

POLLS VIOLENCE

HRW calls for neutral probe

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The Human Rights Watch has called for an independent and impartial commission to investigate the serious allegations of abuses, including attacks on opposition party men, voter intimidation, vote rigging, and partisan behaviour of the election officials before and during the just-held national elections of Bangladesh.

"The pre-election period was characterised by violence and intimidation against the opposition, attacks on opposition campaign events, and the misuse of laws to limit free speech," said Brad Adams, Asia director at the HRW.

"Reports of ballot stuffing, intimidation of voters, and ruling party control of voting locations on election day mean that an independent and impartial commission should be formed to determine the extent of the violations," he added.

After a campaign marred by violence, mass arrests of the opposition, and a crackdown on free speech, the election commission announced that the ruling Awami League won the December 30 election, returning Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to a third consecutive term, with the ruling party winning 288 of the 298 parliamentary seats contested.

The prime minister said the election was "free and fair," while the opposition described the election as "farical," said the New York-based rights group that has close links with the Western governments, and significant influence in international institutions.

The HRW, in its report yesterday, said thousands of opposition support-

ers were arrested before the elections, and journalists described having to censor their reporting for fear of arrest and violence.

Opposition parties, journalists, and voters alleged serious irregularities, including ballot stuffing, voters being denied access to polling centres, ruling party activists occupying polling places and casting ballots instead of voters, electoral officials and the police behaving in a partisan manner, and violations of voter privacy in an atmosphere of blatant intimidation.

Opposition BNP said its polling agents were denied access in 221 constituencies. Chief Election Commissioner Nurul Huda characterised the reports of electoral violations on polling day as "stray incidents." Police chief Javed Patwari described the atmosphere as "peaceful."

The rights group said two journalists were accused under the draconian Digital Security Act, which criminalises peaceful speech and places undue restrictions on investigative journalism. Instead of investigating irregularities, Bangladesh authorities arrested journalists for their reporting.

Internationally recognised election monitors and foreign journalists were largely barred from the country, the report added.

Nevertheless, a BBC journalist in Chattogram captured images of what appear to be stuffed ballot boxes before the polls opened. Other media reported that in some constituencies, in defiance of the rules, polling places closed for lunch in a clear attempt to suppress turnout.

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BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, right, hands over a memorandum to Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda at his office in the capital's Nirbachan Bhaban yesterday. In the memorandum, the Jatiya Oikyafront alleged that the administration was "blatantly used against the people" during Sunday's polls.

'30-60pc votes cast night before polls'

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pushed into darkness through this cruel drama in the name of election."

The AL rowdies with the help of law enforcers forced all shops to close across the country before 9:00pm the night before the election to create a ghostly atmosphere, the memorandum said.

After stuffing the ballot boxes at night, they cast false votes during election day and voters were forced to vote for boat, it said.

It said ballot papers in almost all polling centres ran out by noon and in many cases polling officials took lunch breaks.

The night before the polls, AL men

terrorised voters and threatened them with dire consequences if they went to vote, the Oikyafront claimed, adding that the AL men showed off their muscle power at intersections to intimidate voters.

"Law enforcers did not take any steps when help was sought."

Counting of votes began before 4:00pm at many places, the Oikyafront said, adding that the EC's role was mysterious.

It said the EC and the courts cancelled candidature of 18 Oikyafront candidates and at least 16 other candidates were arrested.

There was no change in the civil and

police administration. Judicial and executive magistrates were made inactive, it claimed.

"The media and the social media were controlled and the army was made inactive," it said.

The EC must take the responsibilities of depriving the people of the country from exercising their right to vote, it said.

BNP leader Nazrul Islam Khan, Moyeen Khan, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) President ASM Abdur Rob, Krishak Sramik Janata League President Kader Siddique, Nagorik Oikya Convener Mahmudur Rahman Manna and Gono Forum leader Mostofa Mohsin Mantu were in the Oikyafront delegation.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN



No comment

Khaleda says she won't say anything on election

JNU CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday said she would not say anything about Sunday's national election.

She said this when reporters asked her about the election after a hearing of the Niko graft case at a makeshift court inside the Old Dhaka Central Jail.

As she was being taken back to her cell in a wheelchair, she said, "My legs ache too much."

During the hearing, she told the court, "I won't come to the court if it sits at a place like this. The court can't run here. Our people can't come here. Give me sentence if you want...I won't come to this court."

Judge Sheikh Hafizur Rahman of the Special Judge Court-9 of Dhaka said, "Start the charge hearing afresh as I am new in this case. I will hear everyone's speech."

After that, Public Prosecutor of the Anti-Corruption Commission Mosharraf Hossain Kajol read out the charges against Khaleda and 10 others.

BNP standing committee member Barrister Moudud Ahmed, an accused in the case, told the court, "We are yet to get the documents stating the allegations against us although we have applied for them before. We need to read those documents to be able to fight the legal battle."

He also said the setting of the court was not appropriate for holding a trial as there was no proper seating arrangement for lawyer and others.

