



POLLS TALK

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Voting in an intimidated and monopolised space



IFTEKHARUZZAMAN

By all credible indications, voting in the two city corporations of the capital has taken place in an uneven playing field—an electoral space that has been intimidatingly patrolled to ensure its monopolisation.

To be sure, the elections have been held in a context that had hardly any reason to create any reasonable amount of trust among voters. So they didn't think their efforts to cast their vote would make any sense.

At the core of the factors that led to this lack of trust amongst voters is not only the experiences they have gone through during the last national election and a series of local elections held before and after that, but also the unprecedented impotence of the Election Commission (EC), which has subjected itself to self-inflicted humiliations through loss of dignity and credibility. The EC is a constitutional body currently headed by a CEC and Commissioners whose

potential to deliver anything near a free and fair election has been questioned from day one. The internal tensions and differences of opinion among the commissioners on various issues have been craftily manipulated to transform an official of the commission, who is supposed to be reportable to the Commissioners, into the most powerful factor in decisions, actions and interpretations of the EC.

Against this backdrop, with the full-fledged introduction of electoral voting machines (EVM), as much as it could be viewed as an opportunity to take the challenge to restore some semblance of trust, the Commission has acted just the opposite, demonstrating an all-round insensitiveness to a series of complaints of violations of electoral rules and codes since the announcement of schedules till date. The potential gains of EVM have not only been overshadowed by well-designed and strategic moves to monopolise the electoral space, but also by creating an atmosphere of subtle and not-so-subtle intimidation and deterrence against voter turnout, polling-centre patrolling and booth capture, including the supposedly covered space meant to ensure the confidentiality of the voter while voting.

The low voter turnout is a symbol of lack of trust in the capacity of the EC that has eroded the value and dignity of people's right to vote, and apathy to a political culture where only a handful of the high and mighty—not the voters—determine who goes to power.

The restrictions on media and other stakeholders who wanted to observe the election only demonstrate a rather brazen example of how the space was designed to be manipulated and a sheer lack of confidence that a free and fair election is not affordable.

In an apparent dead-end where there is no indication of a light at the end

realise that what is happening is not only unsustainable but also shutting down all prospects of a peaceful transition of power, which can in the end only be counterproductive to themselves and to the democratic future of the nation.

The main burden of failure to conduct genuinely free and fair

There is no doubt that the difference is made by the wrong people being entrusted with state functions that are too important. This must change—the EC must be headed by people competent enough to understand the sanctity of the power they are entrusted with, deliver their job without fear or favour, and at least not let the commission be dictated by its biased and partisan staff. They must be courageous enough to realise that it is the degree of trust and credibility of the EC that determines the rate at which people are motivated to come to the polling centre.

No less important is the bigger issue of depoliticisation of the law enforcement agencies and administration that play a crucial role in elections. Finally, despite growing intimidation and a shrinking space, the media, civil society, and people in general must raise their voices loud and clear about the constitutional right of the people as the source of all power. The media, in particular, cannot enter into its shell, nor can it allow itself to be co-opted, compromising their fundamental principles. Professional integrity, transparency and accountability are the best available capital in the hands of the media and civil society to successfully and effectively navigate in the abiding context and catalyse change in the public interest.

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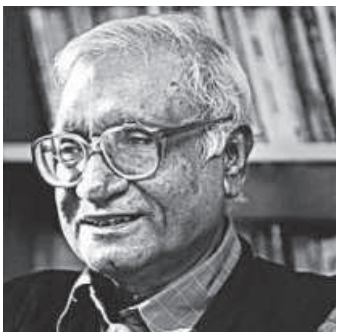


PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

of the tunnel, it is the political parties who must first transform themselves in a paradigm shift under which they have to recognise that the mandate to obtain the lease of state power lies with the people, and not with manipulations, however crafty they may be. They must

elections lies with the EC. The electoral laws, despite some deliberately created deficits, are still good enough to deliver nationally and internationally acceptable elections as shown in the not-so-distant past when the present regime came to power to start with.

Low voter turnout was inevitable



PROF SERAJUL ISLAM CHOWDHURY

That voter turnout in Saturday's election would not be satisfactory was a foregone conclusion, given that people in general have lost confidence in the electoral system. The manner in which the last general election as well as some of the local elections in recent years were held has, in fact, significantly eroded people's trust in the idea of an election. So, people did not go to the polling centres, not in large numbers anyway. They already knew their opinion would not be reflected in the election.

Generally, people do not seem to give much importance to the city corporation elections. But what was worse this time is that they didn't have much idea about the candidates either. In the past, aspiring ward councillors and their supporters would keep the electioneering scene vibrant by going from door to door and providing the voters with voting slips. I don't think the candidates did it this time. In fact, many people were confused. They

did not know which candidate belonged to which party even as they went to the polling centres.

