



DHAKA SUNDAY JANUARY 7, 2024

REGD. No. DA 781

VOL. XXXIII No. 348

POUSH 23, 1430 BS

www.thedailystar.net

JAMADIUS SANI 24, 1445 HUIRI

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One more vote, one vote fewer



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Violence casts shadow over Ctg polls

Vote today, the outcome long known

WASIM BIN HABIB and MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

As the nation goes to polls today for a third straight time under Sheikh Hasina-led government, the outcome is already a foregone conclusion. The 12th parliamentary election will go down in history as a race between Awami League candidates and Awami League "independents".

The 2014 national election, the first polls under the AL government since it took office in 2009, is widely known as a "voter-less election". The second, in 2018, has been etched in the nation's collective memory as a "night-time election", although the ruling party disputes the claim.

The opposition BNP, which bagged 30-35 percent votes in the past elections that were deemed fair, is boycotting today's polls, like it did in 2014.

BNP, whose thousands of leaders have been imprisoned in allegedly trumped-up charges over the last two months, maintains no election can be free and fair under the AL government.

Fifteen other political parties are also boycotting the election that is being watched globally.

Main opposition in parliament Jatiyo Party, formed by military dictator HM Ershad and now led by his brother GM Quader after the autocrat's demise, remains in the race after much drama.

But at least 225 of the 265 candidates it fielded have pulled themselves out, mostly unofficially, terming the race "one-sided and staged".

BNP enforces a nationwide hartal today, and has called upon voters to shun the election to mark the beginning of an end of what it calls a "fascist government."

The boycott and pull-out as well as fear of violence means a large number of voters will take little interest in voting, which starts at 8:00am and ends at 4:00pm without a break.

"What's the point of going to the polling centres when the election is nothing but a battle between two groups of the same party. We all know Awami League will win the race at the end of the day," said Md Monir Hassan, a resident of Dhanmondi.

"As I went to the polling station in 2018, I found my vote had already been cast. Who will guarantee us that it will not repeat?" he asked.

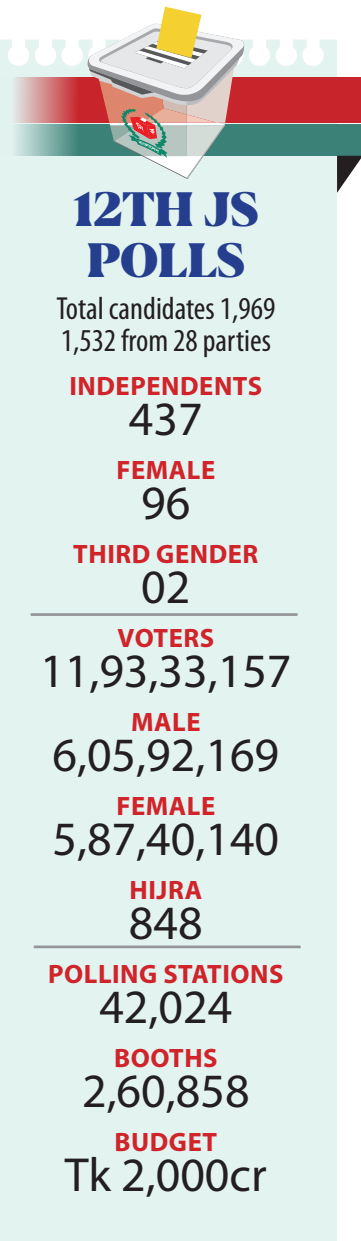
The Daily Star could not independently verify his claim.

But Monir also fears violence.

On Friday night, at least four people were killed and many others injured as arsonists set a running train on fire in Dhaka. Including them, nine people have lost their lives in eight incidents of arson on trains since November 16.

Additionally, at least five people were killed in clashes and attacks

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Ballot boxes were dispatched yesterday to different polling centres from Azimpur Government Girls' School and College in Dhaka. The country goes to polls today with 1,969 candidates vying for 299 parliamentary seats. Election to Naogaon-2 was postponed following the death of an independent candidate.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

AL aims for a 'tough' 50pc turnout

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

The Awami League will be fully focused on turnout as the nation heads to the polls today.

A high number of voters will help legitimise the 12th national election, AL leaders believe. They think a good turnout would be a befitting reply to the BNP and like-minded parties who are boycotting the polls and urging voters not to vote.

Turnout has been on the AL's mind all along and the party allowed its leaders to run against its nominees in the polls to improve the number of people showing up to vote.

