

Bangladesh Goes to the Polls

A Street-side view

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An informal but informed Indian professional on assignment in Dhaka sends this engaging commentary on the general elections in Bangladesh.

On an assignment in Dhaka for the last few months, I had a nice opportunity to witness the National Elections here in person as a neutral observer. This is a great treat for a keen political activist like me.

There has been a festival-like atmosphere here for the past few weeks. Reading the local newspapers, talking to my staff and 'aam janata' about local politics, the political situation, and their electoral choices has been invigorating.

Surprisingly, many were tightlipped about their choices and would only give vague and largely negative responses, 'this will be a one-sided election without any opposition', 'no use participating' and so on.. My chauffeur insisted that other parties would not be allowed to contest. Even my Indian friends working here in Dhaka, would discuss the local politics in a hush hush tone and weren't willing to offer frank opinions. Free speech appears to be rare here, or so appears to me! This is surprising, for after all this is a democratic nation.

The incumbent PM Ms. Sheikh Hasina has been in power for the last decade, completing three terms in office already. Her win this time will see her begin her fourth term and the third in succession. She seems to be a very popular leader and is sure to win the next term too, easily. I understand that this is good from the Indian perspective as she is pro-India and takes an anti-terrorist stand, and has long looked at India as a development partner.

In contrast, the Opposition-led by BNP Alliance is far behind in resources and their leader Ms. Khaleda Zia, Ex-PM is in prison serving a sentence on misappropriation of funds and corruption charges. They are leaderless and also rudderless without a proper direction.

Here are some known facts:

- The Sonshad or Sansad (Parliament) has 300 representatives as Lawmakers elected directly by the eligible voters.

- The remaining 50 are reserved for women who are nominated later according to the percentage of votes polled by the parties involved.
- This time 39 Political parties took part in the elections, which can be considered participatory as compared to 2014 when the main Opposition party led by Ms. Khaleda Zia boycotted the Elections.
- Here, the Party Nominations are sold to the individual candidates, which I feel is quite all right because it generates party funds. This is a new experience for me since this is not a practice in the Indian elections.
- About 104 million registered voters took part in the election held on 30th December 2018 across Bangladesh. Around 66 - 70 per cent polling was recorded overall.
- EVMs were used in 6 Constituencies only for the first time on a trial basis.
- There were neutral observers from the UN, USA, UK, and India, along with journalists from other nations as well who were monitoring the process. Their observations have not been made public as on date. Nonetheless, there were complaints that BNP polling agents were not allowed inside the booths.
- There was a very tight security for the elections and over six lakh personnel were deployed around the country fearing large scale violence both during and after the elections. There was violence in a few pockets outside Dhaka. There have been reports of excesses, violence in which around 18 to 20 persons were killed across the country. But by and large, Dhaka city was peaceful, thanks to the meticulous security arrangements made during the election process. A lot more violence and unrest was expected after the polls too which, fortunately did not happen.
- All types of vehicles were banned on the roads, which created problems to the elderly voters.

I took a walk on the evening of election day in an area called Gulshan -2 locality which is supposedly very posh. As vehicles were banned, the roads were empty, and it made walking very easy and safe on the roads. I enjoyed the winter walk with a nip in the air and had a chai at a local shop. I tried to get people to talk about the elections, but my questions were mostly ignored... as expected. The counting of votes started almost immediately after the closing of polls. By dinner time the counting of votes had already commenced and the results were coming

in. I watched the interaction on TV sitting in a diner, struggling to read the Bangla numbers on the flickering screen. It was nice to watch the whole process from the outside without any direct involvement.

As reported in the media, and as everyone expected, the ruling Awami League led by the incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won hands down. Their Alliance won 288 out of 299 seats declared so far. (The remaining one seat was countermanded and polling postponed due to the death of a recognized party candidate).

Notwithstanding this thumping victory, the opposition, led by the BNP as expected cried foul and have demanded re-election under a neutral government within 90 days.

It is indeed a relief that despite all other issues and shortcomings, democracy survives in Bangladesh to a large extent.

Now for the Indian General Elections 2019! Let us keep our fingers crossed on that and hope for a nail-biting finish! To the Wire ...a la Ravi Shastri!