

HOW FREE WILL REPORTERS BE IN COVERING THIS ELECTION?

| SPOTLIGHT |

During the Dhaka City Mayoral elections of 2015, Samakal's senior reporter, Amitosh Paul, was assigned to cover the polling booth at the Uttara Girls High School Centre. Inside, he noticed a group of men—belonging to the ruling party—misguiding a section of the voters.

"They were fake agents deciding who could vote and who couldn't," recalls Amitosh. He subsequently informed the presiding officer at the booth, after which the men were driven out of the polling centre. Amitosh thought that the matter had ended then and there and continued with his reporting.

However, as soon as he stepped out of the centre, the same group of men attacked him. "They had noticed that I complained to the presiding officer and that's why they targeted me," Amitosh tells *Star Weekend*.

"I was shocked. I never imagined that

polling centre who came to the reporter's rescue. But by then Amitosh had already been beaten black and blue. The police came in after the assault and provided Amitosh with 'protection' for the rest of his time in the field.

Later that day, Amitosh went to the nearest police station to file a General Diary. "It was frustrating. The police interrogated me unnecessarily. In the end, I got fed up and left for the hospital because I couldn't take the pain anymore," he recalls.

The Election Commission (EC) formed a probe committee after the incident. According to Amitosh, however, it didn't make a difference. "The report they published was inadequate and the attackers weren't eventually punished. In fact, the main perpetrator is all set to become a counsellor in his area in the next

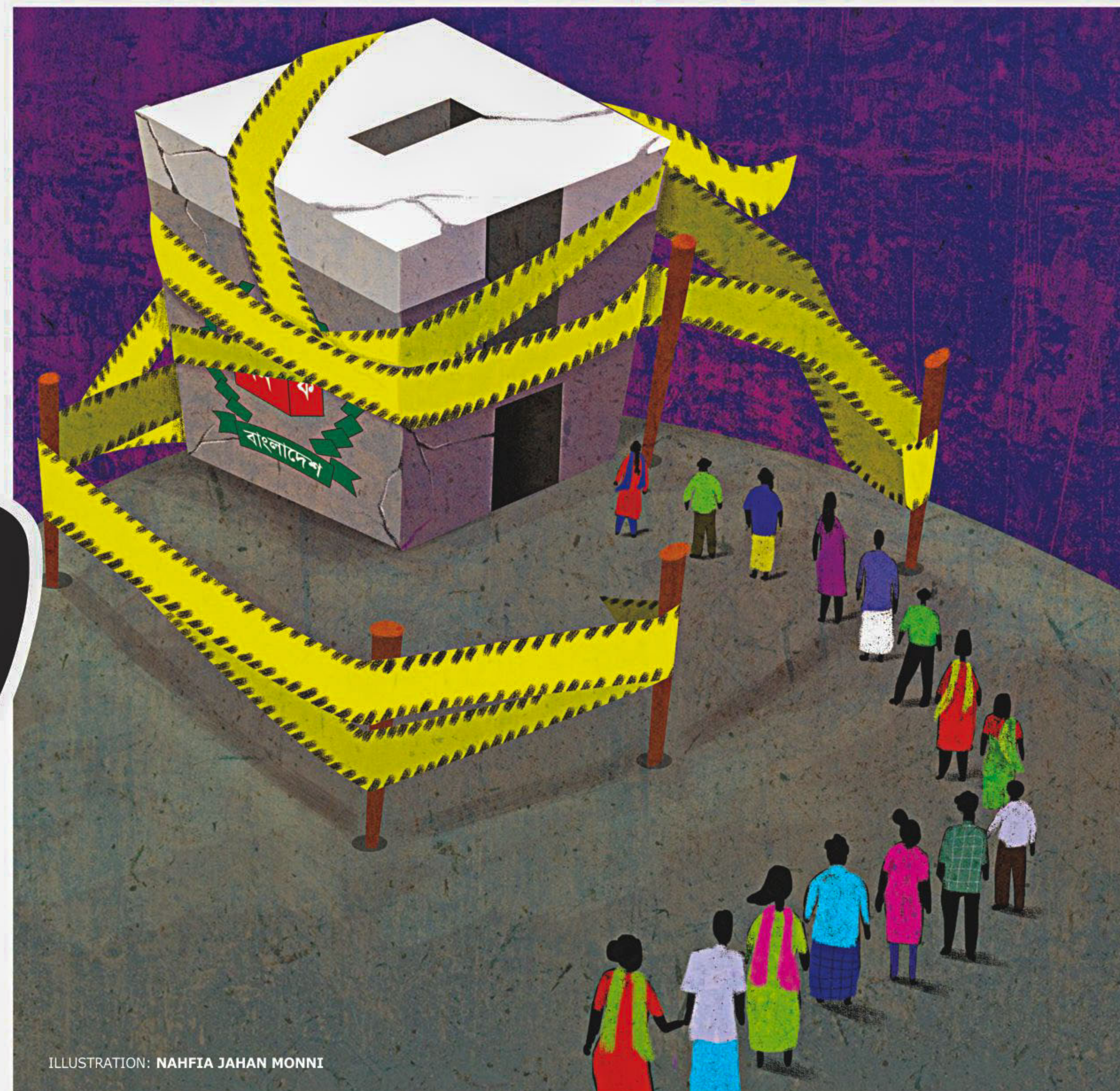


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

officer of the centre accurately.

