

Campaigning ends

And the EC's role still remains crucial

WHAT impression has one got from the goings-on in the last three weeks now that the campaign phase of the election has ended? Firstly, in spite of the claim of some EC members, the number of incidents of violence and the tally of injured suggest that it was more than sporadic or stray. Thank Providence that although the number of injured was almost 1,200, there were only two deaths, although even that is two too many. And it was the opposition, in almost all the cases, that was at the receiving end of the attacks.

Secondly, it seemed to be a one-sided canvassing with only the ruling party in the scene. Very little ground was accorded to the opposition candidates to conduct their campaigns. Regrettably, the law enforcing agencies, as much as the ruling party activists, created the impediments. Many BNP activists, including seven candidates were arrested.

Thirdly, BNP will not be able to contest in at least 17 seats because these aspirants were disqualified on various grounds—most of them being upazila chairmen whose resignation was not accepted by the government. As such, as per the RPO, they invalidated themselves for “holding office of profit”. It is incongruous that when sitting MPs can not only contest elections but exploit their status and office to also canvass, the upazila chairman cannot even contest in the national elections.

Fourthly, the much-hoped-for level playing field was even more undulated than in any previous election. And within the EC, there was a difference of opinion in this regard. The blatant violations of the election rules were at best glossed over and at worst dismissed out of hand by the EC.

Thus, while one had hoped that the EC would be more hands-on and inculcate confidence in the voters, that, unfortunately, has not been the case. We reiterate what we have stressed in the past. On EC rests the onerous task of ensuring that the assembly elections are free and fair. Notwithstanding its lack of proactive response, we would hope that it would muster all its resources and give us a credible election on December 30.

Observers lend credibility to an election

Low number of observers disappointing

ONE of the indicators of a good election is the presence of national and international observers during the election process without any restrictions. It is, thus, surprising that compared to previous elections, the number of domestic and international observers in the 11th parliamentary election is very low. While in the 2008 election, there were 1.6 lakh local and 600 international observers, this time the total number of observers had initially gone down to around 26,000. And now we have come to know that among them, around 8,000 will not be able to take part in the monitoring process because the organisations they belong to have not gotten the approval from the NGO Bureau. Some members of the Election Working Group (EWG) have been denied approval to monitor the election allegedly on political consideration. These are very unfortunate developments.

At present the number of election observers stands at around 17,000 with only 146 international observers; therefore, one wonders if it is at all possible for them to monitor around 42,000 polling stations across the country. Also, putting restrictions on local observers when it comes to talking to the media goes against the very spirit of the free flow of information. We hope the EC will reconsider this decision.

The presence of a large number of observers is crucial during an election as they make significant contributions in making sure that elections are free and fair. No doubt, the absence of the necessary number of observers will only dilute the credibility of the election.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Political parties should live up to their promises

While the country's population has become divided across the broader political spectrum, there are many who are not committed to supporting any particular political party. These people should not be taken for granted. To them, what matters most are the manifestos of political parties—the promises that they make to the people.

However, whenever a party comes to power, it forgets to keep the promises it had made to the people. This is one of the fundamental flaws of our society that we do not hold these parties accountable in regards to whether they keep their promises or not. The media, civil society and NGOs should play a proactive role in this regard, while citizens should be more prudent when casting their votes. People should make political parties realise that they will only vote for them based on their track record of delivering on their promises and not only on face value.

