

Turnout

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was 70.57 percent, while it fell to 61.23 percent in 2014.

Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam attributed the low voter enthusiasm to the absence of some registered political parties in the polls. "The elections became less competitive and participation of voters became less than that of previous elections."

Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of election watchdog Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), termed the turnout figure "questionable". He also called the polls "one-sided" as the people already considered its results "certain".

"Voters became disinterested because they were not sure whether casting their votes will make any difference," he said, adding that voters feared they could not vote if they turned up at polling centres.

"Most importantly they [voters] lost faith in the EC," he said.

This year, elections in 480 upazilas out of 492 are taking place in five phases. The fifth phase will be on June 18.

This is the first time political parties have nominated candidates for the posts of chairman, vice-chairman and female vice-chairman in upazila parishads.

The BNP, left democratic alliance, a combine of eight left-leaning parties; Islami Andolan Bangladesh; Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan and Bangladesh Muslim League boycotted the election, saying that they did not see any prospect of free and fair polls.

The results also show that 108 chairman candidates had been elected unopposed in the four phases. Of them, 107 are from the ruling Awami League while the other is an independent, according to the EC.

Fifty vice-chairman contestants and 52 female vice-chairman contenders were also elected uncontested. Almost all of them are AL-backed contenders.

The EC have results of 451 upazilas. Of them, no elections were needed in 30 upazilas as all three candidates of the upazilas - chairman, vice-chairman and female vice-chairman - were elected unopposed.

AL chairman candidates won in 320 upazilas. Independent contenders secured victory in 127 upazilas, Jatiya Party men in three upazilas and JP (Manju) candidate bagged a chairman post.

Independent candidates took around 27 percent of the chairman posts.

EC officials said not less than 80 percent of the independent candidates who won in the elections were rebel candidates from the AL.

"The parties that are not contesting the local government election might have extended support to the independent candidates," said Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam.

Japan declares

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"command" but can also mean "good" and "beautiful," while the second means "peace" or "harmony". The name emphasises the beauty of Japan's traditional culture and a future in which everyone would be able to achieve their dreams, especially young people, Abe said.

"Our nation is facing a big turning point, but there are lots of Japanese values that should not fade away," he told a news conference, adding the name signals that "our nation's culture is born and nourished by people's hearts being drawn beautifully together."

Naruhito's ascension to the Chrysanthemum Throne will come a day after his father, Emperor Akihito, abdicates on April 30, ending the Heisei era, which began in 1989. He will be the first emperor to abdicate in Japan in over two centuries.

The announcement came a month early so government offices and companies can update computer software and make preparations to avoid glitches when the new era begins.

While use of the Western calendar is common, many Japanese count years by gengo or use the two systems interchangeably.

While the public response was generally positive, some people did not like the new name, pronounced "ray-wa." "It's a gentle, peaceful name," said Masaharu Hannuki, a 63-year-old man outside Shimbashi train station where free special edition newspapers were handed out. "We want this to be an era where children can shine in a calm future."

Others said it sounded severe because the first character is used most often to mean "command" and "order." "The idea that you should just give in to orders from those above you - that's probably their wish but that doesn't give me the sense they want peace for ordinary people," said one Twitter user.

For the first time, the new name was taken from an ancient Japanese source - an anthology of poems called the Manyoshu - instead of old Chinese texts.

The characters are from a poem about spring that mentions soft winds and plum blossoms - references that scholars recognised but are not familiar to most people.



Police surround senior BNP leaders, who are waiting for the arrival of ailing party Chairperson Khaleda Zia, on the premises of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Medical University yesterday. PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Khaleda taken to BSMMU

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Brig Gen AK Mahbulul Haque told reporters after a five-member medical board examined her.

"She has pain in joints of her hands and feet. She is weak and does not have a sound sleep. Her blood sugar level was measured 14 [mmol/L] after having meal," he said.

The director ruled out any possibility of sending Khaleda abroad for treatment now, saying "she is not facing any such complexity which is not possible to be treated at BSMMU."

According to the jail authorities, Khaleda was so sick that she could not be produced before the court of Judge Sheikh Hafizur Rahman of the Special Judge Court-9 yesterday. The court was set up inside the Old Dhaka Jail for hearing on charge framing in connection with the Niko graft case.

The court fixed April 10 for the next hearing on charge framing in the case.

Khaleda, escorted by 15 vehicles full of law enforcers, prison and fire officials, was taken out of the prison at 12:20pm. She was taken to Cabin 621 after the convoy reached at the BSMMU at 12:38pm.

