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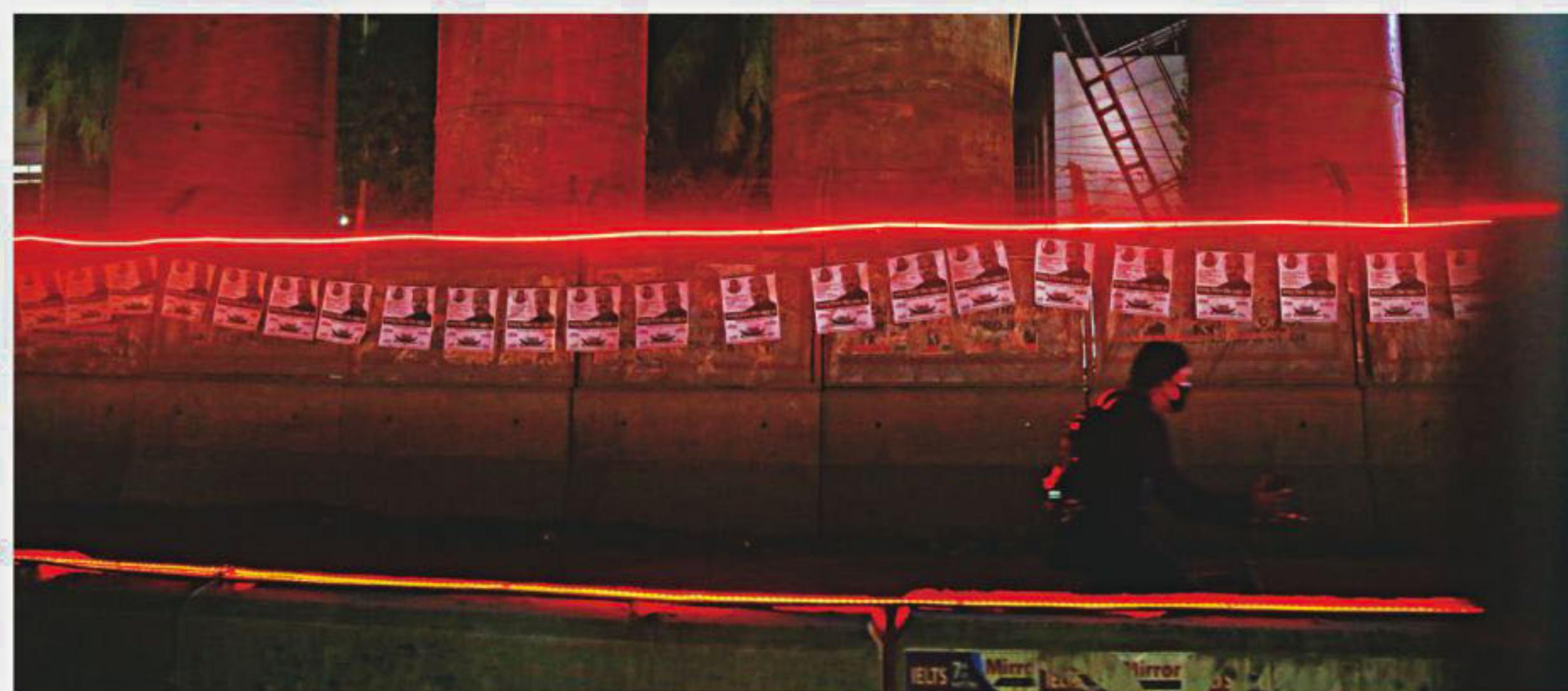
The success of this election will be a building block for an electoral system to come, if the political parties so allow! The pre-election environment is not very encouraging at the moment and although there is still time to act, we are fast losing that opportunity.

Unlike in 2008, the Election Commission has not gained the full trust of the political parties and the voters which was extremely important. Although it has taken some actions against officials and police for attacks on the opposition, it is seen as far too little and too late. With

only two days to go, a level playing field is perceived to have not happened. With ministers and MPs flouting rules, increased violence affecting contending parties and no clear strategy from the EC to bring these under control, there is growing fear and discomfort. We have received reports of high tension among some voters who are leaving their homes for 'safer places'.

Both the EC and the government need to act quickly to release tension among voters and political parties and reassure them of their safety, even if it is only perceived insecurity.

The space for election observation has largely shrunk. Compared to 2008, there



will hardly be any international observers given that many have not received visas (ANFREL) and clearances (a downsize from 593 to less than 100); national observers will also be very limited due to lack of funds (as the international community has shifted priorities) and lack of permission to a larger observer group (a downsize from more than 100,000 to less than 20,000). Observers and media are strictly regimented by the EC, hence, unlike 2008, there will be fewer eyes to watch over the process. Deterrent factors will also be less at play. The observers are the most natural allies of the EC and an extension of their eyes. Both these bodies have a common interest, i.e. ensuring neutrality and fairness in the process. The EC would be wise to permit professional observers to assist with timely information. The EC must also have a team of its own monitors who will be a deterrent to malpractice and violating officials.

