

# Eyes wide shut?

Much as international observers can improve their transparency, Bangladeshis can also deepen our relations with observers. It is not enough for Bangladeshis to approach observers with only our experiences and views on the electoral and political processes.

TAZREENA SAJJAD

**I**N the expanding business of democracy promotion, election monitoring has become a prominent part of the global project to promote democratic norms and practices. The presence of neutral observers, it is believed, promotes conformity with emerging international standards for the conduct of elections.

The presence of a "neutral" third party illustrates the interest of the international community in the politics of the country and underscores an explicit support for the democratic process.

Second, it is believed that elections observers can have a restraining influence on anyone attempting to break the rules.

Third, election monitoring boosts confidence in the fairness of the electoral process while helping to deter fraudulence in the balloting and counting procedures.

Other arguments highlight the reporting on the integrity of the elections, mediating disputes resulting from the election and creating some semblance of security in polling stations, which also has significant bearing on the participation of minority populations.

Finally, observers issue recommendations for improving future elections.

As the 2008 elections approach, Bangladesh is welcoming several hundred international election observers who will meet with parties, officials and voters, observe polling and the counting of votes. Election observation in Bangladesh has mostly been carried out by the EU, Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), the Carter Center (not involved in the 2008 elections), and the International Republican Institute (IRI).

ANFREL is a regional association of domestic rights and elections groups, while NDI and IRI are political institutes. "Long-term observers" have been in Bangladesh since November reporting regularly on political developments and election preparations. A much larger contingent of "short-term observers" will arrive shortly before election day to observe election day procedures. Bangladeshis and policy-makers on the outside will await issuance of their public reports on the election process and recommendations for improvements in the conduct of elections in Bangladesh.

While the importance of international observers cannot be undermined, some points need to be raised about this practice.

First, it is easy to distribute free trips to Bangladesh but much more difficult to observe the esoteric political and proce-



Be vigilant.

dural maneuvers that surround elections. Unless observers are committed, well-trained, and experienced, there is a risk that they will be political tourists, not serious observers.

Second, one can challenge observers' presumed neutrality -- election monitors can face a clash of interests stemming from pressure to project and protect the institutional agenda of their organisations.

Similarly, there is a risk of complying with the hegemonic position of specific countries defined in terms of strategic and economic interests, with human rights and democracy being tangential.

Third, without knowledge of local languages and cultural context, and little understanding of local political nuances, the impact of third party presence can be even detrimental, especially if troubled areas are reported as being "free and fair."

Election monitoring organisations (EMOs) may have institutional motives

apart from conducting a professional, high-quality observation effort. NDI and IRI, which conduct programs in dozens of countries, may use election observation missions as a chance to build the capacity of their own staff or that of their partners in other countries. ANFREL's leadership is drawn from regional EMOs and rights groups, which are often donor driven and are not necessarily models of clean management. While not inherently problematic, observer selection is opaque and there is a risk that observation missions become vehicles for patronage and networking: a chance for EMO officials to give free trips to politically influential partners, who can help secure continued funding and worldwide access.

EMOs receive the overwhelming majority of their funding from governments. While their staffs are professional, their leadership is often political. In the case of NDI, many board members are former officials of Democratic adminis-

trations and former members of Congress. IRI presents a more problematic case: some of IRI's board members are sitting members of Congress, including powerful Republican senators John McCain and Chuck Hagel.

International election observation missions are also vulnerable to donor sentiments; funding cuts can have direct bearing on the size and efficacy of election observation teams.

Also, absent a serious commitment on the part of EMOs to deploy to difficult locations, citing security considerations, means some of the most difficult and dangerous areas can remain largely unmonitored.

Finally, while the spectacle of election day itself might pass by quietly, the overall process might have involved being tainted by cynical political maneuvering, voter intimidation, and purchase of loyalties well before the ballots are cast -- all of which are difficult for foreign observers to document, understand, and report.

Despite these criticisms, international observers bring expertise in the more technical aspects of the elections, such as matters of transparency and ballot counting. Internationals are also useful where there is less trust in local observers, who also remain significantly more vulnerable to changing security and political conditions.

Further, internationals continue to have far more leverage than Bangladeshis in persuading the government to respond to problems. Because of the internationals' potential utility and power to legitimise a critical component of the democratic process, i.e. elections, we must raise the question of their accountability to the Bangladeshi people.

