'Even minor election allegations must be scrutinised and addressed'

As the country moves towards what could be the most consequential election in decades, **Dr Md Abdul Alim,** *election specialist and former member of the Electoral Reform Commission, spoke with* **Monorom Polok** *of* **The Daily Star** *about the Election Commission's readiness, the referendum process, and overall preparation for the poll.*

How would you rate the steps taken by the Election Commission and the government to maintain law and order during the election? Do you think these measures are adequate?

If we look at past elections in Bangladesh, there was usually a clear pattern before the announcement of the schedule. Law enforcement agencies would carry out pre-election drives with three objectives: arresting miscreants who could disrupt the election environment, recovering illegal weapons, and ensuring that licensed arms were deposited at police stations. This time, we did not see such measures taken in advance.

There was some discussion about drives after the shooting of Osman Hadi, but they did not appear well-planned. As a result, we are seeing some incidents from time to time. Although the situation is currently under control, this is a unique election. Some political parties are not participating, and there are known internal and external attempts to disrupt the process. From the beginning, it was clear that law and order would pose a different kind of challenge.

Many of us have been saying that law and order would be one of the biggest challenges during this election cycle. I feel this issue should have been addressed more comprehensively. What was needed was a Comprehensive Election Security Plan based on risk assessment. Once risks are identified, there must be a detailed plan for remedies. I see a gap here. Even if the situation is under control for now, there is no guarantee that it will not deteriorate. These precautions were necessary, but they are largely absent.

Some people are alleging that the government is supporting a particular party or group. Do you see any basis for such claims?

At this stage, it still appears to be an allegation—just that. These complaints are not coming from a single party; almost all parties are complaining against the Election Commission. This is not new. During past elections held under political governments, even ruling parties lodged complaints. Often, these allegations reflect political positioning rather than verifiable facts.

That said, elections are extremely sensitive when it comes to neutrality, freeness, and fairness. Even minor allegations must be investigated and scrutinised. The Election Commission has a responsibility to respond to complaints and regularly update all electoral stakeholders through an official channel, but we have not always seen a proper

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institutional response. Sometimes responses come informally through media briefings, but that is not enough.

For the sake of voters and public trust, responses should be written, clear, and public. Whether complaints come from BNP, Jamaat, NCP, or others, the EC should respond explicitly and publish it on the official channel. This would help voters understand its position and strengthen trust in the process. Such a mechanism is essential, because questions will continue right up to election day.

Recently, the public disclosure of candidates' financial information generated public interest. Although the EC does not audit such information, do you think it should do so in the public interest?

From the Electoral Reform Commission, we recommended that, given the limited time before the election, verification should at least be done on a sampling basis, with the findings made public. Another important step has already been taken—a new provision has been added to the RPO allowing the EC to investigate and take action for up to five years after the election if a candidate submitted false information or concealed data in their affidavit. This means verification can also take place post-election.

However, full verification before an election is extremely difficult within such a short timeframe. My view is that sampling-based verification should be the first step. Second, the timeframe for verification should be extended so that a deeper review can be conducted before party symbol allocation and campaigning begin. Finally, the new legal provision allowing post-election scrutiny must be actively used.

Voters have a right to know their candidates—their assets, profession, and educational background. This information must be verified rigorously in the public interest.

The impact of government campaigning on the referendum is still limited, especially at the grassroots level. How do you see this? Also, does the government's stated position in favour of a 'Yes' vote undermine its neutrality?

In recent days, I have seen some government campaigns involving the referendum, but it is true that they have not yet reached the grassroots. If they fail to do so, problems will arise.

This election is different because voters will cast two votes. If voting takes two minutes per person, and a booth is reserved for 600 voters, for instance, then even 80 percent turnout would require far more

time than the nine hours available for this election. If the process is slow, voters may become frustrated by long queues and leave.

This means training is crucial. Assistant election officers must be well prepared. Voters must also enter the polling booth with their decisions already made. If they try reading and understanding the referendum questions while inside the booth, the process will slow down further.

During previous referendums, extensive campaigns were conducted. This time, political parties are more focused on the parliamentary election. Although BNP and Jamaat have called for a "Yes" vote, it needs to be communicated more widely. Parties must mobilise their grassroots activists.

As for the government's position, in all three previous referendums, the then governments had actively campaigned for a "Yes" vote. This one is a reform government, with reform as its core mandate. It formed various reform commissions and held dialogue with political parties for consensus. I have not seen any major party openly campaigning for a "No" vote. In that context, seeking public support for reform is not unethical.

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Even before campaigning has begun officially, electioneering is already visible on social media and in public spaces. There are also allegations that religion is being used in electioneering violating the code of conduct. Can the EC address these issues?

We have seen reports of fines and show-cause notices, but overall monitoring before the official campaign period remains weak. This is a longstanding pattern—enforcement often feels ad hoc.

