

# The field is as level as the Martian surface

## EC must investigate allegations

*No complaints should be rejected out of hand*

THE face-off between the Chief Election Commissioner and the Jatiya Oikyafront delegation that ensued during a meeting on Tuesday is regrettable. The delegation met with the CEC to apprise him of allegations about police playing a partisan role ahead of the election. What transpired afterwards, from what we've learned from media reports, was unwarranted. The CEC and Dr Kamal Hossain, leader of the Oikyafront, reportedly engaged in a heated argument with the former defending the police in a manner that the alliance leaders called "biased" and "discourteous". In the fitness of things, the appropriate course of action for the CEC would have been to assure the opposition of investigating the allegations rather than dismissing them outright. The CEC happens to be the last resort for the aggrieved parties at this time, and the reality is that there is mounting evidence to support those allegations.

It's understandable that the job of a CEC is not an easy one. Given the highly divisive political climate in our country, patience on his part should be the necessary virtue. He should not act or react in a manner that might be construed as unfair to one party or the other. Matters should be decided neutrally and proactively in the end, based on the EC's own investigations. Unfortunately, the EC has not been able to ensure a level playing field as yet for all the parties, and has repeatedly made itself the subject of controversies by its unwillingness to acknowledge the reality on the ground. It is the EC's responsibility to deliver a fair election and the failure to do so will be its alone.

## Spare the children, please

*Making them campaign is unethical and unlawful*

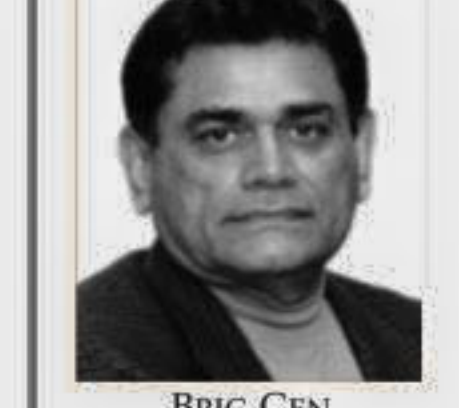
ELECTION campaigning is going ahead with full steam. Amongst the host of problems that we have seen so far is the use of children in campaigning. In a photograph published in this daily yesterday, a number of children can be seen riding on a pickup van apparently being part of the election campaigning in Dhaka's Banani area. This is not only a blatant violation of election code of conduct and rules but also shows a complete indifference towards the safety of children.

We know that election season is often a messy and violent affair in our country. And, this phenomenon of making children participate in electioneering is problematic on many counts. The foremost of concerns is the fact that such practices pose great dangers to children's lives because violent incidents may occur during campaigning and children can become victims.

It seems that we have learned nothing from the past when political violence took a dangerous turn and claimed the lives of countless children. These children often hail from low-income families, and it seems that some party supporters are taking advantage of their poor socioeconomic conditions by luring them with money in exchange for their involvement in campaigning.

The list of instances of the Election Commission's inaction is a long one as it is; and its lack of action in addressing the violation of yet another code of conduct, such as making vulnerable children participate in election campaigning, is extremely disappointing. The Commission cannot simply turn a blind eye to the safety and welfare of these children and must immediately take action to prevent this unethical and unlawful practice.

### STRATEGICALLY SPEAKING



BRIG GEN SHAHEDUL ANAM KHAN NDC, PSC (RETD)

THERE is only one political party in the country that understands and indulges in professional politics. It can think and plan ahead to achieve a predetermined objective (perpetuation of power). And the way its plans and policies have panned out in the last five years, following an election which most of the Awami League leadership believe was anything but, only confirms its farsightedness. And since 2014 it has proceeded with that predetermined objective in mind.

In the writer's view, the Awami League

put all its eggs in one BNP basket. It had a backstop and a further fallback option too. Ershad's JP was an alternative to flaunt, but not as the domesticated opposition of a unique parliament that is not to be found in any political science literature, but an opposition of "acquired" credibility (through an understanding of "sharing" seats between the AL and JP(E)).

Another masterstroke of the AL was to drive a wedge in the opposition conglomerate by getting the father and son to disassociate from the potential larger alliance and offering them a manna of three seats. They have formed an agglomerate of inconsequential parties which could act as the opposition, should it be necessary.

