



KHULNA, JHALAKATHI, PIROJPUR Sporadic violence mars voting

STAR REPORT

Voting was held peacefully in six Khulna constituencies yesterday, marred only by a handful of isolated incidents.

Returning officer Khandker Yasir Arefin, however, claimed no untoward incident took place.

In Khulna-3 constituency, miscreants set fire to Dakshin Karigrapa Government Primary School centre around midnight, damaging all voting materials.

Confirming it, OC Probrir Kumar Biswas of Daulatpur Police Station said new voting materials were provided before polls began yesterday morning.

Presiding officer Md Jasim Uddin said he took charge of the centre at 7:00am with full setup, and conducted polls, while the headteacher's room, which was burnt, remained in police custody.

In Khulna-5, a fake polling agent was arrested at Shobna Birajmani Secondary School centre in Dumuria upazila around 11:00am yesterday.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

People wait in queue to cast vote at a polling centre in Khulna yesterday.

The arrestee, Zillur Bagati from Pur-Shobna village, was working as a polling agent of AL candidate, but could not show his documents, said Smail Hossain, executive magistrate in charge of the area.

In Jhalakathi's Nalchhity upazila, 54 ballots were cancelled at Magar Government Primary School centre after local union parishad chairman Md Shahin Hossain allegedly snatched ballot papers from the assistant presiding officer and forcibly stuffed them.

Confirming the matter, Nalchhity UNO and ARO of Jhalakathi Md Nazrul Islam said the presiding officer of the centre Mofazzel Hossain Howlader informed him the matter and suspended voting for half an hour from 10:30am. The disputed ballots have been cancelled, he added.

Contacted, Shahin Hossain denied the allegation and termed it a "misunderstanding".

In Pirojpur Sadar upazila, a youth was sentenced to two years in jail and fined Tk 10,000 for casting fake vote at Badura Government Primary School centre, confirmed presiding officer Ali Asgar Nasir.



Two first-time voters on their way to the polling booth with their mothers. The photo was taken near Sher-E-Bangla Girls School polling station in the capital's Wari yesterday morning.

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

19 candidates quit over polls irregularities

STAR REPORT

A total 19 candidates, including 11 of opposition Jatiyo Party, in 13 districts boycotted the national polls yesterday, bringing allegations of widespread irregularities.

They are: Rejaul Razi Swapan Chowdhury (Thakurgaon-1), Md Delwar (Lalmonirhat-2), Johurul Haq (Jashore-4), Mohammad Ali (Tangail-1), Enayet Hossain (Mymensingh-2), Mir Shamsul Alam Lipton (Jamalpur-3), ANM Rafiqul Islam Selim (Narsingdi-2), Alamgir Sikdar Loton (Narayanganj-2), Yahiya Chowdhury (Sylhet-2), Sazzad Rashid (Chandpur-4) and Nurul Amin Sikdar Vhuttu (Cox's Bazar-4) of JP; MM Shahin (Moulvibazar-2) of Trinamool BNP; Mokabbir Khan (Sylhet-2) of Gonoforum; and independent aspirants Advocate Sohana Tahmina (Munshiganj-2), Mizan Sayeed (Cox's Bazar-3), Zafar Alom (Cox's Bazar-1), Nurul Bashar (Cox's Bazar-4), Yunus Islam Talukder (Tangail-2), Ashraful Alam Liton (Jashore-1), and AKM Shafi Ahmed Salman (Moulvibazar-2).

They alleged that ruling Awami League

leaders and activists occupied the polling centres in their respective constituencies by driving out their agents before casting fake votes, while the local administration and the police collaborated with them in rigging the election.

Mahmud Alam, joint office secretary of JP, confirmed to The Daily Star that 11 candidates of the party boycotted the polls.

Contacted, JP's Rejaul Razi Swapan said the AL candidate's supporters grabbed almost all polling centres of his constituency with help of local administration and police.

"They drove out my polling agents from different vote centres," he said.

"I visited many centres to get firsthand experience regarding the allegations and found those to be valid. Later at around 2:00pm, I announced to quit the election in protest of vote rigging," Swapan added.

