

Participatory polls, for sure

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The incumbent government has been in power for about 10 years now and in all through this time, many have found it becoming increasingly intolerant where dissenting voices are muffled with strong-arm tactics and civil space has shrunk. All this time, the rise of the law enforcing agencies to emasculate opposing views has been remarkable and even awe-inspiring.

But above these words, there is another story too, perhaps burning bright in the cap of Awami League. It has charted the country through a development phase never witnessed before. The economy has grown by over 6 percent and crossed over the magical 7 percent mark of late. Huge infrastructure projects have been taken up, waiting to yield results in near future. The pillar for industrial development has been hammered in with power plants being set up at a break-neck speed, with a huge 2,400 MW nuclear plant fast being constructed, a hundred special economic zones are being readied and Bangladesh today has caught the attention of world investors, who are finding it a next stage, after China and India, for growth.

Despite its many gains on economic fronts, however, Bangladesh has fallen behind most of its neighbours in the 'Forbes' list of 'Best Countries for Business' for 2019.

Awami League's election campaign has focused much on this shining streak. To get growth, you need this party in power again is how it has formulated its communication strategy.

But the growth story has its dark shadow as well. Inequality has increased. Corruption is visible. Intuitions have weakened. Governance has not improved. And freedom of speech and expression has waned with the passing of new draconian laws, and the rise of abasement against pluralism is spectacular.

So it was natural that when the opposition BNP formed an unlikely alliance, Jatiya Oikyafront, with old political hand like Dr Kamal Hossain to launch a united comeback battle against an incumbent power, their main slogan was to righting the wrong and to go for a waft of reforms that aims at building institutions and strengthening governance.

But their battle is poised on an uneven ground.

First came the extraordinary wave of cancellation of their candidacies, apparently on trivial grounds. Then the subduing tactic of attacks on the opposition.

Motorcades and campaigns of more than 50 BNP and Oikyafront candi-

dates, including that of BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, have come under attack across the country. Bangladesh's politics has turned violent sometimes, but never before have so many candidates come under attack on campaign trail.

In the last 10 years, cases piled against the opposition leaders and activists, many of whom face over 100 cases each from long before when the BNP had waged a violent anti-government movement in 2014 in demand for an election-time caretaker government, scrapped by the Awami League government in 2011.

But many more new cases had later been filed against unnamed persons and those unnamed persons are now appearing as the opposition members.

Candidates have been arrested and at least 17 of them taken to jail -- six of them after announcement of election date. The BNP and its allies find themselves confined to their houses, their party and camp offices are empty and frequently attacked. The BNP does not have its own candidates in 17 seats as their candidacies were cancelled following court orders.

The party, which formed government thrice since restoration of democracy in 1991, finds itself especially handicapped with its leader Khaleda Zia in jail in a corruption case. She has been disqualified to run.

But that has not derailed the BNP from taking part in the election and it stayed the course despite all odds. It had no choice too because boycotting this one would have completely routed the party with the cancellation of its registration.

Its only hope today is that voters would turn out in great numbers and vote it on their reform agenda. The Awami League is also confident that voters, in whatever numbers they walked in, would choose it again for all the good things it did.

The Election Commission's role has not been inspiring. The chief election commissioner maintains a level playing field for all parties exists, a claim that has been belied by field realities. The EC has brushed aside complaints by the opposition. In a rare instance, one of the election commissioners, Mahub Talukder, has raised his voice against the skewed election atmosphere.

Bangladesh witnessed 10 elections in its political history -- four under caretaker governments and six under political governments of both parliamentary and presidential type. Of the polls held under political governments, none except for the one in 1973, could claim fair dealings. And the ones held under caretaker governments since 1991 were widely

acknowledged as free and fair.

The elections to different local government bodies held in the last five years have instilled little confidence. The latest city corporation elections in Gazipur, Barisal, Khulna, Sylhet and Rajshahi, all held this year under the current Election Commission, were marred by manipulation. The EC turned a blind eye to the facts in the field.