"There's every chance that the officer may get confused and will end up saying that journalists cannot go into the polling room altogether instead of just barring us from broadcasting live from the polling room," says Soma.

"From my experience I can say that if they don't allow us to broadcast live from the polling room, they won't allow us to do so from the balcony either. We are concerned that we might have to argue with the police to enter the premises and that can be very frustrating," she explains.

Probbhash Amin, head of news at ATN News explains that it's easier for journalists to report irregularities if they are allowed to broadcast live and not being able to do so could negatively affect their coverage.

"I think the decision was taken this time because of the large number of irregularities that were reported from the polling stations in the last few elections. But, yes, if reporters from 26 television channels start broadcasting live inside a polling room, it could end up becoming very chaotic," says Probbhash.

Journalists are also worried about the recent incident of assault on them while they were covering student protests earlier this year.

One of the assaults that caught the country's attention was that of a photographer getting ruthlessly beaten up by men in helmets with sticks and iron rods.

That video went viral on social media

NILIMA JAHAN

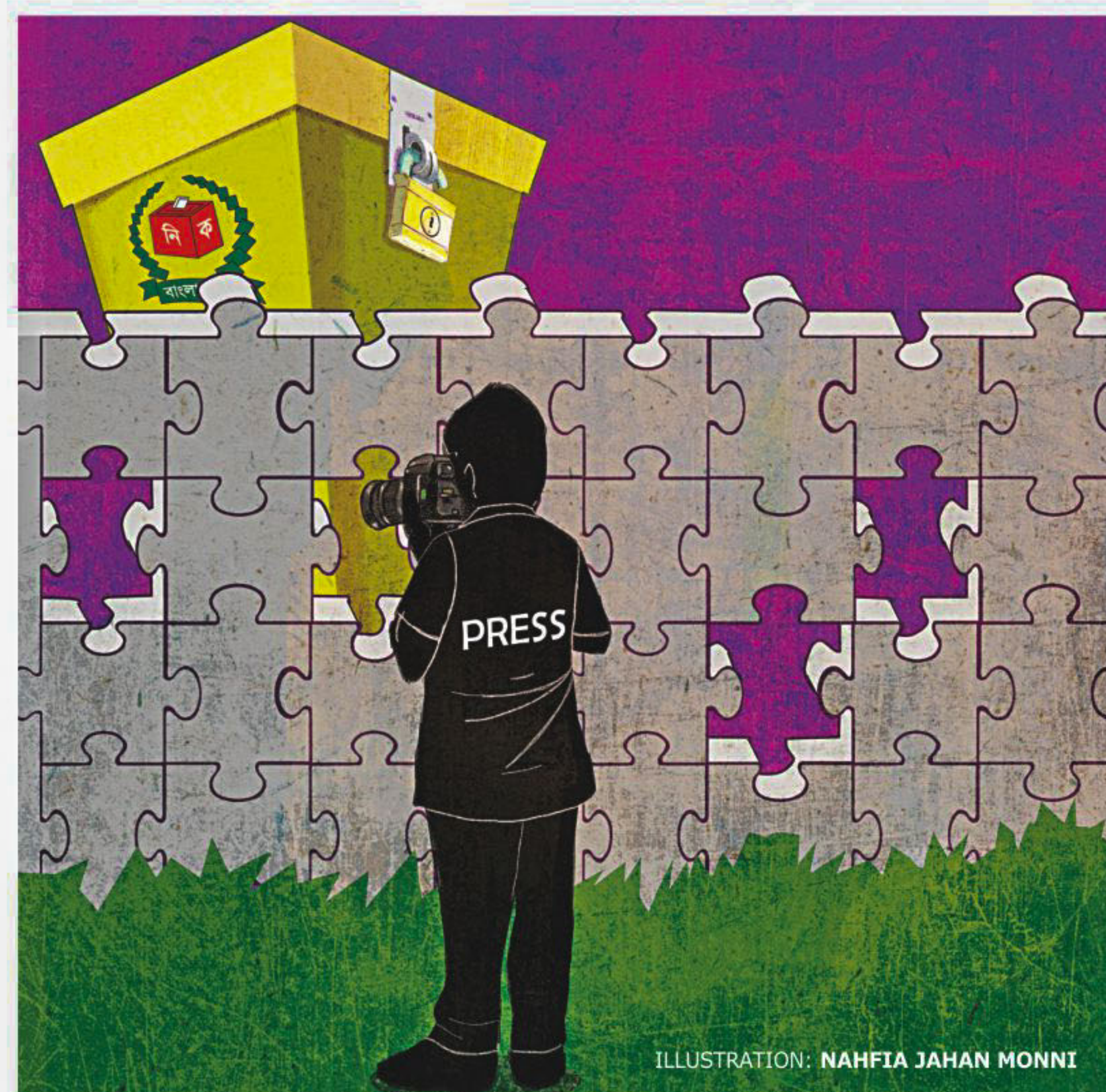


ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

such a thing could happen to me. They slapped and kicked me. The police were nearby, but they didn't do anything to save me," he adds.

Eventually, it was the people around the

city corporation election," laments the senior reporter.

With the National Elections due next week, Amitosh is gearing up once again, and this time, he fears that he might have to put up with many more such obstacles. "It's going to be a lot more difficult to cover the national elections properly. Many of us are worried that we won't even be allowed to enter the polling rooms. There could be a lot more risk this time," he says. Amitosh's sentiment is shared by a number of seasoned reporters who will be covering the election this time.

It's a combination of issues that has created this collective concern of sorts. For one, the BNP is participating in the polls, making this the current government's first face-off in a decade. As such, journalists predict the climate to be a lot more aggressive at the polling centre.

Signs to support the above prediction are perhaps already visible. A number of BNP leaders and supporters have come under attack in the last few weeks. Even senior leaders of the opposing alliance the Oikyafront, such as Dr Kamal Hossain, weren't spared. Reports from different parts of the country suggest that many BNP nominees have refrained from campaigning in their respective regions for 'security concerns.'

The Digital Security Act is another aspect that reporters covering the elections this time will be worried about. The Editor's Council has consistently criticised the act. In one of its press releases, the Council explained that the act gives unlimited power to the police to enter premises, search offices, seize

computers, computer networks, servers, and everything related to the digital platforms.

