



# Municipality Elections 2015

## Odhikar Report

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### Introduction

Since 1996, Odhikar has been involved in monitoring elections and electoral violence alongside regular monitoring of the human rights situation in Bangladesh. Over the last 21 years, Odhikar has been able to establish itself as a credible and reliable organisation in Bangladesh in the field of monitoring of local and national elections. Additionally, the Organisation has earned international recognition for its role in the observation of electoral and democratic developments in the country, which is reflected in its close working relations with regional organisations, including the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), engaged in regional election observation and raising democratic awareness. Odhikar strongly believes in the need for strengthening each tier of the local government system in the process of strengthening and empowering such governments. Odhikar goes beyond the monitoring of methodological aspects of elections administration to monitor the state of civil and political rights of the electorate during election time.

### Legal basis for local government polls under party banners

Municipality (Pourashava) elections were held in January 2011 after the incumbent government of the Bangladesh Awami League (AL) assumed office through general elections held in 2008. At the end of the (municipality elections) term, the AL held elections to municipalities on December 30, 2015, which were distinguished from the century-old tradition of Municipality elections. For the first time in the history of Bangladesh, municipality polls were held along party lines, which required the candidates to gain their party nomination. The ruling AL party solely decided to hold Municipal elections under political party symbols despite objections and concerns from the civil society and the electorate being sceptical about the system. The President of Bangladesh declared an Ordinance on November 2, 2015 for necessary amendment to the Local Government Act, providing for local body polls to be held under political party banners. The Ordinance was made public in a gazette published on November 3, 2015. The Cabinet approved the draft of the amended Local Government Act on November 9, thus clearing the way for the elections to all local bodies to be held under political party banners.<sup>1</sup> After the Ordinance was declared, the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) drafted the Code of Conduct for the candidates and sent the final draft to the Ministry of Law for its opinion on November 5, 2015.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 10/11/2015, the daily Manabzamin 12/11/2015

<sup>2</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 11/11/2015

On November 22, the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament) passed three Bills providing for partisan elections to the Mayoral post at the City Corporation level (urban local government) and to the Chairman post at the Upazila Parishad (UZP) and Union Parishad (UP) levels.<sup>3</sup>

## **Electoral campaign**

In a functional democratic system, the electoral campaign is considered a vehicle for the candidates and political parties to communicate their manifestos and principles. However, there were reports of allegations that the BNP-nominated candidates were deprived of equality in opportunities with the AL-nominated candidates in carrying out electoral campaigns, particularly in the holding of public rallies and processions. The Code of Conduct for candidates declared by the Election Commission provides for reasonable restrictions on electoral campaigns to ensure that the candidates use campaign opportunity for valid purposes. According to laws, all forms of electoral campaigns must be stopped 48 hours ahead of the start of voting. Election-related publicity or campaign in any forms within the given timeline is strictly prohibited. However, Odhikar's monitoring in different electoral constituencies found violations of the electoral Code of Conduct in a range of forms, including wall postering, tearing of campaign posters of rival candidates, attaching photographs of candidates to walls, hanging banners and the using of several election camps by a single candidate. Furthermore, campaign materials were even found in different polling centres on the election day.

## **Security measures**

Despite the claim of adequate security measures taken by the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC), polls in many of the municipalities that Odhikar observed, witnessed incidents of electoral violence and fraud. Although it is integral to the role of the BEC to ensure all arrangements that guarantee that voters can cast their votes freely, the incumbent BEC has largely failed to perform its role to ensure free elections. Activists and supporters of the candidates nominated by the ruling party were reportedly involved in taking illegal control of the polling centres, snatching ballot papers, forcing the polling agents of contesting candidates to leave the polling centres, vote rigging and violence. Odhikar monitors also identified municipalities in which law enforcement agents were found to be reluctant towards applying security measures.

## **Election schedule and relevant information**

Flouting the opinion of the opposition political parties, civil society and ordinary public against holding of local government elections under political banners, on November 24, 2015 the BEC declared the schedule for elections to 234 out of 319 municipalities.<sup>4</sup> The total number of voters in these elections were 7,272,603. Of them, 3,639,067 were men while 3,633,536 were women. There were a total of 3,582 polling centres and 19,187 polling

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<sup>3</sup>The Daily Star, 23/11/2015

<sup>4</sup>The Prothom Alo, 01/12/2015

booths.<sup>5</sup> The 227 AL nominated candidates used the ‘boat’ as their party symbol; while the 223 BNP nominated candidates contest the mayoral elections with their party symbol ‘Paddy sheaf’. Candidates from other parties were allocated 203 party symbols, while 285 independent candidates joined the race with various symbols too. (Among the independent candidates, 98 were AL-rebels, 38 were BNP-rebels and 36 were Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami (JI)-affiliated candidates). The JI-affiliated candidates join the elections as independent candidates as the party lost its registration with the BEC.<sup>6</sup> The AL-nominated candidates in seven of the municipalities were declared elected unopposed ahead of the polls. The AL-candidates elected uncontested reportedly obstructed the opposition-nominated candidates from submitting their nomination papers.

