

THE WATCHERS

International and local observers facing delays and bureaucratic processes preventing them from monitoring the elections properly

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One of the biggest concerns this election is regarding observers, or more specifically, the number of observers participating. 25,920 local observers have been cleared to monitor the polls, the lowest number of observers (barring the 2014 elections which saw even fewer numbers and was largely dismissed as a one-sided affair) going back to 1991.

Media reports have pointed out that the number of voters and polling centres have increased significantly, requiring election observers in large numbers. There are more than 42,000 polling centres this time around.

Another concern is international observers—or the lack thereof. 175 foreign observers are set to participate—again the lowest number in decades, excepting 2014. The European Union was the first to say it would not be sending its observers, citing security concerns and the lack of budget and time required to send a credible observer mission. In an interview with Deutsche Welle, the EU Ambassador to Bangladesh also said “good” local observers were in place to monitor the elections. Only two election experts on behalf of the EU are staying in the country through the polls.

The latest cancellation was of the Bangkok-based Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), whose 32-member team was sub-contracted to observe by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a US organisation.

A large number of international observers are preferred by opposition parties as their presence puts pressure on the elections to be free, fair and inclusive. A pre-election assessment report by the NDI in October stated that the elections were taking place “amid a high degree of political polarisation, heightened tensions and shrinking political space.”

A spokesperson for the US State Department, in a statement on December 21, said that it was disappointed “by the Government of Bangladesh’s inability to grant credentials and issue visas within the timeframe necessary to conduct a credible international monitoring mission” by ANFREL’s observers. ANFREL was accordingly “forced to terminate”.

In response, the foreign ministry issued a press release on December 23 stating “the decision of ANFREL to cancel its observation mission is entirely their own despite the fact that, nearly half of its applicants have already been approved and the rest is under process.” The ministry said that it was still in the process of accrediting international election observers (with exactly a week to go before the polls).

In a statement on its website on

December 23, ANFREL “expresses dismay with the manner in which the Bangladesh authorities have handled the accreditation application process for domestic and international election observers”.

The network had completed all



accreditation application

procedures for its 32 members by end-November. However, as of December 21, only 13 ANFREL observers had been approved by the EC prompting it to cancel its mission the next day, the statement noted. Issuing of visas, as has also been seen in the case of foreign journalists seeking to cover the elections, were delayed. ANFREL cited delays by both the EC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in approving accreditation and visas respectively.

With limited foreign observers, local organisations are shouldering the burden of ensuring fair conduct at the polls. In its statement, ANFREL also stated that non-governmental organisations such as itself as well as domestic groups “faced significant delays in their accreditation or were barred altogether from monitoring the upcoming elections.”

The foreign ministry’s press release also noted that local human rights organisation Odhikar was a founding member of ANFREL. “Odhikar” is widely known for its disproportionate bias and prejudice against Bangladesh, in particular the government of Awami League, which is evident in its various reports including the recent ones

published in October and December 2018,” it stated.

Forced to cancel election monitoring

On November 6, the EC canceled Odhikar’s registration as an observer. The organisation which has been observing elections both at home and abroad since 1996, said it received no prior notice or a hearing after. According to the election observation rules 2017, the EC is first supposed to send a notice regarding the allegations against it and the observer can apply for a hearing, in which it can appoint a lawyer and submit evidence in its defence.

“We went to the court and filed a petition with the High Court,” says CR Abrar, president of Odhikar. Though the court ruled in the organisation’s favour last month, a subsequent government appeal and legal shuffling meant Odhikar received the all-clear quite late in the game. However, Abrar states that the court’s decision upheld their stance that the government could not arbitrarily cancel the organisation’s registration with the EC.

But with the polls only days away, the political and legal battle has put an end to Odhikar’s election monitoring this time around. “We are entitled to observe the elections now but because this has all happened so late—resource mobilisation is almost impossible.”

Earlier this month, the Prime Minister’s political adviser HT Imam also filed complaints against four local observers registered with the EC. These include the Khan Foundation, Democracy Watch, and Light House—which he claimed as “completely partisan” or biased towards the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). The other, Bangladesh Manobadhikar Somonnoy Parishad, a network of 300 non-governmental organisations, claims Imam, was also run by Odhikar’s Adilur Rahman Khan.

“Odhikar is not even a member of our network,” says AHM Foysoul, member secretary of Bangladesh Manobadhikar Somonnoy Parishad. The network has been observing since the 1991 elections. One of the 118 local observers registered with the EC, it is set to observe the polls in eight upazilas and deploy a total of 400 observers.

The network is also a member of the Election Working Group (EWG), a group of 22 observing bodies who will be submitting a joint report to the EC. But the group has run into a funding crunch, as it awaits clearance (for funds from the Asia Foundation) by the NGO Affairs

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