

Voters keep off

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236,512 votes, according to results from the 1,150 polling stations in the DSCC.

In Dhaka North City Corporation, AL mayor candidate Atiqul Islam secured 447,211 votes. His rival Tabith Awal of the BNP bagged 264,161 votes, show results from the 1,318 voting centres in the DNCC.

Before the announcement of results from the returning officer's office, both Atiqul and Taposh met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban around 9:30pm.

Meanwhile, the BNP rejected the results and called a daylong hartal today in the capital.

"We are totally rejecting the city elections. A dawn-to-dusk hartal will be observed in the city on Sunday," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said at a press conference at the party's Nayapaltan central office last night.

Earlier, the party submitted a written complaint to the Election Commission, alleging "irregularities" in the city elections.

As in the previous polls, the BNP could not put up a fight in this election as well. Though the party could assemble a good number of leaders and activists in the run-up to the election, the polling agents of the BNP candidates were largely absent on the election day. This showed their incapacity to stand against the ruling AL.

Fakhrul alleged that all agents of the party's mayoral candidates were either barred from entering the polling

stations or driven out of those.

"Presiding officers and members of law enforcement agencies played the role of mere spectators."

The BNP has been in a tight spot after its humiliating defeat in the December 30 national polls in 2018. Since then, the party could hardly carry out any meaningful political programme except for some meetings and rallies.

'EC COULDN'T EARN TRUST'
The poor turnout in the city polls speaks volumes of apathy that has developed among voters regarding the electoral process.

Reports from our correspondents indicate that voters' presence was thin at most of the polling centres where over 54 lakh voters were supposed to elect the city's custodians.

And this, according to experts, indicated people's diminishing confidence in the country's electoral system.

Many people were deprived of their voting rights in some of the previous elections, they said. Also, the Election Commission has failed to create enthusiasm among the voters to go to polling centres.

"It is probably the outcome of the previous elections. Voters did not have confidence that they would be able to cast their votes without any fear, and their vote would make a difference," Prof Nizamuddin Ahmed, an expert on local governance system, told The Daily Star.

Given the intensity of the candidates' campaigns, the voter turnout should have been higher, he said. "But the poor presence of voters indicates that the Election

Commission could not earn the trust of the voters."

Echoing this view, Brig Gen (ret'd) Shakhawat Hossain, a former election commissioner, said people are losing trust in the electoral system because of the EC's poor management.

"The election was apparently peaceful with an abnormal voter turnout," he told this newspaper.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda predicted that the turnout would be less than 30 percent.

"It was a good election," he told the reporters last night.

According to the EC's data, the voter turnout was 18.08 percent in the DNCC and 21.27 percent in the DSCC as of 2:00pm yesterday.

In the previous 2015 elections, the average voter turnout in the two city corporations was 43.92 percent -- 37.29 percent in north and 48.4 percent in south.

RESEMBLANCE TO DEC 30 POLLS
Yesterday's polling was quite peaceful. But the city residents found some uncanny resemblance between this election and the 11th parliamentary polls. As in the December 30 polls, there was a one-sided overwhelming show of strength this time too.

Both the BNP mayor aspirants as well as some BNP-backed councillor candidates alleged that the ruling party men drove out their polling agents from the polling centres. In elections, polling agents play a vital role in checking fake voting.

About the allegation, the CEC said, "The [polling]

agents must have the strength to stay put... They shouldn't leave [the centres] if anyone asks them to do so."

There were a lot of speculations centring yesterday's election as it was the first EVM-only polls.

The EC used the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) at all the 2,468 polling stations despite reservations from opposition political parties and concern among many voters about how to use the machines.

Many voters complained that they were unable to cast their ballots as the EVMs could not recognise their fingerprints. They also said what made them uncomfortable was that confidentiality in casting ballots was compromised.

Besides, they alleged that inside the booths there were many "helping hands" who cast votes through EVMs on their behalf.

On the issue, Shakhawat said he heard that there were cases where voting through EVMs was manipulated by the people behind the machines.

"Even EVMs could not stop vote manipulation," he said.

The first election to the undivided Dhaka City Corporation was held in 1994 and the second one in 2002. The government in 2011 split the DCC into two but there was no election.

The two city corporations went to polls in 2015. The AL-backed candidates won the mayoral posts with the BNP-backed candidates boycotting the election halfway over allegations of vote rigging.

Ghosts around

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inviting for voters to come out from their homes on a day, declared a public holiday to cast votes amid festivity.

Largely peaceful was the climate around all polling centres. Still, the polls ambience, as seen by our 48 correspondents at 120 of 2,468 centres, was eerily quizzical. It was emptiness everywhere. Empty road, empty voting centre, empty polling booth, empty presence of opposition parties and empty look in the faces of polling officials. As if the word empty personified the city elections.