## Election observation methodology

Despite being registered with the BEC, it did not allow Odhikar to formally observe the Municipality Elections of 2015. On November 25, Odhikar applied to the Secretary of the BEC for permission to deploy its mobile observers in 50 of the municipalities in which elections were held on December 30, 2015. The BEC remained unresponsive to this request. On December 27, Odhikar sent a second letter to the Secretary of the BEC requesting a response of Odhikar’s application. However, the BEC kept silent. Being denied official permission to monitor the municipality polls, Odhikar sought to collect information from human rights defenders affiliated to Odhikar, who work for different media houses. Upon approval from local administration, these journalists collected information by monitoring the overall electoral situation, particularly incidents of electoral violence inside and outside polling centres in 48 municipalities. Moreover, Odhikar collected election-related reports from various media through coordination.

## Selection of municipalities

In order to select municipalities to monitor, Odhikar relied on its experience from past election monitoring, its knowledge of the electoral process, previous records of human rights violations during elections and potential areas for violence. Based on all these factors, the following municipalities were selected:

Name of the Divisions	Name of the Districts	Name of the Municipalities
Rangpur	Panchagar	Panchagar Municipality
	Thakurgaon	Pirganj Municipality
		Thakurgaon Municipality
	Dinajpur	Dinajpur Municipality
		Phulbari Municipality
	Lalmonirhat	Lalmonirhat Municipality
	Kurigram	Kurigram Municipality
Ulipur Municipality		
	Sunamganj	Sunamganj Municipality

<sup>5</sup>The daily Naya Diganta, 30/12/2015

<sup>6</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 30/12/2015

Sylhet	Sylhet	Sylhet Municipality
	Moulavibazar	Moulavibazar Municipality
Dhaka	Mymensingh	Phulpur Municipality
		Trishal Municipality
		Iswarganj Municipality
	Tangail	Mirzapur Municipality
		Bhuapur Municipality
		Tangail Municipality
	Gazipur	Sreepur Municipality
	Narayanganj	Tarabo Municipality
		Sonargaon Municipality
	Munshiganj	Munshiganj Municipality
		Mirkadim Municipality
	Rajbari	Goalanda Municipality
Rajbari Municipality		
Madaripur	Madaripur Municipality	
Chittagong	Lakshmipur	Lakshmipur Municipality
		Ramgati Municipality
	Noakhali	Choumohani Municipality
	Chittagong	Sandeep Municipality
		Chandnaish Municipality
Raujan Municipality		
Barisal	Barisal	Babuganj Municipality
		Uzirpur Municipality
	Bhola	Bhola Municipality
		Borhanuddin Municipality
	Patuakhali	Kolapara Municipality
Kuakata Municipality		
Khulna	Khulna	Chalna Municipality
	Norail	Norail Municipality
		Kalia Municipality
	Jessore	Jessore Municipality
	Jhenaidah	Kotchandpur Municipality
		Harinakunda Municipality
		Shailkupa Municipality
Kushtia	Kushtia Municipality	
Rajshahi	Naogaon	Naogaon Municipality
	Chapainababganj	Chapainababganj Municipality
	Rajshahi	Katakhali Municipality
		Naohata Municipality
	Pabna	Pabna Municipality
		Ishwardi Municipality
	Sirajganj	Sirajganj Municipality
Ullapara Municipality		
Belkuchi Municipality		

## Pre-election situation and irregularities

According to media reports, law enforcement agencies arrested many leaders and activities of the opposition political parties under the guise of blanket arrest, across the country ahead of the elections. In many of the municipalities, the ruling party men attacked houses of the opposition parties' leaders and activists and forced them to leave their constituency or to refrain from electoral activities. The following are some reports showing the pre-election scenario:

