



‘Need administration support to get rid of godfathers’



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Dr Selina Hayat Ivy has made a name for herself as an energetic, courageous and people-friendly leader. On January 16, 2022, she won the Narayanganj City Corporation (NCC) mayoral election, for the third consecutive term, with a big margin against her principal opponent. In conversation with *Golan Mortoza* of *The Daily Star*, Ivy speaks about the election and some upcoming issues.

Compared to the last two elections, was this one more challenging?

All elections are tough and challenging. But this time, there was an invisible opponent besides the visible one. Thus, on the whole, this election was indeed a bit more difficult. I contested for the third consecutive term. I received enough positive responses from people. But the internal and external conspiracies were very difficult to deal with. But I won despite these deep conspiracies.

Did the conspiracy stem from within the party?

Conspiracies came from all directions. But if you look closely, none of them could sway public support. I have survived for 18 years now because of this public support. I believed from the very beginning that the deeper the conspiracy, the stronger the people's support for me would be. Eventually, that became the reality.

This time, you got fewer votes compared to the last two polls. Does this indicate a waning of your popularity?

You can be the judge of that. There are certain reasons behind my getting fewer votes this election. First, a lot of voters could not vote because of confusion with the EVMs. Polling was slow. Also, in many polling centres, booths



Ali Ahmed Chunka

exchange favours with contractors.

People know that there's no truth in this allegation. They have faith in me.

You will hear about this particular allegation once every five years—only during elections. In the last 18 years, I haven't taken favours worth even Tk 18 from anyone. Money flies in the air of Narayanganj city. If I really wanted money, I wouldn't have carried favour with contractors—I could take it from anywhere. But I don't indulge in such things. More importantly, now all the work is done through e-tender, so it's not possible to give contracts to one's contractor of choice or create syndicates. You can no longer fool the people with such allegations. That is why they have been electing me.

But your main opponent Taimur Alam Khandakar has alleged election engineering.

I think he said it for the sake of saying it. No engineering took place during this election. On the polling day, Uncle Taimur himself said that vote-casting had gone well and properly. Only after the results were announced did he start talking about election engineering. Nothing of that sort happened. Those who were against me knew where my vote bank was. They tried to employ sly tricks to keep my voters away from the polling centres. Those issues have nothing to do with EVM engineering.

Taimur Alam blessing you with his hand on your head, and you treating him with sweets—this image is now the talk of the

town as a symbol of positive political gesture.

I had told uncle beforehand that I would bring sweets to his house after winning the polls. Since he was busy in the morning, I visited him in the afternoon. I would've visited him anyway. My relationship with him is like that. I knew our contest ended on the 16th, and from 17th onwards, he would no longer be my rival. I don't know what the future holds, but from my side, there has been and will be no problem with anyone. I firmly believe Uncle Taimur gave me his blessings sincerely, and he will cooperate with me.

Tell us about your family's relationship with Taimur's family.

Uncle Taimur was my father's constant companion. In a way, we can say that he was my father's disciple. My father made him the leader of various organisations, too. They were very close. The two families were well-acquainted too; we would visit each other frequently. Uncle Taimur was by my side after my father passed away. I was the president of the memorial committee dedicated to my father, and he was its general secretary. He held that position until he joined the BNP. Even after he joined the BNP, our bond didn't break. I never granted him any political favours, but I maintained an amicable personal relationship with him.

Do you think you can change Narayanganj's image as the kingdom of criminal godfathers and terrorism?

We need the administration's support in order to free Narayanganj from the godfathers and terrorism. I don't know if we can rid our city completely of those elements. The situation has improved slightly. I hope it will get even better in the future.

Will we get justice for Twaki's murder?

We hope so. I have not compromised on this matter. I firmly believe that there will be justice for Twaki's murder. The people of Narayanganj will no longer tolerate such crimes. Since 2011, the undue influence of the godfathers has reduced greatly. I believe it will decrease further in the future.

I will try to restore Narayanganj's old identity as a business hub. Narayanganj has a rich economic, societal, cultural and sports-related history. I am trying to restore those aspects of the city. I am constructing many fields, have created open platforms for cultural activities, and built drama theatres. I am also working to facilitate mosques, temples and churches. Along with these, I am digging canals and ponds. I am doing all of this for the benefit of the people.

But certain problems, like hawkers, still persist.

I have rehabilitated the hawkers—I set up a market for them. The sad part is, if I rehabilitate 500 hawkers today, 2,000 more will occupy the streets within a few months. I need the administration's support for this effort, too. We must make an alternate arrangement. We need to keep the roads available for the general people. With the administration's support, it is possible to resolve the issue of hawkers.