Tanzia Basher Chaity, By email



Unjustified restrictions on media and observers

EC should be more forthcoming



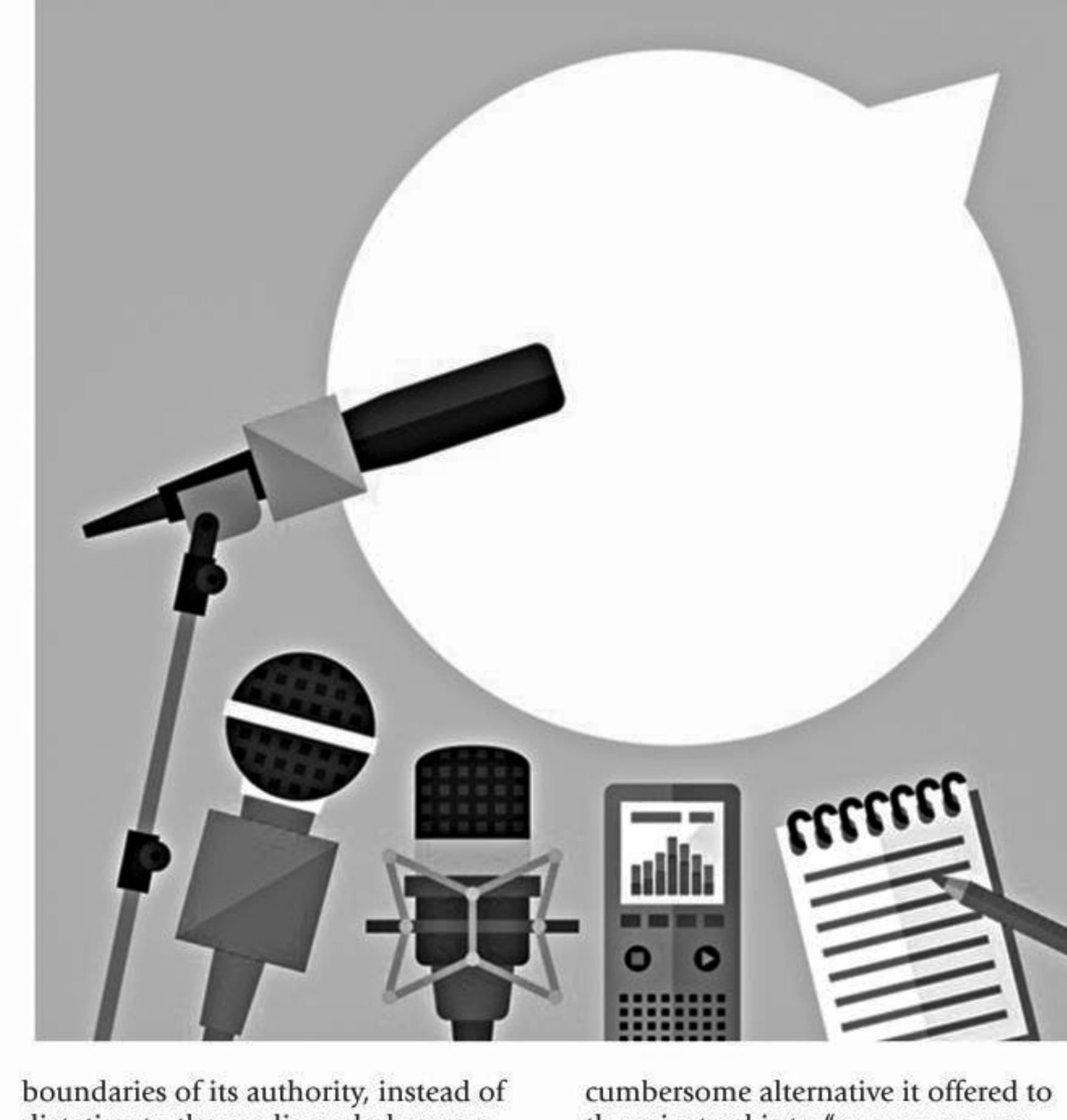
NAHELA NOWSHIN

A number of extraordinary restrictions have been placed on journalists by the Election Commission ahead of Election Day and the extent to which the media can

fact that the EC has been coming up with one restriction after another without any credible justification whatsoever.

Whether the EC agrees or not, there are some commonly accepted principles and standards which it must abide by if we are to believe that the EC indeed is an “independent body” that can duly fulfil its responsibility of conducting the election in a free and fair manner. This requires the EC being aware of the

“unimpeded access to all persons concerned with election processes, including news media personnel.” This would obviously apply to local observers as well and entail verbal communication with the media. This is not to say that observers are free to disclose anything and everything to the media—there are specific guidelines regarding this as well. But in our case, what the EC has done is categorically disallow local observers from talking to the media; the



cover the election on December 30 remains unclear. Some of these implausible restrictions, as prescribed in the EC's guidelines, are allowing journalists to live telecast only from a “safe distance” from polling booths on the “condition that they will not create any trouble in casting vote” and barring local polls observers from talking to the media. Unsurprisingly, the absurd restriction on journalists travelling on motorbikes on voting day was withdrawn yesterday soon after a delegation of the AL requested the EC that it be removed.

So far, all that the EC has done is curtail access for the media on a crucial day such as Election Day. The actions it has taken thus far *vis-à-vis* the media go against the norm which is to create an enabling environment for the media to report freely. The EC should know that blocking the free flow of information on Election Day goes against the very ethos of an acceptable election which demands complete transparency and access for the media so that citizens can remain well-informed.

While the EC's problematic statements and actions make for a long list, let's focus on the fact that the EC Secretary instructed local observers not to talk to the media on voting day. Does this mean that these observers, who are supposed to be an independent entity, work and report to the EC? What does it then say about the freedom that polls observers are going to enjoy in the upcoming elections? Why is the EC dictating to them who they should or shouldn't talk to?

Not only are the EC's restrictions on the media and local observers in contradiction of long-established global standards, but they also give way to questions as to why the EC is so desperately overreaching. And what makes it all the more disconcerting is the

boundaries of its authority, instead of dictating to the media and observers what it can and cannot do and defusing the channels of communication among those reporting and monitoring the election.