The AL is hoping for an ambitious turnout of around 50 percent, a figure the party believes would be enough to make the election appear participatory and acceptable to the international community. Many of its leaders think 50 percent will be hard to achieve.

In the ninth national polls in 2008, over 87 percent of the voters voted. In the 2014 polls, which many parties boycotted, 40 percent voted.

The last election, which the BNP-led Jatiya Oikya Front joined, had over 80 percent turnout.

Speaking to The Daily Star, a central committee member of the AL said around 1.27 crore voters are abroad, which is 10 percent of all the voters. Another 15 percent have migrated internally, the leader said, adding that if all voters living in a constituency voted, the turnout

would be around 75 percent.

"So, ensuring around 50 percent turnout will be very tough," the committee member said wishing anonymity.

The AL believes that in constituencies where

The Awami League is hoping for an ambitious turnout of around 50 percent, a figure the party believes would be enough to make the election appear participatory and acceptable to the international community.

AL nominees are neck and neck in their races against the "AL independents", the number of voters showing up would be high. In the constituencies where the party nominees are set to have an easy run, the turnout would be comparatively low.

The party expects tight races in around 150 constituencies.

AL nominees, however, do not want to see too

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15 polling centres torched on the eve of election

8 vehicles set on fire; scores of crude bombs explode in Habiganj

STAR REPORT

At least 15 schools designated as polling centres, a Buddhist temple, and eight vehicles were set on fire yesterday, a day before the national election.

The incidents took place on the first day of BNP's 48-hour strike and amid tight security measures taken for the 12th parliamentary polls.

In Dakshin Surma upazila of Sylhet, trucker Afzol Miah and his assistant Joydul Abedin were injured when their truck was set on fire.

In Jhenidah town, at least one man was injured as crude bombs were thrown in different places around 9:15pm.

In Habiganj town, police said BNP activists threw scores of crude bombs.

Besides, a makeshift campaign office of the Awami League and two motorcycles were set on fire in the Shayestanagar area, said Ajay Chandra Deb, officer-in-charge of Habiganj Police Station.

Locals said they heard explosions in Muslim Quarter and Sabuj Bagh areas.

In Sylhet, discarded tyres were set on fire and crude bombs were thrown in front of at least six polling centres last night.

In Shibpur, Narsingdi, a supporter of Awami League leader and independent candidate Sirajul Islam Mollah was allegedly assaulted by AL nominee Fazle Rabbi Khan's men. Rabbi could not be reached for comments.

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Such one-party centric election not desirable

Says Sakhawat Hussain in interview with Star

MD ABBAS and BAHARAM KHAN

A "one-party-centred election" like the one today is not desirable at all, said former election commissioner M Sakhawat Hussain.



"This election is taking place between the same party in the name of independents and dummy candidates. This is a unique model of election. Such a one-party-centred election is not supposed to take place in the country," he told The Daily Star in an interview.

There are newspaper reports that efforts are on to make some of the independents win, said Hussain, who served as an election commissioner from 2007 to 2012.

"It is certain who will win the election, so it is not an election but a selection."

Citing the remark of Election Commissioner Md Anisur Rahman that the country could face

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Law enforcers frisk bikers and check an auto-rickshaw at a makeshift checkpoint on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Dhaka's Shanir Akhra yesterday. Stringent security measures have been put in place across the country ahead of the parliamentary polls today.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Social media BNP's last resort to dissuade voters

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

The BNP has adopted a strategy of using social media to discourage voters from casting ballots in today's election, said party sources.

The party leaders and activists have been instructed to take out flash processions and take to the streets to enforce the ongoing 48-hour hartal.

The party has also asked its former lawmakers and the prospective MP candidates to deploy people at every polling centre to capture irregularities with cameras and share footage on social media.

"The lower the voter turnout, the less credible the election will be," said a BNP standing committee member who is aware of the party's social media strategy.

He said the BNP rank and file will not go to the polling centres, but some people who are not BNP men will capture with cameras the irregularities at polling centres.

The BNP and like-minded political parties are boycotting today's national polls saying that a free and fair election is not possible under the Awami League government. The party has called a non-cooperation movement to protest against the general election being held under the incumbent government.

The party has been distributing leaflets among people to discourage them from going to the polling centres. It is also enforcing a nationwide 48-hour hartal, which began at 6:00am yesterday.

"We call upon the democracy-loving voters to boycott the polls. This one single decision of yours will spell doom for the fascist government," Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, senior

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