- On December 10, 2015, the leaders and activists of the Bangladesh Chhatra League— BCL (the student wing of Awami League) attacked leaders and activists of the BNP who were returning home from an electoral campaign for the BNP nominated candidate of Monohardi Municipality in the Narshingdi District. Two of the BNP men were injured. Chhatra League activists also set fire to their motorcycles.<sup>7</sup>
- On December 13, 2015, 10 BNP men, including Abdul Hye, the President of Munshiganj District unit BNP, who is also a former Member of Parliament (MP); and the local mayoral candidate from BNP, Iradat Hossain Manu were injured when leaders and activists of the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) attacked them during an electoral campaign.<sup>8</sup>
- On December 20, 2015 ruling party (AL) men attacked the electoral campaign of Nasiruddin Ahmed, a BNP-nominated mayoral candidate for Tarabo Municipality in Narayanganj District. 15 people were injured during this incident.<sup>9</sup>
- On December 29, 2015 at around 8:00 pm, an altercation took place in front of the polling centre at the Nitarkandi Bangbandhu Governemnt Primary School in Bazitpur Municipality under Kishoreganj District, between the supporters of Anowar Hossain Ashraf who was a mayoral candidate and a younger brother of MPAfzal Hossain, affiliated to the ruling AL; and supporters of the BNP-nominated mayoral candidate, Ehesan Kufia. Three BNP activists, Azim, Mamun and Sadek were injured in the incident. The BNP-nominated mayoral candidate Ehesan Kufia alleged that armed supporters of the AL-nominated candidate, Anowar Hossain Ashraf attacked the Nitarkandi Bangabandhu Government Primary School in the evening before the election day and started stuffing ballot boxes in favour of their own candidate. When the BNP men came to the school on hearing the news, they alleged that they came under attack from the AL activists.<sup>10</sup>
- On the eve of the elections the police arrested 10 BNP-followers from different areas of Moulvibazar Municipality.<sup>11</sup> In five of the nine polling centres in the Shakhipur Municipality in Tangail, 4th grade public officials were deployed as polling officers to oversee the electoral process, in defiance of existing practices and with no

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<sup>7</sup>The daily Jugantor, 12/12/2015

<sup>8</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 14/12/2015

<sup>9</sup>The daily Manabzamin, 21/12/2015

<sup>10</sup>The daily Manabzamin, 30/12/2015

<sup>11</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Moulvibazar

ostensible reasons. These public officials included a night guard of a secondary education office, Manower Hossain and and MLSS (peon) Raton Talukder from the same institution; a night guard of Baga Government Primary School, Jahirul Islam; a night guard of Gargobinda Government Primary School, Shahin Alam and another night guard of the Upazila Resource Centre under the Primary Education Department, Mohammad Montu Mia.<sup>12</sup> When the news about the deployment of these 4th grade officials as polling officers went public, their deployment was immediately cancelled. Referring to this irregularity, the Shakhipur correspondent of the renowned Bengali-language daily Prothom Alo, told Odhikar that even he was called in on the eve of the elections and deployed as an assistant presiding officer for a potentially violent polling centre. He observed that by making him an assistant presiding officer for a particular polling centre, meant that he would not be able to monitor and report on the electoral process across the municipality.



*Journalists in Sunamganj stopped their work in protests of attack at them – Photo: collected*

## **Election violence**

In the wake of the government declaration for Municipality polls under political banners, violent attacks by supporters of the ruling party-nominated candidates took place on the candidates nominated by the main opposition (though not in parliament) BNP and other political parties, and on the independent candidates. The attack from the ruling party men came in the form of infringement of their right to electoral campaign, physical attack and even abduction. The Ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs) from the ruling party were seriously accused of violating the electoral Code of Conduct by participating in the electoral campaign for the AL-nominated candidates. The incidents of pre-election violence left two

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<sup>12</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 28/12/2015

killed and 657 persons injured. Three persons were killed and 401 persons were injured on polling day while one was killed and 234 persons were injured in post-election violence.<sup>13</sup>

## Restrictions and attacks on the media

Before the elections, the Election Commission issued a letter imposing restrictions on the media with regard to the collection of election-related information. The regulations given in the letter required journalists to seek permission from respective Presiding Officers to visit inside a polling centre.<sup>14</sup> Such restrictions imposed by the BEC allowed the police, the Presiding Officers and supporters of the ruling party candidates to prevent the journalists from performing their professional responsibilities. The new regulations prevented the journalists from entering into polling centres even to report on the cases of severe allegations of irregularities. According to information gathered by Odhikar, at least 15 journalists were victims of attacks from the ruling party men and the police while taking photos of voting scenes and performing duties at poll times. Even their cameras and cell phones were vandalised. Some incidents that were reported are as follows:

