



## Voting held peacefully in three hill districts

STAR REPORT

Voting in the 13th national election was held in a peaceful and festive atmosphere yesterday across the three hill districts – Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachhari – with no major untoward incidents reported.

While voter turnout was comparatively low in Bandarban, long queues were seen at many polling centres in Rangamati and Khagrachhari.

In Bandarban, voter presence was relatively thin at most centres since voting began at 7:30am.

At the Government Girls' High School centre in Bandarban town, Presiding Officer Satyajit Majumdar said around 55 percent of the 3,784 registered voters cast their ballots by the time voting ended at 4:30pm.

A similar picture was seen at the Bus Station Government Primary School centre, where female voter turnout was comparatively higher. Presiding Officer Abu Hasan Md Nayeem said about 56 percent of the 3,311 registered voters exercised their franchise.

Election officials said turnout at remote centres ranged between 45 and 55 percent.

According to district administration sources, voting was held at 186 centres for a total of 3,15,422 registered voters in the district.

In Rangamati, long queues of voters were visible at different centres from the morning.

At the Shukrachhari Government Primary School centre, 31 percent of votes were cast by 12:00pm, while the figure



stood at 42 percent at the Hajachhari centre at the same time.

At 6:00pm, the office of the district returning officer said a total of 54.07 percent votes were cast across the district's 10 upazilas, excluding postal ballots.

Rangamati Superintendent of Police Muhammad Abdur Rakib said voting ended peacefully across the district, except for a few isolated allegations of fake voting.

In Khagrachhari, voting was held peacefully at 203 centres, with visibly high voter turnout at polling centres across Khagrachhari Sadar, Panchhari, Dighinala, Mahalchhari, Lakshmichhari, Matiranga, Manikchhari and Guimara

upazilas. Participation of female voters was also significant.

District Election Officer Md SM Shahadat Hossain said nearly 60 percent of the district's 5,54,414 registered voters cast their ballots.

To ensure security, members of the BGB, police, Rab, Ansar and VDP were deployed across all three districts, with additional measures taken at vulnerable centres. The administration said necessary materials and officials were present at all centres on time.

[Our Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachhari correspondents contributed to this report.]

## After 56 years, women of South Rupsha vote

### This Chandpur union sees women voters for first time since 1969

STAR REPORT

For the first time in 56 years, women from Rupsha South union under Faridganj upazila of Chandpur exercised their franchise in the 13th national election and referendum held yesterday.

According to locals, in 1969, women were locally directed not to cast votes. Since then, women residents of the union have not participated in elections, despite repeated encouragement from the Election Commission and local authorities, reports Prothom Alo.

After voting began yesterday morning, women were seen thronging polling centres across the union in good numbers, casting their votes spontaneously and with enthusiasm.

"I am feeling very happy to have voted for the first time in my life today," said Ayesha Begum, 70, at the Gridhkalindiya High School polling centre.

Asked why she had never voted before, Ayesha said, "There was a restriction [on voting by women]. After locals convinced us, we came to vote."

Nurjahan Begum, another resident, said she has been living in the area for 45 years since her marriage and has never voted during this time.

Explaining why she came to vote this time, Nurjahan said, "Everyone told us that since women can have jobs, go to the market and do everything, why can't you vote? Voting isn't haram in Islam, so there is no problem with it. So we came to vote today. Not participating in previous elections had been a mistake."

KM Lokman Hakim, presiding officer at the Gridhkalindiya High School centre, said there were 3,603 voters at the centre, including 1,811 men and 1,792 women. "Till 9:30am, a total of 401 voters had cast their franchise, including 159 women," he said.

A similar scene was witnessed at the Charmandari Shaheed Smriti Government Primary School

centre. However, presiding officer Abdus Samad said that as women voters had never voted before, many were largely unaware of the voting process.

The union has a total of 21,695 voters, including 10,299 women.

Recently, the Chandpur district administration took initiatives to organise meetings to raise awareness among women in the union and encourage them to vote. Local leaders, alems, imams, muezzins and common people participated in the meetings.

"Voting by women is not a crime according



to Islam. The then military administration's directive 56 years ago was misinterpreted locally, depriving women in this union of their voting rights all these years, which is unacceptable," said Nazmul Islam Sarkar, deputy commissioner and returning officer in Chandpur.

