led by the BNP and several other parties.

Awami League President Sheikh Hasina ran from Narail-2 in the 2001 national polls and won.

## Foreign observers now even fewer

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monitor the election. The number of voters and the polling stations, however, has increased.

'DISAPPOINTED'

US State Department Deputy Spokesperson Robert Palladino in a statement yesterday said the US is disappointed by the "Bangladesh government's inability to grant credentials and issue visas within the timeframe necessary to conduct a credible international monitoring mission to the majority of international election monitors from the ANFREL".

"As a result, ANFREL was forced to cancel its observation mission for the December 30 national election," he said.

Asked about the issue last night, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal said, "I can't say anything clearly right now. Usually, international polls observers contact the Election Commission through the foreign ministry. Then it is referred to us for checking."

"One thing I can say that we got a list from Americans and most of them were of Asian origin. That's why our intelligence officials are taking time to check it."

In his statement, Palladino said the lack of an international observation mission makes it even more important for the government to complete the accreditation of all the local NGOs that constitute the Election Working Group, which includes some funded by USAID, so they can conduct the vital work of monitoring the election.

Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General Stéphane Dujarric at a press briefing in UN Headquarters on Friday said, "Civil society and electoral

observers also need to be fully supported to play their role in this process."

Mark Field, British foreign office minister for Asia and the Pacific, said, "I am concerned by reports that some civil society organisations in Bangladesh are being prevented from observing the election."

During a debate in the House of Commons on Thursday, he said independent domestic and international observers have a crucial role in helping support a free and transparent process for the elections in 10 days' time.

Earlier, the European Union said it will not send any election monitoring team this year, saying in budgetary terms, it's quite expensive and takes a

Year	Local observer	International observer	Voter	Polling centre
2001	2,18,000	225	7.5 crore	29,978
2008	1,59,113	593	8.1 crore	35,263
2018	25,920	146	10.42 crore	40,183

lot of effort and preparation.

Leaders of the Election Working Group (EWG), an alliance of 22 local organisations that monitor election, said members of the combine were in confusion whether they will be able to monitor election as NGO Affairs Bureau has not given "no abjection certificate" to them about covering election.

"We did not get NOC as of today [Saturday]," EWG Chairman Abdul Awal told The Daily Star yesterday. "If we do not get NOC by tomorrow [today], it will be tough for us to hold training of the observers."

FOREIGN OBSERVERS

EC sources say 178 observers on behalf of 16 countries and international organisations have so far shown inter-

est in monitoring the election. Of them, 97 are foreigners, many of them stationed in Dhaka, and the rest are Bangladeshis.

The US will deploy a maximum of 65 observers and 32 of them are foreigners; Germany will assign eight observers including six foreigners; Japan nine observers including four foreigners, and Switzerland six observers including two foreigners. The Netherlands will engage four foreigners.

France will field four observers including two foreigners; Denmark three observers including one foreigner, and Norway two observers including one foreigner.

Democracy International will send

22 observers and two of them are foreigners while Asian Foundation seven observers including two foreigners.

Four observers including one foreigner will be from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Nepal-based Dipendra Kandel Initiative will send three foreigners while US-Based International Republican Institute will field four observers including two foreigners.

Apart from this, the EC invited two representatives each from member countries of the Forum of Election Management Bodies of South Asia.

It also invited Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the Commonwealth and the Philippines-based Association of Asian Election

Authorities (AAEA) to send representatives to monitor the polls.

LOCAL OBSERVERS

EC Joint Secretary SM Asaduzzaman yesterday said they approved 25,920 local observers from 81 organisations to monitor the election.

These organisations applied for the approval of 34,671 local observers, according to EC sources.

Around 1.6 lakh domestic and 600 international observers monitored the December 29, 2008 election. About 2.18 lakh domestic and 225 international observers monitored the election in 2001.

However, the number of voters and the polling stations is much higher this time than in 2008.

