

## **29<sup>th</sup> December National Election: Some interesting insights**

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Bangladesh stands at a crossroads and the path to a new invigorated Bangladesh depends how the new political forces emerge after the national elections on December 29<sup>th</sup> and accept the environment, characterized by mutual tolerance and respect, rule of law and accountability to people.

### *Political parties and nominations:*

It is reported by NGO *Sujon* that Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) has nominated 4 convicts, 16 accused, 12 loan defaulters, 7 relatives of top party leaders and one corruption suspect, while Awami League (AL) nominated 10 accused, 1 convict, 8 loan defaulters, two relatives of top party leaders and one corruption suspect. JP nominated 1 convict, and 4 loan defaulters, while Jamaat-e-Islami nominated 3 accused and one corruption suspect and other parties nominated 10 loan defaulters (*The Daily Star: 4<sup>th</sup> December 2008*).

In another statistics by *Sujon*, AL nominated 136 business persons (51% of total candidates, BNP nominated 157 (62%), JP nominated 36 (59%) and JI fielded 15 (38%) . Cases against BNP candidates constitute 49%, while AL 38% of total candidates. About 100 candidates have been under murder charges ( BNP 34, AL 24).

Observers and some media have pointed out that the nomination of candidates show leaders of major political parties have not changed their old mind-set and rejected many persons who advocated reforms of parties.

### *Election Manifestos:*

The major parties –AL and BNP- have released their election manifestos on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> December (AL in English and BNP in Bangla languages).

If one compares the AL 23-points manifesto with 35-points manifesto of BNP, observers say many of their promises for good governance, accountability to their action, independence of judiciary, strengthening of Anti-Corruption Commission and political decisions on consensus basis on important national issues are similar.

The demand for direct election for women, instead of reserved seats in the parliament, has been delayed until 2021 by both major parties. Women rights groups view it as disappointing.

According to some analysts, there appear to be three major differences between the two manifestos. AL's manifesto provides a vision for the country for 2021 and deals with day-to-day issues, while BNP's manifesto enumerates primarily contemporary burning issues.

Second, BNP's manifesto criticises the care-taker government while AL's manifesto states the caretaker government has ruled "with various limitations, weaknesses, lapses as well as some successes."

Third and most important difference appears to be the way the two parties end their manifestos with slogans..

AL concludes with three slogans—"Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu and Long Live Bangladesh," while BNP ends its manifesto with Let Allah provide strength to serve the country for benefit of people, Allah Hafez, Bangladesh Zindabad, and BNP Zindabad (*English translation is mine*).

If one analyses the slogans, it appears that AL's slogans are primarily based on pro-liberation ethos and separation of religion from politics, while BNP's slogans attempt to emphasise the link between religion and politics and uses non-Bangla words such as "Zindabad, a relic of Pakistan days.

The Jamaat manifesto asserts that there is no Islamic extremist in Bangladesh but the threat is from the communists. It wants blasphemy law and to give military training to citizens between the age of 20 and 30 perhaps to be able to potentially ban music, dances, cinemas, arts and sculpture as un-Islamic and raise its armed cadre.

Some observers said that major parties have not taken a clear stand on the issues of hartal and siege programmes. Furthermore, many political analysts argue that major parties did not say what they would do if not voted to power.

*A few new features in national elections:*

For the first time, only registered political parties with Election Commission are contesting the election. Registration process includes the disclosure of sources of funds and expenditures of political parties. Earlier registration with the Election Commission was optional under Representation Public Order 1972 as amended from time to time.

33% per cent of total voters are reportedly the first-time voters. About 5 million voters who are prisoners in 67 jails across the country will be, for the first time, eligible to vote through postal ballot. Furthermore there is a provision of "No" vote in the voters card.

It is reported that female voters are more than male voters. Out of total 810,58698 eligible voters, 412, 36149 females and 398, 22549 males. Female voters exceed more than 14 lakhs than the number of male voters out of total more than eight crore voters.

A total of 49 women candidates will contest the national elections, although 82 women candidates submitted nomination papers from 88 constituencies.

The figure 49 women candidates is compared to 38 women candidates during the 2001 national elections from 46 constituencies and 36 women candidates during the 1996 general polls from 48 constituencies.

A few innovative voter's awareness programmes have commenced to provide publicity among voters not to vote for suspected corrupt or convict or accused or defaulters of loan persons. Each catchword in the programmes is about who to vote for, who not to vote for, how to vote and how to identify the right person to vote for and why voters should not vote for certain people.

During the presentation of short film-sketch in one of the programmes, a wife requests voters not to vote for her criminal husband or a son pleads not to vote for his father as he is a defaulter of loan. Each of its programme ends with a rhyme jingle *Amar vote Ami debo, Dekhe shune, chinney debo* ( My vote belongs to me and I will vote after due consideration and identifying the right person) . Some of film-sketches are already shown through various media across the country.

Bangladesh has gone through a painful political process. A process many Bangladeshis believe they had to have at some stage, given the past political malaise engulfing the country. In financial market metaphor, the country has gone through a "correction".

How successful the correction has been will depend on the people how they vote, and for whom, at the general election. Corruption and other ills of society cannot be removed by law or by force. Unless people elect honest and competent people to the parliament, corruption or abuse of power cannot be totally eliminated. There is a saying "people get the government they deserve".