Visiting the Gridhkalindiya High School centre around 11:00am, Chandpur Superintendent of Police Rabiul Hasan said women in the union had been informed that there would be no problem if they came to vote.

"Realising that, women have come to vote. So far, there has been no untoward incident across the district," he added.

## Queues, selfies

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Because most centres lacked elevators, elderly voters and women faced difficulties. Ansar members were seen assisting them, and one pregnant woman was observed climbing to the third floor, having to pause at each level to rest.

Abul Kashem, a voter at Jatrabari Ideal School and College in Dhaka-5, said he cast his vote after many years, hoping for a big change in the election. "Earlier, other people cast our votes on our behalf. This time, I cast my own vote."

A female voter of Dhaka-5 rushed to the polling centre at Rose Garden High School in Dhalpur but could not enter because the voting time was over.

Speaking to The Daily Star without mentioning her name, she said she had gone to different polling centres to find her name on the voter list. "When I finally found my name and rushed to the correct polling centre, I discovered that the time was already up."

Expressing frustration that she missed entering the centre by only three minutes, she added, "It was my fault. I should have left home earlier to cast my vote."

Meanwhile, a relaxed atmosphere was observed at a roadside tea stall in Pallabi's C Block in Dhaka-16. Voters were seen chatting over tea, relieved that there was "no fighting or shoving".

Right next to the stall, fresh jilapris were being fried in a single pan and selling out instantly, with many voters returning home carrying bags of the sweets after casting their ballots.

In Dhaka-6, 90-year-old Monowara Begum arrived early with her daughter, stating she "could not sleep at night" out of excitement. The Laxmibazar resident cast her vote at St Gregory's High School and College.

Another Laxmibazar resident, Laila Akter Lipi, came to cast her vote despite battling a brain tumour for a long time. She said she last voted in 2008 and had been waiting for the opportunity to exercise her right again. "I feel very good to have gotten the chance after so many years. Please pray for me."

In Dhaka-15, a long queue of voters was seen at Shewrapara's Monipur School and College around 6:15am – even before polling activities gained full momentum.

According to several locals present at the scene,

many of those standing in line identified themselves as supporters of Jamaat-e-Islami. Witnesses said they had gathered shortly after the Fajr prayer, demonstrating early enthusiasm to cast their votes.

Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman, a candidate from this seat, cast his vote at the Manipur High School and College centre (Boys' Branch) at 8:30am.

Young voters were seen taking selfies and group photos in the centres after voting, prompting the Army and BGB to use megaphones to request people to return home and reduce congestion.

Throughout the day, a notable number of female police officers were deployed, playing an active role in managing the crowd and maintaining order. Their efforts were observed to be effective in keeping the voting process smooth and disciplined.

The overall environment reflected strong voter participation and heightened security arrangements.

While generally peaceful, a tense scene unfolded at Mirza Abbas Mohila College in Shahjahanpur. National Citizen Party candidate Nasiruddin Patwary and BNP candidate Mirza Abbas held separate press briefings where they traded barbs.

The duo's verbal tug-of-war and prickly relationship during the campaign season have left voters both troubled and entertained over the past month.

Patwary, chief coordinator of the NCP, claimed that voters were being intimidated by Abbas's men due to the party's rising popularity, alleging that BNP activists barred his polling agents from entering several centres.

He also alleged that the Awami League was backing the BNP, and "India was backing the Awami League", and therefore, the Awami League, India and BNP were collectively contesting the election against the Jamaat-led II-party alliance.

As he left the Mirza Abbas Mohila College centre, a group, mostly BNP supporters, chanted "Bhua bhua [fake]" aimed at him.

Later, at a separate press briefing in the same place, Abbas said the NCP candidate had failed to deploy agents in many centres as he had no supporters.

## Polls results being 'withheld'

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Rahman, chairman of Bangladesh Labour Party, were present there.

Shafiqur said, "As far as we know, we are ahead in several constituencies, and counting has been completed. But the returning officers concerned are not announcing the results. It is puzzling why they are keeping them pending."

"At one point, the [Election Commission] website suddenly showed the number of seats won by different parties. Then it disappeared. Our agents were made to wait for a long time."

"We hope to get the detailed information by tomorrow or the day after. The Election Commission has also assured that it will publish the results by February 13. We are waiting for that."