In that sense, it is now a big challenge for the incumbent government to live up to its promise that a free and fair election is possible under a political administration. It is all the more important for stability of the country so that Bangladesh can reach the other magic number -- a 10 percent growth in the coming years.

Khaleda Zia

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nation papers on ground of her conviction in criminal cases.

The High Court rejected three of her petitions challenging the EC's decision that had upheld the cancellation of her nomination papers by the ROs.

Her archrival Sheikh Hasina, who is seeking a third term in a row in office, will cast her vote at a polling centre at Dhaka City College.

Awami League's Assistant Office Secretary Biplob Barua said the AL president was expected to cast her vote in the morning.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda would cast his vote at the IES School and College centre in Sector-5 of the capital's Uttara in the morning. EC Joint Secretary SM Asaduzzaman said.

Jatiya Oikyafront convener Dr Kamal Hossain will be casting his vote at the Viqarunnisa Noon School and College center in the morning, Latiful Bari Hamim, a staffer of the alliances media wing, told The Daily Star.

Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad will not vote "due to poor physical condition," Maj (retd) Khaled Akhter, the JP chief's personal aide, told this newspaper.

Raushan Ershad, opposition leader in parliament and senior co-chairperson of the Jatiya Party, is likely to vote at Radha Sundari Girls' High School in Mymensingh Sadar within 10:30am, said Md Mamun, public relations officer of the leader.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir is likely cast his vote at the Thakurgaon Government Girls High School in Thakurgaon town around 9:00am, said Sayrul Kabir, member of the BNP chairperson's media wing.

Make sure election not questionable

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officers and presiding officers."

She expressed firm optimism that today's election would be held in a free, fair and peaceful manner.

"If people cast votes for us, we will stay in power, or else we won't. I'm leaving it to the people."

She said local and foreign investments would increase further and the country's economy would be strengthened if the elections were held peacefully.

The PM cautioned people, including her party candidates, against possible election boycott by the opposition halfway through the voting as part of a trick and advised them to stay at the centers until the polls ended.

"I would like to tell all not to believe if the BNP says halfway through the voting that we withdraw ourselves from the election and we will not participate in it... this is their another

game."

Hasina blasted BNP-Jamaat for "killing six Awami League leaders and workers and injuring more than 450 party men," "On the one hand, they're making complaints against us across the world, and on the other hand, they're launching attacks on our leaders and workers."

About the BNP's allegations regarding a level-playing field, the premier said the party's level playing field means that it would have to be made winners.

She said the BNP created its own problems by giving nominations to 4/5 candidates in a single seat. "They did nomination business and distributed seats among candidates through auctions, saying that those who would be able to pay highest amount of money would become candidates."

The premier said many candidates having good reputation in their respec-

tive areas couldn't get BNP's nominations. "As a result, they became aggrieved and they got involved in internal clashes."

Hasina said nominees could not go to their constituencies due to opposition from those deprived of party tickets. "They are getting involved in clashes, setting fire to their own offices and then putting the blame on our party."

She said had the BNP not done the nomination business, it would not have faced this problem.

Describing the attack on AL leader Mahubur very regretful, the PM asked the law enforcement agencies to identify the culprits involved in the attack and ensure punishment for them.

Chief of Army Staff General Aziz Ahmed, PM's Principal Secretary Md Nojibur Rahman and PMO Secretary Sajjadul Hassan were present.

14 agents of BNP candidates detained

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using dozens of motorbikes in the area violating the code of conduct. Besides, they also threatened BNP leaders, activists and supporters.

Meanwhile, Daudar Mahmud, BNP candidate in Natore-3, said his polling agent Shamim Hossain was picked up from Singar upazila.

Two other polling agents -- Humayun Kabir and Surma Begum -- were physically assaulted by the AL men, he alleged.

In Natore-1, police picked up Golam Rabbani, incumbent member of Jamnagar Union Parishad in Bagatipara upazila, from his home. His son Mister Ali, a polling agent of Natore-1 BNP candidate Kamrunnahr Shirin fled when police raided their home.

Shirin said police raided the area and threatened BNP supporters not to cast their votes.