In the 2001 polls, 29,978 polling centres were set up for 7.50 crore voters. In the 2008 polls, there were 35,263 polling centres for 8.1 crore voters.

In the December 30 election, around 40,183 polling stations will be set up for more than 10.41 crore electorates.

About the fall in the number of local observers, Abdul Awal said they have decided to deploy fewer observers due to unavailability of funds.

Asked about the reason behind the fund shortage, Awal said development partners were losing interest in funding election observation missions across the world. "This can be one reason."

Their priorities for Bangladesh are also changing. Many development partners are now channelling funds for the Rohingya refugees, he added.

Election observers contribute greatly to making sure polls are free and fair. Their presence in large numbers is therefore very crucial, said M Hafizuddin Khan, former adviser to a

instruct their followers to end the rapidly escalating campaign of violence, the statement added.

The global rights watchdog has also found that the Bangladesh authorities have tried to stifle dissent and criticism including on newspapers, television networks, and on social media. Journalists said that the Digital Security Act (DSA) effectively prohibited investigative journalism. Bangladeshis are under pressure to self-censor on social media or risk arrest. A newspaper editor told the HRW, "You have a culture of fear, an environment of fear."

Bangladesh should take immediate steps to uphold its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), including rights against arbitrary arrest and detention, the right to freedom of expression, and the right to political participation, the statement said.

"International actors who care about stability and democracy in Bangladesh should continue to publicly press the Bangladesh government to create the conditions for a credible election."

Political leaders in Bangladesh should

## Won't return home without results: BNP

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

The BNP yesterday urged voters to guard the polling stations until the vote counting ends on December 30.

"They [Awami League] have become alienated from the people. They are making various evil designs as they know that they would not be able to win the election by popular vote," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir told a rally in Nilphamari's Saidpur.

A bitter reply awaits the conspiracies, he said.

"We will return home taking the result with us. Victory is...for us."

Since the Election Commission has failed to ensure a level-playing field there is no election atmosphere in the country, he claimed.

"The Election Commission is worthless and helpless. Fair election is not possible under this commission."

The 11th national election is very crucial for the nation as it will determine whether democracy will prevail in the country, Fakhrul said.

He then alleged that the law enforcers have been working as a force loyal to the ruling AL.

"You do not belong to any party because you are the servant of the republic," he said, addressing the law enforcers, "So, it is your duty to ensure an atmosphere where people will be able to go to the polling stations and cast their votes in peace. Work for the people."

Fakhrul urged people to vote for BNP nominee Amjad Hossain in Nilphamari-4.

Later, addressing rallies in Parbatipur and Chirirbandar upazilas of Dinajpur, Fakhrul said the AL had been planning to remain in power by misusing the state organs.

In Parbatipur, he said people wanted see an end to corruption, extrajudicial killing and enforced disappearances.

In Chirirbandar, he said, "We, Dr Kamal Hossain, Abdur Rob and Mahmudur Rahman Manna, have joined hands to save the country from misrule."

## Barred from campaigning

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claimed they were kept confined to their village homes by police and AL men, while a number of BNP candidates sought security of their lives.

Besides, at least 35 people were injured in electoral violence, while police arrested at least 44 BNP men since Friday night from Barishal, Faridpur and Netrokona alone.

Meanwhile, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan yesterday admitted for the first time the "intensity of election violence is slightly higher" this time compared with previous years, reports UNB. He, however, blamed a "vested quarter" for the violence.

The minister's comments come just two days after police chief Javed Patwary boasted that election-time law and order was better than ever.

'OBSTRUCTION'

All five BNP candidates in Narsingdi yesterday sought security for themselves and their families.

They made the call at a joint press conference at the district Bar Association on Friday evening, claiming that AL men were frequently attacking their campaigns, but police took no action against the attackers.

Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan, BNP standing committee member and party candidate for Narsingdi-2, told the press conference that neither the local administration nor the Election Commission did anything to stop such attacks and police harassment.