The turnout less than 30 percent only reflected how lowly the EC had actually fared in the trust scale of majority of voters who chose to forgo their right to elect.

Historically, Bangladeshis were most enthusiastic about their voting rights. Where did the enthusiasm go or how voters of today developed this mass apathy towards their once-cherished rights could be a grim soul-searching for our political system. But this symptom they certainly did not develop overnight. Ghosts in our electoral process have contributed to voters' gradual loss of interest.

However, irrespective of who won or lost in the city polls, the single biggest loser is the EC for sure. A strong 'no vote' was cast against the EC and election process, with majority of voters not turning up at polling centres. The erosion in voters' confidence started a long ago, with the EC appearing more and more compromising with the powers that be while holding elections in the past.

Apart from the overt bias of allowing the ruling party to violate the election code of conduct, the EC remained nonchalant to common concerns of parties out of power and experts about the prospect of getting EVMs malfunctioned and mishandled. Their strongest concern was: 'if machine is made by men, it can be hacked by men as well.'

The EC neither came forward to dispel their fear nor give parties the confidence about men around the machine during the polls. It maintained the same stance while moving on to conduct the city elections.

Coming out of polling centres yesterday, almost all voters complained to our correspondents about the presence of too many 'helping hands' around the machine.

Who were they? Helping hands for voters or ghosts that actually ran the machine? An independent investigation may clear the air around machine. But what's more urgent now for the EC is to clear its name and win back voter's confidence in elections.

Not smooth sailing at all

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most of the voters The Daily Star talked to at different polling centres yesterday cast a grim picture.

Many complained of not being able to vote as the fingerprint scanners failed to identify them, unwanted "helpers" cast their votes instead, and no privacy in the polling booths. The Daily Star got many of these complaints from over 100 centres its reporters visited.

Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda's fingerprint did not match the one in the database when he tried to cast his vote at a polling station in Uttara yesterday morning. He eventually voted using his national ID card number.

The CEC was lucky to have been able to cast his vote. The Daily Star got many complaints from voters who were unable to cast their votes due to fingerprint mismatch. This paper's executive editor was one of those who were not allowed to vote as the machines failed to read the fingerprints.

"I could not cast my vote. Someone cast it for me," a voter told this correspondent in front of Gandaria High School polling centre around 11:30am.

This correspondent, also a voter at that centre, then went into the polling centre, which is in Dhaka-6 constituency where EVMs had been used in the 2018 national polls.

When this correspondent reached the polling booth on the third floor, he saw five people standing in line to cast their votes.

As a voter approached the booth, an unwanted "helper" sporting a card around his neck with the symbol of boat and Dhaka South Awami League candidates' pictures, entered the booth before him.

The voter and the "helper" were seen and heard exchanging heated words.

"What's the point of this kind of farce? I should not have come to vote," the man was heard saying as he left.

Apparently disheartened by seeing a fellow voter's vote being cast by the unwanted "helper", some of the voters who were in the queue started leaving without casting their votes.

Asked, one of them said, "I will not allow someone else to cast my vote against my will. It is better to not vote."

After completing his biometric clearance, a voter in his 40s engaged in a heated exchange with the "helper" and at one stage told officials that he won't cast his and left fuming.

No sooner the voter had left, the "helper" went inside the booth and cast the votes.

Ahead of a five-person queue was an elderly philanthropist of the area. Following 10 minutes of trial and error, he got biometric clearance to vote.

But when he was casting his vote, the unwanted "helper" was keeping an eye over the barely shoulder-height black curtain at the booth.

When this reporter went to cast his vote, a leader of the ruling party's youth front shouted from a distance. "He is a big brother of our neighbourhood. Let him cast his vote."

A first-time EVM voter shared his experience to this correspondent afterwards.

"I told him [unwanted "helper" inside the booth], 'Let me cast my vote'," the voter said.

"Of course, I'm here to help you choose the ones to vote for," the voter quoted the man as saying.

At Kids International School in PC Culture Housing, Adabor, a woman complained that a polling officer cast her vote pretending to fix a broken machine.

"After I selected the first candidate, the machine stopped working. The polling officer then entered the booth and said 'let me help you and cast the votes'," said the woman, adding that the officer stole the next two votes on the ballot pretending to fix the machine.

The privacy required for casting votes seemed to be scarce.

Most of the voters said they felt embarrassed.

When a voter cast their vote, it remains on the screen for quite a while allowing people in the station to sneak a peek.

Around noon at Ideal School and College of Rampura, a heated exchange ensued after a woman protested AL supporters' illegal interference. The woman told The Daily Star that the AL supporters were peeking into the booth to see who she was voting for.