The police arrested Habib Shourav, the Bureau Chief of the daily Samakal and private satellite TV Channel ATN News, and his cameraperson, Rabiul Islam, for entering into the polling centre in Puthia Municipality under Rajshahi District. Naoshad Ahammed, the Assistant Editor of a local newspaper named Jamuna Probaho, was beaten for taking photographs of ruling party men taking illegal control of a polling centre and ballot stuffing in Sirajganj. The ruling party men also broke his camera and snatched away his cell phone. Badrul Islam Biplob, Secretary of Thakurgaon Press Club, came under attack when he went to the Thakurgaon Pourashava Polytechnic Institute polling centre to collect election-related information.<sup>15</sup> While collecting information about an incident of grabbing of ballot papers and filming the scene of the incident at the Bazaar Government Primary School polling centre in Moulvibazar Municipality, Panna Dutta, a correspondent of the private satellite TV channel SA TV; Oliur Rahman from the Shomoy TV; Hamid Mahbub, Moulvibazar correspondent of the daily Kaler Kantho; and Mahbubur Rahman Rahel, Moulvibazar district correspondent of the online news portal Bangla News were humiliated by a group of AL supporters, led by the General Secretary of the Moulvibazar District committee of BCL, Saifur Rahman Rony.<sup>16</sup> The supporters of Jubo League<sup>17</sup> leader Maruf Hossain Shanto, who was also a Commissioner candidate, attacked Thakurgaon Press Club Secretary and Massranga Television correspondent, Badrul Islam Biplab and Thakurgaon District correspondent of the Jamuna TV, Partha Sharathi Das and vandalised their microbus when they went to collect information at the Thakurgaon Pourashava Polytechnic College polling centre.<sup>18</sup> Latifur Rahman Raju, Sunamganj District correspondent of the daily Sangbad and Maidul Russell, Sunamganj District correspondent of the Satellite TV station Channel 24 came under attack by supporters of the AL-nominated Mayor candidate as they entered the

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<sup>13</sup> Information gathered by Odhikar through its documentation team

<sup>14</sup> The daily Jugantor, 23/12/2015

<sup>15</sup> The daily Jugantor, 31/12/2015

<sup>16</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Moulvibazar

<sup>17</sup> Youth wing of Awami League

<sup>18</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Moulvibazar

Sunamganj Government Mahila College polling centre.<sup>19</sup> The Returning Officer did not issue accreditation cards to local correspondents of the national daily newspapers Manabzamin and Naya Diganta, which they applied for to observe elections to the Munshiganj Municipality and Mirkadim Municipality under Munshiganj District. The Munshiganj District correspondent of the dail Shokaler Khabor and a human rights defender associated with Odhikar, Arafatuzzaman Babu, was injured as he was hit on the head with a pistol by supports of the AL-nominated Mayor candidate Foysal Ahmed Biplob.<sup>20</sup> On January 13, 2016 Abdus Salam, a photo-journalist of the daily Prothom Alo, was humiliated by a group of youth wearing badges showing boat symbols (symbol of AL-nominated candidate) when he was taking photographs of stuffing ballots during re-voting at the Madhabdi College polling centre under Madhabdi Municipality in Narshingdi District. They also grabbed his camera and deleted all photographs.<sup>21</sup>

## **Election day**

The Municipality elections were marked with widespread incidents of capturing polling centres casting fake votes and violence on December 30, 2015. Voting in 50 polling stations of 19 Municipalities were suspended due to clashes and anomalies. Among them 38 polling stations in 18 Municipalities and all polling stations in Madhabdi Municipality under Narshingdi District were shut down.<sup>22</sup> Several of the polling stations kept an outside impression that voting was going on in a fair manner. However, the scene inside was the opposite, with supporters of the ruling party candidates queuing up, taking control of the polling booths, casting fake votes unopposed and bullying general voters into voting for the ruling party candidates. Polls in many municipalities were marred mostly by the capturing of polling centres and booths, casting fake votes and clashes. In many incidents of electoral violence and irregularities, police inaction was quite evident and in many places the law enforcers were reportedly found taking side with supporters of the ruling party candidates. Surprisingly, there were reports of Presiding Officers engaged in casting fake votes for the ruling party candidates in many centres. Despite widespread irregularities and violence, the BEC showed total indifference to the mayhem and claimed that elections were held in a peaceful manner.

