

If opinions can be changed, who says the poll results won't?



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DISCREPANCY," "error," "lie," "forgery," "unethical," "unlawful" - which word is best suited to describe the recent activities of the Election Commission (EC)?

The Daily Star journalist Mohammad Al-Masum Molla's report titled "EC doctored parties' stance on EVM," published on September 16, has raised some serious allegations against the EC.

allegedly directly opposed the usage of EVMs were shown to be "in favour of EVMs." The commission said 17 out of the 29 parties who participated in the talks had supported the idea of using EVMs in the election - one way or another.

But is it the truth? The Daily Star's investigation revealed that at least four of those parties spoke against using EVMs. Among them, Bangladesh Islami Front, Bangladesh Khelafat Andolon and Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish took part in the talks and directly opposed EVM use.

The Nurul Huda commission surpassed all controversies - they faced specific allegations of financial discrepancies, as well as allowing "overnight voting." The current EC seems to be following suit; they have been accused of changing political parties' stances according to their own will. Why did they do so? Can they establish a good enough argument in favour of using EVMs in the election? The commission's desperate attempt at ensuring EVM use raises the question: Do they intend to hold fair polls or is there a pressure of fulfilling some agenda?

However, in the roadmap, the EC allegedly changed the opinions of some of the political parties regarding the use of electronic voting machines (EVMs) in the election. Parties that

three parties in favour of EVM use. Shameem Haider, acting secretary general of Zaker Party, tells The Daily Star, "We clarified our party's position to the EC, which leaves no



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room (for the commission) to depict us as favouring EVM use."

One of the members of the 14-party alliance, the Workers Party of Bangladesh, placed the condition of implementing the Voter-Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) technology if EVMs are used in the next parliamentary election.

A recent comment by Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Habibul Awal further fuels this confusion. Speaking to the ruling Awami League in July, the CEC said, "Some supported while some others opposed the use of EVMs. Most parties do not trust the EVMs... Many

of us can't seem to rely on it" (Channel 24, July 31, 2022). Meanwhile, as per media reports, four among the parties who participated in the talks with the EC, including the ruling Awami League, favour using EVMs in the election. Among them, two are part of the 14-Party Grand Alliance. Ten parties have directly opposed EVM use. Twelve parties have given specific conditions for using EVMs, such as resolution of all EVM-related disputes, inclusion of VVPAT, and elimination of all mechanical faults and other issues. However, none of these conditions have been met.

The EC also took an initiative to get expert comments.

According to a report published in Jugantor on May 25, 2022, Dr

Muhammed Zafar Iqbal and Dr Mohammad Kaykobad visited the Election Commission to see an EVM, and said it was "a perfect and reliable machine." Later, in an interview with The Daily Star on May 29, Dr Kaykobad said, "However, it must be said that we did not test the machine ourselves during that short visit. They showed us the machine and spoke about it, and based on our technical expertise, we said our part."

Till date, there has been no initiative to fulfil the conditions placed by 12 parties before the Election Commission for EVM use. So, there is no scope for considering those parties in favour of EVM use "one way or another."

ECs in Bangladesh have historically faced controversies, such as allegations of being puppets of the government, conducting polls without voters, and converting five percent votes to 40 percent. However, the Nurul Huda commission surpassed all controversies - they faced specific allegations of financial discrepancies, as well as allowing "overnight voting."

The current EC seems to be following suit; they have been accused of changing political parties' stances according to their own will. Why did they do so? Can they establish a good enough argument in favour of using EVMs in the election? The commission's desperate attempt at ensuring EVM use raises the question: Do they intend to hold fair polls or is there a pressure of fulfilling some agenda?

I mentioned a few words at the beginning of this column. A chronological review of the incidents reveals that the words "discrepancy" and "error" are not pertinent to the EC's behaviour. They knowingly and intentionally changed the opinions and stances of those political parties. Most likely, the four other words are more suited in this situation.

As a constitutional body, how can the EC handle such slander?

The question that arises is that, if the EC can change the statements and written opinions of political parties, what is the guarantee that they will not change the outcome of the election? Do the election commissioners have a clear answer to this question? If not, do they have a moral right to be in charge?

After creating a precedent of changing the opinion of a political party in such an unprecedented act of dishonesty and irregularity, is there anything left to be expected from this EC?

Translated from Bangla by Mohammed Ishtiaque Khan

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