The EC also held elections in five city corporations. It however could not demonstrate strong leadership in holding the polls. Its weakness in enforcing electoral code of conduct was exposed in many cases. But the elections were largely free, fair and peaceful. It was possible due to the government's political goodwill, and the Rakibuddin-led EC can claim no credit for that.

The city corporation elections were highly focused. The polls drew attention of the entire country and many foreign countries took an interest in them as well. Both the government and the ruling AL were very careful and sensitive about them. They did not want to do anything in the polls which could have contributed to justify the BNP-led alliance's demand for a restoration of a non-partisan parliamentary election time government.

It is certain that the city polls also did not make Rakibuddin tired. The situation has changed during the ongoing Upazila Parishad elections. The ruling AL men opted for violent and unlawful means including capturing polling stations and stuffing ballot boxes in the first two phases held on February 19 and 27 when Rakibuddin was leading the EC. It annoyed him. He reportedly sent a message to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and sought her assistance to contain violent ruling party men. But he did not get the desired response. Then, according to a source close to Rakibuddin, he decided to leave the country, allowing Election Commissioner Abdul Mobarak to lead the EC.

Mobarak appeared to be the perfect man for the ruling AL, whose rowdy activists captured polling stations and stuffed ballot boxes in the third phase of the polls held on March 15. But Mobarak, after the polls ended, termed them largely peaceful, and free and fair. He will lead the EC during the remaining two phases of polls on March 23 and 31.

Staying in the US, Rakibuddin must have observed how the third phase polls were held on March 15. As a silent observer, he will be noticing the mode of the remaining two phases of the polls. Nothing can be more unfortunate and disgraceful for a leader who leaves the battlefield in the middle of the war.

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Milon Mridha, president of Babuganj upazila Chhatra League, tries to stop photojournalists from taking pictures as he and his cadres stuff the ballot box at Rajguru Govt Primary School polling centre in Barisal.

PHOTO: ARIFUR RAHMAN