

# Observing the 'election observers'



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Bangladesh now has a new government, determined through an election held on January 7 that was described as "controversial" in well-known international press. As the results of the voting came out, several international media outlets likened Bangladesh to a budding one party state, as more than 95 percent of the winners for the 298 seats are effectively from the ruling Awami League. Not to mention, the rest of the less than five percent—who are from Jatiyo Party and may pose in the new parliament as the opposition—was also "chosen" by Awami League as both parties negotiated not to confront each other in some seats.

government media reports even made those foreign individuals seem like the "official observers" of their respective countries. That prompted the Canadian High Commission in Dhaka to take to X (formerly Twitter) to clarify that the country had not deployed any observers to monitor Bangladesh's January 7 election. "Any individual who identifies as a Canadian observer is acting independently. Their views have not been endorsed by the Government of Canada," the High Commission said. One of these individuals, Alexander B Gray from the United States, was quoted by local media as saying at a group press conference on January 8, "None of us have personally observed anything other than a fair, transparent, and accountable election in line with democratic norms, international standards, and Bangladesh's local circumstances." This is a starkly different observation from his country's official statement. Finding this interesting, I delved deeper into exploring who these "independent" observers are. After all, we do have records of ruling

executive director of the South Asia Democratic Forum (SADF), on at least two occasions while talking to the media implied that the opposition parties were involved in the Benapole Express arson incident of January 5 in Dhaka and also blamed previous election violence on them. "But the way to improve is not through violence, is not burning trains, is not destroying polling booths," were his words about improving the overall electoral environment. In the recent past, Casaca's SADF was accused by EU Disinfo Lab, a Brussels-based disinformation research organisation, of facilitating a vast Indian disinformation campaign targeting China and Pakistan. One of the observers, former US Congressman Jim Bates—who has been a controversial figure throughout his career and was accused of several instances of sexual harassment and for using bad checks to fund his election campaign in 1990—"found the election to be very peaceful, free, and fair." Bates' visit is apparently part of his offerings to the Bangladesh government as to lobbying "to engage the current congressmen and senators" in its favour, as discussed in a meeting with Bangladesh's ambassador in Washington in June 2021. Another observer was Nicholas Powell, the political editor of EU Reporter—a dubious website based in Brussels that was exposed in a Politico investigation as portraying itself as an independent media



VISUAL: ANWAR SOHEL

bodies and democracies were convinced about the absence of the intention of authorities to hold a fully participatory election. However, countries like Russia, China, India, and Japan sent their official teams of observers to monitor the polls. There were also some individuals from the US, the UK, Canada, Germany, Portugal, Australia, Malaysia, Nepal, and some other countries who came to Bangladesh as "independent" observers, according to Election Commission documents. Statements by the UN Human Rights Commission and some democratic governments following the announcement of the election results reflected their previous concerns over the credibility and legitimacy of a voting of this sort. UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk warned that "the future of all Bangladeshis is at stake." The US Department of States spokesperson, Matthew Miller, said that they "share the view with other observers that these elections were not free or fair." A spokesperson of the UK government's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office said on the day after the election, "Democratic elections depend on credible, open, and fair competition. Respect for human rights, rule of law, and due process are essential elements of the democratic process. These standards were not consistently met during the election period." However, echoing the monitors from nations like Russia and China, who declared the election as "fair, open and transparent," the so-called independent observers from some Western countries also found it "fair and transparent." The overall coverage from Bangladeshi (and also Indian) media—which enjoys increasingly curtailed freedom—focused more on the positive reactions of the Western individual observers and portrayed them as "independent." The wording in some pro-

party men hiring fake election observers during the 2018 general election, as reported by Reuters. Before digging through the online records of the observers, we need to know more about the term "fake observer." According to the European Platform for Democratic Elections (EPDE), an EU-funded project that promotes citizen election observation across Europe, "Fake observation is politically biased international election observation. It is a form of political activity performed by international actors and aimed at advancing interests of politicians and political forces by imitating credible election monitoring during electoral processes." The Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations says: non-partisan observers are required to have credible and transparent methodologies for observing election processes. This seemingly is not the case for the "independent" observers of January 7. A release provided to reporters at a press meet in Dhaka by a group of nine observers led by Alexander Barton Gray, the CEO of the Oklahoma-based lobbying firm American Global Strategies (AGS), did not specify the methodology they'd followed to monitor the election before giving a sweeping verdict of fairness in the process. Accepting funding, including for travel and/or accommodation, from any party involved in the electoral process is also an indicator of non-partisan observation. Media reports say that the Bangladesh government had sponsored accommodation for the observers it had invited. Partisan or fake observers make personal and biased comments about their observations or conclusions to the media. This is exactly what happened with many of the so-called independent observers on Sunday. For example, Paulo Casaca, the founder and