The interview was translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan

A people's daughter

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The year was 1973.

A popular Narayanganj labour leader Ali Ahmed Chunka went to meet Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He wanted to contest in the first-ever Narayanganj municipality polls under the symbol boat.

Bangabandhu appeared, hugged him affectionately and said, "I know why you are here. But the party's candidate is Khoka [Mohiuddin], I can't give you nomination, but I give you my blessings."

With Bangabandhu's blessings and support from the people, Chunka won that election as an independent candidate.

Forty-eight years later, it was the turn of Chunka's eldest daughter Selina Hayat Ivy to repeat the feat. Ivy got the blessings of Bangabandhu's eldest daughter and also Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina—but not the party's nomination.

The physician-turned politician won the first-ever Narayanganj City Corporation polls in 2011, defeating AL-backed heavyweight candidate Shamim Osman. She made history as the first female mayor of the country.

With a "clean image" like that of her father, Ivy has become a popular leader of all in the thriving industrial city over the last decade.

But Ivy's political journey has not been an easy one. Many still cannot fathom how she stood firm against criminalisation of politics that has intensified with increasing industrialisation of an otherwise peaceful city on the bank of river Shitalakshya; even more astounding has been her courageous battle against the mighty Osman family.

Narayanganj's politics was by and large fair after the Liberation War, when Shamim Osman's father AKM Shamsuzzoha and Ivy's father Chunka led AL. There was healthy competition between the two and they made sure that their differences did not affect the people.

But things took a turn for the worse as the Osman family allegedly became involved in various criminal activities after Shamsuzzoha's death.

Ivy's entry into the electoral race came long after her father's death in 1984. Family members and Chunka's well-wishers persuaded her to take part in the municipality election in 2003.

"Chunka was defeated in 1984's municipality polls and there wasn't another municipality election till 2003," recalled noted civil society member, Rafiur Rabbi.

"Upon people's request, Ivy, who was in New Zealand with her family, came back and joined the electoral race against an influential BNP leader Nurul Islam," he said.

"She won the polls by a big margin. At that time people knew her only as Chunka's daughter. But she excelled and gradually became an icon in her own right due to her courage and pro-people attitude," he added.

In 2003, the BNP-led four-party alliance was in power. Shamim Osman and his followers had left the country, and there were only a few leaders who regularly visited the AL office.

At the time, Narayanganj district council chairman Anwar Hossain wanted to contest the municipality polls. However, the PM extended her support to Ivy considering the political situation, recalled GM Arafat, organising secretary of Narayanganj city unit AL.

Ivy made the headlines in 2011, when she contested the polls as an independent candidate. Subsequently, she became a voice against injustice.

"When allegations about the Osman family's involvement in the murder of 17-year-old Tanvir Mohammad Twaki came to the fore, she raised her voice and termed Shamim Osman a 'godfather'," said Arafat.

"There was no one but Ivy at that time to make such a statement with courage. In addition, her development activities, stance against corruption and commitment to the people have brought her where she is today," said Jahangir Alam, joint general secretary of Narayanganj district AL.

Ivy won the election in 2016 again, defeating the BNP candidate Shakhawat Hossain Khan, although she had to face opposition within her own party despite getting the party ticket.

In the recently concluded city corporation polls, Ivy defeated her father's close aide Taimur Alam Khandakar by around 70,000 votes. The win also made her the first female mayor to accomplish a hat-trick in any city corporation polls in the country.

When Chunka died on February 25, 1984, Ivy, the first of her siblings, was a high school student. Born in 1968, Ivy was a meritorious student, who won a scholarship from the Russian government to study at Odessa Piragob Medical University in 1986 with a scholarship from the Russian government.

After graduation, Ivy returned to Dhaka to complete her internship and work as an honorary physician at Dhaka Mitford Hospital.

She then married Kazi Ahsan Hayat, a computer engineer based in New Zealand, in 1995 and left the country.

A mother of two sons, she lived there till her return in 2003.

The rest, as they say, is history.



PHOTO: PD

Ivy got the blessings of the PM in 2011, but not the party's nomination.

for female voters were set up on the first or second floor, so many of them could not go up to them. These were all subtle plans to prevent women from voting. Those who conspired against me knew well that if more women were able to cast their votes, I would get more votes. Despite all of this, I say Alhamdulillah.

Why do the people of Narayanganj vote for you? Have you ever thought about it?

The people of Narayanganj consider me as one of their own. I also love them. I never asked for anything in exchange for my love or work. I never engaged in extortion, spreading terror, killing people. I was focused on the general public, and I worked for everyone, regardless of their beliefs and support.

But your opponent has alleged that you