Electioneering was almost dominated by the candidates of one party. In the area where I live, I haven't seen much activity from the opposition candidates. There were no posters of the opposition candidates and people could see that there was no level playing field. It was evident that an environment in which people would be inspired to vote willingly, for the candidates of their choice, could not be created.

It's not just that they did not go to vote due to their lack of trust in the system, they were also annoyed at the way the campaigns were held. The wastefulness of the campaigns was visible everywhere you turned. While the mayoral and councillor candidates made promises to improve the city's environment if elected, during their campaigns they did things that were completely opposite to their pledges. The way posters, especially laminated ones, were hung all over the streets and loudspeakers were used was harmful to the environment. It continues to be. We need to understand that Dhaka has become unliveable and those who will be elected should be committed to making the city liveable again. Sadly, through their campaigns the candidates have given the public an impression that they are not capable of taking up that challenge.

Moreover, people had doubt

about the use of EVM in the election. They did not have prior experience of using the technology. There was also doubt about the efficacy of EVM—whether proper machines were bought, whether there is any mechanism to oversee it, etc. EVM came with a questionable reputation, and the Election Commission has made sure that question mark was never erased. The manner in which the EVM issue was handled from the start raised questions in people's minds, which could potentially be a reason for the low voter turnout.

Overall, I would say, the performance of the EC was very unsatisfactory. It was clear that the EC was not functioning properly. The rules of electioneering were not maintained by the EC and they also made some irresponsible comments. They did not take into account violations of the electoral code of conduct by candidates and their supporters. No one was held accountable for the violence during the campaigns and for attacking some of the candidates.

People expect the EC to work independently, without the influence of the government. The EC should take responsibility for everything involved with the election and the administration should listen to them and provide all kinds of assistance. Sadly, they failed to do their duty and lost people's trust.

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No confidence vote for the EC



ZOBAIDDA NASREEN

Since the 2015 mayor elections, we have seen a steady decline in voter turnout in elections in Bangladesh. The latest Dhaka City Corporation elections are expected to have the lowest turnout yet—the culmination of a trend that clearly shows that people have lost their confidence in the Election Commission (EC) and the electoral process. The past few elections have given people the impression that they may be faced with harassment at the polling centres when they turn up to vote, and if they do not, it is highly likely that someone else may cast it for you. The strength of a democracy is demonstrated through free and fair elections, and one with low voter turnout and different kinds of irregularities is bound to create doubts around the legitimacy of the polls and those in charge of ensuring it goes well. Despite that, every time there is an election, the EC says it has been the best one yet, and there seems

to be no end to this denial on their part.

However, there have certainly been a number of irregularities in yesterday's elections. Firstly, voters were given very little information by the EC on how exactly to use the newly introduced electronic voting machines (EVM). While the media and candidates themselves tried to make the information available, those in charge of doing so failed to make it available to the masses. We have seen that the Chief Election Commissioner himself was not able to vote with only his fingerprint and had to use the national ID instead. Did the common voter have this sort of access? For voters who were not able to use the EVM, the EC had no plan or alternative arrangement in place for them. Many are reported to have left without being able to exercise their right to vote.

We have also heard reports of opposition party polling agents being kicked out of voting centres. When questioned on this, the EC came back with a ridiculous question—why did the polling agents leave when they were asked to? I think it is quite obvious that they were not "asked" to leave, but that is completely beside the point. If the Election Commissioner is of the opinion that polling agents have to stand their ground when faced with abuse and harassment, instead of condemning the situation where they are faced with harassment

in the first place, then it is very clear that they have failed to fulfil their obligations of creating an environment that is conducive to fair elections. In the past, elections in Bangladesh came with a festival feeling and people spontaneously turned up to vote. This environment has now been replaced with one of fear. This has been so easily achieved because of the EC and their willingness to turn a blind eye.

We know the reality of why voters are not turning up to exercise their democratic rights. The EC is responsible for creating a space where voters feel safe and included; where they are not afraid of their democratic rights being taken away from them. However, the EC has evaded this responsibility and instead said that the candidates are responsible for bringing in voters, while the candidates have said the EC is responsible. In this back and forth, one thing is quite clear—no one has really thought about the needs of the voters, despite voters being the core characters in the electoral process. Unless the EC can find a way to place voters at the centre of elections and create a neutral space where they are able to vote without fear of harassment and coercion, there will always be a question mark attached to any polls that are organised under their mandate.

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(Interviewed by Shuprova Tasneem)