

As we saw

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voting slips of AL candidates, polling agents of AL and journey from gates of polling centres to booths looked after by AL were the features of the day.

The polling atmosphere was eerily festive. Almost too peaceful and too systematic to be true. The AL men adorned with badges of candidates were seen taking care of elections, asking voters, in many cases inside the booths, to vote for the party. Some voters, seemingly non-responsive to this assistance, were taken out of the queue and shown the door. It's all done in a visibly cordial manner.

Too many cooks always spoil the broth but yesterday, there wasn't any cook other than the AL. Even the election officials seemed to be orchestrated to AL men's tune.

The Daily Star correspondents visited around 250 out of 2,698 polling centres in Dhaka and around 350 in 25 other districts. All came across almost the same experience.

Friendly and happy faces would greet voters at gates of polling centres, guarded by police and BGB members. A column of voters in wait would remain almost static for hours but voting would progress, anyway. But a group of people with symbol "boat" would find no problem in getting in and out of the centres through another channel any time they wanted.

Coming out of booths, voters too made little or no complaint at all. As if, no one wanted to disturb the quiet environment of the chilly winter day.

Police showed highhandedness to journalists, asking too many unnecessary questions for allowing them into a polling centre, prohibiting them from using mobile phones and even escorting them to the centres. Repeated showing of EC regulation for journalists did not work.

A number of our correspondents found rampant ballot stuffing and ousting of agents of BNP and Jatiya Oikyafront in presence of law enforcers in some constituencies.

'WHO ARE YOU?'
A reporter of this newspaper could not vote because a bearded young man wearing spectacles had cast it.

It was around 11:30am in Gendaria High School polling centre as he entered the secret ballot room after completing necessary procedure in presence of a polling officer at booth-4.

The secret ballot room is nothing but a small chamber with an EVM (electronic voting machine) placed on top of a table and the small facility is covered by coloured clothing.

As he entered the chamber, the bearded man inside it pressed a button and the image of "plough" appeared on the digital screen. The man then pressed the green button even before he could utter a word.

"It's okay. You can go now" was the first reaction of the person in question.

Asked about his identity, he proudly replied he was the ward unit general secretary of Tanti League, a pro-AL organisation, but refused to show his identity card.

Another man, seemingly a polling agent of Jatiya Party's heavyweight Kazi Firoz Rashid, running with election symbol plough, popped up.

"Who are you to ask his identity? If he has done anything wrong, I'm sorry. Now, let's go," said this man. He also told the bearded man to give the reporter a customary hug before taking him out of the booth by grabbing his arms.

LINE THAT BARELY MOVES
When a senior journalist of this paper, who is also a retired army officer, arrived at the Muslim Modern Academy centre in Dhaka Cantonment around 10:30am, saw a long line of voters outside the entrance.

"I stood literally on the same spot for thirty minutes without moving an inch forward. The queue moved only ten feet in the next thirty minutes or so."

The few that emerged from the centre after casting vote said that there were actually very few voters inside the gate. Thus, one could not make out why the line was moving at such a snail pace.

"I saw the same thing when I managed entry inside the centre after more than an hour of waiting, and only after pulling rank [retired briggen].

"There were perhaps no more than 10 or 12 voters in the line downstairs of the two-storey school building. When I asked the polling officer inside my booth why the line was so slow and all the other booths seemed empty, her reply was, 'We can't say why sir, these are political matters [political bepar shepar]'."

"When I asked her if she was a teacher at the same school, she said no, she was a staff at the PMO."

At Dharmikpara Government Primary School in Demra, a reporter of this paper saw some men, wearing cards of an AL candidate around their necks, were asking voters to cast vote for "boat" around 10:00am in presence of Presiding Officer Mohammad Asaduzzaman.

He also saw a man instructing female voters to cast vote for the same party a few yards away.

Five polling booths were set up in a single room for 3,267 enlisted voters.

Another presiding officer, Mahbubur Rahman, asked law enforcers to get those wearing cards out of the centre when he was informed about them.

According to Asaduzzaman, 700 votes were cast within the first two hours of the day, meaning each booth saw more than one vote cast per minute.

However, the reporters saw a long queue moving at a slow pace which did not complement the presiding officer's claim.

"I've been waiting here for around 30 minutes but the queue is not moving," said Shahidullah, the second person on the queue.

Some 1,100 votes out of 1,900 were cast in four booths by 11:00am at the centre.