The police can also arrest anybody based simply on suspicion, without warrant and do not need any approval from any authorities. Journalists believe that this is one act that can be used as a weapon against them during the elections.

Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul, chief editor and chief executive officer of ETV, says: "Journalists can be harassed by the Digital Security Act (DSA) any time. During the elections the probability of this could be higher. If the police find anything suspicious, they can seize the camera, check them and do something illegal. We are already in fear of this."

Prothom Alo Business Editor Sujoy Mohajan, echoes Monjurul's sentiments. During the city corporation election of 2015, Sujoy's phone, wallet and EC ID were taken away from him because he had filmed something that the authorities didn't like. "I noticed members of the ruling party occupying a poll centre forcefully. I recorded that on my phone. When they noticed, they took away everything. The police were just silent observers," recalls Sujoy.

With the Digital Security Act, there's a

danger that incidents like these might take place more often.

"The Digital Security Act will make this election a lot more difficult to cover. I believe that journalist leaders and editors must arrange a discussion with the Chief Election Commissioner," says Sujoy.

The government on its part has said that no journalist will have to worry about the Digital Security Act if he or she hasn't done anything wrong.

The other aspect that is bothering television journalists is the EC's decision to ban live broadcast from inside the polling booths. Reporters, however, will be allowed to go inside the booths and take photos and capture video footage.

The directives, according to KM Nurul Huda, the Chief Election Commissioner, were taken to ensure that the work of the polling officers inside the booths would continue uninterrupted.

Huda further said that journalists would be allowed to stay inside the polling centres for a limited amount of time and that the presiding officer at the polling centre would determine how many journalists would be able to enter a booth at any given time.

Huda also said that a code of conduct for journalists and observers would be

aired on various television channels this week.

Now, these directives don't necessarily seem to restrict media freedom in a big way. The presiding officer of the centre, after all, needs to stay focused and not be disturbed.

However, Soma Islam, special correspondent of Channel I, who will be

covering her third national election, explains that the reality on the ground is often very different.

"The EC has said that we can broadcast live from the balcony and the whole centre but not from inside the polling room. But we are apprehensive whether this message will reach the presiding

The police can also arrest anybody based simply on suspicion, without warrant and do not need any approval from any authorities. Journalists believe that this is one act that can be used as a weapon against them during the elections.

networks and reporters protested the incident vehemently. Till date though, no significant action has been taken to punish the culprits. If an incident as widespread as the above doesn't manage to get the desired attention of the authorities, one can't tell for sure as to what will.