Mohammad Ali and several other JP candidates also echoed the same when contacted.

Besides, independent candidate Sohana Tahmina, who is also joint general secretary of Munshiganj district AL unit,

made similar allegations.

"Only activists of the AL candidate are present at the polling centres. I didn't receive any cooperation from the administration. My final decision is to boycott the polls," she said.

The three independent candidates from Cox's Bazar, who are also leaders of ruling AL, announced to boycott the polls just an hour before voting ended.

They alleged that AL-nominated candidates in their respective constituencies rigged the election by bribing the polling and presiding officers.

Mizan Sayeed from Cox's Bazar-3 filed a written complaint to the returning officer citing that his agents were driven out of polling centres and fake votes were cast in favour of the AL candidate.

Independent aspirant AKM Shafi Ahmed Salman from Moulvibazar-2 also filed a written complaint addressed to the Election Commission secretary, RO and OC of the local police station, alleging that the local administration collaborated with the AL candidate in the seat and did not respond to his complaints over polls irregularities.

DINAJPUR, RAJSHAHI Of deserted centres and 'peaceful' polls

STAR REPORT

Most polling centres in Dinajpur wore a deserted look throughout the vote casting period during the national elections held yesterday.

Our correspondents visited at least 17 polling centres under Dinajpur-1, 2 and 3 constituencies, and found most of the premises empty while there were crowds outside.

A large crowd of supporters and polling agents of the Awami League and independent candidates was seen at the entrance of Birganj Govt College centre in Dinajpur-1 around noon.

Surprisingly, there were hardly any voters inside.

Hamidul Islam, an elderly voter at the centre, said he could cast his vote without any hassle as there was no long queue.

A similar scene prevailed at almost all the other centres.

The voting in Dinajpur ended peacefully with some isolated incidents.

Meanwhile, in Rajshahi, apart from minor tensions among candidates in two constituencies, the voting was held peacefully almost everywhere.



Birganj Government College polling centre in Dinajpur-1 wears a deserted look yesterday morning.

PHOTO: STAR

In Rajshahi-4, independent aspirant Enamul Haque alleged that AL candidate Abul Kalam Azad's supporters drove out his agents from at least four polling centres, said returning officer Shamim Ahmed.

"I visited all the four centres and found both their agents present," the RO added.

In Rajshahi-5, AL candidate Kazi Abdul Wadud Dara and independent aspirant Obaidur Rahman exchanged words from a distance at Banerwar High School centre around 2:00pm, creating a tensed atmosphere.

Law enforcers later brought the situation under control, said presiding officer Md Saiful Islam.

In Rajshahi-6, Arani municipality mayor Mukter Hossain and his men went to Arani Monomohini Govt High School centre around 11:00am and allegedly asked female voters to cast their votes for "boat" symbol.

Presiding officer FM Nazmul Hossain, however, said he was unaware of the allegation, adding that Mukter and his men left when they were asked to.

AL helps itself to fourth straight win

FROM PAGE 1

Jatiya Party bagged 11 seats, while AL's alliance partners Workers Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Inu) one each.

With this win, Sheikh Hasina is poised to become the longest serving prime minister in Bangladesh since independence. Earlier, she was prime minister from 1996-2001.

Following BNP's boycott threat in the lead-up to the election, the Hasina administration undertook a series of strategies that allegedly include creating pressure and a failed attempt to cut a deal with BNP to bring it to the polls.

Subsequently, Hasina went for a tight-listed seat-sharing with Jatiya Party and other allies, and invited essentially any and all her party leaders and activists to join the race as independent candidates in efforts to make the election look participatory and competitive.

As part of the deal, AL gave up 26 seats for JP and six for its 14-party alliance partners. Of the six, three went to JSD, two to Workers Party and one to Jatiya Party (Manju).

Within hours after voting began yesterday, 11 JP candidates withdrew from the race, alleging widespread vote rigging. In total, 43 candidates of the party officially quit the polls. Besides, more than 200 of its candidates unofficially pulled out, saying the election was "one-sided and staged."