organisation while secretly facilitating political influence campaigns. In a now-deleted marketing video on YouTube, EU Reporter's narrator says: "Our business model is to offer political parties, businesses, NGOs, industry associations, financial institutions and governments the opportunity to use EU Reporter to influence the European political decision-making process by sponsoring coverage and the placement of positive news stories and editorial comment related to them." A German observer named Volker Uwe Friedrich, founder and CEO of lobbying and consulting firm GBP International, previously visited Bangladesh to attend a conference organised by SAARC Human Rights Foundation, a dubious organisation linked with a ruling party MP that had hired fake observers during the 2018 election. Another election monitor named Richard Semitego visited Bangladesh several times over the past years to meet government ministers and ruling party leaders, and even attended a local political gathering in 2021 in Sunamganj alongside Planning Minister MA Mannan. Australian parliamentarian Shaoquett Moselmane, who was once investigated for his alleged involvement in a Chinese influence operation, met with Bangladesh government officials and Awami League leaders on several occasions. In November 2022, Moselmane moved a motion in the Legislative Council of New South Wales to celebrate the 76th birthday of Sheikh Hasina and highlight her government's successes. None of the 11 individuals I searched about on the internet was representing any professional or renowned election observer organisation, two others turned out to be staff or owners of lobbying and consulting firms, while the last two and their credentials could not be traced online.

# Dissolve the people, elect a new one?



KNOT SO TRUE

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RUBANA HUQ

Bhutan held the second national election (globally) of the year on Tuesday. Threatened by melting glaciers, boomeranged by Gross National Happiness, the young citizens of Bhutan are migrating to Australia and beyond in search of a better living. But in spite of all the economic challenges, Bhutan went to vote, elected the People's Democratic Party, and rejected the governing centre-left Druk Nyamrup Tshogpa party, even ahead of the election. So, despite 35 countries experiencing decline in political rights (as per a 2023 Freedom House report), there are countries that are attempting to move towards democracy. It may not be a sprint, but it certainly is not a limp either. In 2024, a "tumultuous year" as termed by Bloomberg, 83 national elections will be held in 78 countries around the world, including in India, Mexico, Senegal, Ukraine, and the United States. Many nations will face geopolitical volatility as the biggest risk of all, and countries with economic woes will potentially have all their props exposed to the global stage of war-mongering. Quite understandably, economic prosperity is the principal discourse of our times. Here, instead of a robust moral infrastructure, we continue to fight for wealth and seek power to enhance it. Most countries, including many that we love, live in, and work from, have by now turned into private companies sustained by oligarchs. In these lands, complacency has become the name of the game. So, while the country (also known as the private company) runs, it evaluates its employees (also known as citizens) based on the barometer of loyalty and rhetoric. One could, of course, also call these countries "fictional." Since, in reality, these countries resort to extreme imagination to estimate reserves, calculate GDPs, and report exports, your columnist

will happily refresh your memory of novels and take you back to the Nobel prize winner José Saramago's *Seeing*. The story revolves around an election day where 83 percent voters cast a blank ballot. On the ground, bureaucrats are appalled, members of the press are excited, and the government is hysteric. When asked why they had left their ballots blank, the citizens refused to respond, reminding the questioner that the question is illegal. It's a satire where all characters are nameless except a dog, who goes by the name of Constant. The ministers lobby for power while the plague of blank votes continues. One member of the press calls it a "dissolute use of the vote." This is not, of course, how the government sees it, and the press dutifully follows the government's line. A state of emergency is declared, followed by a siege wherein the government and its services exit the city, and the city is sealed off. A railway station is blown up by the government itself, hoping that the blame will fall on the so-called terrorists and/or foreign agitators. The citizens see through it all. And yet, the ending of the novel goes down in the dark. In this very year of a global vote-fest, in most countries, election results end up being more of a coronation in place of a real race, by use of a few powerful (soon to be powerless) tools, such as ruthlessly eliminating or exiling opposition. Last month in Hong Kong, only 27.5 percent of voters turned up to vote in a "patriots only" district election, just because opposition democrats were barred from the ballot sheet amid a national security crackdown. Apart from plain and simple rigging, the pre-election fevers will also see a dose of artificial intelligence producing deep fakes. Remember how Trump shared a doctored video of CNN's Anderson