## **Municipality-wise polling information**

### **Thakurgaon Municipality**

Many of the voters who went to the Thakurgaon Polytechnic College polling station in the afternoon found that their votes had already been cast. The Presiding Officer Mustafizur Rahman told them that all that ballot papers had been used. On condition of anonymity, one voter said that he had waited in queue for a long time, but only to learn later that all the ballot papers had been exhausted. He added that supporters of the Awami League-nominated

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<sup>19</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Moulvibazar; the daily Jugantor, 31/12/2015

<sup>20</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Munshiganj

<sup>21</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 14/12/2015

<sup>22</sup>The daily Jugantor, 31/12/2015



candidate Tahmina Molla entered into the polling booths at around 2.00 in the afternoon and left after casting their votes. While collecting on-spot information, Odhikar found that many of the voters standing in queue for voting had been told to leave, as polling was over. When asked about the scarcity of ballot of papers, the Presiding Officer Mustafizur Rahman said that some ballot papers were stored in the cupboard and he would soon make them available to the voters. However, at the end, he could not show any ballot papers. There were allegations of launching attacks on polling stations at the Thakurgaon Polytechnic Institute College and Govindanagar Government Primary School; and grabbing of ballot papers and ballot stuffing by supporters of the AL-nominated Mayor candidate Tahmina Molla. Those who were reportedly involved the incidents were Thakurgaon District unit Chhatra League General Secretary Sanowar Parvez Palok, BCL leaders Mizan and Chayon and Jubo League (youth wing of Awami League) leader Abdul Mazid. When the polling agents of the BNP-nominated candidate tried to stop supporters of Tahmina Molla from stuffing ballot papers, the AL supporter tried to grab the ballot box. This led to the suspension of voting there for 30 minutes from 12:00 pm.<sup>23</sup>



*Police arrested a BNP supported councilor candidate and his six supporters from Cricent Kindergarten polling center. Photo- Collected*

### **Dinajpur Municipality**

In cotravention of electoral laws, Dinajpur District unit Awami League (AL) President Ataur Rahman Azad, another AL leader called Marshal and his supporters were reportedly chanting slogans in favour of the ruling party candidate within a distance of 200 yards of the polling centre, at the Collegiate School and College and Government Women's College in Dinajpur and bullying voters into casting their votes for their candidate. There were also allegations of physical attacks on supporters of the BNP-nominated candidate Syed Jahangir Alam and of forcing them to leave the polling station at the Adarsho College. These were done under the leadership of the Upazila (Sub-District) unit AL General Secretary Biswajit Kumar Ghosh and BCL leader Bappi and his supporters. The culprits reportedly also vandalised tables and chairs outside the polling centre. In violation of law, AL leader Marshal allegedly entered the Government Women's College polling centre and cast fake votes for the ruling party candidate. Voting at Kalitola Crescent Kindergarten polling station in Dinajpur Municipality stayed suspended for an hour after police arrested a Councilor candidate, A K M Masud and

<sup>23</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Thakurgaon; <http://www.ittefaq.com.bd/print-edition/first-page/2015/12/31/92713.html>

six of his followers. One BCL leader, Sujan, reportedly casting fake votes at around 3:00 pm at the Suihari Chehelgazi Shikkha Niketon polling centre.<sup>24</sup>

### **Kurigram Municipality**

In booth number 3 for Tannery Paara at the Madinatul Ulum Dakhil Madrassa polling centre in the Ferry Ghat area in Kurigram Municipality, there was a row over fake votes between candidates for Councilor positions. It happened at around 1:00 pm on the polling day. When the journalists tried to dig into details, the polling agents for other candidates, being dictated by Arshad Hossain Dipan, a polling agent for the AL candidate Abdul Jalil, refused to give any information. There was reportedly a scuffle between AL leader Manzu and BNP leader Farouque outside the polling station. Allegations of fake votes at the polling stations at the Kurigram Government Boys School and Kurigram Government College were reported against the Kurigram Municipality unit AL Joint General Secretary Saidul Hasan Dulal. Allegations of intimidating voters into voting for the symbol of ‘Boat’ (electoral symbol for AL-nominated candidate) in Kurigram Alia Madrassa polling centre, were found against the Convener of the Kurigram District unit Juba League, Ruhul Amin Dulal and his supporters. The Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Kurigram Sadar Police Station, Murshedul Karim Ihtesham said that they had arrested two men named Manirul Islam (22) and Ranu (23) at around 3:00 pm, for casting fake votes at the Kisholoy Government Primary School polling station.<sup>25</sup>

### **Ulipur Municipality**

Five persons were injured as clashes erupted between supporters of rival candidates for Councilor positions, Kaiser (with electoral symbol ‘Camel’) and Noor Islam (with electoral symbol ‘Apple’) at around 1:00 pm in the polling station housed at the Narikelbari Government Primary School.



