

# 'Space for election monitoring is shrinking'

Sharmeen Murshid, Chief Executive Officer of the election observation group "Brotee", talks to Shakhawat Liton of The Daily Star about the importance of election monitoring and recent developments ahead of the election.



Sharmeen Murshid

*In the last participatory election in Bangladesh, held in 2008, the number of international election monitors was 593 while the number of local monitors was 100,059 from 75 organisations. This time, as of today, we have some 25-26 thousand local monitors and less than 100 international monitors only. Why is that?*

I think there are several aspects related to the inclusion process of election monitors. First of all, while listing the election monitors, the Election Commission has ignored many experienced monitors but at the same time included a number of new observer groups, which we had no prior knowledge of. The listing is usually done fulfilling certain criteria. I don't think the EC has fulfilled all of those criteria this time. Secondly, there is a general understanding in our society that the international community doesn't want to monitor an election if there is not a functional democracy in the country. Case in point: the 2014 election, which was shunned by the international observers as flawed. The 2018 election would have drawn even fewer international monitors had it been considered a completely one-sided one.

But there is another issue attached to it. It seems Bangladesh no longer warrants urgent attention from the international community. For example, the EU is not sending any observation mission this time. Two potential factors may have contributed to this de-prioritisation process: 1) the international community feels that their attention and assistance are needed elsewhere as Bangladesh has progressed considerably in terms of building a democratic structure; or 2) they feel that there will be a one-sided election this time too. Conversely, however, the US has shown considerable interest in observing and supporting election monitors.

A third reason behind the dwindling interest or presence of election monitors can be related to the shrinking fund for this purpose. The culture of election

observation in Bangladesh has developed in large part due to assistance from the international community. So funding for such activities is very important. Recently, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) cancelled its observation mission for the December 30 election after Bangladesh failed to issue visas to the majority of its international monitors. The Bangkok-based ANFREL mission was funded by the US. How would you view this development?

This is very unfortunate. I don't understand why the ANFREL observers would be denied visas. ANFREL is a well-known international observation group with experiences of working in many countries. It has worked in Bangladesh too. Which begs the question that despite what it claims, is the EC really encouraging election monitoring? I don't think it is. Can the EC be solely blamed for this? I don't think it can either, because granting credentials and issuing visas is the responsibility of the government. This raises concerns about the potentially shrinking space for election observation.

*Election is a process that involves a whole range of activities over a certain period, not just what happens on a single day. It starts with the announcement of the election schedule and culminates with the act of voting on the poll day. Why is it then that only the activities of the poll day are observed?*

Well, unlike in the past, I think one sort of observation does begin with the announcement of the election schedule today. We remain alert. But you're right. The formal process should begin start when everything begins because how it begins can say a lot about how it will pan out eventually. Speaking of this year's pre-poll environment, I must say that I have never seen such a situation before in my 18 years as an election observer. It's strange, to say the least. Forget about a level playing field. Let's just focus on the term "playing field." How even is it? The fact that candidacy has been rejected just a week before the election is unprecedented. Many constituencies don't even have any opposition candidate, which means that election there is going to be one-sided. Equally worrying is the tendency to disregard the Constitution and relevant laws, especially in matters related to campaigns. Who will we turn to or hold responsible when things go bad? I think the EC and the government have a big responsibility to play in ensuring that no violation of any sort takes place. They cannot avert that responsibility.

*How would you assess the role of the EC so far?*

It's frustrating when you make a comparative analysis of its performance. Think of the EC's performance during the last local government elections—say, the Union Parishad elections. There was so much violence, so much death. We have observed similar kinds of violence during the Union Parishad elections in 2003. So there has been no progress at all during this period. Clearly, the EC has failed to assert its authority and play the role expected of it. And it has displayed its weaknesses like never before, like no other EC in the past. Cracks within the EC have also been exposed, with one member of the team blaming the other. There are deep divisions in the commission. We don't expect this kind of behaviour from the EC. It is also

sending mixed messages about the prospect of a 100 percent free and fair election, saying that it is not possible. This is intended to take some blame off it in case there is any untoward incident, but it is also true that Bangladesh too has had credible, if not totally spotless, elections. So despite what it claims, a free and fair election is possible.

*Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, all elections except two (in February 1996 and January 2014) were held under caretaker governments. These elections were relatively credible and participatory, but those held under a party led government were not. Is there any reason?*

I have a different view of the elections held under a caretaker government, but let me focus on elections held under a party led government. Our electoral experience shows that every time there is an election held under a party government, there is unrest and chaos. It happens because those in charge of conducting the election do not do their job properly. They view the election from a winner-takes-it-all perspective, which leads to widespread protest and resistance, and eventually the politicians are forced to get back on track. Our politicians, given the chance and in the absence of proper checks, often tend to derail the train of democracy, and every time they do that, the people of this country fights back and resists until some semblance of democracy is restored. The democratic process must be respected or people will always find a way to make our politicians listen.

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## The mixed results of COP24

QUAMRUL CHOWDHURY

**A**MID deep frustration of scientists and activists, the political economy of climate change has taken a new turn at the ever-widening gulf between science and politics as a depleted number of official delegates from around 200 countries struggled to reach a common ground at the United Nations Climate Change Conference, or COP24, in Katowice, Poland.

They reached a face-saving last-minute weak consensus on December 16 after 30 hours beyond the scheduled deadline for negotiations, crafting the rulebook for implementing the Paris Agreement from 2020.

They adopted a truncated rulebook which contained only soft issues leaving the tougher ones for future UN parleys. Some of the core issues and decisions have been left hanging for the next two COPs—in Chile in December 2019, and then at the country chosen to host it in 2020, either UK or Italy.

COP24 barely averted disaster thanks to UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres' repeated interventions. But, as a long-time climate negotiator, I think the rulebook is a weak mechanism that lacks enforcement. It's a good thing that the UNSC has called a special climate summit in September next year to make a quantum leap forward in order to cut back on emissions.

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decisions are taken after long gruelling hours and exhausting work. It's always painstaking even at the best of times. Why? Because in any UN setting, decisions have to be taken on the basis of consensus among around 200 countries. At Katowice, about 11,000 delegates took two weeks to debate the latest scientific and proposed policy instruments. But when they agreed upon the rulebook after an extra time of 1.5 days, by then most delegates had already left leaving a few exhausted ones to witness the closing plenary. Credit should be given to those who helped whittle down some 2,500 areas of disagreement in the text.

As per the rulebook, on emission cutbacks, countries now need to report every two years on their progress along the Paris Agreement commitments for keeping temperature increase within 1.5 and 2 degrees Celsius.

On the mitigation front, a few key anchors were set, but a lot deferred, such as deferral of guidance on features of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) to 2024. Decisions regarding market mechanisms including Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) were deferred to COP25. Africa and LDCs wanted to participate without a heavy burden after having been able to set up CDM programme of activities in the last few years.

On the adaptation tax, discussions were on whether it would be based just on Article 6.4 or all mechanisms. Industrialised countries were against it, while Brazil, Africa and Alliance of Small Island States were in favour. Adaptation communication should be flexible—it is not to be used for country comparisons, not subject to review, and can be linked to adaptation reports under Article 13.

At UN, many of us know, most of the

was agreed that ex-ante communication (Article 9.5) shall be mandatory for industrialised countries, and voluntary for all others.

Historical divisions between developed and developing were not a major problem at Katowice. Past obstacles were overcome. Standards on transparency were agreed upon by China while developed countries, more specifically, Germany and Norway, pledged to provide over USD 100bn to help poorer countries adapt to the changing climate.

However, the US, Russia and Saudi Arabia pushed till the end to downplay scientific warnings about temperature rise beyond 1.5 degrees Celsius. Social implications of carbon tax or fossil fuel price hike also came up. Noted economists Nicholas Stern and Ottmar Edenhofer argued that the carbon tax

Bangladesh and other LDCs led by new LDC Chair Bhutan, I earnestly hope, would leave no stone unturned to prepare this 48-nation group for the next two years; they should do their homework on the basis of the latest scientific facts. Bangladesh as a ground-zero country in terms of adverse climate change effects, without any fault of her own, should also require changing its narrative as a victim nation. It was one of the first countries to prepare a strategy and action plan, namely the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan (BCCSAP) in 2008 that was revised in 2009; it should now be updated in a participatory manner so that it can be implemented without further delay. The formulation of the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) should be started immediately following the NAP Roadmap pre-



Too early to celebrate? COP24 President Michal Kurtyka jumps at the end of the final session of COP24 in Katowice, Poland, on December 15, 2018. PHOTO: REUTERS

pared by a group of experts. Here, too, people's participation should be stressed upon.