Perhaps the EC should take a quick look at the “Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers,” published by the United Nations, which clearly states that for international election observers to work effectively, one of the basic conditions that have to be met is

cumbersome alternative it offered to them instead is to “arrange a press conference but only after submitting their reports to the commission,” as declared by the EC Secretary himself. This begs the question: why should anything neutral observers have to say or comment on have to be approved by the EC? Is there such a precedent anywhere else in the world? In fact, according to the guidelines set forth by the UN, observers should “refrain from making any personal comments about their observations or conclusions to the news media or members of the public before

the election observation mission makes a statement, unless specifically instructed otherwise by the observation mission's leadership.” So, if anything, the final decision rests on the leadership of the mission, depending on the nature of the information being revealed to the media, and not the Election Commission of the host country.

All this is happening in the backdrop of a declining number of local observers. According to a report in *Prothom Alo* yesterday, 15 NGOs out of the 22 organisations forming the Election Working Group, despite having obtained permission from the EC, have not yet received a letter of no objection related to foreign funding from the NGO Bureau. This means that the number of observers will now be down by around 8,000.

So far it does not look like it will be smooth sailing for either local observers or journalists on Election Day. Furthermore, the EC's plan to reduce internet speed on voting day seems set in stone—for which we are yet to get a credible justification once again. According to a BTRC official, the telecom regulatory body “may” ask mobile operators to reduce internet speed to 2G in which case photos or videos cannot be uploaded on social media.

Journalists should prepare themselves for the insurmountable obstacles they are likely to face on Election Day. On top of the many restrictions, to make things worse, any hope of a violence-free election has been dashed and journalists are not off limits, as the recent horrific attack on reporters covering election news in Nawabganj clearly shows. The day following the attack on the ghatshouse where journalists were staying, the EC Secretary feigned ignorance of the entire incident, remaining true to the EC's long-held attitude of indifference since election proceedings began. So it's not just the overall hostile environment that journalists should be scared of, i.e. physical intimidation by miscreants, but they should also be extremely worried about the complete lack of protection—both from the law enforcement and the EC—should a serious incident arise on D-Day.

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What this election means for young voters

NAZNIN TITHI

ONTRARY to popular belief that our young generation is indifferent about politics, our universities, colleges and even schoolgoing children have proved in the recent past that they are not only politically conscious but also willing to play their part when it's time. This was proved during the recent quota reform movement as well as the road safety movement. A particular slogan during the road safety movement comes to mind which said: “the state is under construction.” Only those who are politically conscious can come up with such a powerful expression.

Ahead of the 11th parliamentary election, young voters have expressed their thoughts to different newspapers and media outlets including *The Daily Star*, which has helped us learn to some extent as to what their perceptions are about this election.

Sumaiya Jahid, a student of Dhaka University, in a talk show of *The Daily Star*, said that she, along with her friends, want to vote but for that to happen, there has to be an environment that is free from fear and intimidation—an environment that seems to be sorely absent right now.

While talking to some students of Dhaka University recently, I came to know that many of the students who are first-time voters are not sure whether they should go to vote as they do not think the election would be a fair one. They also told me that they don't think there is a level playing field and that they are worried about violence erupting during the election.

But suppose, there is a free and fair election. What are the factors that would make young voters go vote?

What political analysts say is that young voters could play a deciding role in this election if they vote. In the last 10 years, the number of young voters has increased to 2 crore and 25 lakh. As per government statistics, currently 22 percent of voters are aged between 18 and 28. And in the upcoming election, 1 crore and 23 lakh young voters will vote for the first time.