Asked, district police superintendent Miraz Uddin Ahmmad said, "It's the duty of police to ensure security for all. It'll be better if candidates inform us about the time and venue of their campaign. We will then be able to arrange full security."

The district unit president and general secretary of the AL could not be reached by phone for their comments.

Madaripur-2 BNP candidate Milton Baidya also alleged police harassment and obstruction to his campaign by the supporters of his Awami League rival Shahjahan Khan.

Shahjahan, also shipping minister, dismissed the claim. The district returning officer said they would take action upon getting specific allegations.

At a press conference at Jashore Press Club, Jessore-2 BNP candidate spoke of his fear for life in the face of "repeated attacks on his campaign by AL men".

Jessore district AL President Shahidul Islam Milton said all the allegations were false and that the BNP candidate was campaigning in full swing.

BNP candidates for Chapainawabganj-2 and Gazipur-1 -- Aminul Islam and Chowdhury Tanvir Ahmed Siddiquee -- also alleged obstruction and attacks by AL men.

"We are not being allowed to campaign. There is no such thing as level playing field. There is only torture, oppression, attack and cases," Tanvir told a press conference at his office in the capital's Motijheel.

AL candidate for Chapainawabganj-2 Ziaur Rahman said the allegation against his party men was baseless.

tender Jalal Uddin alleged that police had kept him confined to his house at Ladhua village for around one week so that he could not run any campaign.

But Matlab Uttar Police Station Officer-in-charge Kabir Hossain claimed they did no such thing. Rather, a patrol police team were on duty near Matlab-Changerchar road, some 300 metres from the BNP candidate's home.

Pabna-2 BNP aspirant Selim Reza Habib brought similar allegations. He said police and AL men kept him confined to his home at Malifa from yesterday noon till evening.

The OC of Sujanagar Police Station told The Daily Star that many BNP men gathered in the house. So police took position there to prevent any unwanted incidents.

ATTACKS, VANDALISM

At least 26 people were hurt in Noakhali when supporters of the two groups clashed at Charjabbar under Suborno Char upazila yesterday.

Meanwhile, at least five BNP men were injured when alleged AL men attacked the campaign of BNP candidate for Netrokona-1 Kayser Kamal yesterday.

Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal (BSD) candidate for Chandpur-3 Shajahan Talukder filed a complaint with the returning officer yesterday that at least three of his supporters were hurt when AL men attacked his campaign in Warehouse and Circuit House area Friday evening.

Two election camps of BNP aspirant for Pabna-3 KM Anwarul Islam were vandalised, allegedly by AL men. At least three BNP men were injured in the attack in Chatmohor upazila Friday night.

Meanwhile, miscreants allegedly launched a bomb attack on the motorcade of AL candidate for Cumilla-2 Selima Ahmed Merry at Dariakandi of Titas upazila yesterday. No one was hurt in the incident.

In Sherpur, unknown people allegedly set fire to an electoral camp of AL candidate for Sherpur-3 AKM Fazlul Haque at Chotomaljikkanda in Jhinaigati early hours yesterday.

In the capital, Chhatra League men obstructed a campaign rally of Zonayed Saki, chief coordinator of Ganasanghati Andolon and a candidate for Dhaka-12, at the main gate of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University yesterday, said a press release.

In Chattogram, two BCL groups chased each other in the evening when AL candidate for Chattogram-11 MA Latif was leaving North Colony area after electioneering.

Also in the port city, AL men allegedly vandalised a number of vehicles at the house of Abu Sufian, a BNP candidate for Chattogram-8, in the evening.

Two BNP men were injured during the attack, said Sufian.

Abul Bashir, OC of Chandganj Police Station said, "We found the windshield of a pickup truck used for the election campaign broken. Some motorcycles were lying around and some windows of the first floor were broken."

But he added Sufian could not identify any of the attackers.