| SPECIAL FEATURE |

Online portal of the election commission could not provide voter serial number and voter centre information to many voters even after typing the required information correctly.

PHOTO: **SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED**

FIRST-TIME VOTERS: FAILED BY TECHNOLOGY OR THE SYSTEM?
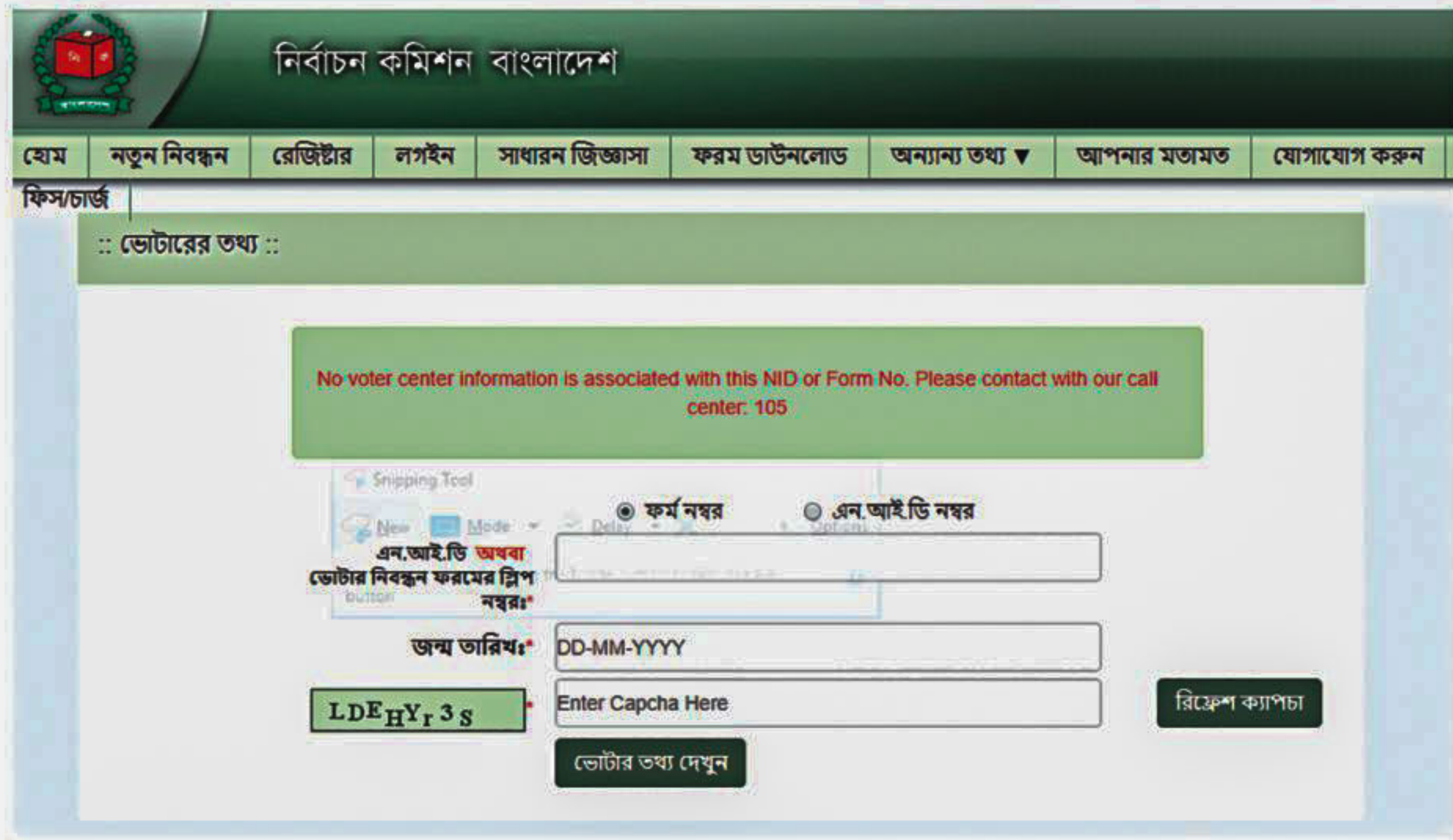
MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

The results of the 11th Bangladeshi general election was supposed to be determined by the Bangladeshi youth who constitute roughly one-fourth of all voters. According to the Bangladesh Election Commission (EC), since 2008, 23.5 million Bangladeshi youth registered themselves as voters—many of whom were to cast their vote for the first time in the 2018 general election, as previous election in 2014 was boycotted by all major political parties and voter turnout was only 51.37 percent.

It has not been easy for the Awami League to garner support from the youth, who remember only too vividly how their peaceful demonstrations during the quota and road safety movements were suppressed by the government. On the other hand, for the opposition parties, the challenge was to formulate a manifesto that would propose positive and sustainable change and create opportunities for the disenchanted part of Bangladesh's population. Despite misgivings about low voter turn-out amongst the youth, social media trends suggested that young Bangladeshis were, in fact, quite excited about participating in the elections and outspoken while expressing their political opinions on social media. There was no doubt that, unlike in 2014, first-time voters would show up to the polls to cast their vote on December 30, 2018.

