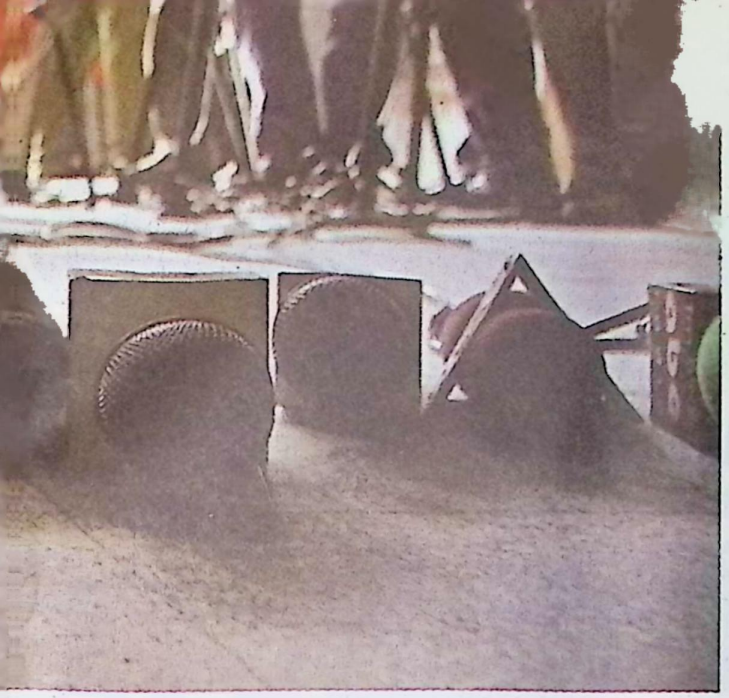


Jatio Party. Moreover, poll coverage by another channel of the by-election of Dhaka 10 constituency held in 2004 inferred that these channels can be used for political propaganda, though it's expected that the mass media, keeping aside any political motivation, upholds the highest ethical standards.

During the most sensitive time (from withdrawal of election nomination date to the election day) a television channel has unabashedly broadcasted news on only the four party alliances candidates while covering different constituencies, though it did mention the names of the candidates of the grand alliances. It's news coverage on Dhaka-16, constituency where Barrister Rafiqul Islam Mia is the four party alliances candidate, had a communal tint; the reporter claimed that the candidate is expecting huge support from the newly enlisted Urdu speaking voters.

An attempt to impose a 'code of conduct' for the media while covering elections was shot down by irate journalists and media personalities on the ground that it contained too many contradictions. The code of conduct was developed by the Election Commission (EC) with technical support from Unesco to ensure that a sense of accountability and propriety is maintained.

They also highly criticised the CEC's announcement to the mass media not to publish election results before they are officially declared by the EC to avert confusion. The journalist community considered such an announcement an infringement on the freedom of the press. Even political leaders criticised the CEC's announcement. "We get election results faster in the media. It should not be stopped. If, it's done there is every possibility of 'manipulating election result' centrally. In fact, their stand is not clear. Restrictions on the media also raise serious questions as to the possibility of a coup during the election. There are a number of reasons to suspect that such a coup may be planned," says MK Anwar, a Bangladesh Nationalists Party (BNP) leader.

On the reason behind their concern about the 'Code of Conduct', Saiful Bari, chief adviser of the private channel, ATN Bangla says, "It was formulated like an ordinance, which the EC is not authorised to do. Moreover, it was full of contradictions, incomplete and the language of the act was like we don't know anything and they are teaching us the difference between minor issues such as the difference between news, editorial and post editorials."

"Instead of imposing restrictions on the media during the reports of election results, the EC could address the issues that would make the vote-counting system faster, more legitimate and transparent in the presence of representatives of the contestants. We want that the EC instructs the officials involved with election process to help them for election coverage," observes Bari.

The EC formed another five-member committee headed by Bari, to provide a media guideline within a week. The committee handed over the proposed "guidelines to facilitate cooperation between mass media and the EC for election coverage to the commission.

In the proposed guideline the committee demanded to set a control room so that journalists get required information. The committee suggested setting a media room at the EC office and other returning offices. Saiful Bari says, "Even they should install latest technologies for vote counting for swift coverage and they should also allow the journalists to use mobile phone and even helicopters for smooth coverage." For the suitable coverage of the foreign journalists the committee suggested setting up election booths at the major hotels.

However, like many reforming plans initiated by the current BEC, it bounced back from its stand. Subsequently the Chief Election Commissioner announced at a seminar that there would not be any code of conduct or media guideline for the up-coming election coverage.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Information has set a guideline for the state-run BTV and Bangladesh Betar regarding election coverage. Jamil Osman, secretary of Ministry of Information, informs that like the previous occasions the ministry has formed a guideline for state own BTV and Bangladesh Betar. "We will ensure neutrality and authenticity in BTV and Bangladesh Betar during the election," he says. "All of the 39 registered political parties will be given equal treatment during the election."

He also adds, "Free opportunity and equitable access will be provided to candidates and representatives of political parties or alliances to participate in radio or TV debates, talk shows and discussions to express their opinions on issues relating to their election agenda, campaigns and policies."

But BTV's stand of giving equal importance to all parties is highly criticised by the political leaders, journalists and civil society members.