



Dhaka-17 polling agents keep watch on ballot boxes. PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

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After a whole day of observing the elections, the one common observation made by journalists at *The Daily Star* and media elsewhere was this—there were no Jatiya Oikko Front polling agents in sight, and barely any of the leftist parties as well.

It becomes imperative to quote directly from the law to press upon the need to have polling agents of all contesting candidates inside the polling booths themselves. Chapter 3 titled "Election" of *The Representation of the People Order, 1972* states that:

- At least half an hour before the time fixed for the commencement of the poll, the Presiding Officer shall show the empty ballot box to the contesting candidates and their election agents and polling agents who ever may be present (Order 28 [4b]); place the ballot box so as to be conveniently accessible to the elector, and at the same time within the sight of himself and of such candidates or their election or polling agents as may be present (Order 28 [4d])

- Immediately after the close of the poll, that is, as soon as the last of such persons, if any,

# WHERE WERE ALL THE MISSING POLLING AGENTS?

SPOTLIGHT

as are present and waiting to vote [...], has voted, the Presiding Officer shall, in the presence of such of the contesting candidates, election agents and polling agents as may be present, proceed with the count of votes. The Presiding Officer shall give such of the contesting candidates, election agents and polling agents as may be present, reasonable facility of observing the count and give them such information with respect thereto as can be given consistently with the orderly conduct of the count and the discharge of his duties in connection therewith (Order 36).

In other words, polling agents of all the candidates being present in a polling booth is an essential part of ensuring that voting happens in a non-partisan manner.

This correspondent personally visited nine voting centres of Dhaka-7, where Gonoforum put up Mostofa Mohsin Montu as a candidate, and found a *dhaner shish* polling agent only in one centre... but even he didn't stay for too long.

Around 8:40 am, more than half an hour after voting had begun, the polling agent in question, Jisan\* registered his name with the presiding officer at Ahmed Bawani Academy School and College. "I am late because I was not supposed to be here in the first place—another polling agent was assigned to this centre. Unfortunately, he was not allowed in by the people at the gate."

This has been a common complaint—and this correspondent herself has also observed the same. The

gates of different polling centres of Dhaka-7 were being guarded by men wearing green ID cards bearing the face of Haji Mohammed Selim. They were the ones deciding who to let in—agents, journalists, and even voters.

Later, while talking to this correspondent over phone, Jisan claimed that around 10:30 am, he was asked to leave by men who identified with the ruling party. "They simply came up to me and ordered me to leave. I did not have a choice but to comply... this is my neighbourhood and I need to survive here. I did not even get the chance to cast my own vote at the centre," he alleged.

Up until Jisan walked in, Bawani school boasted *nouka* agents representing Awami League in every of its eight rooms, and only four *haatpakra* agents representing Islami Andolon. No other party was present.

This was a rather common sight.

The presiding officer of Azimpur Girls' High School proudly told this correspondent that he had registered three *dhaner shish* polling agents in his centre—except when we visited the actual booths where these agents were supposed to be sitting, they were not there. "The agent left very suddenly around 12:15 pm," said the polling officer of one booth. The agent of the other room too left around the same time, reported his polling officer colleagues.

Polling agents of Abdus Salam,



Each seat was contested by several parties but not all could send polling agents.

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



Polling agents of Oikyafront and the left parties were noticeably missing

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Shamim, another polling agent at Mohammedpur Government Boys' School, then described his experience, "I reported for duty around 7:30 am. Three hours later, the ruling party men came and started threatening me. I was unwilling to leave, so they grabbed my collar and threw me out. I went back again at 3:30 pm to collect the result sheet, but was not even allowed inside."

The left alliance was not spared this fate either.

Jyoti went to Rahmatullah Model High School as a *moi* polling agent for Khalequzzaman, the Dhaka-7 candidate for Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal. This was slightly surprising because we too visited the same centre around 1:30 pm but did not find Jyoti there. In fact, there weren't any agents

pm, the ruling party men came into the polling booth and asked me to leave. When I refused, two grabbed me by the arms, while two grabbed my legs, lifting me into the air. I was carried down and thrown out the gate," alleged the man.

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Another woman, called Hasina, stood up and claimed, "I was a polling agent at

Bangladesh National Party's (BNP) candidate from Dhaka-13, gathered at his home office on New Year's Eve to discuss the treatment of polling agents in various centres, when this correspondent showed up. In order to differentiate between real accounts and staged interviews, this correspondent ensured that none of the people present knew a journalist was present in the crowd, as the discussion was going on. It was only after the meeting was over that we disclosed our identity, and sought permission to report on the discussion.

A woman sporting a split lip spoke up about how she was physically assaulted while campaigning. "I tried to set up a

Residential Model School and College. We were mostly women with one man among us. As we stepped in through the gate, the *nouka* polling agents started accosting the man. When I went to the presiding officer to complain, they got enraged and started attacking all the women, including myself. Some pulled my bag, others my scarf. The police then escorted us out."

After the women were thrown out, one of them, Tara Khanam, went to Badshah Faisal Institute School and College to vote. "The men had already thrown me out of my polling centre and so recognised me. They attacked me and snatched my NID so that I could not vote," alleged Tara.

Next to speak was Anis, a polling agent of Sweet Bird School in Adabor. "Around 3:30



Three polling agents and two polling officers observe a voter.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

inside except for *nouka*, *haatpakra* and one lone *machh* (the symbol for Gonofront). When Joyoshi was asked why she was not there around lunchtime, she replied, "I left because they were openly stuffing ballots in front of me and I could not do anything."

"When I told the presiding officer about what was happening, he said, 'Sit tight and stay silent,' alleged Joyoshi. "I then took out my cellphone to lodge a complaint but the police came over and started harassing me. On the other hand, the ruling party agents continuously used their cellphones and nobody batted an eyelid. It became increasingly difficult for me to stay inside because of the harassment and so I left."

On Monday a left party's polling agent called Aurora Semonti Khan published a post on Facebook about her experience as a polling agent at Lalmatia Mohila College. She alleged that she was constantly being threatened by ruling party men. When she complained to the presiding officer, a party man came up to her and said, "This is Bangladesh, not America or Canada. Judging by what you have started, you will not be able to live a life here."

Award-winning photographer Taslima Akter was a polling agent for the left-leaning Ganosamhati Andolon's Zonayed Saki who contested the polls from Dhaka-12. "We had around a hundred agents but they were mostly all made to leave the polling centres. The very first hurdle happened in the morning when men supposedly belonging to the ruling party were not letting my agents in, in the first place," alleged Taslima.

Yet the administration decidedly refuted these allegations.

When journalists asked the Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda about the missing polling agents, he said, "If they don't come, how will they be seen?" He said this to journalists after casting his ballot at Uttara IES School and College.

On the other hand, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) demanded a judicial inquiry into the elections last week. According to Section 81 (f) of *The Representation of the People Order, 1972*, "a person is guilty of an offence punishable with rigorous imprisonment for a term which may extend to [seven years] and shall not be less than three years, and also with fine, if he drives out any candidate or his election agent or polling agent from the polling station and compels the polling authorities to proceed with the election work in their absence."

\* Name has been changed on interviewee's request