But the ruling party needn't have worried about BNP's participation in the parliamentary election. BNP has had to

became an excuse for the police for denying the party permission to hold political meetings and rallies in the last five years. But that was also a strategy of the ruling party: squeeze the political space for the BNP on grounds that appear apparently plausible. And that convenient excuse, that BNP would resort to violence given the slightest bit of space, became a handy expedient to keep the BNP leadership at various levels either behind bars or on the run. Numerous cases were lodged, with thousands of "unknown accused". And we all know what havoc the police can wreak by exploiting this tool. Such tactics of misusing the law enforcers to harass the opposition have been blatantly employed during the period of campaigning too.

The fears were not unfounded considering how things have turned out. The strategy to get the opposition to the

feared they would, with impunity. Threats have been made by some AL candidates to supporters of all other parties to avoid the polling centres, and opposition motorcades and rallies continue to face attacks from ruling party activists.

The police, unfortunately, has become a party in implementing AL's strategy. As a part of that, deterrents are being applied, sometimes directly by arresting in large-scale BNP members, mostly on old cases or as "unnamed accused", or subtly, by telling them to make themselves scarce from the locality and be so till the end of polls or risk incarceration. Therefore, if on Election Day the polling booths are without election agents of the opposition, we know why that is so.

But the BNP's participation in the polls is not the be all and end all of participatory election. An equally important aspect of elections is whether all parties can campaign without hindrance and every single voter is able to participate in the process and, eventually, cast their vote freely, rather than finding out that their votes have been already cast when they get to the polling station. That is the moot question that everyone is asking, with doubts becoming more certain as we approach December 30. The impediments created by the ruling party cadres compel one to come to this disturbing conclusion. Instead of equal opportunities, political space is shrinking. The comments of some of Bangladesh's close friends and development partners, about a free and fair election, are not mere articulation of routine niceties but an expression of apprehension garbed in diplomatic parlance.

As a footnote, one would like to ask: Why is the AL, that claims to have achieved so much, which it indeed has in so many areas, and which claims to be riding on the crest of unprecedented popularity, resorting to coercive measures and using government agencies to create hindrances for the opposition to do its bit of campaigning? Why is it so unsure of itself or its record?

The brazen contrast in the situation, as displayed by the pictures of senior government leaders campaigning under the protection and facilities of the state, and of opposition leaders being attacked by ruling party members with police doing little to protect them, speaks of the state of the playing field. It seems that the AL is not prepared even to have a situation where the BNP comes second in the race.

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Injured senior BNP leader and the party's candidate for Dhaka-3 Goyeshwar Chandra Roy speaks at a press conference at the party chairperson's Gulshan office in the capital on Tuesday night, hours after he came under attack during campaigning in Kadamtali of Keraniganj. Goyeshwar is also a member of the BNP's Standing Committee, the party's top decision-making body.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

has succeeded in implementing the first part of its plan, which was to get the only other major political party to participate in the national elections. AL had recognised that it could not continue another five years with the stigma of a government that assumed power through an election with questionable credibility, notwithstanding the legal validity accorded to it by the High Court after the 2014 election. Thus, the compulsion for the AL to make the BNP participate in the national elections.

Nevertheless, it is not that the AL had

pay dearly for its Himalayan blunder by boycotting the 2014 elections. It is still carrying the stigma of the senseless violence after the disputed election of 2014. It may be appropriate, in passing, to mention that reports have it that a good many arsonists arrested during that time belonged to other parties besides the BNP and Jamaat. Interestingly, there have been few convictions, if at all, in those specific cases even after five years of those incidents.

The BNP is only to blame for giving its detractors the meat for criticism. It

battlefield but not allowing it the ground to manoeuvre has been brazenly implemented with the important institutions and agencies playing their own roles. The EC has chosen to do nothing more than expressing its embarrassment. It has dismissed out of hand allegations of violence against the opposition despite evidence. On the other hand, it has taken measures to make the work of the media during polls day difficult by imposing stricter conditions.

