

MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN BANGLADESH

On August 4, 2008, elections of four City Corporations (big municipality) and nine Paurashavas (small municipality) were held in Bangladesh. The City Corporations where elections were held were: Khulna City Corporation, Barisal City Corporation, Rajshahi City Corporation and Sylhet City Corporation. Paurashavas were: Dupchanchia Paurashava (Bogra District), Naohata Paurashava (Rajshahi District), Manikganj Paurashava (Manikganj District), Sreepur Paurashava (Gazipur District), Fulbaria Paurashava (Mymensing District), Chuadanga Paurashava (Chuadanga District), Shariatpur Paurashava (Shariatpur District), Shitakunda Paurashava (Chittagong District) and Golapganj Paurashava (Sylhet District). These were the first sets of elections held under the present non-party caretaker government which came into office on 11 January 2007, replacing another caretaker government headed by the President.

A total of 1600 candidates representing various political parties as well as independents contested the elections. The state of emergency, which was imposed at the time of the formation of the present government, was relaxed during the elections and the campaigning went on without any hindrance. Voters were able to cast their votes freely and candidates were able to campaign without difficulties. By all accounts, elections were free, fair and impartial. The voter participation was very high – on average 79 percent in City Corporations and 88 percent in Paurashavas.

Through these elections four City Mayors and 157 City Councilors including 39 from reserved seats for women were elected. Elected Councilors include: 41 from Khulna City Corporation (31 from general seats and 10 from reserved seats), 40 from Barisal City Corporation (30 from general seats and 10 from reserved seats), 40 from Rajshahi City Corporation (30 from general seats and 10 from reserved seats) and 36 from Sylhet City Corporation (27 from general seats and 9 from reserved seats). In Paurashava elections, 9 Paura Mayors, 81 Paura Councilors from general seats (nine from each Paurashava) and 27 Paura Councilors from reserved seats for women (three from each Paurashava) were elected. It may be noted that only two women from general seats of all City Corporations were elected although 17 women contested from those seats. No woman from Paurashava general seats was elected even though 2 women contested from those seats.

According to the electoral rules, local elections were to be held in a non-partisan manner, but political parties indirectly nominated the City Mayors. However, a few days before the elections, a Division Bench of the Bangladesh High Court opened the doors for party-based local elections. Consequently, all major parties came forth with their support for specific candidates although party symbols were not used by the candidates. Despite the party-based elections, all four City Mayors resigned their party posts, following the elections, as is required by the election rules.

Election results showed that the Awami League led alliance headed by former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina won all City Mayorships and eight out of nine Paura Mayoral posts. The BNP led alliance headed by Begum Khaleda Zia won only one Paura Mayoral post. The party affiliations of Councilors are mixed.

One of the distinguishing features of the recently held municipal elections of Bangladesh was that the contestants had to submit affidavits with their nomination papers disclosing their educational records, profession, criminal records, income, and assets and liabilities of the candidates themselves and their dependents. The purpose of such disclosures was to empower the voters with information so that they could vote for relatively clean and competent candidates. In this way, improving the quality of elected leaders was a major focus of the recent elections.

Unfortunately, the desire to see that the so-called clean candidates get elected in municipal elections remained largely unrealized. Many of the elected Mayors and Councilors possess controversial antecedents. In fact, there are many criminal cases against them and some of them were elected while contesting from jail. Their educational qualifications are also relatively low. More importantly, about 80 percent of the elected Mayors and Councilors reported their profession as business. This is discomfoting in that about two-thirds of the members of the last parliament were businessmen. The reason for these unexpected results – the election of candidates with less desirable backgrounds – is believed to be due to the prevailing feudalistic structure characterized by a patron-client relationship. In other words, voters acted on their self-interests and cast their votes in favor of their patrons who dole out patronage to them on a regular basis and the antecedents of the patrons were irrelevant to them.