Security was beefed up around the hospital centreing the shifting.

Mahbulul said they had reformed the previous medical board as its former chief Dr Prof Abdul Jalil Chowdhury took retirement a few days back.

"She [Khaleda] had gone through different tests a few days ago. No test is required right now," he said, adding

that a doctor would check her health every day.

Mahbulul said Khaleda expressed satisfaction over the medical board that includes two of her personal physicians, including Abdullah AL Mamun.

Replying to a query about BNP's demand of shifting her to a specialised hospital, the director said, "The BSMMU is the super specialized hospital in Bangladesh."

Last year, a debate raged between the government and the BNP about whether Khaleda would be treated at BSMMU or her preferred United Hospital.

Though the BNP chief initially refused to take treatment at BSMMU, she finally agreed and was shifted there on October 6 that year.

The issue of Khaleda's shifting surfaced once again on March 5 when a six-member BNP delegation, led by its Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, met Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan and discussed her illness and the necessity of proper treatment. Khaleda refused to be treated at BSMMU when the authorities made all arrangement on March 10.

Khaleda has been in jail since February 8 last year when a special court awarded her five years in prison in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case.

The High Court later extended her jail term to 10 years in the case. She was also convicted in the Zia Charitable Trust graft case and handed a seven-year jail term.

Probe bodies

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after inspecting the building around 11:30am.

"We are planning to compare the Rajuk-granted building plan and the one provided by the owners of the FR Tower so that we can investigate if there are any differences between the two."

Meanwhile, another eight-member probe team, formed by the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB), inspected the spot for three hours but refrained from commenting in details.

Engineer Kazi Khairul Bashar, a member of the probe body, said fire might have originated there from an electrical short-circuit from an air conditioner or other things on any floor between seventh and ninth.

"There will be a meeting on April 4. We will not comment today," he added.

Meanwhile, owners have been handed their belongings which were stored on different floors of the 23-storey FR Tower.

Talking with The Daily Star, Sazzatul Islam, a staff of Fryyay Restaurant housed at the building, said they started the business two months back. It is owned by five students of a private university.

"The business was growing but suddenly this happened," Sazzatul said, adding that though their restaurant was safe from fire, they don't know where they will shift now.

Staffers of DIRD Group, which had offices on the third, 12th, 13th, 16th, and 19th floors of FR Tower, were also seen moving their goods.

"Our export is now closed after the fire incident. We are now shifting the goods to our factories in Savar and Gazipur so that we can set up our office there," said Golam Mostafa Warish, an official of the DIRD Group's marketing department.

Visiting the spot yesterday, it was seen that the broken pieces of glasses were often falling down on the road. So the authorities have put up sheds on both sides of the building to avoid any accident.

Ramadan

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officer (commercial) of TCB.

Under the programme, the TCB will sell 2,000-2,500 tonnes of edible oil, 2,000 tonnes of sugar, 1,000-1,100 tonnes of lentil, 1,500 tonnes of chickpea and 100 tonnes of dates.

Some 2,827 dealers will sell the commodities at 187 spots across the country with goods loaded on trucks - 35 spots in the capital, 10 in Chattogram, five each in all the divisional cities and one each in all the district headquarters.

The TCB will sell the items to help low-income people deal with possible hike in the prices of daily essentials ahead of the Ramadan. But the unit price of the commodities is yet to be fixed by the government, said the official.

The sale spots in the capital are Secretariat Gate, Jatiya Press Club, Kaptan Bazar, Victoria Park, Science Lab intersection, New Market-Nilkhet intersection, Shaymoli-Kalyanpur, figatola intersection, Khamarbari at Farmgate, Kalmilata Bazar, Rajanigandha Supermarket at Kachukhet, Agargaon Taltola and Election Commission Office, Rajloldkhi Complex at Uttara, Mirpur-1 Mazar Road, Shantinagar Bazar, Fakirapool Bazar and Ideal Zone, Motijheel Balaka Chatter, Khilgaon Taltola Bazar, Rampura Bazar, Mirpur-10 roundabout, Ashkona Hajj Camp at Uttara, Mohammadpur Townhall Kitchen Market, Dilkusha and Madartek Nondipara Krishi Bank.

The sale will continue till the last day of Ramadan, the official added.

NZ shooters back gun control after massacre

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand will crack down on firearms ownership this week after the Christchurch mosques massacre that claimed 50 lives - and the Kiwi gun lobby, for the most part, is okay with that.