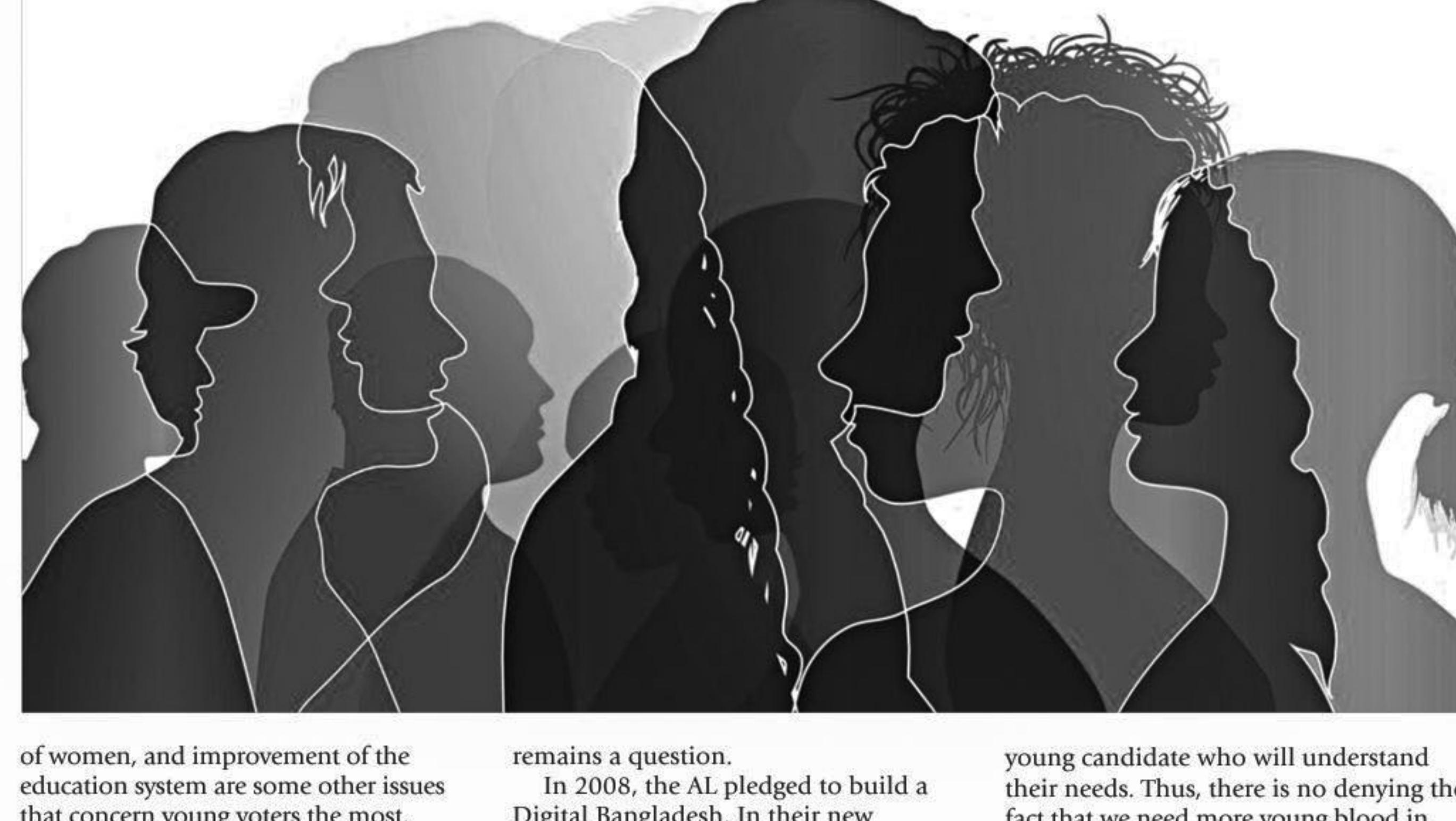
Unemployment is the biggest issue for today's young generation. According to government statistics, currently there are

27 lakh unemployed people in the country and although every year 20 lakh people enter the job market, new job opportunities are created only for some 13 lakh people. According to the ILO, within the last seven years, the rate of youth unemployment has doubled. So young voters will certainly consider voting for those who they think will actually address this problem.

According to political analysts, freedom of expression, access to information and technology, eradicating corruption, safety

percent of them use internet regularly. And there is no doubt that the rate is increasing. Young voters will appreciate any decision that will give them increased access to technology. Policy decisions such as reducing the cost of the internet will certainly have a positive impact on young voters.

Although both the Awami League and the BNP have incorporated many of these issues in their election manifestos, whether or not their promises can actually attract first-time voters still



of women, and improvement of the education system are some other issues that concern young voters the most.

So needless to say, the major political parties' stance on controversial laws that restrict people's freedom of expression is something that young voters will consider before they go to cast their votes. Clearly, young voters will not take lightly the EC's decision to block social networking sites and messaging apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, IMO, etc., especially on Election Day.

This generation is very enthusiastic about technology. In 2017, *Prothom Alo* carried out a survey among young people across the country whose age range was between 15 and 30 and found that 41

remains a question.

In 2008, the AL pledged to build a Digital Bangladesh. In their new manifesto, the party has promised to introduce 5G by 2023 as part of their vision of a Digital Bangladesh. Zero tolerance to corruption is another pledge the party has made.

The BNP, on the other hand, has promised to create one crore new jobs in the next five years, ensure people's right to freely express their views even if they go against the government, repeal the Digital Security Act as well as other controversial laws that restrict people's freedom of expression, etc. Among the other promises that the party has made are providing unemployment benefits,

young candidate who will understand their needs. Thus, there is no denying the fact that we need more young blood in our politics who can work hard to earn the confidence of young voters.

But even if the issues that matter most to young voters remain unaddressed, and even if there are issues that disappoint this important demographic ahead of the election, they might still go cast their votes if only it is ensured that they can vote in a peaceful environment, without any intimidation from any quarters, and if their votes are not already cast.

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