Some aggrieved women also made similar complaints at New Model Degree College polling centre.

They said the ruling party men wanted to see who they were voting for.

At Little Star KG and High school in Badda, Chand Mia said it took 10 minutes to cast his vote and that he felt it was easier to vote without the EVMs.

The presiding officer of the centre Mohammad Mohiuddin said most of the voters there were labourer and many of them went to vote with scratches on their thumbs, making it difficult to read the fingerprints.

Over the last 10 years, the EC used EVMs on a small scale in local government elections and in one constituency in the last parliamentary polls.

The use of EVMs was marred by controversy before the 2019 parliamentary election in India when opposition political parties claimed that the machines were susceptible to manipulation and tampering.

The Indian EC then introduced voter verifiable paper audit trail (VVPAT) or verifiable paper record (VPR).

Germany, the Netherlands and Ireland have stopped using the machines after security flaws triggered debates.

What CEC said
Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda claimed that voting for someone else was not possible with EVMs.

Regarding the allegations of voters that someone had voted for them after the biometric clearance, the CEC, speaking to reporters at the Nirbachan Bhaban in Sher-e-Bangla Nagar in the evening, said the EC did not get any such complaints.

He claimed that no voter who went to the polling centres returned without casting their votes.

Speaking to The Daily Star after his biometric clearance failure, Huda said, "As my fingerprint was taken eight to nine years ago, it may not match. It may not match even if your finger tips are moist," he added.

"Such problems may arise, but no one will go back home without casting his or her vote," he said, adding that there are three to four ways to cast votes. He however did not elaborate.

US author Mary Higgins Clark dies

AFP, Washington

Best-selling American author Mary Higgins Clark, known by her fans as the "Queen of Suspense", has died aged 92, her publisher confirmed Friday.

She was still producing a book a year at the age of 90, with her page-turners earning her a legion of fans across the world -- and even making her one of the top-selling fiction authors in France.

Clark's publisher Simon & Schuster announced her death, tweeting she died peacefully "surrounded by family and friends".

With sales of more than 100 million in the United States alone, she achieved success in her 40s after a series of personal tragedies.

Her father died from a heart attack when she was 11 years old and, with her mother struggling with three children, Clark was obliged to work from 15.



A cat tries to take a catnap beside the booth at Sir Salimullah Medical College polling station in Old Dhaka yesterday as voter show was poor there.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Agents must be

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whenever anyone asks them to leave."

The CEC told the polling agents to ask for assistance from presiding officers and members of law enforcement if they were threatened or driven out.

Returning officers will take steps if they receive allegations, he said, adding "We will stop voting if the situation in a centre goes beyond control."

At the briefing, he, however, said the voter turnout till then was not satisfactory and hoped that it would pick up soon.

The CEC expressed his satisfaction over the overall election situation.

Former election commissioner Brig Gen (Ret'd) Shakhawat Hossain told The Daily Star that being a CEC, Huda should not make such comments.

"What is he implying by this? Will polling agents remain in the polling stations through a show of force? Then what is the role of EC?" he wondered.

The constitution empowers the Election Commission (EC) to do anything and everything to ensure a free and fair election.

It is constitutionally oath-bound to ensure free and fair elections to the office of President of the Republic, and to Jatiya Sangsad and local government bodies.

The EC, according to experts, must then work to create a congenial voting atmosphere, where such needs to resort to "strength" and put up "resistance" should not even be a question.

Unwanted help

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"Midway through voting, a man with a 'Boat' symbol ID peeked into my voting booth. I asked what he was doing there and he said, 'No, I'm making sure that you are voting right'".

At this point, the voter asked him to leave, but the man had noticed that he had not voted for 'boat'.

"He looked at me sternly and said, 'Oh, so you voted for that symbol? Get out of here.' He then exited the curtained area. I followed him out and saw him pointing at me and screaming at others present, 'Didn't you see this [profanity]' cast her vote for that symbol? Who let her in? Make sure this symbol gets no vote in this station'.

"I asked why he was screaming profanities but he refused to engage with me, and instead coerced the officers to give my four-digit number and then walked inside the curtained area. When I questioned this and asked everyone there why he went in there with my number, they just told me to leave."

The voter tried finding the presiding officer, but failed, and alleged that the guards too did nothing.

3 journos beaten up

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professional duties. A handful of journalists alleged that police and the presiding officers did not cooperate them and even drove them out of the centres in some cases.

Mostafizur Rahman Sumon, a crime reporter at online news portal Agami News, was attacked while taking photos of a gathering of Awami League activists in Rayerbazar area in the morning.