'NO VOTE IS TAKING PLACE HERE'

A photojournalist of this newspaper saw ballot boxes being stuffed in front of him when he went to cast vote at a polling centre in the capital's Tejgaon College around 3:00pm.

The polling officer told him that he had run out of ballot papers and took him to another room.

"Some men, who were not wearing any badges, were talking to the polling agent there. These men brought a whole

sheaf of ballot papers and started to stamp those," the journo said.

On seeing him, they started asking the polling officer who he was and why he was there. He said, "I am a voter".

A police officer was on guard inside the room.

"I asked the polling officer where the booth was -- where I could vote in privacy but was told to cast my ballot right there, in front of him. But I insisted and took my ballot paper to a corner. He still followed me there and even after I asked him to leave, he was lurking behind."

After casting vote, the journalist saw that the other men in the room had started stamping the "boat" symbol on all the ballot papers. He was asked to leave when he tried to have a closer look.

A senior journalist of this newspaper, who went to vote without showing his press card, at Dhanmondi Government Girls' High School, said, "AL men were freely stuffing ballot boxes in room No 19, while four of their volunteers



A burnt vehicle at Oikyafront candidate for Brahmanbaria-3 Khaled Hossain Mahbub Shaymal's house, which was attacked and vandalised yesterday and two vehicles were torched.

PHOTO: STAR

guarded the doors and windows.

"The windows were open, so I could see what was happening inside. One man was continuously stamping on ballot papers."

This incident happened around 11:30am.

Another staff of The Daily Star found a similar picture in room No 24 of the same voting centre. A man was standing at the door spreading his arms to bar people from entering. When approached, he said, "No vote is taking place here."

Then she saw from a window that two youths were stuffing ballot papers inside a ballot box placed on a table right in front of the assistant presiding officer.

The AL men saw her press pass and the journo was chased out of the centre.

Another journalist also observed vote stuffing at a polling centre of Nazneen School and College in East Rajabazar under Dhaka-12 around

11:30am.

From the entrance of the designated room around 1:00pm, she saw an assistant presiding officer assisting voters either by stamping the ballots himself, or instructing voters how to vote and for which symbol. The polling booth in the room was not being used, and polling agents of no other party except the AL were seen.

"I found a tick mark beside my name on the verification sheet, meaning my vote had already been cast. The officials did not have any explanation and simply termed it an honest mistake due to the large number of voters."

"When I demanded a ballot paper, the assistant presiding officer tried to tick another voter's name on the list, but I did not let him do that."

One of our senior journalists was standing in line at the polling centre inside Gausia Islamia Fazil Madrasa in Dhaka-13, when 12 to 15 activists wearing AL badges came forward, exclaiming, "Oh brother, you are a journalist! Why would you stand in a

line? Come with us."

He replied in the negative but was escorted upstairs to a booth on the third floor. The 15 activists stood around the room while he cast his vote.

"Although there was a partition, one could still see or figure out what symbol is being picked. I had no choice but to vote for the AL to appease its supporters who had almost held me hostage."

At Islamiya Bohumukhi High School of Boro Katra in Dhaka-7, a man, wearing a badge of "boat" around his neck, was seen force another man into a booth and make him stamp the ballot.

The AL man was not a polling agent. When the polling agent was asked by a reporter who that man was, he said, "He is only helping the voter, there is no law against that."

'CAST VOTE FOR BOAT'
Entering the Fakirchan Sarder Community Centre at Sutrapur in Old Dhaka, one of our correspondents saw young men, wearing badges of

"plough", sitting either inside or just beside the secret rooms. None except the voters were supposed to be there.

Those men were present at five out of eight secret rooms, the correspondent found.

Polling officers were sitting at their designated places. One of them said they were helpless.

At Kamrunnesa Government High School centre in Tikatuli such men were seen sitting right in front of the secret rooms' entrance.

Annoyed by such pressure to vote for "boat", a woman was seen leaving the centre around 3:30pm without casting her vote.

At Anandamoyi Girls High School in Dhaka-7, a voter was talking to our correspondent about why there was no BNP polling agent in sight. Suddenly, a group of AL men stormed the centre and dragged the voter away by the collar.

The presiding officer of the centre was present on the spot and watched it all. He then asked our correspondent to

leave.

At Satarkul Government Primary School centre in Dhaka-11, AL activists compelled the voters to cast their vote in front of them. Voters were forced to vote for "boat".

Asked why the voters were forced to cast their votes for "boat" breaching the rules, Presiding Officer AKM Humayun Kabir said he would take immediate action regarding the issue.