"Police are saying that they will pick up BNP supporters if they are seen in the area," said Farzana Sharmin, Shirin's main polling agent, said.

She further said the AL men destroyed the authorisation papers of nine polling agents in two centres of Lalpur upazila.

"We sought help from the army deployment in the area but they said they couldn't do anything before tomorrow [today] morning," she said.

Contacted, Saifulla Al Mamun, super-

intendent of police in Natore, denied any detention of BNP polling agents.

"I have inquired into such allegations of detention in police stations. They said nothing like that happened," he said.

He claimed a peaceful polls environment had prevailed in the district, a statement that was not endorsed by the BNP leaders and activists.

Zahidul Islam, a ward member of Kafuria union in Natore Sadar, said AL men attacked his house twice last week. Once on December 23 and then on December 26, he added.

He went into hiding out of fear, he claimed.

He said, "BNP agents are now afraid of going to polling centers."

"I am a representative of the people but I have no strength at all now."

Amzad Hossain, of Chanpur village in Natore Sadar, said around two dozen unknown men vandalised his house on December 27 night and threatened him of dire consequences if he casts his vote.

He said, "They asked us to go to the polling centers if we can publicly cast votes for 'boat'."

"If the situation remains like this, how can we participate in vote?"

Meanwhile, three agents of Chattogram-9 BNP candidate Abu Sufiyan were arrested from Mehediabag area of the district.

The arrestees are: Anwarul Hossain

Lipu, joint secretary of Chattogram city BNP; Osman Goni, president of Chattogram unit NAP; and Ariful Islam, a Jubo Dal leader.

They were arrested with their election documents after they attended a meeting at the residence of BNP Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud around 7:30pm, Sufiyan said.

Mohammed Kamruzzaman, additional deputy commissioner of police in Chattogram, said the law enforcers arrested them for their alleged involvement in subversive activities.

The Detective Branch of Police arrested and handed them over to Chandgaon Police Station, he said.

BTRC

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On Thursday, the BTRC slowed down mobile internet for nearly 10 hours.

There were 8.60 crore mobile internet users in the country, according to data collected last month.

Broadband internet connections are likely to remain unaffected during the period.

There were 57.35 lakh broadband internet connections across the country in November.

The BTRC had also formed a team to stay at its office round the clock and act in case of unlawful online activities, officials earlier said.

Press passes

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Daily Star found many people were still waiting there to get their "press pass" and "vehicle stickers".

Regarding the number of cards the EC issued yesterday, SM Asaduzzaman, director (public relations) of the commission said, "It is not possible to give the number now. It could be told tomorrow [today]."

Wishing anonymity, a number of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) activists of Dhaka University told this newspaper that they had gotten blank press passes for the polls day.

"I have received around 200 press passes from a senior leader [of my organisation] who instructed me to fill the card with names of activists of different associate bodies of the ruling party."

I filled them up and, in the organisation category [of the card], I put names of different media houses at my will."

Our correspondents from several districts also said they have heard such allegations. They said local ruling party men and even relatives of local top leaders allegedly obtained press cards using the names of so-called newspapers.

Meanwhile, several journalists from Cumilla said they did not get their pass cards until 8:00pm yesterday.

Masud Alam, local correspondent of Dhaka Tribune and Bangla Tribune, said, "Although, I am an active journalist, I did not get a press card but many post holders of local political parties obtained them."

Imtiaz Ahmed, editor of local newspaper Ajker Cumilla, also did not get a pass.

"I am still trying to get a press card," Imtiaz, also the local correspondent of Banglanews24.com, told our Cumilla Correspondent around 8:00pm yesterday.

In Lalmonirhat, local correspondents of Alokito Bangladesh, Naya Diganta, Sangram, and Jagonees were not given press cards until 8:30pm, reports our district correspondent.

Asked about the allegations, Asaduzzaman said the EC has already issued directives for press cards and, after proper verification, the cards were issued.

However, there are journalists who are also involved with politics and such allegations may arise in such cases, he added.