In stark contrast to the United States, where even the most minor curbs on gun ownership meet ferocious opposition led by the National Rifle Association, New Zealand gun owners agree action is needed.

The March 15 rampage by a white supremacist gunman has been a shock to the collective system.

"We want to support our government in any changes to prevent a terrorist attack from happening in New Zealand again," Nicole McKee, secretary of the Council of Licensed Firearm Owners said.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's government announced an immediate ban on military-style semi-automatic rifles (MSSAs) after the shooting and will put laws to parliament formalising its action today.

Finalising such legislation can often take months but Ardern says the matter is so urgent it will be done by April 11.

Further curbs - potentially including a gun register, tighter vetting and stricter gun storage rules - are set to be passed by the end of the year.

In a move that would be unthinkable in the United States, one of New Zealand's largest gun retailers, Hunting & Fishing, voluntarily stopped selling MSSAs and halted online firearms sales.

"Such weapons of war have no place in our business - or our country," chief executive Darren Jacobs said.

New Zealand has its own National Rifle Association, but since the shooting, it has been at pains to point out it is a small sporting organisation, not a wealthy political lobby group like its American counterpart.

"Our members shoot with single-shot bolt action rifles at paper targets," president Malcolm Dodson said.

Another office holder has told media the New Zealand NRA is considering changing its name to avoid any association with the American body.

On the surface, New Zealand and the United States share many historical similarities, but they have a fundamentally different attitude towards firearms.

Both are former British colonies that fought bitter wars against indigenous populations and forged an individualistic frontier mentality.

However, statistics highlight the difference.

In 2016, New Zealand, with a population of about 4.7 million, had nine firearms-related homicides.

In the United States, population approximately 327 million, there were 14,415, about 23 times the per capita rate as New Zealand.

There are approximately 393 million guns in private hands in the United States, or 1.2 for every person, whereas New Zealand has about 1.5 million, or 0.3 per person.

The New Zealand government believes there are 13,500 MSSAs in the country, while estimates put the number in the US at 15 million.

Philip Alper, a gun policy researcher at the University of Sydney, said the crucial difference between New Zealand and the United States was the US Constitution's Second Amendment, which guarantees the right to keep and bear arms.

Alper, himself a Kiwi, said countries such as New Zealand viewed gun ownership as a privilege, while in America it was seen as an inalienable right.

1 killed, 5 hurt

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Three other workers of the factory - Keshob Chakraborty, Dilip Chakraborty and Hridoy Chandra Debnath - sustained injuries while they were trying to douse the fire. They were sent to Noakhali General Hospital for treatment.

They were also sleeping in another room near the factory.

Officer-in-charge of Senbagh Police Station Md Mijanur Rahman said the owner of the factory has been asked to show the factory's authorisation papers, adding that necessary legal action will be taken after investigation.

In Noagoan, a fire occurred in a plastic warehouse setup at the top floor of a five-storey building in the town's Dabpatty Bazar area yesterday afternoon.

The building owner, Majnu Kawsar, is a businessman who lives with his family on the second floor of the building while using the basement and other floors to store plastic material for business purposes, said witnesses, police and fire fighters.

The fire service received the information of fire around 2:30pm and sent six units to the spot immediately. The fire was completely doused within one

"We have a population who, when they travelled to America would get off the plane and be absolutely horrified to see people walking around with a gun," he said, adding that safety was at the centre of New Zealand gun culture.

EU's patience

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Frustrated with her approach, MPs in the House of Commons last week voted to give themselves powers to find an alternative strategy, by holding a series of "indicative votes".

No single option won a majority in the first round but MPs were set to try again yesterday, with voting starting at 8.00 pm (1900 GMT), and another day of debate is scheduled for this Wednesday.

The two most popular options last week were a new EU-UK customs union or a public vote on any agreed deal, both backed by the opposition Labour party.

Some pro-European ministers might support a customs union, but that risks mass rebellion among the rest of May's cabinet, who believe it would curtail Britain's freedom after Brexit.

Another widely discussed plan, based on the model of Norway's membership of the EU's single market, secured less support last week but many MPs abstained.

In rare public remarks, chief whip Julian Smith - who enforces discipline among May's Conservative MPs - said a closer relationship with the EU was "inevitable" due to the make-up of parliament.

But in a BBC interview broadcast yesterday, he also noted the divisions among ministers, saying it was "the worst example of ill-discipline in cabinet in British political history".

