

Minority voters

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Panchanon Biswas, the AL candidate for Khulna-1, said he was hopeful that minority community voters would support him.

"The voters are now politically more conscious than ever. The AL government has not left a single stone unturned for the betterment and wellbeing of the minority community. The voters understand that," he said.

On the other hand, Amir Ezaz Khan, the BNP candidate in Khulna-1, said, "I prefer not to discriminate the minority voters. For me, all voters are equal. I will work for everybody if the people elect me with their votes."

Narayan Chandra Chanda, AL candidate in Khulna-5, said, "The days are gone when minority community was a winning factor in national polls. All the voters are now equally important to me."

Mia Golam Porwar, a Jamaat-Islami leader who is fighting on BNP ticket in Khulna-5, said, "I bagged a lot of votes from the minority community in the 2008 and 2001 elections. I am expecting even more votes from them in the upcoming polls."

"I never treat them as minorities. Islam does not teach us to discriminate people belonging to other religions or communities. I worked for everyone in the previous terms and the minority communities are no exception."

Azizul Bari Helal, BNP candidate in Khulna-4, claimed the AL tried to emotionally blackmail the minority community voters ahead of the polls.

The voters are now aware of it, he added.

"There is no reason to believe that members of the minority communities belong to any particular political party. I am expecting to win in my constituency with a lot of votes from the minority voters."

In Khulna, there are around 500,000 minority voters among the total of 1,800,000 voters.

The correspondent spoke to at least 35 voters from minority communities in the district.

Many of them said attacks and tortures on the minority communities that had happened throughout the years may become an issue in the district's polls.

The gap of communication between the mass people and the candidates were also a factor among the minority voters.

However, the candidates tried their best to decrease this gap ahead of polls, they said.

In the end, they said they would cast their votes for whoever they believed were the right candidates.

BNP backs Salma

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Waliur Rahman Rana, chief election agent of BNP candidate Mizanur Rahman Minu in Rajshahi-2, said he submitted a list of 320 polling agents to the returning officer for 137 centres in the city.

"Police raided the houses of most of the polling agents," he said, adding that police arrested at least 11 people who were appointed as polling agents.

He said Murad Parvez, Rajpara thana BNP's organising secretary, was arrested yesterday noon. "We are frequently reappointing agents when we come to know about the arrests."

Mahfuzur Rahman, election agent of Aminul Haque in Rajshahi-1, said their polling agents are always receiving threats one after another. "For the last two days, our agents are receiving threats."

Abu Hena, BNP candidate for Rajshahi-4, said he could not finalise polling agents for many centres as "most of them are under continuous threats".

Nazrul Islam Mondol, BNP candidate for Rajshahi-5, said he could not find any BNP man to pick as polling agents. He said police arrested at least five BNP men yesterday.

Hasina

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Earlier in the afternoon, they held a meeting with leaders of the party and its front organisations about the latest polls situation and the party's preparations at the AL chief's Dhanmondi office.

During their meeting with Hasina at the Gono Bhaban, the prime minister asked them to be ready to face any circumstances on the voting day, according to the sources.

She also told her party leaders that conspiracies were on to foil the polls.

At the meeting in the Dhanmondi office, top party leaders said that public support was in favour of the AL, but BNP and Jamaat men were plotting to foil the polls, the sources said.

The meeting also discussed that BNP and Jamaat men made a huge number of "Mujib Coats" and scarves with "boat" symbol, which they will wear to mislead voters.

After the two meetings, the five leaders conveyed the message to district and upazila level leaders.

Grassroots leaders and activists were also asked to guard every polling station.



People inquire about their voter number and polling centres at an information centre set up by a ruling alliance candidate in the capital's Eskaton. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

World watches as Bangladesh goes to polls

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opposition party men, the United Nations has called for a "peaceful, credible and inclusive" election.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, on Thursday, called for "an environment free of violence, intimidation and coercion" to allow peaceful, credible and inclusive polls.

Meanwhile, the United States has wished all Bangladeshis a free, fair, tolerant and peaceful election.

Bangladesh is set to vote tomorrow and decide whether to grant a record third consecutive term to a prime minister who has overseen one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but whose government is accused of rampant human rights abuses, reports The Guardian.

It also reported that Hasina was hoping Bangladesh's 100 million voters would ignore the violence and focus on the country's extraordinary economic progress including the tripling of per-capita incomes since 2009 and an annual average growth rate above six percent in the past decade -- the fastest in the developing world.