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Let's not be monsters

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They said they wanted her to hold the post as long as she lived, sources said.

Hasina was first made ALPP chief after her party's win in 1996.

Hours after the ALPP meeting yesterday, Hasina met President Abdul Hamid at the Bangabhaban around 4:20pm.

As is the norm, the president invited the AL chief to form a new government as she has support of majority MPs of her party, president's Press Secretary Joynal Abedin told The Daily Star.

The PM and her cabinet members will take oath at 3:30pm on January 7 at the Bangabhaban, he added.

It was the first meeting between Hasina and Hamid after Awami League's victory in December 30 election.

Major opposition parties, including the BNP-led Jatiya Oikyafront, rejected the election results citing "widespread irregularities and ballot stuffing". Yesterday, they submitted a memorandum to the Election Commission, demanding a fresh election under a nonpartisan government.

The ruling AL and the EC termed the election free and fair, and denied that the election was rigged.

In Sunday's election, the AL won 257 seats while the BNP-led Oikyafront got just seven seats.

In all, the AL-led grand alliance bagged 288 seats, including the 22 won by the Jatiya Party, which took part in the election under the banner of the ruling alliance.

In her speech at the ALPP meeting, Hasina told her colleagues, "We are in power now, but remember that it is not permanent.... If we stand by the people, nobody will be able to resist us."

"We have won three consecutive landslide victories. But do not consider yourselves more powerful now. Rather behave humbly with the countryman."

She also said her party's main challenge would be to fulfil the pledges in the election manifesto.

"So work sincerely," she asked her party lawmakers, and warned them against indulging in corruption.

"Now we will not consider who voted in favour of boat or not. We are representatives of all. We are MPs for all. We will work for everyone's development," Hasina was quoted by an MP elected from Tangail.

She also said people gave a befitting reply to Oikyafront, by not voting for them, as the opposition alliance joined the election with Jamaat-e-Islami, a party that opposed the country's Liberation War.

289 MPSTAKE OATH

Newly elected MPs of the AL, Jatiya Party and other parties as well as independent ones were sworn in at four separate sessions yesterday.

Outgoing Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury first took oath (administered by herself) as an MP and then administered the oath to other AL MPs at the Oath Room of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

Later, the Speaker administered the oath to the MPs of Jatiya Party, Workers' Party, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, Bikalpadhara Bangladesh, Jatiya Party (Manju) and Tarikat Federation as well as the independent MPs.

Deposed military ruler and JP Chairman HM Ershad and AL Presidium Member Syed Ashrafur Islam did not take oath yesterday due to their illness. Ershad, who is now PM Hasina's special envoy, may take oath today, parliament secretariat sources said.

Ashraf, who was under treatment at a Bangkok hospital, died last night.

Oikyafront spokesperson and BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said that seven MPs elected with Oikyafront tickets will not take oath.

Under the law, MPs-elect should take oath within three days after publication of the gazette. If anyone fails to take oath within 90 days of the first parliament session, their seats will fall vacant.

Instance not necessary

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The first sitting of the 10th parliament was held on January 29, 2014, meaning its five-year tenure will expire on January 28.

One may argue that the MPs sworn in yesterday would not assume office before January 28. Such argument does not have any substance.

This is because, according to article 148 (3), MPs assume office immediately after taking oath.

After swearing in as lawmakers, the ruling Awami League MPs held their parliamentary party meeting, elected party President Sheikh Hasina as their leader and passed a resolution to this effect.

The resolution proves that Hasina commands support of the majority of lawmakers in the newly constituted parliament. Her party won 257 of the 300 seats in the election.

President Abdul Hamid invited Hasina to form a new government when she met him yesterday afternoon. He will appoint her as the PM and administer the oath of office.

On advice of the newly appointed PM, the president will appoint other ministers and state ministers.

In parliamentary democracy, one of the major functions of parliament is to form a government.

The Jatiya Party, which emerged as the second largest party in Sunday's election, held its parliamentary party meeting immediately after its MPs took oath yesterday.

They decided to be a part of the new government.

AN UNUSUAL INSTANCE

Our lawmakers yesterday set an instance that cannot be found in any other existing parliamentary democracy.

Countries such as the UK -- birthplace of Westminster style of parliamentary democracy -- New Zealand, Australia and Canada go to general elections, dissolving their parliaments. The question of constituting a parliament keeping the existing one in place does not arise there.

India is the only exception. Over the past 65 years, it has held 16 general elections.

Its parliament, popularly known as Lok Sabha, existed during the general election on several occasions. But in those cases, new parliament was not constituted, keeping the existing one in place.

Take the formation of the current 16th Lok Sabha for example.

Elections were held in nine phases from April 7 to May 12 in 2014. The 15th Lok Sabha existed during the polls.

As soon as the election results were announced, the then President Pranab Mukherjee on May 18 dissolved the 15th Lok Sabha with immediate effect, completing a formality before the constitution of the new House, according to a NDTV report published on May 18, 2014.