"If they do not, we will wait for a reasonable time," he said, questioning the "cat-and-mouse game" in some constituencies.

"Why would Dhaka 8, for instance, still remain pending? These do not reflect healthy political practices... We will consider these matters and inform the nation as much as we deem necessary so that such bad practices do not continue in the future."

The Jamaat leader said that in an election, not everyone wins. "Some will win; some will lose. This is the beauty of democracy. There are certain political cultures in

our country, and we are in favour of changing them.

"We have already said we will not create disputes over minor issues, and we do not want to return to the old political culture. We want to practise positive politics."

Asked whether Jamaat and the II-party alliance fear any manipulation, Shafiqur said, "Many things have happened. But we do not want to comment on this right now."

"Someone will certainly be held accountable for this. For that, we need to know more and verify. If I make an unconfirmed statement before you [journalists], the responsibility will fall on me later. We do not want that."

Meanwhile, earlier at a press briefing at his main election office in Dhaka-15, the Jamaat ameer said his party would accept the results of the 13th parliamentary election, regardless of whether other parties do so.

"We believe that if voting continues the way it has so far and there is no major interference, we will accept the results. In Sha Allah, whether others accept them or not."

Replying to a question about Jamaat's expected performance in the polls, he said, "We believe the results may begin to take shape by around 11:00pm. It would not be appropriate for us to make any comment at this moment."

Speaking at another press briefing, he described Jamaat as "a party with a

painful history". "Since its inception, the party has been banned repeatedly, yet it has never stopped its activities."

Shafiqur also expressed hope that if Jamaat gets the opportunity to form the government, it would want all parties as partners.

"There was a lot of fear, panic, and propaganda that the election would not take place and that no one would be able to participate. Ultimately, the Election Commission and the people together ensured a good election."

"The credit does not belong as much to political parties as it does to those involved in election management and those who worked as guiding forces to make this election meaningful from different aspects."

Thanking voters for their participation, Shafiqur said, "There had been widespread panic surrounding the election. But despite everything, the election has been held, and there has been no major incident."

Regarding the possibility of victory or defeat in his own constituency, he said, "In society, mistakes can happen when people move together. The person who contested against me in this seat is also my colleague and associate. We met twice today [Thursday] as well. When we engage in such a contest, only one will win, and the other will accept it. That is normal."

## Polls catch the eyes of global

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put forward a manifesto focusing on reform, women's safety from harassment and clean politics, the party is not running a single female candidate, Guardian reported.

In an interview story with Tarique Rahman, Guardian reported the BNP leader is the main contender to be the next prime minister of Bangladesh and promised a new era of clean politics, including a "top down, no tolerance" approach to graft.

"One of the biggest geopolitical challenges facing the new government of Bangladesh will be rebuilding relations with its neighbour India," it said.

In a report, BBC said the new government in post-uprising Bangladesh will have to restore law and order or lead in economic recovery.

"It will also have to

determine the country's direction in a changed geopolitical world."

Furthermore, the new leadership will be tasked with implementing the state and social reforms that the people have repeatedly demanded, BBC reports.

News agency AP reported that the election could redefine the nation's future.

"Many voters hope the return to elections will restore law and order, protect civil liberties and bring accountable leadership. But there is also unease. Some fear political instability, the marginalisation of women and minorities, and the rise of Islamists in a secular country."

There is a broader consensus that Yunus' interim government steadied an economy

that had been in free fall, but many say it failed to restore security and protect human rights, and neglected the safety of religious minorities.

For years, Bangladesh stood out globally for being governed by female prime ministers – Khaleda Zia for two full terms and Hasina for four. It gave many women a sense of representation. That legacy, however, is under threat, it added.

CNN in its report titled "Gen Z won the revolution. The old guard is dominating the election" says that amid the absence of the Awami League, the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islam are back.

The new party, the National Citizen Party, has struggled to meaningfully muscle its way into Bangladesh's fractious and often violent political scene.

## BNP reclaims Obaidul Quader

FROM PAGE 4

According to election affidavits, Fakhrul was among the wealthiest candidates in the district and has spent heavily on campaigning.

Expressing full confidence before the vote, Fakhrul said Noakhali-5 had been built as a BNP stronghold through the tireless efforts of Moudud, a former BNP law minister.

He alleged that Quader had held the seat for years by abusing power and muscle.