"We have the fastest growth of ultra-rich in the world," said Shahab Enam Khan, the research director at the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute. "But that doesn't mean the lower strata has benefited."

The Guardian also said scores of opposition figures, including

Hasina's major rival Khaleda Zia, have either been jailed or have disappeared during the months leading to the election, adding that international election monitors and press freedom groups have complained of unnecessary delays in issuing visas.

"Police harassment on opposition activists has reached unprecedented levels," said Dr Kamal Hossain, a human rights lawyer who is also a leader of the joint opposition, the Guardian wrote.

The international media have also highlighted the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) ordering the shutdown of high-speed mobile internet services in a bid "to curb the spread of confusing content".

Reuters reported that Facebook and Twitter said last week they had removed accounts and fake news pages linked to the government that had posted anti-opposition content.

It reported from Dhaka that campaigning for Bangladesh's general election ended on Friday after weeks of violence, mainly against leaders and activists of the opposition alliance, which has drawn criticism from the US and others.

The Awami League is promoting its economic record over the past decade but the BNP-led opposition alliance, many of whose leaders have been jailed, has vowed to remove curbs on the media, increase wages

and freeze energy prices.

"The government has lost moral support," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhruddin Alamgir told reporters on Thursday, urging voters to "restore democracy".

"But the people are with us. They want change," he said.

Aljazeera reported that Bangladesh would vote tomorrow in its 11th general election, which "will be held amid widespread violence".

Despite earning global plaudits for sheltering nearly a million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, the nine-year tenure of incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was marked by allegations of creeping authoritarianism, the crushing of political rivals and a gag on media freedom, said an Aljazeera report on Thursday.

Associated Press (AP) reported from Dhaka that Hasina was poised to win a record fourth term in Sunday's elections, drumming up support by promising a development bonanza as her critics questioned if the South Asian nation's tremendous economic success has come at the expense of its already fragile democracy.

The Indian Express in a report, headlined "This time in Bangla poll heat, why India not hot-button issue", yesterday wrote that "the India factor -- which had been a part of the pre-election rhetoric in the

past -- was missing from campaign speeches".

What has helped is that India has not issued any statement, except asking for a "free and fair election", unlike many of its western counterparts -- especially America and Europe.

According to a Bloomberg report yesterday, Hasina's ruling Awami League -- which has presided over the years of high economic growth and has handled the influx of 750,000 Rohingya refugees from neighboring Myanmar -- is widely expected to return to power. That outcome would ensure economic policy continuity and help sustain a steady flow of foreign investment, they said.

However, it said as the national vote scheduled for December 30 drew closer, security operations had intensified and prominent opposition leaders had been jailed. At least 8,243 opposition alliance activists and leaders had been arrested since the election schedule was announced in November, according to data compiled by the BNP.

UN News reported that Sheikh Hasina, of the ruling Awami League, is seeking a third consecutive term, while her main rival for the top job, former prime minister Khaleda Zia, also the chairperson of the BNP, remains in jail on corruption charges which she said were politically motivated.



Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda talking to reporters after visiting the election results collection and announcement centre at the Nirbachan Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

Security scaled up

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of fear, the CEC said, "This will be proved wrong. We are prepared. The voters will cast ballots amid festivity."

"I expect that law enforcers will ensure security so that people can vote freely and return home safely," Huda said.

He also asked the law enforcement agencies to give special attention to security of minority communities during voting.

Law enforcers will have to be watchful so that no one can bar any voter from choosing his or her preferred candidates through ballots, the CEC said.

Briefing reporters in the evening, EC Secretary Helal Uddin Ahmed said, "All preparations have been made. Ballot papers have been dispatched to all districts."

He further said the assistant returning officers will start handing over ballot papers and other materials to the presiding officers this morning.

"The election will be peaceful," the secretary hoped.

Yesterday, army personnel were seen checking vehicles at different parts of the capital.

At the Bangla Motor intersection, a group of army men was checking documents of vehicles while another group was searching boots of vehicles around noon.

The situation was similar in Narayanganj.

Jasim Uddin Haider, additional deputy commissioner (revenue) in Narayanganj, told The Daily Star that army personnel were checking vehicles

as part of measures to thwart plots to carry out subversive activities.

In Bogura, Tongi and Gazipur, members of the army set up check posts at different points and searched vehicles yesterday.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia said they have taken adequate security measures to check violence and influence of muscle power, and ensure that voters return home safely after casting ballots.

"We are ready to tackle any situation," he said, adding that police will provide security to the candidates as well as their agents at the polling centres.