The competing influences on observers and the sheer difficulty of their task make it

important that they be open about their methods, strengths, and shortcomings. The EU delegation website (<http://www.eucombangladesh.org>) is an excellent model of transparency that ANFREL, IRI and NDI should emulate.

From the site, we can learn the names and deployment locations of EU observers, the names and qualifications of the management team in Dhaka, an overview of the EU's methodology, and the documents governing the conduct of EU observers in Bangladesh.

Much as international observers can improve their transparency, Bangladeshis can also deepen our relations with observers. It is not enough for Bangladeshis to approach observers with only our experiences and views on the electoral and political processes, though such exchanges are a core element of international observation.

We should also engage EMOs in discussion on their recruitment and methodology, applying gentle, sustained, and constructive pressure at the field office and headquarters levels for the focus to remain on conducting a professional observation mission, not on distributing patronage or giving in to possible political pressure from the boards of the party institutes or from embassy officials.

Ultimately, election observation and monitoring should go beyond being a symbolic gesture. While we would like to believe that EMOs are singularly devoted to conducting professional and sophisticated observations, there are simply too many competing influences for us to take that for granted.

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# Dilemma for the young voters

As the days of election near, the young must make a decisive choice. In the absence of the likes of a Mr. Barack Obama, they must pick the lesser evil.



HABIBUL HAQUE KHONDKER

**S**OMEONE told me of a Lebanese proverb that says: "Bad is better than worse." Watching elections frenzy and thinking of the Bangladesh politics, I was thinking of young voters who, faced with a dilemma, may use this proverb while making their electoral choice.

One of the interesting points about the December 29 election is the demographic composition of the voters. About 30% of the voters will cast their votes for the first time. Now whom they will vote for is anybody's guess.

As a teacher for over two decades, I have had some insights into young minds. The more I have known them, the more I have learned to respect them. The young have ideas and ideals. They have no time for unsubstantiated remarks. They are impatient with stupidity and they get disappointed with dishonesty. They should be listened to and not simply lectured at.

The candidates seeking their votes must be honest with them and tell them as things are, with all its warts. Don't tell them lies -- whether about the past, or your date of birth.

Don't paint an overly optimistic scenario. The current economic crisis, affecting the entire globe is a real crisis, and Bangladesh is not immune from it. Responsible political leaders should prepare them for the sacrifices.

- Don't try to use the same old political rhetoric -- political slogans must be replaced with political data; politics of bullets by bullet points.
  - Politics of bitterness and animosities must give way to politics of reconciliation and civility.
  - The young voters, for the most part, are not going to be impressed with religious bigotry. They know the future belongs to the enlightened. Tolerance and secularism will win in the long run. The turn to religious right is, at best, a diversion bred by economic crisis and alienation. When the dust settles, a progressive enlightened society is where they would want to live.
  - Most young people have forward-looking ideas -- they want to dream of a bright prosperous future. Please show them the light and not spread gloom. They want to live in a digital culture with their fingers on the keys (of laptops and cell phones) and eyes on the horizon of the future.
  - The young people want to see Bangladesh as a globalised, cosmopolitan society; they want to be proud of their culture and heritage and yet enjoy the music of Alicia Keys and Bappa Majumdar at the same time. They don't see an inherent animosity between my famous namesake, Habib (Wahid) and Avril Lavigne.
  - They like fusion in music, in food, and in politics.
- Our politicians must grow up to win the hearts and minds of this generation.

Sure, elections are about making promises. But the promises must not be irresponsible fantasies. As I watched the manifestos of the main contenders, I remembered one particular episode of The Simpsons where Homer runs for the mayoral elections and makes such promises like: "You don't have to take out your garbage to the roadside; let someone else (city officials) take it." But what about the funds? Homer gets into serious problem for his irresponsible promises once elected to office.

Both parties have made lofty promises and elaborate plans. For BNP, some of these are not only jaded but ironical, like fighting corruption. For the Awami League, at least, there are specific targets -- presented in bullet points.

But please let us not promise anything free. There is no free lunch.