Bangladesh also created the Climate Trust Fund from its own budgetary resources and the Climate Resilient Fund with support from development partners, mainly from the UK and a few others. Now it needs to raise the budgetary allocation to tackle climate change. What is also urgently required is to build the skills and capacity to prepare adaptation and mitigation programmes to access the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund, LDC Fund and other global funds.

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## EC's unnecessary restrictions on journos

*Let them do their job freely*

THE guidelines issued by the EC to journalists with several "do's and don'ts" will only create impediments for journalists in carrying out their duty. This is the first time that the EC has imposed caveats on the functioning of journalists by imposing extraordinary conditions on their movements while covering the polls. We fail to see the logic behind preventing journalists from using motorbikes on Election Day. Motorbikes are the fastest and easiest means of getting from one polling centre to another. And isn't that what the reporters are supposed to do to get the news to the people as quickly as possible?

Never before were reporters required to seek permission before taking pictures of a polling booth or the polling centre. Why has it become necessary now to seek the permission of the presiding officer before taking pictures? The so-called secret room—the polling booth—has been placed virtually out of bounds for photographers. Live telecast from a "safe distance" is permitted on the condition that it would not hamper casting of votes.

One has never heard of any instance where photography or live telecast or presence of journalists has disrupted voting. What does the EC mean by "safe distance" and who would determine what exactly is a "safe distance"?

We understand that the EC and the law enforcers have to adopt measures to ensure trouble-free voting. But that should not entail curtailing the normal way of life of the public. Gathering information and delivering it to the people is the duty of the media, particularly when it comes to an election with high stakes.

We hope the EC would realise that journalists never hamper voting. In fact, in some cases their coverage of an incident has helped the agencies to react instantly. Reports have little value without evidence that pictures provide of an incident. Therefore, instead of restricting the movements and activities of journalists, the EC should facilitate easy coverage of the polls.

## Election officials must be neutral

*EC should stick to its guidelines*

IN Patuakhali-2 constituency, at least seven upazila- and union-level leaders and activists of AL have been allegedly appointed as election officials. This is in direct violation of the Election Commission's guidelines, which states that individuals whose neutrality is doubtful cannot be appointed as election officials. Yet, the opposition candidate of the constituency has urged the local administration for withdrawal of these officers—as of writing this no action has been taken. If the allegations are true—and they seem to be borne out by the facts—the EC must act decisively and withdraw these partisan officials for the sake of a credible election.

According to our reports, the appointees to these posts, including that of presiding officers, consist of a vice-president, a joint-secretary, an assistant publication secretary, a forest and environment affairs secretary, an organising secretary, and a member of various upazila- or municipality-level AL or Jubo League bodies. In at least one case, one of the appointees has also been called out for campaigning for the AL candidate in the constituency.

We have reported and editorialised multiple times in the recent past of anomalies such as this, from opposition candidates facing various barriers to campaigning to police officials openly campaigning for the ruling party—not to mention the spates of violence. It is not only the EC's credibility that is at stake with many of these issues remaining unaddressed; the free, fair and credible election we are all looking forward to is at stake too.

It is good to hear that the complaints about the appointments in Patuakhali-2 have been acknowledged and promises have been made about investigation and action. But, by this time it is evident that these discrepancies are not the exception. The EC should be the one upholding the codes of conduct and guidelines, not acting retrospectively in some of the cases.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### How public hospitals can better serve the people

Medical professionals in Bangladesh command considerable respect from people. However, the health sector is increasingly becoming a private affair. Doctors' fees and the cost of treatment have become very expensive for ordinary people.

It's true that when it comes to government hospitals, every employee is bound to be present at their office during office hours but very few adhere to this rule. It's true that we only have a limited number of doctors in public hospitals. But if they regularly saw patients as their job description demands, the public would obviously be better off.

The government should make it mandatory for all doctors to spend a certain amount of time in their hospitals and the practice of patients visiting doctors' private chambers must be discouraged. The violation of this rule should be taken seriously. In exchange, the government should think of a mechanism whereby these doctors are remunerated or compensated.

Zubair Khaled Huq, By email