3 killed

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Quoting witnesses, he said a bus carrying garment employees ploughed into staffers as its driver lost control over the wheel, leaving Latif dead on the spot.

The injured were rushed to Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH) where doctors declared the two others dead, the OC added.

The two buses hired by Youngone used to transport its employees.

Firefighters later reached the spot and fought flames on the buses.

Talking to The Daily Star at the CMCH, injured Towhidul Haque said a bus hit him from behind when he was getting off another one.

AM Hamidullah Al-Rashid Chowdhury, human resource officer at Youngone Group, said Irfan was a lab chemist, Sultana a security guard and Latif a cutting supervisor.

KEPZ Manager Mozammel Hossain said, "Families of the three dead employees were primarily given financial assistance for burials. The authorities of the company concerned will bear the treatment costs of the injured employees."

He said the families of the deceased would be "compensated" under the company's insurance coverage.

Operations of KEPZ factories would remain suspended for today and tomorrow, he added.

Epic food fight

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In Roman times, it was the slaves who took over for a day. Nowadays, friends and neighbours take up the differing roles.

The uprising starts in the morning as "the floured" take control of the town hall and announce a new regime and laws. The two groups then move to the local square to slug it out, using a seemingly endless supply of eggs and flour. It doesn't take long for everyone to be dusted white with flour and egg smears to coat the cartoonish military uniforms.

Local records in Ibi first mention the winter festival in 1636. The tradition was lost during the right-wing dictatorship of Francisco Franco, but in 1981 the festival started up again.

As soon as the eggs have run out, it's the turn of the "drunk" fireworks to overthrow the upstarts.

Directionless and explosive, the fireworks end up going everywhere.

"We always come to beat them and we eat them alive," said participant Ramon Castella, a 35-year-old electrician. "The 'drunk' rockets, this is the moment we really give it a go."

No alternative

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by the opposition parties, then there will be no qualitative change in the country's politics. Democracy will move backwards. So there is no alternative to a good election.

Q: Why is a free and fair election needed?

(AAK): Election means free and fair. If the poll is not free and fair we cannot term it to be an election. If election is held in a democratic atmosphere and manner, election must be free and fair. If free and fair election is not held, it is difficult to say what would happen. What I can say is that it may not be good for the country and its people.

Q: How do you evaluate the debate over development versus democracy?

(AAK): I do not find any debate between democracy and development. For Bangladesh, both development and democracy are necessary. If democracy does not prevail, then it would not be possible to uphold the ideology and spirit of the liberation war. Similarly, if democracy prevails but there is no development, it is also not acceptable. So we need both and there is no scope for creating any debate over the issue. Both must go hand in hand.

Q: How do you evaluate the atmosphere that prevailed during electioneering?

(AAK): According to media reports, it seems that there is no atmosphere for holding a free and fair election. There were a number of incidents of attack on the candidates, supporters and opposition campaigns. To one party, the election seems festive but to other, the election seems [to be] taking place amid a violent and dreadful situation. Till now, we did not see any effective step from the Election Commission to create a congenial atmosphere where voters can cast their votes without fear and there will be no irregularities.

But if people of the country go to the polling stations and cast their votes without any fear, we may get a surpris-

ing result. But that possibility is also very low. In Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Maldives, the ruling party wanted to influence the voting but the people of those countries foiled that attempt and reflected their will.

Q: Around 2.5 crore new voters will exercise their franchise in this election. What's your message to them?

(AAK): I urge all voters -- not only the young -- that they cast their votes realising the importance of democracy and considering the interests of the country. If people fail to cast their votes, democracy will suffer and their right to cast vote in the next election may be uncertain.

[Dr Akbar Ali Khan was born in 1944 at Nabinagar in Brahmanbaria. He obtained his Honours and MA in history from University of Dhaka. Later, he studied in Queen's University Canada and obtained his MA and PhD in economics. He joined the Civil Service of Pakistan (CSP) in 1967. A former chairman of NBR and secretary of Internal Resources Division, he was appointed cabinet secretary in 2001 and retired from that position in 2002. Dr Khan, also a former chairman of Regulatory Reforms Commission, was an adviser to a caretaker government in 2006 and resigned in protest against the failure of the government in ensuring a free, fair and impartial election.]