Following the political shift on August 5, 2024, Quader fled the country, Fakhrul added, allowing voters to cast their ballots freely in the 13th parliamentary election.

He said he expected a landslide victory with the sheaf of paddy symbol and hoped to present the seat as a gift to party Chairman Tarique Rahman.

A BNP supporter echoed this sentiment, saying,

"This seat belonged to Moudud Ahmed; we are fighting to bring it back this time."

Meanwhile, Jamaat also retains a strong organisational base in the constituency.

Its candidate Belayet has generated considerable discussion in political circles, particularly due to Jamaat's voting strength in Kabirhat and Companiganj.

Observers said Jamaat's growing influence pushed the contest towards either a three-way race or a direct BNP-Jamaat showdown, with a visible "wave" of support for the Jamaat candidate, especially in Kabirhat, shaking the foundations of Quader's former stronghold.

BNP leaders say the party revitalised its old vote bank to reclaim the seat and end Quader's long dominance.

Local analysts note that the opportunity for a genuinely free election after a long interval generated

significant enthusiasm among general voters.

In the election held under the interim government, voters were able to cast their ballots without fear after years of restraint.

Law enforcement agencies ensured strict security across the constituency, while voters said they prioritised both development and good governance in exercising their franchise.

Moudud was elected MP from Noakhali-5 in 1979 (BNP), 1991 (Jatiya Party) and 2001 (BNP), while Quader won in 1996, 2008, 2018 and 2024. Moudud's long political era ended with his death in 2021.

Harunur Rashid Azad, secretary of the district BNP and mayor of Noakhali municipality, claimed all six seats in Noakhali are BNP strongholds.

Describing Moudud as the party's late guardian, he had also expressed confidence that Moudud's successor in Noakhali-5, Fakhrul, would win by a huge margin, reclaiming the seat for the BNP.

## Voting festive, peaceful

FROM PAGE 2

European Union and the Commonwealth reported strong voter participation and peaceful proceedings in yesterday's elections.

The European Union Observation Mission said it witnessed a lot of positive enthusiasm among voters till noon.

The mission deployed 200 observers nationwide to monitor the vote, marking the first full-fledged EU mission since the 2008 elections.

Ivars Ijabs, the mission's chief observer, said EUEOM maintained online contact with its observers stationed across Bangladesh, receiving regular updates on the opening of polling stations, voter turnout and the overall conduct of the election.

The mission will publish preliminary findings tomorrow and a final report within two months.

According to Ijabs, most polling stations opened on time and voting proceeded peacefully.

He described the election as an important opportunity for citizens to exercise their democratic rights.

"I think this is really a wonderful opportunity for Bangladeshi people, this time, to cast their vote in a really free, participatory, and competitive election," he said.

"This is really a big day for Bangladesh's democracy."

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth described the election as the largest democratic exercise of 2026, both within the Commonwealth and globally.

Nana Akufo-Addo, chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group, said his team monitored the entire process, from the opening of polling stations to the management of results.

For the first time, diaspora voters participated in the election from 122 countries.

"The inclusion of diaspora voters on this scale, alongside the simultaneous referendum on the constitutional reforms, is noteworthy and reflects a commitment to enhancing democratic processes," said Akufo-Addo.

The Commonwealth deployed observers to eight divisions two days before the vote to assess preparations and meet with local stakeholders. They will issue a preliminary report tomorrow.

According to the Chief Adviser's Office, at least 394 international observers and 197 foreign journalists were on the ground to monitor and cover the election and referendum.

## Turnout 38.4%

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At Kairail Kopa Government Primary School centre, near the mausoleum of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, turnout reached 22.43 percent by 2:00pm.

Meanwhile, 20.18 percent of votes were cast at Baghiar Ghat School and College centre by 2:30pm.

Several voters expressed cautious optimism outside polling stations.

Sanjit Kumar, 62, a resident of Ward No. 10 in Tungipara, told The Daily Star, "The election is being conducted in an orderly manner. Many people have come to vote. We want to elect someone who will continue development work and complete the unfinished projects."

Young voter Enjamul Haque Rasu echoed a broader yearning for change.

"We want an equitable, humane and justice-based Bangladesh. Over the past 17 years, we have seen how people's voting rights were undermined. This generation wants a Bangladesh where voting rights are ensured and democratic practices continue. I have come to vote with that expectation," he said.