The MPs, elected in the 16th Lok Sabha polls, took oath on June 5, 2014.

But for Bangladesh, things are different.

Asked, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Anisul Huq said there is no constitutional bar on newly elected MPs in taking oath with the current parliament in place.

"The maiden session of the 11th parliament will be held after the tenure of the present parliament ends on January 28."

No opposition needed!

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During the election, the leaders and activists of the JP worked with AL men and they now want to work together with the ruling party for the country's development, he said.

"A delegation of the party [JP] will meet Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina to convey our decision to her. If she has any suggestions for us, we will discuss them in our party forum," Quader said.

At the meeting, he said, his party's lawmakers opined that they want to work with the leader of the grand alliance to take the country forward.

The complication emerged due to the poor performance of the BNP-led alliance in the election, Quader said,

adding, "We did not predict such a poor performance by the BNP."

The way people voted indicated that they did not want to see the opposition in parliament, Quader claimed.

After the meeting, JP Secretary General Mashiur Rahman Ranga told reporters that people were happy with the government and they did not want a major opposition in parliament.

"We want to stay with the new government. However, grand alliance chief Sheikh Hasina will make the final decision in this regard. We will abide by her decision," Ranga said.

In the December 30 polls, the AL-led grand alliance secured 288 seats. JP, a key component of the alliance,

bagged 22 seats. The BNP-led Jatiya Oikyafront managed to win only seven seats. Independent candidates won three.

Election in Gaibandha-3 was rescheduled for January 27 following the death of a candidate and re-polling will take place in three centres in Brahmanbaria-2 on January 9.

The Jatiya Oikyafront has announced that its MPs-elect will not take oath as the alliance rejected the polls results alleging that the election was rigged by the ruling party.

Against this backdrop, it was assumed that the JP may sit on the opposition bench, like in the current parliament.

The JP became the main opposition in the current parliament formed

after the 2014 election, which the BNP-led alliance had boycotted. The JP won 34 seats and its senior leader Raushan Ershad was recognised as the leader of the opposition with the status of a minister. Three JP MPs were also made ministers.

Their dual role has been criticised. The party could not play its due role as the main opposition in parliament in the last five years.

Meanwhile, JP Chairman HM Ershad could not take his oath as MP yesterday due to his illness, said GM Quader, Ershad's younger brother.

He was then scheduled to take the oath separately at 3:00pm yesterday. But later, he informed Quader that he was feeling ill and would not be able to do so.



Garos students observe a candle-lit vigil at a memorial of Piren Slan in Tangail's Madhupur yesterday, his 15th death anniversary. Piren was killed on January 3, 2004, when police and forest guards opened fire on demonstrations against the establishment of an Eco Park in Madhupur forests.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

China rover reaches

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Unlike the near side of the moon that offers many flat areas to touch down on, the far side is mountainous and rugged.

The moon is "tidally locked" to Earth in its rotation so the same side is always facing Earth.

Chang'e-4 is carrying six experiments from China and four from abroad, including low-frequency radio astronomical studies -- aiming to take advantage of the lack of interference on the moon's far side.

The rover will also conduct mineral and radiation tests, the China National Space Administration has said.

"It's a very good start," said Wu Weiren, chief designer of China's lunar exploration program, in an interview with state broadcaster CCTV. "We are now building China into an aerospace power."

Beijing is planning to send another lunar lander, Chang'e-5, later this year to collect samples and bring them back to Earth.

It is among a slew of ambitious

Chinese targets, which include a reusable launcher by 2021, a super-powerful rocket capable of delivering payloads heavier than those NASA and private rocket firm SpaceX can handle, a moon base, a permanently crewed space station, and a Mars rover.

The People's Liberation Army "looks at space as a new strategic high ground," said Michael Raska, who studies security and defence issues at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore.

An increased presence in space will be vital for "anything for early warning, surveillance, reconnaissance, targeting... nearly every military mission out there is relying on some sort of space capability."

But China's aerospace industry still has a long way to go, especially compared to that of the US, said Shen Dingli, a Shanghai-based international studies scholar.

"Armstrong landed on the moon more than 50 years ago -- Chinese people still have not landed on the

moon even today."

EXTREME CHALLENGES

It was not until 1959 that the Soviet Union captured the first images of the moon's mysterious and heavily cratered "dark side."

No lander or rover has ever previously touched the surface there, and it is no easy technological feat -- China has been preparing for this moment for years.

A major challenge for the mission was communicating with the robotic lander as there is no direct "line of sight" for signals to the far side of the moon.

As a solution, China in May blasted the Queqiao (Magpie Bridge) satellite into the moon's orbit, positioning it so that it can relay data and commands between the lander and Earth.

In another extreme hurdle, during the lunar night -- which lasts 14 Earth days -- temperatures drop to as low as minus 173 degrees Celsius (minus 279 Fahrenheit).

During the lunar day, also lasting 14 Earth days, temperatures soar as high as 127 C (261 F).