Voters showed little interest as the outcome of the polls -- basically a race between Awami League candidates and Awami League "independents" -- had long been known.

Across the country, presence of voters was noticeably thin with many election centres hardly seeing any queue throughout the day.

In many centres, election officials and polling agents sat idly with very little to do, as seen by 76 journalists of The Daily Star who covered more than 350 centres in 37 districts, including Dhaka, Mymensingh,

Chattogram, Khulna, Barishal, Rajshahi, Rangpur and Sylhet.

In the capital and elsewhere, the ruling party candidates arranged food and transport for voters, who still did not turn up in numbers as expected.

However, a good number of seats saw a significant turnout as the AL nominated candidates and AL independents fought neck-and-neck. In some cases, some heavyweight AL picks were blown away by their party colleagues who ran as independents, many of whom are sitting MPs.

Sporadic incidents of violence were reported in different districts, leaving one person dead

YEAR	TURNOUT (in %)
1991	55.45
1996 (Feb)	26.5
1996 (Jun)	74.96
2001	75.59
2008	87.13
2014	40.04
2018	80

in Munshiganj and many others injured in other places.

Separately, an assistant presiding officer in Gazipur died of "heart attack" while on duty.

Ruling party supporters were seen frequenting the polling centre areas in many places while some were even seen inside the booths. Voting in seven of the 42,000 polling stations across 299 seats were suspended due to irregularities.

International reactions are yet to come. However, a few foreign observers lauded the election process and arrangements for voting, saying the polls were by and large free and fair.

The voting was held amid

repeated calls from the US and some other Western nations for a free and fair election. In September last year, the US announced sanctions on some individuals for undermining the voting process, and warned of further sanctions on the same grounds.

AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader has termed yesterday's voting "a victory of democracy and people of the country".

"The election was held in a free, fair and peaceful manner overcoming many obstacles. They [BNP] wanted to confuse the international and national friends of Bangladesh by spreading propaganda," he said.

BNP, which enforced a hartal yesterday, did not give an immediate official reaction, saying it will come up with one today.

But the party's Standing Committee Member Abdul Moyeen Khan said their boycott proved to be successful.

"The countrymen have refrained from casting their votes. Even Awami League supporters did not go to the polling centres," he told reporters at his Gulshan residence after polling ended.

BNP had been waging a movement to topple the government and force it to install a neutral administration to oversee the election, but the government snubbed the demand as unconstitutional.

BNP's street programmes ended in a whimper on October 28, when police foiled its Dhaka rally following clashes between BNP and AL activists, some of whom were joined in by law enforcers.

The government then quickly launched a countrywide crackdown on opposition leaders and supporters.

By the time the nation went to polls yesterday, more than 27,000 BNP leaders and activists were rounded up and over 1,700 were sentenced to jail in political cases in just about two months.

Independents

FROM PAGE 1

AL cultural affairs secretary and AL nominated candidate for Netrakona-3, Ashim Kumar Ukil fought with his predecessor Itiqaat Uddin Talukder Pintu, but his efforts fell short as he was defeated by only around 2,000 votes.

AL liberation war affairs secretary and AL nominee for Munshiganj-3 Mrinal Kanti Das was defeated by "AL independent" and immediate past Munshiganj municipality mayor Mohammad Faisal.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haque Inu repeatedly requested the AL chief to do something to make the AL leader running as an independent to quit the race in Kushia-2. As Hasina didn't do anything about it, Inu, despite having the AL electoral symbol of boat, lost to Kamarul Arafin, a former union parishad chairman.

AL publicity and publication affair secretary Abdus Sobhan Golap, who had allegedly denied local AL leaders' access to the PM's public rally in Madaripur on December 30, got a befitting response from the grassroots of his constituency, Madaripur-3.

AL independent Tahmina, also Kalkini upazila chapter AL president, secured victory by getting 96,633 votes.

After having a series of meetings, three partners of the 14-party alliance got six seats from the AL, and only two of them, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon from Barishal-2 and Rejaul Karim Tansen of JSD from Bogura-4 got victory.