With the formal allocation of party symbols approaching, which will mark the start of the campaign period, the EC should become much more proactive. Field-level officials must be instructed to monitor the code of conduct rigorously. Early enforcement is crucial to prevent violations from escalating once formal campaigning begins. The law allows for up to six months' imprisonment and a fine of Tk 1.5 lakh for violations.

Social media will play a decisive role, of course. For the first time, it has been formally included in the code of conduct, yet we are already seeing AI-generated misinformation and digital propaganda. Strong monitoring is essential to prevent content that could incite violence.

The EC should form expert monitoring teams—possibly seat-based—to assess harmful language and misinformation. The code prohibits negative or attacking language and the sharing of unverified content. While it may be difficult for ordinary citizens to verify information, those who violate these rules, especially political actors, must still be held accountable.

As a member of the Electoral Reform Commission, can you tell us how many of your recommendations have actually been implemented? Are you satisfied with the progress so far?

We made around 250 recommendations. Some key proposals—such as the Election Commissioner Appointment Act and the Delimitation Act—have not yet been implemented. However, several important reforms have been incorporated into the RPO. These include recognising the army as part of law enforcement, requiring alliance candidates to use their own party symbols, and allowing an MP's status to be cancelled for submitting false affidavits.

The "No Vote" option has not been revived as we proposed; it has been limited to single-candidate constituencies. Structural reforms such as establishing an Upper House in parliament or increasing women's representation require constitutional amendments and depend on the referendum.

I am not fully satisfied, but I remain hopeful. Many recommendations could still be implemented after the election and the referendum process.

Proactive steps can future-proof jobs in the AI era

AN OPEN DIALOGUE

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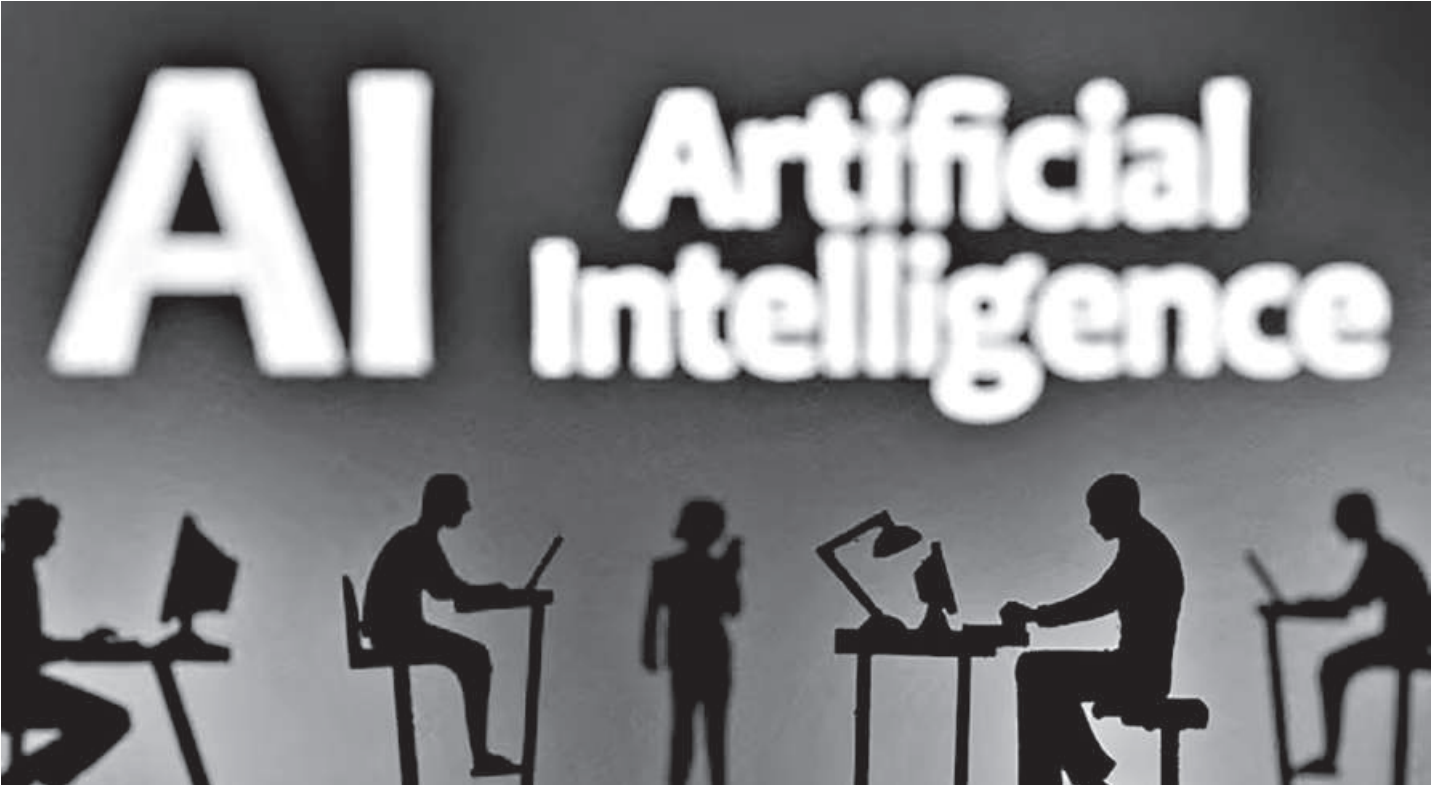
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There is a widespread fear across US campuses, businesses, and industries that the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and its rapid integration into all spheres of our lives will lead to job losses and a lifestyle where robots control our daily routines. However, further exploration of this notion shows that much of this projection is exaggerated, fed by our fascination with dystopian science fiction. In reality, AI will gradually make inroads into transportation, manufacturing, and agriculture; AI-driven robotics will replace routine tasks, provide health and other services, thus boosting financial growth.