German junior foreign minister Michael Roth had harsher words when he addressed a meeting of his Social Democratic Party in Berlin this weekend.

"Brexit is a shitshow, I'll say it quite undiplomatically," he said.

He blamed people who "went to private schools and elite universities" saying: "They screwed it up and other have to take responsibility for it."

GENERAL ELECTION THREAT
May struck a divorce deal with the EU last November, but it was rejected by MPs in January, on March 12 and again last Friday.

The numbers of Conservative MPs against the plan fell after May pledged to resign if it passed, but her Northern Irish allies, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), are still opposed.

Guy Verhofstadt, the leader of the European Parliament's Brexit committee, urged MPs to "find a compromise and stop this chaos".

"This evening, for once voting 'Yes', instead of every time voting 'No,'" he tweeted.

Cabinet ministers will meet this morning to discuss the outcome of the ballots, and could still decide to hold a fourth vote on May's deal on Wednesday or Thursday.

The votes by MPs are not legally binding but the government fears they may lead to legislation that would force May's hand.

"I fear we are reaching the limits of this process in this House," the prime minister said last week, fuelling speculation that the only way out may be a general election.

But many Conservative MPs oppose the idea. The party's deputy chairman James Cleverly told Sky News: "I don't think an election would solve anything."

14,988 absent on first day

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803, according to the data of Bangladesh Inter-Board Coordination Sub-Committee.

Twenty-two students were expelled for resorting to unfair means under the Technical Education Board, while one each from the Dhaka, Cumilla, Jashore, Chattogram and Madrasa boards was expelled.

Education Minister Dipu Moni has meanwhile assured that the exams would be held without any incidents of question leak. She also urged all not to pay heed to any kind of rumours in this regard.

Dipu Moni and Deputy Minister for Education Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury Nowfel visited the examination centre at Siddheswari Girls College in the capital.

The written examinations will continue until May 11, while the practical examinations will be held from May 12 to May 21.

A total of 11,38,747 candidates are

taking the examinations under eight general education boards, 88,451 candidates under the Madrasa Education Board and 124,264 others under the Technical Education Board.

The government has taken a decision to shut down all coaching centres across the country from April 1 to May 6 in a bid to prevent question leak during the examinations.

The examinees have been asked to enter their respective centres 30 minutes before the exam starts. If anyone failed to do so, they have to mention the reason for their delay.

Besides, no electronic devices are allowed within 200 yards of the exam centres. On violation, legal action will be taken against the offenders. The set code of the question papers would be announced 25 minutes before the exam starts.

Only the secretary of the exam centre is allowed to use a feature phone inside the centre.

Four killed, two hurt

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Mashiur Rahman, officer-in-charge (OC) of Khilgaon Police Station, told The Daily Star that they seized the van and detained its driver from the spot.

Meanwhile in Lalmonirhat, a truck ran over Rana, an SSC examinee, while he was crossing the the Kakina-Chaparhat road near Kakina area around 7:00am, leaving him dead on the spot.

The driver fled the scene with the truck, police said.

Rana was a student of Kakina Mahima Ranja Memorial High School and was waiting for his results, said Maqbul Hossain, OC of Kaliganj police station.

As the news of his death spread, agitating students from different local schools blocked the Lalmonirhat-Burimari highway for two hours from 12:00pm demanding the driver's immediate arrest.

Police later intervened and convinced the students to withdraw the blockade, promising that their demand will be met, OC Maqbul said.

However, talking to journalists, Aminul Islam, a student of class 10 of the school, said they would wage tougher movement from today if the

truck driver was not arrested by then.

The driver had been identified and would be arrested immediately, the OC confirmed.

Earlier, on March 19, a university student - Abrar Ahmed Chowdhury - was killed after a bus ran him over in Dhaka's Bashundhara Residential area, triggering the protest of students for safe road once again.

In Dinajpur, freedom fighter Lutfar, along with two others - Mosir Uddin, 68, and Saidur Rahman, 50, were taking a walk after morning prayers in Sadar upazila's Tajpur village when a tractor lost control and hit them around 6:00am, said Redwanur Rahim, officer-in-charge (OC) of Dinajpur Sadar Police Station.

Lutfar died on the spot and the two others were injured.

Locals rushed them to M Abdur Rahim Medical College Hospital, the OC said.

In another incident, Jahidul was killed when a speeding truck hit him in Chirirbandar upazila's Bekipur area on the Dinajpur-Rangpur highway.