BNP has shown some honesty by saying that they will fight against portraying Bangladesh as a religiously extremist state. At least, here BNP is honest. That's exactly what they did when they were in power, anyone alerting about the rise of extremism was painted as acting against national interest.

For them the game plan was simple: use the religious right to intimidate political opposition, and suppress information about religious extremism. Punish the messenger and ignore the message. This did not work. The stories of BNP men's complicity in the so-called Bangla Bhai's reign of terror were more than a bungle. The BNP government dismissed the well-reported stories in the print media.

What happened to the young and bright in Bangladesh? Remember the story of Mr. Mahi B. Choudhury. While an MP of BNP, he wanted to accord a reception to Sheikh Hasina, the opposition leader who wanted to visit Mr. Choudhury's constituency. For such a forward-looking thought Mr. Choudhury was not only never rewarded, he was, instead, reprimanded by the then ruling party.

There are many such well-educated, articulate, young leaders in various fields in Bangladesh. Just watch what the likes of Ms. Tania Ameer or Mr. Zafar Sobhan are saying.

As the days of elections near, the young must make a decisive choice. In the absence of the likes of a Mr. Barack Obama, they must pick the lesser evil.

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# Between enemy lines

If the leaders do indeed believe in democracy and do envisage a state shaped by statecraft, then the debate is the least that the Bangladeshi *jonogon* should expect.

S. I. ZAMAN

**I**T'S high time we had a debate between the two political arch-rivals. Yes, it's been too long for a country to be without a democratically elected government, but have the political parties changed for the better? Do the leaders (*netris*) have a changed mind-set now? Sadly, no!

The two leaders have yet to come out of their make-believe aura and are yet to come to terms with the politico-economic realities of the present. We have yet to see from them even a veneer of democratic mind-set. They exude the same attitude, reminiscent of *hartal*, *aborodh*, *jalao-purao* days of pre-1/11. They are still the unquestioned leaders of their respective parties.

As for the CTG, the less said the better. They have made a shamble of their tenure over the last couple of years. What have we achieved in real terms? Nothing significant! We have an EC which is still struggling to assert its independence. We have a semi-independent ACC, which has lost the glow that it had a year ago. It certainly has a competent leader but he is compelled to keep a low profile -- so, what else is there that we can call a significant change?

The corrupt politicians who were indicted have now come out, virtually unscathed, as though acquitted of all charges. The known corrupt people have

been virtually cleared of all charges, and, paradoxically, the genuine reformists now find themselves as pariahs. Furthermore, it has been clearly demonstrated that there are people who are well above the law and that it pays to be corrupt. The perception is that corruption will now proliferate -- the very evil the CTG set out to demolish!

Is this what we envisaged? The spirit of 1/11 now seems to have become a relic of a "distant" past -- a mere aberration in the political theatre, just one more failure in the annals of Bangladesh. Two years ago the CTG emerged as a formidable force to be reckoned with -- with a seemingly evangelical mission. Despite setbacks, they received overwhelming support of the people. So what went wrong?

However repugnant it is to swallow, the reality is that the CTG team and the erstwhile political governments and their allies belong to the same breed, that is far removed from the mainstream, the downtrodden, the struggling, and the misery of the real Bangladesh. It's far removed from the groan of the seething wrath of the millions. Poverty alleviation and the pretentious rhetoric, such as "reaching-out-to-the-downtrodden," are just words.

Indeed, the CTG began their tenure with a seemingly resolute posture: to have the mainstream political parties "drink water" from the same stream as it were, to get the parties to carry out genuine reforms, to have the parties democratise themselves,

to deracinate corruption and its causes from all echelon of government and corporate regimes.

I wish I could say: "The rest is history." But, far from it, it's as though Bangladesh stumbled on a phase in history, quite by chance, to forcefully shun all that is negative in politics and governance, to re-assess her weaknesses and to reassert her position as a truly just society in the world community. Sadly, the phase was short-lived and may never come again.