With political parties still struggling with placing their candidates, fighting rebels and court cases, this perhaps is the most chaotic pre-electoral environment that I have seen over the past 18 years. Pushing opposition out of the field is not new. The by-elections in Munshiganj-1, Dhaka-10 and Gazipur-2 show how hard it was for opposition candidates to stay in the race against pressure pushing them out by ruling party cadres. On June 1, 2004 (one example from many) in South Paikshah of Kolapara Union, the main contender was campaigning when

supporters and cadres of the ruling party attacked; foreign observers and the candidates were forced to flee. The candidate was neither allowed to return to continue his campaign or distribute posters in the area. (parliamentary by-elections 2004, monitoring report, Sharmeen Murshid, Brotee).

The issue is not new but its persistence is shameful. Here, the EC and the political parties, especially the ruling party, must share blame. Both must act robustly to bring calm in the fields before the elections. The EC must make the Home Ministry accountable and non-partisan to ensure forthright action to restore faith in the process and peace in the environment.

So, this article is an urgent but humble call from a humble citizen to all those who, in power and out, can turn today's fear into courage, exclusion into inclusion, demonstrating generosity and kindness so that every life is preserved and protected while we move through another election.

Bangladesh has journeyed through many upheavals and surmounted each one of these. Fall of authoritarian rule, rise of the caretaker system, its abolition, and the crisis of elections under political governance all point towards one fact: it is a time of deep national reflection, it is time to draw lessons from our wrongs, it is time to change the political narrative, it is a time to turn the page and start anew.

Sharmeen S Murshid, *election analyst and chief executive, Brotee.*



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Bureau, a government body under the Prime Minister's Office.

"Even if we are given clearance, we don't know yet whether we will be able to go ahead with observing because this is so late," says Foysoul. Training, transportation and honourariums for the 15,000 observers set to be deployed by the EWG, are all dependent on the funds coming through. "Local groups don't have the kind of money needed to fund large observer teams, though we make up the bulk of the election observers at the grassroots level, and we do not get any funding from the government or EC," adds Foysoul.

At a meeting of the EWG on the afternoon of December 24, the observing bodies were informed that the NGO Affairs Bureau had only approved funding for seven out of the 22 members of the coalition so far (Bangladesh Manobadhirak Somonnoy Parishad was not one of them). Less than 6,000 observers can now participate, according to EWG chairperson Abdul Awal.

With the next day a holiday, there were only two working days left before election day. "We are assuming that we might not get any more funding in time. Accordingly, we have decided that the rest of the members, since we are all accredited by the EC, will observe using our own limited funds," says Awal.

However, without the funds, it will be impossible for the 15 other EWG members to deploy as many observers as had been accredited by the EC. In other words, the number of observers the largest coalition of local bodies can deploy is less than half of what was declared.

'Restrictions' and the guidelines

The EC's domestic and foreign observer guidelines 2017 include banning observers from stationary election observation, or in layman's terms, remaining in the same polling booth throughout election day. This, notes the NDI report, is not in accordance with global norms for observer rights. The practice ensures transparency from the opening of the polls to the counting process.

The EC also announced that local

observers were not allowed to speak to the media on the day of the election or use their mobile phones at the polling centres, in a briefing for observers. The EC also threatened to cancel registration of local observers if they did anything that questioned the credibility of the election process. Which, in essence, is their job.

However, the election observation guidelines 2017 only states that live telecasts or going live on social media was "highly discouraged" and that observers "refrain" from making comments to the public or the media which would disrupt the election process.

Abrar describes this time around "a much much worse scenario" for observers compared to previous elections. While the work of foreign observers is done once they have written up their report and returned to their country, the same is not true for local observers who have to deal with the repercussions of the election results.

"Local observers have to remain in the country—who is going to provide them with protection?" asks Abrar.

BY THE NUMBERS

2018 ELECTION

25,920 local observers (118 organisations)

175 foreign observers

Highest number of observers in a constituency

220 in Khagrachari

Lowest number of observers in a constituency

13 in Dhaka-3 (Keraniganj)

NUMBER OF OBSERVERS IN PAST ELECTIONS

2014 : 8,874 local (35 organisations) + 4 international

2008 : 159,113 local (73 organisations) + 593 international

2001 : 218,000 local + 225 international (from 32 countries)

1996 : 40,000 local + 265 international

1991 : 30,000 local + 59 international