Several ministers and MPs have been in breach of the election code, as we

# The love-hate relationship with social media

### NO STRINGS ATTACHED



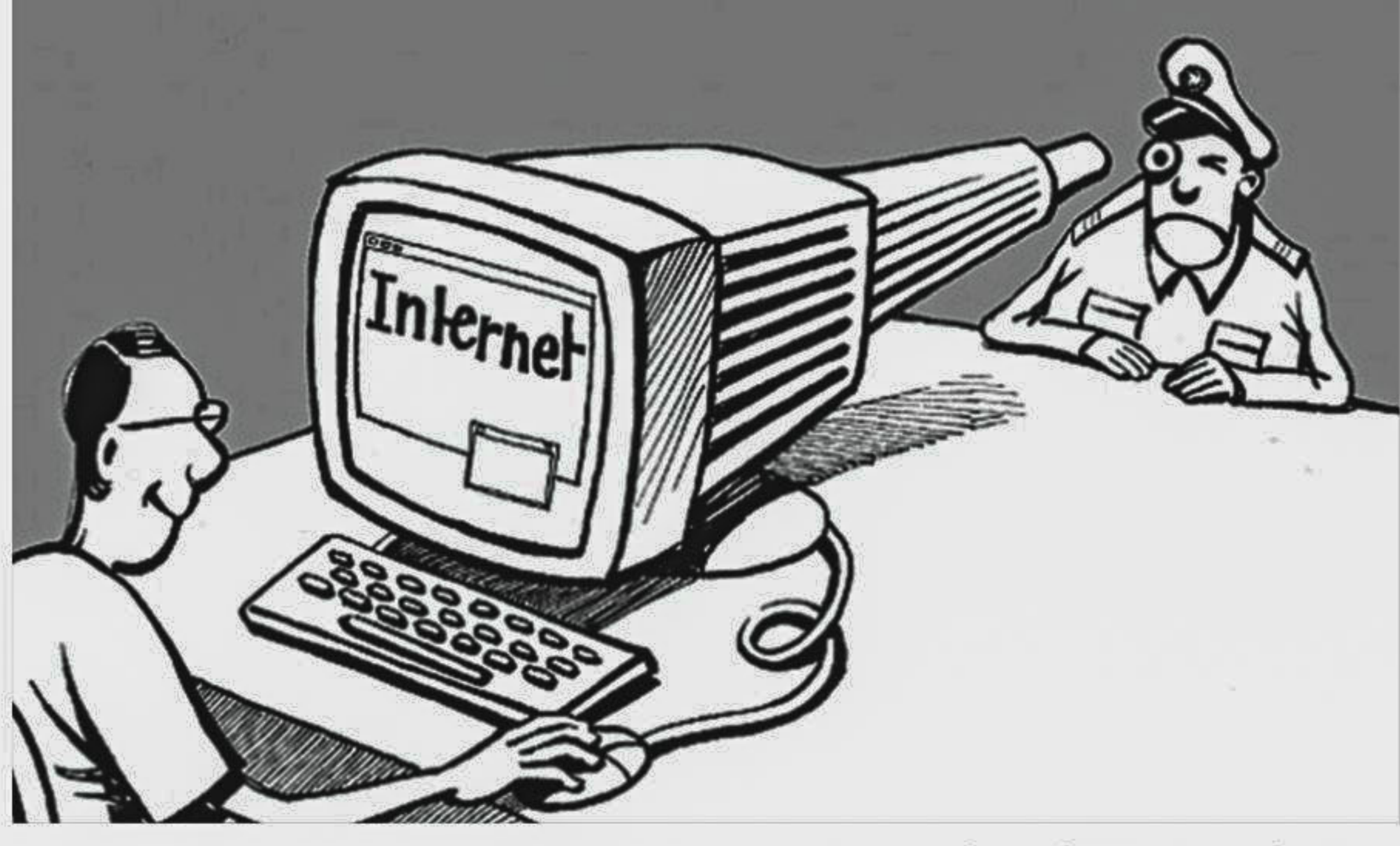
AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

EVER since it started existing, governments have had a love-hate relationship with social media. Predictably, the romance starts to sour when social media contains criticism of the government as it often does and the affair blooms when the opposite happens, in particular when sycophancy takes on gargantuan proportions. In our particular case, only days before the elections, we have a

peculiar situation where social media is being manipulated with the seeming intention of bringing about a certain outcome in the polls.