Cooper? Similarly, in Slovakia last year, right before elections, pro-Kremlin social media accounts shared "audio recordings," rather deep fakes of journalists and politicians allegedly talking about rigging the election. AI was also intelligently used in Pakistan last month, when the jailed former Prime Minister Imran Khan (who has now been barred from the election) delivered a four-minute speech using an audio clip and a video, all a compilation of his earlier photos and speeches from previous rallies, made by AI. Khan addressed a virtual rally, the first ever in Pakistan. Politics 101 today runs the risk of being solely authored by autocrats from all over the world, with special courses on oppression, corruption, profit, fakes, rhetoric, misinformation, illusion, and scriptwriting. Then again, we also sense hope. Since Mandela walked to freedom and the Apartheid ended in 1994, the African National Congress now stands a chance to lose its overall majority and be punished by voters for years of corruption, leadership scandals, crime, unemployment, and power cuts. We must remember that democracy is also a relatively new concept. Even the US, in the beginning, had only the White men with properties voting, and it was only in 1960 that it truly turned into a free democracy. Democracy, therefore, is rightfully expected to undergo a fair number of trials and tribulations before the erasure epilogues of the autocrats and the dictators are finally inked. The world has come a long way. So has Bangladesh. We must make sure that we appreciate our incredible progress and acknowledge our failures only to turn them into intelligent ones. Let us also admit that our answer does not lie in lopsided, brutish criticism, but rather in being a part of a civil society that is neither blind nor deaf. In a satirical poem, *The Solution*, written in East Germany in 1953, Brecht wrote that the people had lost the trust of the government and wondered if, perhaps, it would be easier "... for the government // To dissolve the people // And elect another?" Let that not happen anywhere in the globe—least of all in Bangladesh.

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার  
বাংলাদেশ পুলিশ  
পুলিশ সুপারের কার্যালয়  
১৬, জনমন রোড, ঢাকা-১১০০  
নিলাম বিজ্ঞপ্তি

বর্তমান প্রকৃত (Auction Rule) অনুযায়ী ঢাকা জেলা পুলিশের নিম্নবর্ণিত অফিসের অফিসারদের মিলবাজারে পুলিশ লাইনে (যেখানে যে অবস্থায় আছে) প্রতিটি পাকি পৃথক পৃথক ভাবে নিলামে বিক্রয়ের নিমিত্তে "দি পাবলিক প্রকিউরমেন্ট রেকর্ডেশন- ২০০৮" এবং "উর্দ্বার সর্বশেষ সংশোধনী" এর বিধি অনুসারে পৃথক পৃথক সীলমোহর হুক খামে নিম্নলিখিত কাজের নামসহ নরপার আহ্বান করা যাচ্ছে।

ক্রম নং	পাকির বিবরণ	প্রাপ্ত	সংখ্যা	রেজিস্ট্রেশন নম্বর	উর্দ্বার সাল	সিডিউউসের মূল্য	নরপার ক্রয়দানের পরিমাণ
০১	জীপ	৪সি ৬৪	০১	ঢাকা মেট্রো-৭-১৪-০৯০৬	২০০১	৫০০/-	২,২০০/-
০২	ট্রাক	টয়োটা জায়মা	০১	ঢাকা মেট্রো-৪-১৪-০৯৫৭	২০০১	৫০০/-	৩,৩০০/-
০৩	জীপ	৪সি ৬৪	০১	ঢাকা মেট্রো-৭-১১-৪৮৮২	২০০৩	৫০০/-	৫,৫০০/-
০৪	মোটরসাইকেল	অফেন-১২৫	০১	ঢাকা মেট্রো-৫-১৪-০৮১৮	২০০৪	৫০০/-	২৮০/-
০৫	মোটরসাইকেল	অফেন-১২৫	০১	ঢাকা মেট্রো-৫-১৪-৪১১৯	২০০৪	৫০০/-	২৮০/-

১৬। জ্ঞাত নং: ০১  
০১। নরপার ক্রয়ের সময় বাজি বা প্রতিদানের স্বত্বাধিকারীর স্বাক্ষর এবং সীলমুক্ত হুক প্যাকেট মূল প্যাকেট মূল্য ১২,০০০ টাকা হতে হবে এবং মূল্য ১৪.০০ খটকা পর্যন্ত নরপার সন্মত করা হবে।  
০২। কোন কারণে নরপার বাতিলকৃত হলে নরপার অর্থ/স্বত্বাধিকার করার ক্ষমতা জ্ঞাত নং সন্মত করে।

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