Rapid Action Battalion Director General Benazir Ahmed urged people to go to the polling centres and vote without any fear.

"Always remember that law enforcers are with you in any adverse situation," he said at a religious gathering at Jagannathpur Singia Shahapara village in Thakurgaon.

The law enforcement agencies have taken all necessary measures, he mentioned.

The Rab DG said it is regrettable that people from religious minorities face attacks whenever an election approaches.

Benazir further said those who attack members of minority communities are a disgrace to the nation and should not live in this country.

"If any vested group tries to create anarchy in the election, the law enforcers will take stern action against them," he added.

Violence

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candidate Mujibur Rahman Chowdhury, widely known as Nixon Chowdhury, in Faridpur-4 yesterday over establishing supremacy in Bhanga upazila's Moheshwardi village.

Witnesses said supporters of the two rival candidates were campaigning informally in the village around noon. At one stage, they got involved in an altercation and clashed using lethal weapons.

Police and BGB teams later rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Talking to journalists, Nixon's supporter Md Azam alleged that two supporters of Zafarullah beat him up without provocation.

Ashad Matubbar, supporter of the AL candidate, claimed Azam phoned him and threatened not to seek vote for Zafarullah.

Both the rival groups denied the allegations against each other.

Additional policemen were deployed in the area to avoid further violence.

In Chandpur, police picked up 13 alleged BNP men following a clash between "criminals" and the opposition party men at the Rupsha house of Chandpur-4 BNP candidate Harunur Rashid in Faridganj upazila around noon.

Witness said a group of bike-riding criminals reached near Rashid's house and attacked it. As the BNP men tried to resist the attackers, the clash broke out.

Police later brought the situation under control.

Faridganj OC Ohidul Islam said they picked up 13 people in connection with the incident. The BNP claimed the arrestees to be its activists.

In Sunamganj, police arrested BNP leaders Abdul Motaleb Khan, also chairman of Dharmapasha upazila, and Harunur Rashid, former general secretary of Dowarabazar upazila BNP yesterday evening.

Police said the two were accused in sabotage cases.

N'GANJ CANDIDATE QUILTS RACE

In Narayanganj-3, independent candidate Abdullah Al Kaiser last night announced that he was withdrawing from the polls in the face of pressure from the administration and considering the security of his supporters.

He made the announcement while talking to journalists at his Mograpara home in Sonargaon upazila around 9:00pm, hours after a joint team of police, BGB and Rab, led by an executive magistrate, raided his house.

Sazzad Roman, inspector (Special Branch) of Narayanganj police, said the raid was conducted on information that Kaiser was holding a "secret meeting" to commit subversive activities.

Shahinur Rahman, assistant returning officer in the district, said he didn't receive any compliant from any candidate about facing pressure from the administration.

In Tangail-3, BNP candidate Lutfar Rahman Khan Azad at a press conference yesterday demanded withdrawal of Maksudul Alam and Amirul Islam, officer-in-charge of Ghatail Police Station and in-charge of Dhalapara Police Outpost, for allegedly threatening his possible polling agents not to go to the polling centres on the voting day.

Amirul, however, denied the allegation.

Despite repeated attempts, The Daily Star could not reach Maksudul over the phone for comments.

In Cumilla, police were forced to release an AL man after the ruling party activists laid siege to Kotwali Model Police Station yesterday.

Police detained Syed Raihan, 40, son of local AL leader Abir Ahmed Photo, also a ward councillor of Cumilla City Corporation, in the city around 2:00pm.

Hearing the news, around 500 AL men laid siege to the police station. Law enforcers freed the detainee around 4:45pm, said locals.

Talking to journalists, Abir said, "Police detained Raihan from Mogoltuli area after Juma prayers without any specific allegation. Locals protested the incident and laid siege to the police station demanding his release."

Abu Salam Mia, OC of the police station, said Raihan was detained due to a "misunderstanding".

In Meherpur, criminals hurled two bombs at the house of district BNP Joint Secretary Abdul Awal Biswas in Gangni upazila's Bamundi village around 9:30pm on Thursday.

On the same night, Faridpur police in separate drives arrested seven BNP men from different areas of Boalmari Municipality.

Our district correspondents contributed to this report.

One dead

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accident happened when a speedboat with passengers heading for Pabna's Kazirhat crashed head-on with an empty one coming from the opposite direction around 4:30pm.

On information, police rushed to the spot and recovered Iqbal's body, he said, adding that three children went missing.

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority sources said over 50 speedboats are plying Aricha-Kazirhat route illegally.