

One Flew over Falu's Nest

Rampant corruption and unprecedented rigging in the Dhaka-10 by-poll are reminiscent of the elections held in the forlorn days of military rule. Once again people have been denied their right to vote; this time by a government that enjoys absolute majority in the parliament.

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JULY 1, 10:30 in the morning. At the Udayan High School polling centre, a group of Jatatabadi Chatra Dal (JCD) leaders were seen lurking around the area, which had as many as 2,619 votes. "Don't waste your time here. Your votes have been cast; have ice-cream and leave the place," a JCD worker told six voters. "Our strategy was quite simple. In the first hours of the day, we cast votes of those who were unlikely to cast for Falu bhai," said a BNP-loyalist to the Daily Star (DS) reporter. "The party hierarchy said we would be held responsible if Falu bhai fails to get 80 percent of the votes in this centre," another JCD leader reasoned for this unsolicited service to the voters.

The same old farce was re-enacted in all the 103 polling stations of the constituency. Rigging, in fact, began literally before the election saw the light of the day. Truckloads of BNP-men-- most are not voters of the area-- gathered at different parts of the city in the early morning of July 1. The much-talked about by-poll turned into a sham within two hours. "Fake voters from Demra, Lalbagh, Kamrangir Char, Motijheel and Shabujbagh 'cast' votes mostly between 8 am and 10 am," a DS report says.

Most of the polling centres remained off-limits to the agents of the opposition Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB). Hoodlums belonging to the ruling party even manhandled BDB candidate Major (retd) Abdul Mannan in the Hossain Ali Primary School centre in the early morning. "The government did not deploy the army at the polling centres," an angry Mannan told the journalists while leaving the booth in a press car. "I had no option but to boycott the election and appeal to the election commission to cancel the Dhaka-10 by-poll," he continued.



Two voters press stamps against their ballot papers in the open rather than inside the polling booth at a centre at Curzon Hall at Dhaka University.

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It was, however, a different story inside the red building of the election commission secretariat. Chief Election Commissioner Abu Sayed went abroad on a long vacation; and the Acting Chief Election Commissioner (ACEC) Safiur Rahman was not in the office when Mannan, along with fellow BDB MP Mahi B Chowdhury, stormed the EC secretariat at around 1:45. Munsef Ali, one of the election commissioners, was holding the fort. And when Mannan complained that army-men were not deployed in every polling centre, Munsef replied, "But I have seen them." Mahi B Chowdhury, this time, ran him through Mannan's plea. But, a visibly unperturbed Munsef stuck to his guns and replied, "I have seen members of the army in both the centres I have visited." At this point Mannan just lost his cool. "You are telling a lie," the BDB candidate hollered at the election commissioner. Munsef, too, reacted angrily, "You can't speak like this. It is you who is lying."

But Safiur Rahman, the ACEC, did not buy Munsef's idea. "The High Court order (regarding deployment of army in every polling centre) was flouted and there was no polling agent of Bikalpa Dhara at most centres," Safiur told the awaiting journalists. "Voting was unrealistic at some times...I can only say the poll was not totally satisfactory," he continued.