It started with the news of the authorities shutting down certain sites of the BNP because they contained "distasteful content"—a vague term that could be applicable to just about anything. Of course keeping things vague is an age-old practice of state administrations to make sure certain agendas are pursued without technically breaking the law. Interestingly, only a few days later, another news report informed us that Facebook has decided to shut down a series of "fake news sites spreading false information in Bangladesh before national elections." The sites—nine Facebook pages designed to imitate well-known news outlets that are popular such as BBC Bangla language service and bdnews24.com and six fake personal accounts—were geared towards spreading anti-opposition propaganda. According to an AP report, Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's head of cybersecurity policy, said that these sites were created by "Bangladeshis having ties with the government." Twitter too made a similar allusion and said it had suspended 15 accounts in Bangladesh "for engaging in coordinated platform manipulation" though most of them had no more than 50 followers.

As social media users we all know that for the most part we spend very little time, if at all, on trying to assess whether the site of a well-known news outlet is authentic or not. Our over-reliance on anything we find online makes us vulnerable to such fraud and this ignorance presents the window of opportunity for governments to manipulate information to influence public perceptions. According to Facebook, the company disabled 754 million fake accounts globally in the third quarter of this year, up from 583 million in the first quarter in 2018. This is after the widespread criticism of Facebook's role in allowing false information to be spread through accounts



during the US presidential elections as well as in 2018 in spreading racist propaganda in Myanmar. The result of such social media manipulation, according to political analysts, has had enormous impact such as affecting the result of the US elections or promoting ethnic cleansing that has left hundreds of Rohingyas dead and around a million taking refuge in Bangladesh.

Authorities become hypersensitive to social media during elections, hence the rather absurd steps taken to stop any kind of news that will go against the party in power. A news report in this paper on December 24 tells us that BTRC, the telecom regulatory body, has placed four options to the Election Commission for Election Day. Should they slow down the internet speed from 3G and 4G to 2G or should they partly or entirely block mobile internet services on that fateful day (December 30)? Apparently, it does not matter if local and international businesses come to a standstill, or if people cannot get cash from the ATMs (even if it's an emergency), or if e-commerce is stalled, not to mention the communications people conduct over WhatsApp, Viber, WeChat or Imo. This forced shutdown would apparently be "saving lives"

(according to an official of BTRC) which of course precedes any other kind of priority.

For journalists and observers of the election, if sites like Facebook, Instagram and YouTube are blocked, it will mean pictures or videos cannot be shared. This certainly raises questions regarding why the authorities do not want pictures or videos to be uploaded. As naïve as this question may seem, given the ground realities and the bitter lessons of the quota reform and road safety movements (during which the BTRC had slowed down internet speed as recommended by law enforcers), it must nevertheless be asked. As ordinary citizens who have the right to vote and protest if that right is hampered—by exposing anomalies on their own or through the media—such extreme measures to block certain information while feeding propaganda of a particular party rapidly erode confidence in a free and fair election. If "saving lives" was such a priority, perhaps the authorities should first stop the escalating violence on the real streets, often perpetrated by ruling party affiliates, before taking draconian measures in the virtual highway.

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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Why limit campaign spending illogically?

The Election Commission has set the highest limit of spending in election campaigning for candidates to Tk 25 lakh. This is an impractical policy. In several constituencies, the number of voters is more than 5-6 lakh. So, a candidate is supposed to spend Tk 4-5 for each voter.

While this in itself is an illogical policy, candidates are making a mockery of it. The number of posters, flyers and leaflets certain candidates have put up, the amount of money they spend at each rally, the number of campaign offices they have set up—all these suggest that they are spending way more than the prescribed limit, not to mention the illegal spending of directly handing out money.

We call on the election commission to monitor the spending of candidates. It cannot sit idly by as certain candidates flout rules. The EC should have allowed the candidates to spend more and made it mandatory for them to disclose the source of the money they spend in elections to begin with.

Faisal Kabir, Chittagong