One correspondent entered Mohammadpur Girls High School by 4:00pm but the main entrance was already closed.

Seeing the journalists, three members of a family came forward and alleged that they could not cast vote as they were late. However, many ruling party men were seen inside the centre.

At the centre no 66, the voting was still going on around 4:15pm. Five youths were seen in line when the assistant presiding officer was helping them with his finger print to cast vote. As a

photographer was taking picture, a youth aged 25 to 30, threatened her to leave the place.

After sometimes, three leaders of Mohammadpur Awami League came up and requested the journalists to leave immediately saying the vote had ended there.

Visiting five polling centres in Narayanganj-4, one correspondent found over 60 percent voting was finished before 11:45pm.

But there was hardly any voter seen at those centres despite the claim of a very high turnout in a relatively short time.

"More than 60 percent vote has been cast within 11:45am," said Shafiqul Islam, presiding officer of Mizmizi Painadi Rakmot Ali High School centre. **'YOU ARE NOT ALLOWED TO STAY'**

AL activists threatened one of our reporters when he was trying to take photographs of ballot stuffing at Adarsha Sarkari Primary School centre in Bandarban.

He was threatened in front of police, who did not take any action.

Around 8:40am, ruling party activists, led by one Selim, pushed a reporter out of AKM Rahmatullah Degree College centre.

"You are not allowed to stay here. Rather, have a cup of tea with me," Selim said.

AL activists also barred our correspondent from visiting Rampura Ekramunnesa High School where four polling centres were set up.

Police and Ansar members also barred our correspondents and photographers from visiting polling centres in Nawabganj upazila in Dhaka-1.

"We were not allowed into the compound instantly. The police and Ansar men intercepted us at the entrance of at least seven centres in excuse of taking permission from the presiding officers," said the correspondent.

However, the correspondents were not allowed to stay at the centres for more than three to five minutes.

In all 10 centres of Dhaka-1, they were either escorted by policemen or presiding officers.

In Nawabganj Pilot Girls High School and College centre, Assistant Sub-Inspector Sohrab said the officer-in-charge of the local police station said no journalist would be allowed inside.

When this correspondent showed him the EC's guidelines on journalists visit to the polling booths, he said, "I do not know anything. You cannot go inside. See from outside."

Our reporters were not allowed by police to go to BIT school at Mohakhali DOHS saying this is a VIP area and journalists with cameras and mobile phones are not allowed.

At Kalachandpur High School and College Centre, Sub-Inspector Izhar, cordoned a correspondent visiting a polling booth and asked angrily to show him the note that was taken.

AL activists threatened a reporter of The Daily Star while he was trying to take photographs of ballot stuffing by AL men at Adarsha Government Primary School in Bandarban.

"When they saw me taking photos with my phone, they surrounded me and threatened. They told me if you want to live, get out," he said.

centres were not functioning from the onset. The devices were flown in by helicopter to Dhaka for repair. They were not returned to booths until 3:00pm, our correspondent reported.

A similar incident took place at Nurpur Government Primary School of Rangpur-3 constituency. After being repaired in Dhaka, the EVM was flown in to the venue at about 4:00pm, when voting started again and went on until 6:00pm.

But it was not all bad news: many voters quite enjoyed casting their votes with the EVM.

"It took all of three minutes to cast my vote," said Mohammad Soheli, a 30-year-old voter after casting his vote at Suritola Model Government Primary School.

Just two buttons need to be pressed to cast one's vote, said Osama Rahman, a young voter.

"It's just so easy to use," he added.

Delwar Hossain Khokon, a 40-year-old, waxed lyrical about the system after casting his vote at Banglabazar Government Primary School.

"It is a good system if there are no anomalies in voting," he said.

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In theory, the EVMs would be activated by the voter's smart card, voter number or national identification number.

The voter would then have to use his/her fingerprint for verification purpose and then proceed to cast vote on the balloting unit, which would be kept in a separate room.

As a result, the voting process would be immune to rigging. When the system worked as it was supposed to, the voting experience was quick and fuss-free, many said.

But what transpired for the most part yesterday was far from it: party activists preyed on voters, most of whom were unfamiliar with the workings of the EVM.

Take the case of Rahima Begum, a resident of CRB area under Kotwali Thana of Chattogram. She was eagerly looking forward to voting on the EVM, but her curiosity turned to despair at the polling booth.