However, things did not happen as expected. A huge number of first-time voters could not even exercise their voting right at the polling stations, despite having national ID cards and voter registration numbers.
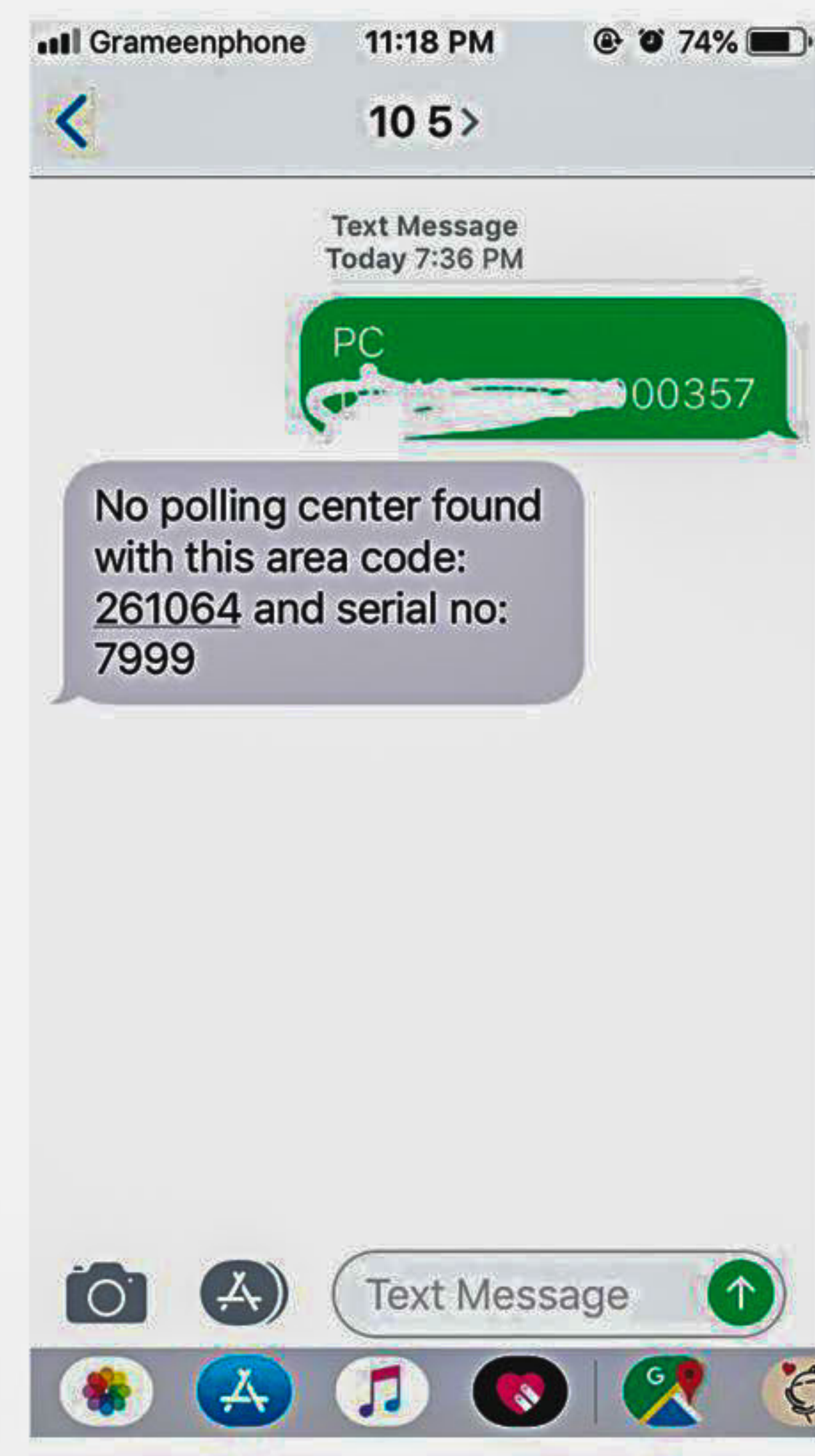
On December 29, the EC introduced an online platform for voters through which they would be able to know their polling centre and serial number by typing their NID numbers or voter form numbers and date of birth. Unfortunately, Bangladeshi voters, 93.57 percent of whom access internet using mobile phone networks according to the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), could hardly benefit from this portal as mobile internet was shut down by the government on the eve of the elections. Besides, the online portal, in many cases, showed an error report after the required numbers were typed. On the other hand, we got hundreds of allegations that the EC's SMS service to inform the voters of their serial numbers and polling centre did not work.

Nilima Samaddar, a Master's student at the University of Dhaka and a first-time voter, went through a harassing experience when she tried to find her serial number and polling centre. She got registered as a voter in 2012, but had not cast her vote in 2014. She was a voter of Dhaka-9 constituency. She, like many of her neighbours, did not get any voter slip from the candidates. On the day before the election, she visited the EC's online portal and inserted her NID number and date of birth only to get the message, "No

SCREENSHOT: **A VOTER'S SMS**

Voter Centre Information is associated with this NID or Form No. Please contact with our call centre at 105." following the instructions, she sent a SMS to the EC's call centre but received a similar reply.

As Nilima was determined to cast her vote this time, she went to Khilgaon Model School and College, where she had registered as a voter. "The polling centre was occupied with AL activists. At the polling booth, I found 20-25 of them wearing headbands of 'boat'. They all looked like thugs and the environment inside the centre was not friendly at all," she describes.

SMS services of the Election Commission also failed to provide the required information to many voters just on the eve of election.

PHOTO: **EC WEBSITE**