The only way forward is to get the two leaders to reassure the nation from the same platform -- and reassure they must because the nation is going through a time of total confusion. Their one-platform pledges ought to be:

- The defeated party will accept the election outcome in good faith, and will not launch a campaign of non-cooperation and hate-mongering blame game.
- The winning party will accept the victory in grace and humility, and will not launch a smear campaign against the opposition party members.
- The opposition party in the parliament will work together with the ruling party for the greater national good.
- The opposition party will form its own shadow cabinet to monitor the functioning of the corresponding cabinet of the ruling party.
- The ruling party will be responsible for smooth functioning of parliamentary sessions and for that a non-partisan speaker is to be appointed.
- Both the opposition and the ruling majority will never try to delay or stall any consensus in a debate.
- Both leaders should categorically state that they will implement what they promise in their election manifestos.
- Both leaders should categorically proclaim that they will never resort to *hartal*, *aborodh* or any other form of violent opposition to achieve their demand.

They should place supreme priority to national progress above the exigencies of personal feelings or family interest. If the leaders do indeed believe in democracy and do envisage a state shaped by statecraft complete with democratic culture and values, then the debate is the least that the Bangladeshi *jonogon* should expect. And indeed the debate could be a precursor and a harbinger of better things to come.

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Will the two leaders debate?



Will the two leaders debate?

# Economy will hit the wall

NURY VITTA CHI

**W**HAT will the economy do in 2009? Will it recover? Will it fall further? We asked representatives of every major professional group to sum up their members' opinions in a single sentence. The results are in.

The Air Traffic Controllers' Association said: "We reckon the whole thing is up in the air."

The Archaeologists' Society said: "The economy will dig itself into the ground."

The Automobile Association said: "We're giving it the green light."

The Society of Blacksmiths said: "We're going to get hammered."

The Botanists' Society said: "The problems extend right down to the roots."

The Chiropractors' Association said: "The important thing is to relax and let everything click into place."

The Society of Dancers said: "We see it taking steps in the right direction."

The Dentists' Association said: "Now this won't hurt a bit."

The Electricians' Union said: "Sparks are going to fly."

The Entomologists' Club said: "Our members say they can detect a buzz."

The Farmers' Association said: "We see it growing organically from the ground up."

The Fire-Fighters' Union said: "It'll crash and burn."

The Society of Florists said: "It'll blossom at first, but will then wilt."

The Funeral Directors' Society said: "It's dead and buried."

The Geologists' Union said: "It's as solid as a rock."

The Hairdressers' Association said: "We're going to go long at the top but definitely short at the back and the sides."

The Human Resources Managers' Union said: "We see it downsizing."

The Jockey Club said: "After lagging for a length it will beat the odds by a short nose."

The Journalists' Union said: "It'll be SENSATIONAL."

The Lift Technicians' Union said: "We foresee a smooth descent to zero."

The Glider Pilots' Association said: "It'll stay up for longer than most people think."

The Explosive Materials Institute said: "It'll go with a bang."

The Flight Engineers' Union said: "There be a short delay for technical reasons."

The Interpreters' Club said: "The economy will fall, tomber, vallen, jatuh, cadere, falle or cair."

The Financial Analysts' Society said: "It may go up, it may go down, or it may stay the same. Can I have my bonus now please?"

The Marine Biologists' Institute said: "It's heading underwater."

The Meteorologists' Association said: "The outlook is gloomy spells with scattered storms."

The Nanotechnology Institute said: "There will be improvements, but they will be very very very VERY small."

The Nuclear Scientists' Union said:

"Don't worry, nothing can go wrong. Just keep repeating that."

The Ophthalmologists' Union said: "It's hard to forecast as the top is clear but the bottom is a bit blurry."

The Police Officers' Club said: "It will proceed straight ahead in a westerly manner before encountering disturbances counter to the maintenance of further onward progress."

The Property Sales Association said: "It's as safe as houses."

The Expectant Mothers' Society said: "You're laboring under a misconception."

The Society of Public Relations Officers said: "There's going to be another massive fall, or what we prefer to call a 'negative rise'."

The Psychiatrists' Union said: "You're

all bonkers."

The Unlicensed Bus Drivers' Union said: "Hold tight, it's going to be a wild ride."

The Society of X-Ray Technicians said: "We can see right through this one."

The Storytellers' Society said: "It will grow like Topsy."

The Taxidermists' Union said: "It's totally stuffed."

The Teachers' Union said: "Fail. Retake. Must try harder."

The Veterinary Surgeons' Union said: "Anyone expecting good news is barking mad."

The World Council of Churches said: "Heaven only knows."

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