My commentary is for the younger generation considering their career paths, today's industry leaders evaluating investment opportunities for the future, and thought leaders in academia and AI research.

Let us take stock of the current situation in the US and other advanced countries. AI is poised to eliminate a variety of jobs, particularly those involving routine tasks, data analysis, and customer service, while roles requiring human judgement and emotional intelligence are likely to remain safe.

Microsoft developed an "AI applicability score" to measure how well AI can perform the core tasks of various jobs. Jobs with high scores are more likely to be transformed or replaced by AI technologies. Many of these jobs are in domains such as computer and mathematical fields, office and administrative support, and sales.

In a recent article in *The New York Times*, Sal Khan, the Bangladeshi founder of Khan Academy, wrote, "I believe artificial intelligence will displace workers at a scale many people don't yet realize." However, he also calls on business leaders to invest in retraining workers to adapt to new workplace technologies.

AI-enhanced humanoid robots and autonomous machines will be in high demand across warehouses, supply chains, transportation, and agriculture. In Bangladesh, many manual tasks, including irrigation, tilling, and fertiliser application, have seen the intrusion of mechanisation for decades.

Robotics in agriculture, often referred to as "agribots," encompasses a range of automated technologies designed to improve farming practices. These robots perform essential tasks

such as planting, harvesting, monitoring crop health, and managing livestock, significantly enhancing productivity and efficiency in modern agriculture.

While AI will enable us to work and learn better, there will be a growing need for skilled labour to operate and manage this new technology. The challenge our society, particularly our new generation, faces is adapting to the changing job market

FILE VISUAL: **REUTERS**

and economic ecosystem. Universities and industry leaders will now need to have a subcommittee to study and better understand the societal and economic impact of AI.

Microsoft itself is dedicating some energy to understanding the future of the workplace. It is providing considerable funding to graduate students engaged in research, market design, the economics of Artificial Intelligence (AI), economics and computation, social learning, applied

microeconomics, microeconomic theory, and behavioural economics.

Sal Khan advised big companies to invest one percent of their profits in training their own workers to adapt to AI and robotics. He estimates that one percent of the combined profit of a dozen of the world's largest corporations would create a $10 billion annual fund.

Now, let us turn to retraining the workers

who will undoubtedly be affected by changes in the job market. The revolution brought about by AI and automation is fuelled by chipmakers such as Nvidia. In a recent interview, Jensen Huang, the founder and CEO of Nvidia, said that polls show AI-driven robots will be used for office and administrative support, domestic work, and repetitive tasks. However, robots will not be able to outperform humans in healthcare, classroom teaching, and scores of other jobs.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that nearly two million jobs will open up annually in the healthcare sector during the next decade. UNESCO estimates a global shortage of 44 million teachers by 2030. In the US, the construction industry needs more than 500,000 additional workers annually just to meet demand; meanwhile, openings for electricians and plumbers are growing faster than average. The hospitality and elder care industries—work rooted in empathy and human presence—are expanding, not shrinking.

Our teachers must adapt to the changing times and prepare our students for smart jobs. With advances in AI technology, many jobs will undergo transformation, and some roles will face a significant risk of automation. Workers in knowledge-intensive fields should be proactive in adapting to these changes, seeking opportunities for reskilling and embracing new technologies to remain competitive in the evolving job market.

At the 1 Billion Followers Summit 2026 in Dubai, educators, content creators, and learning designers called for a fundamental shift in how education is delivered. Education must pivot from rote learning to skill-based development (problem-solving, digital literacy) to equip graduates for this evolving landscape, focusing less on degrees and more on practical workplace readiness, as AI displaces some roles while boosting productivity.

Turning to agriculture, it is a sector that is crucial in meeting the food demand for a growing population projected to reach 9.7 billion people by 2050. Robots can operate continuously, performing tasks faster and more accurately than human labour, which is in short supply anyway. While the integration of robotics in agriculture presents numerous advantages, challenges such as high initial costs and the need for skilled operators exist. Any potential job displacement can be addressed by strengthening the skilled crafts and trades required to sustain the AI-driven economy.

The goal of universities should be to move away from a mindset focused solely on producing more graduates and towards a system that equips students with workplace skills. To do that, educational reform must transition immediately from exam-based assessment to skill-based learning.