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UPAZILA POLLS AL, BNP struggle to keep a grip on grassroots

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

The upazila election has exposed how neither of the two major parties, the Awami League and BNP, has full control over the grassroots leaders.

The ruling AL asked its lawmakers to make sure their relatives do not compete in the upazila parishad election, but at least 50 relatives of AL MPs are in the first phase of the election to be held in 150 upazilas on May 8.

The BNP has shunned the election and expelled 77 local leaders in the first and 61 in the second phase of the election. The party is also distributing flyers among people, urging them to boycott the polls.

Despite the harsh measures, at least 50 local BNP leaders are on campaign trails, running for different posts in the upazila parishad in the third phase of the election, scheduled for May 29.

Seeing its instructions fall on deaf ears, the AL is no



"Every leader should obey the party directives. Those who ignored the directive might face action."
AFM BAHAUDDIN NASIM, AL joint general secretary

"The [BNP] men who are participating are just over enthusiastic about the election. They want to compete in any election that comes along the way."

GAYESHWAR CHANDRA ROY
BNP standing committee member



longer threatening its leaders with harsh measures. The party also narrowed the definition of "relatives" to just children and spouses.

The BNP still maintains that it will expel leaders who participate in the polls. Insiders say that if a significant number of expelled BNP leaders get elected in the early phases, an even greater number of party members will participate later.

In the first phase of the polls, 24 grassroots BNP leaders are running for chairman, 21 for vice-chairman, and 19 for female vice-chairman, according to the party.

In the second phase of upazila election to be held in 160 upazilas on May 21, 26 BNP grassroots leaders are vying for chairman, 19 for vice-chairman, and 16 for female vice-chairman post.

Contacted, BNP Standing Committee Member Gayeshwar Chandra Roy "The [BNP] men who are participating are just over enthusiastic about the election. They want to compete in any election that comes along the way. Also, in many places, Awami League leaders have fielded BNP men to strategically beat the opponents from their own party."

He also alleged that the ruling party is offering money to local BNP leaders who would be willing to compete in the election.

Asked if the expulsions could weaken the party, Gayeshwar said his party's local leaders have nothing to gain from the polls. "Before deciding to boycott the polls, we did a survey on what the grassroots leaders want. Their sentiments have been reflected in our decision."

Mirza Abbas, another BNP standing committee member, yesterday told a programme in front of Jatiya Press Club that the Upazila Parishad election was a trap that the BNP had not fallen into.

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Thick smoke billowing out from a landfill in the capital's Aminbazar, polluting the air. Dhaka North City Corporation manages this landfill, and one of its officials said workers usually douse the blaze fueled by methane gas generated in the heaps of garbage. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

DHAKA-JASHORE RAIL LINE

Opening in July but full benefits far off

Manpower, carriage shortages holding BR back

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

The Dhaka-Jashore rail line via the Padma Bridge is going to open in July, but Bangladesh Railway may not be able to reap the full benefit of the expensive project soon mainly due to shortages of manpower and carriages.

According to the feasibility study of the project, at least 24 pairs of trains can be operated on the line daily once the entire 169km line is opened.

But only five pairs of trains, including one inaugurated yesterday, are operating on the partially opened line.

And two more trains, which now use Bangabandhu Bridge route, will use the new line once it is opened fully. But even after that, 70 percent of the line's capacity will remain unused.

BR will have to introduce new trains or increase frequency of the trains for the south-western region; and operate more freight trains, particularly from India, to effectively use the capacity of the line.

But BR does not have enough manpower to operate the new and additional freight trains. This is because BR is now operating with



"Bangladesh Railway will have to deal with the problems of shortages of manpower and carriages in increasing trips and introducing new trains on the new line."

ASIM KUMAR TALUKDER
General Manager (west) of BR

half the workforce it needs. Moreover, the BR is yet to have approval for the dedicated manpower it sought for the Dhaka-Jashore route.

Besides, it has a shortage of carriages to operate new trains or increase frequency of trains.

The Daily Star came to know this after talking to half a dozen railway

officials.

BR is constructing 169km broad-gauge single-line from Dhaka to Jashore via Padma Bridge at a cost of Tk 39,247 crore. This is the biggest project of BR in terms of cost. More than half of the cost is being provided by China as loan.

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People suffer as schedule for trains collapses

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Thousands of passengers suffered immensely yesterday as the schedule of trains heading for the country's western destinations collapsed.

Around 30 trains bound for the northwestern and central regions got delayed by two to three hours after a train accident caused the closure of one of two lines in Gazipur's Joydebpur on Friday morning, said officials.

Although the railway authorities could clear the line around 5:30pm yesterday, it would take some more time for the operations to normalise, they added.

Dhaka-bound Tangail commuter train with only the staff on board and no passenger crashed into a stationary oil tanker train

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All-out support for media to save environment

Arafat assures journos at
Press Freedom Day event

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will ensure full support and protection for journalists who strive to do authentic environmental journalism, State Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mohammad Ali Arafat said yesterday.

Speaking at a programme marking the World Press Freedom Day, he also said he thinks journalists who expose those responsible for environmental degradation are friends of the government.

The Editors' Council organised the discussion titled "A Press for the Planet: Journalism in the face of Environmental Crisis" at the National Press Club.

Arafat said the government's core policy is to protect the environment while carrying out development work.

He added that the government commits to not only conserving the environment but also ensuring complete press freedom.

"We don't believe in controlling and imposing regulations on journalism. We firmly believe the freer the mass media, the more the prevention of propaganda in society and bigger the space for transparency and accountability in the government."

About the Right to Information Act, the state minister said they will provide journalists with training on how they can effectively utilise the act.

The authorities concerned are bound to provide information sought by the media, but sensitive state information will be an exception, he said.

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