Jatiya Party (JP-Manju) Chairman Anwar Hossain Manju was defeated by his once APS Mohiuddin Moharaj in Pirojpur-2.

Moharaj, joint secretary of Pirojpur district AL and also former Zila Parishad chairman, is widely known as Manju's main political rival in the constituency.

Main opposition in the parliament Jatiya Party made AL agree to withdraw its 26 candidates to make an easy run for their candidates.

The strategy of the main opposition, however, seemed to have failed miserably, helping 15 AL independents become MPs.

Polling officials

FROM PAGE 1

other than a polling officer as the performer.

"As the voter presence was thin, some of us were feeling bored. So, I was singing the song as some other on-duty officials requested me to," he said.

Even three Ansar members guarding the centre were found sitting idle.

Asked, one of them said, "We've had just one voter in the past half an hour."

The two correspondents were stationed at the centre under the Dhaka-5 constituency during the entire eight-hour voting period starting from 8:00am.

The two incidents summed up the turnout of voters in an election that was boycotted by main opposition parties, handing the ruling Awami League a favourable outcome even before polling day.

Of the 5,183 eligible voters enlisted to exercise their democratic rights at the particular centre, 18.05 percent cast votes, less than half of the national average of about 40 percent.

The number of voters was low in the first two hours of the day but the pace picked up later.

The turnout was 7.85 percent at noon, and 14.66 percent at 2:00pm, before crossing 18 percent at the end of the day's proceedings.

Many elderly persons, even some with old-age complications, turned up to vote.

"I was desperate to cast my vote as it may be my last one," said Afsar Uddin Ahmed, a freedom fighter. The octogenarian came in a wheelchair and was helped by others.

Ali Haider, another voter who had a leg surgery recently, said, "I cast my vote as one of the candidates is my long time friend."

Some first-time voters also came to cast ballots.

"I am excited to cast my vote as this was the first time!" said 19-year-old Asma Sada.

Her aunt Mahmuda Khatun alleged that she could not cast her vote in the last national election as the polling officials told her that her vote was already cast when she reached the centre.

Though her claim could not be independently verified, the 2018 polls were marked by widespread vote rigging.

Mohammad Jahid Uddin, another first-time voter and a software engineer, regretted that he could not witness a "real

competition" as many political parties boycotted the poll.

Polling agents representing the 14 candidates of the constituency were seen at the centre, representing the "boat", "eagle" and "truck" symbols, while just outside, the presence of activists of some candidates was noticed.

Tofael Hossain, a presiding officer of the centre, said they had completed the voting process in a free and fair manner.

Meanwhile, low voter turnouts were seen in Sylhet and Cox's Bazar as well.

In Sylhet, 90-year-old Afsar Ali came to the polling centre at Panchakhanda Haragovinda High School in Sylhet-6 with the help of his two grandsons.

"I have been casting votes since the Pakistan era. So, I'm here to vote this time about."

About 22.28 percent of votes were cast at the polling station, where agents of the candidates of the electoral symbols "boat" and "eagle" were present.

In two rooms of the centre, agents of "Plough" and "Golden Fibre" were also found.

Arifur Rahman, a presiding officer of the centre, said three young men tried to enter the centre to cast votes for the second time just 20 minutes before the voting ended. "But they were detained by security personnel."

In Cox's Bazar, it was a long day for election officials and polling agents, as the thin presence of voters gave them very little to do throughout the day.

No untoward incidents were reported at the centres.

(The Daily Star correspondents Mokammel Shuvo and Ekush Tapader contributed to the report)

BNP activists
FROM PAGE 2

A Rab patrol vehicle, damaging the vehicle and injuring the driver, said Rab-7 Commanding Officer Lt Col Mahub Alam.

BNP men also vandalised the Al Hekmah International School polling centre in the Moulavipukurpar area (Chattogram-8 constituency) during the clash forcing the authorities to suspend voting there for an hour before it was resumed, said Rab and police.

According to Fire Service statistics, at least 15 arson attacks were reported in the 12 hours between 6:00pm Saturday till 6:00am yesterday.