A lady offered to guide her through the use of EVM. "She took my fingerprint and asked me to leave," the 45-year-old told The Daily Star.

She was told her voting was com-

pleted, much to her bewilderment. "When I tried to know on which symbol the vote was cast, they simply told me to leave," Rahima added.

Similar accounts were heard from Khulna-2 constituency, particularly from female voters.

An excited Shelly Begum arrived to cast her vote at Sher-e-Bangla Primary School but a young lady pressed the button to cast the vote on the EVM -- before Shelly could do it herself.

"I could not cast my vote because of that lady," said an annoyed Shelly.

Sarmin Sultana had a similar experience when she went to vote around 1:00pm. Two women of Awami League tried to enter the voting room with her to guide her through the process.

But when she declined their help, they dragged her out of the centre.

When it was not the case of unwitting voters being exploited, it was the party activists themselves who proceeded to cast votes for absentee voters on the EVM with the help of presiding officers.

Our correspondent visited Wari Girls' Government Primary School at about 2:20pm and saw a young man

giving voting numbers to the polling officer, who was inputting the numbers on the EVM one by one.

The voters' profiles were flashing on the screen -- and none of the photos that came up matched with the faces nearby. The young man was using his fingerprint to unlock the voting page for the numbers and understandably they would not match.

Then another man swooped in and used his fingerprint, which unlocked the voting page. Soon after, the correspondent saw that the screen was flashing the message: 'Your voting has been completed'.

When the fingerprints do not match on the EVM, the assistant presiding officers have the authority to unlock the system for 25 percent of the cases.

The correspondent then went to Sher-e-Bangla Balika Mahavidyalaya next, where he saw a similar sight.

In fact, it was more pronounced here: almost all the polling booths had someone else casting votes on behalf of others.

The correspondent approached the presiding officer Shahidur Rahman Khan in his cabin and informed him of

the incidents. "I do not know anything of this nature," he said.

Similar scenes of the system being gamed were seen at the voting centres of Dhaka-6.

At about 3:00pm at Kamrunnesa Government Girls High School, a lady was complaining at the top of her voice that her vote had already been cast. Agitated, she went to the presiding officer to inform of the foul play, but it came to no use.

The correspondent then went up to the polling officer, who seemed resigned to what was unfolding at venue. "There is nothing I can do about it," he said, requesting anonymity.

Another correspondent arrived at the Sutrapur Community Centre 10 minutes before polls closed and found the venue buzzing with people.

Security forces came in and asked everyone except the polling agents to leave. A swarm of people rushed to leave the venue, and all were wearing badges of the Grand Alliance.

Asked about the large presence of people with no EC passes, the polling agent Fahad said: "It's because the EVM is complicated to use -- we had volunteers

diately.

A similar incident occurred at the Chandrakala SI High School polling centre at Tebaria union in Natore Sadar around 3:30pm.

Jibon Hossain, around 16, cast the vote of Ashrafur Islam, 40, whose voter number was 142. This was revealed when these correspondents verified the voters' list at the booth.

Asked, Ibrahim Hossain, the booth's polling officer, said he did not know about

the matter. After mentioning that there was a photo of the voter on the list, he said it was "difficult to recognise".

"The polling agents know the voters. They are all locals," Ibrahim told The Daily Star.

Presiding officer Anisur Rahman said it was not his duty to check who was casting vote. "It is the polling agents' duty," he said.

Minutes later, Anisur misbehaved with The Daily Star's Natore correspondent and asked him to get out of the polling booth,

arguing that he did not take permission to enter the booth.

Meanwhile, the BNP candidate Sabina Yasmin Chhobi for Natore-2 constituency and Daudar Mahmud, the party's candidate in Natore-3, boycotted the polls at 2:30pm, alleging vote rigging and that AL men were used as BNP agents in the polling centres.


"My agents were not allowed to enter the polling centres. Besides, almost everywhere the voters under pressure had to cast votes openly for 'boat'," she told The Daily Star.

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According the board decision the closing date would be January 31, 2019

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AUTHORIZED SIGNATORY

Son casts vote on behalf of sick father!

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different man -- one Ahmed Hossain, 70.

When asked about this, Salma Khatun, assistant presiding officer at the booth, said Mobarak Hossain cast the vote instead of his father "who was sick and was at home".

When Mobarak was asked about it, he said, "Please don't take it otherwise. My father is sick and so I voted on his behalf."

The presiding officer of the centre, Abdus Sabur, said it was unlikely and that he would inquire into the matter later but not imme-

diately.

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