Followers of AL-backed councillor candidate Md Hossain Khokon swooped on him wielding sharp weapons and snatched his phone, his colleagues said.

Sumon was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where he had to have six stitches on his head, said Inspector Bachchu Mia, in-charge of DMCH Police Outpost.

Lying on a hospital bed, Sumon told reporters that he was attacked when he tried to capture a procession where some youths were carrying firearms and sharp weapons on Sadeque Khan Road around 11:00am.

"They pushed me down on the road and beat me up ... " he added.

While visiting Banani Bidyaniketan School and College centre in the afternoon, Inspector General of Police Mohammad Javed Patwary instructed police to take necessary actions against the attackers.

A correspondent of Press Bangla Agency was also beaten up by Awami League activists while he was filming irregularities at Nikunja Jan-e-Alam School around 10:30am, Ibrahim Sarker, a special correspondent of the agency, told The Daily Star.

He was later taken to Kurmitola General Hospital, Ibrahim said.

Followers of AL-backed councillor candidate of ward no. 4 Md Jahangir Hossain attacked Chief Photographer of Bangla daily Kaler Kantha Sheikh Hasan at Madartek School, said SM Azad, chief crime reporter at the newspaper.

The attackers also took away the memory card of his camera, he said.

Meanwhile, AL supporters snatched the mobile phone of Foisal Ahmed, a reporter at The Daily Star, as he was taking a video when AL supporters were forcing voters to vote for boat at Ideal School and College in Rampura.

Meanwhile, two journalists were assaulted at Faridabad madrasa polling centre in old Dhaka allegedly by activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League.

The journos are Mahabub Momtaji, staff reporter at Bangladesh Pratidin and Nurul Amin, staff reporter at The Business Standard.

Nurul told The Daily Star that the attackers snatched their mobile phones and deleted some important evidence of irregularities.

Dipon Dewan, a senior reporter at private TV channel Banglavision said the presiding officer at Uttara High School centre did not cooperate him and asked to meet him in the afternoon.

"But when I went there around 2:30pm, a police officer prevented me from entering polling booths saying the presiding officer asked him not to allow any journalists," he told The Daily Star.

At 3:26pm sharp, only half an hour before the centre was closed, three journalists -- two of The Daily Star and another of the Bangla daily Prothom Alo -- were asked to leave a polling centre at Lalmatia Mohila College.

The journalists tried to take a photo of a screen displaying vote counts inside a polling booth, not in the secret room.

An on-duty sub-inspector, named Russel, rushed in and locked into an altercation with the reporter. He argued no one can take any photos inside a voting room.

As the journalists pointed out what the SI said was wrong, he, along with a presiding officer named Saiful Islam, took them to a room and locked it.

As the journalists showed their cards, issued by the Election Commission, the police official said, "Even if you are permitted by the prime minister, I won't allow you here."

BCL men follow

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Earlier in the morning, a mobile court led by an executive magistrate removed at least 60 men who made fake lines in front of the Curzon Hall centres. However, they returned soon after the magistrate left.

At around 9am, eight agents of BNP were threatened and asked to leave polling stations at Curzon Hall and Udayan School, alleged convener of DU white panel teachers, Prof ABM Obaidul Islam.

"The situation of other four centres I have visited so far are the same," he said around 10am.

Later, the pro-BNP teachers submitted a written complaint to the presiding officer of University Laboratory School centre, said Prof Obaidul. He alleged that BNP agents were not allowed at any of the centres.

Agents of Islami Andolan Bangladesh and AL were seen present at the centre since morning.

Meanwhile, voter turnout was sparse till 10am. However, the turnout saw a little rise as the day progressed.

Abdul Motaleb, presiding officer of University Laboratory School told The Daily Star that only three votes were cast at his centre till 9:40am, over an hour and a half after voting began.

Some 80 out of 2,354 votes were cast at the Buet polling centre till 12 noon, said Presiding Officer Bashudeb. This reporter, however, found the premises of the centre empty at the time.

Only 61 votes were cast out of 1,879 at Motaher Hossain building, 57 out of 2,271 at Curzon Hall, and 128 out of 2,400 at DU Gymnasium centres till 10:15 am, according to respective presiding officers.

Udayan School presiding officer said he did not see BNP agents at the polling stations, and was trying to hold the elections smoothly. Presiding officers in other centres echoed him.

Contacted about the allegations, BCL central unit president AL Nahean Khan Joy said he did not hear anything about forming of fake queues or assaulting a voter, adding that he would look into it.

দিলকুশায় অফিস স্পেস ভাড়া হবে

রাজ ভবন, ২৯ দিলকুশা বা/এ, ঢাকা-১০০০

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