

Bangladesh eunuchs to vote in first elections

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DHAKA (AFP) — Among the millions of new voters in Monday's Bangladeshi elections will be some 100,000 hijras — cross-dressing, pre- and post-operative transsexuals — allowed to cast ballots for the first time.

The male-to-female transsexuals are among 32 percent of the impoverished nation's 81 million voters for whom participating in the elections, the first since 2001, will be a new experience.

Hijra social worker Joya Shikder, herself a transsexual, said the move spelled a positive change for the conservative Muslim country.

"We've always been overlooked in previous elections," Shikder said. "It's exciting to be given this recognition but the authorities have stopped short of acknowledging us as a third gender."

The move to give hijras the vote has been applauded by human rights activists but has caused a headache for Election Commission officials who create separate lines for male and female voters at every polling booth.

"You just cannot just class us into men and women by looking at our faces, bodies and expressions," Shikder said.

Election Commission spokesman S.M. Asaduzzaman said officials were still trying to figure out exactly how hijras would cast their votes on Monday.

"It's a difficult one for us. We have only two queues, one for men and another for women," he said.

"We thought long and hard about it but eventually decided that hijras must go to the line that we think suits them best. The more feminine ones will be in the ladies' line while the ones who seem more manly will be in with the men."

Monday's election will end a two-year rule by an army-backed government.

The current regime has pushed through electoral reform during its tenure, including creating a photo identification voter list which has eliminated some 12.7 million fake "ghost" voters.

Commentators say the election will be the fairest in the notoriously corrupt, impoverished South Asian nation. Around 200,000 observers, including 2,500 from overseas, will be watching Monday's vote.

Among those who will also be voting for the first time are more than 40,000 Urdu-speaking Muslims who migrated to Bangladesh from the majority-Hindu Indian state of Bihar after the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947 but before Bangladesh — then East Pakistan — gained independence in 1971.

A Bangladesh court ruled in May that the Biharis, long considered refugees but never welcomed by either India or Pakistan, were full-fledged citizens.

Tens of thousands of floating gypsies and more than 50,000 prisoners have also been given voting

rights for the first time in this election.