BNP alleges

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Gulshan office around 10:30pm

Late last night, the BNP central monitoring desk alleged that ballot box stuffing was reported in several polling centres of Dhaka-2, Dhaka-4, Dhaka-11, Dhaka-15, Sirajganj-2, Cox's Bazar-1, Kushtia-3, Chattogram, 4, Chattogram-5, and Jashore-4 constituencies.

The Daily Star could not verify what the BNP desk had claimed.

All measures

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areas, but there were no serious violations of the code of conduct or any serious electoral offence.

However, he said these small casualties could not affect the election. "The overall situation is still friendly for election."

He claimed that the European Union "expressed their satisfaction over the election atmosphere and thus, they did not send observers".

Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque, who was present at the briefing, replied to some queries of the observers.

Urging the foreign observers to follow the guidelines prepared for them, Helal said election observers can be regarded as judges and that observation is a vital part of fostering democracy around the world.

He told the observers and journalists that for the first time all the 39 registered political parties are participating in the election and the number of candidates -- 1,861, including 128 independent ones -- has also exceeded all previous records.

To conduct the election, he said the EC appointed returning officers (ROs), who are the chief electoral officers in their respective constituencies. The ROs will be given assistance by sufficient officers. Presiding officers will be conducting voting events in polling stations.

The EC has also appointed a sufficient number of magistrates, both executive and judicial, and deployed a sufficient number of different law enforcement agency members, including from the army, navy and air forces.

The EC Secretary said that 64 deputy commissioners and two divisional

commissioners have been appointed as ROs and the number of assistant ROs is 582. The number of presiding officers is 40,183, assistant presiding officers 207,312 and polling officers 414,624.

He said the EC has deployed a total of 1,328 executive magistrates. Of them, 652 for trials of code of conduct violations and 676 will be working with law enforcement agencies.

Apart from that, the EC has deployed 244 judicial magistrates for 122 electoral inquiry committees, each consisting two judicial magistrates.

Helal further informed observers and journalists that the total number of law enforcers deployed for election duties is 608,000.

The break up is: Police - 121,000, Ansars - 446,000 and Village Police - 41,000, Army - 414 platoons, Navy - 48 platoons, Coast Guard - 42 platoons, BGB - 983 platoons, RAB - 600 platoons and mobile and striking force - 2000 platoons. Each platoon has 30 law enforcers.

Ballot papers, voters list, ballot boxes, EVMs (in six constituencies) and all other election materials have been sent to the ROs in polling stations by yesterday evening.

Jamuna TV

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to Salma Islam, a Jatiya Party presidential member running against Awami League nominee and business tycoon Salman F Rahman.

On December 25, at least 12 journalists of Jamuna TV and its sister concern Jugantar newspaper came under attack at Nawabganj upazila in Dhaka.

Egypt kills 40

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Company officials were heading to Cairo and plans were made to allow some relatives of the victims to also fly to Egypt.

One of them was Nguyen Nguyen Vu whose sister Nguyen Thuy Quynh, 56, died in the bombing, while her husband, Le Duc Minh, was wounded.

The couple, both aged 56, was in the seafood business, Quynh's younger brother said.

While tourism has picked up since 2011, the 8.2 million people who visited Egypt in 2017 are still a far cry from the 14.7 million who visited in the year before the uprising.

The blast and the subsequent police raids come as Egypt battles a persistent jihadist insurgency in the North Sinai, which surged after the 2013 overthrow by the army of Mubarak's Islamist successor Mohamed Morsi.

Jihadists linked to the Islamic State group have claimed responsibility for previous attacks, including against Egypt's Coptic Christian minority who make up about 10 percent of the population.

The army launched a large-scale operation dubbed "Sinai 2018" in February to rid the Sinai of jihadists after an attack on a mosque in the north of the peninsula killed more than 300 people.

The army says that hundreds of suspected jihadists have been killed since the campaign was launched.

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