*Narikelbari Government Primary School polling centre in Ulipur Municipality under Kurigram District– Photo: collected*

<sup>24</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Dinajpur; the daily Ajker Protiva, 31/12/2015; the Dainik Antor Kantho, 31/12/2015

<sup>25</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Kurigram; Also found in <http://bangla.jnewsbd.com/?p=details&csl=162226>

The police fired two rounds of rubber bullets as clashes broke out again at around 4:00 pm, around the polling station at the Narikelbari Government Primary School. The BNP-nominated Mayor candidate, Tarique Abul Ala Chowdhury and Jatiya Party (JP)-nominated Mayor candidate A K M Shafiqul Islam Dara alleged that supporters of the Awami League (AL)-nominated candidate, Abdul Hamid Sarker, snatched a book of ballot papers and left the Madinatul Ulum Dakhil Madrassa polling centre at around 12:00 noon. After a primary investigation into the allegations, the Returning Officer of the Ulipur Municipality elections, who is also the Kurigram District Election Officer, Delowar Hossain, suspended voting at the two polling centres.<sup>26</sup>

### **Moulvibazar Municipality**

There was a commotion at around 10.30 am, in front of the polling station at the Bazaar Government Primary School, which turned into violent altercations between supporters of the rival Mayor candidates from BNP and AL, when supporters of the BNP-nominated candidates tried to stop supporters of AL-nominated candidate attempting to capture booths in the polling station. When journalists from various electronic and print media, including Moulvibazar District correspondent of Shomoy TV; staff reporter of the daily Kaler Kantho; Moulvibazar District correspondent of SA TV; correspondents of Mohona TV and online news portal Banglanews came to the spot to collect information about the incidents, the ruling party (AL) men took out the batteries of their cameras. Members of law enforcement baton charged the rioters several times before they shot a round of bullets. The BNP-nominated Mayor candidate, Oliur Rahman Oli brought allegations against the AL men for forcing his polling agents out of the polling station and ballot stuffing. A few government officers who were deployed at the polling station for election administration, alleged that some ballot papers and seals were missing. Some damaged ballot papers were found lying under a table at the polling station. The Presiding Officer of the Bazaar Primary School polling centre, Doctor Nirod Chandra, made no response when his explanation about the suspension of voting or the violence was sought. While sharing his experience, Rajatkanti Goswami, Moulvibazar correspondent of the Dhaka Tribune, said that he cast his vote when voting resumed one hour after the clashes. Clashes reportedly led to the suspension of voting at most polling stations in this municipality, including the polling stations at the Town Senior Madrassa, Kashinath Alauddin High School, Shah Mostafa College and Hafiza Khatun Girls High School. Nonetheless, the presiding Officers and others who were involved in election administration denied suspension of voting at the abovementioned polling centres.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Kurigram; Also found in <http://bangla.jnewsbd.com/?p=details&csl=162226>

<sup>27</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Moulvibazar; Also found in <http://www.mzamin.com/details.php?mzamin=MTA4NTMz&s=Ng==>



*Torn ballot paper lied under the table at a polling booth in Bazaar Government Primary School in Moulvibazar Municipality. Photo: collected*

### **Trishal Municipality**

In the afternoon, three crude bombs exploded at the Nazrul High School polling station in front of the Trishal Upazila Parishad causing widespread panic among voters, which led many of them to leave the polling station before they cast their votes. The police arrested Trishal Upazila unit Jamaat-e-Islami General Secretary, Nazrul Islam, in front of the Ali Akbar Bhuiyan polling station on allegations of influencing the voting. The Presiding Officer of the Ali Akbar Bhuiyan polling centre, Muslem Molla, reported the grabbing of a set of counterfoils of 200 ballot papers towards the closing of voting. There were allegations of another incident of crude bomb explosions at the Dukhumia Bidyaniketan polling centre and vandalising of the electoral office of the BNP-nominated candidate. The attack on the BNP office injured Suruj Ali, the Organising Secretary of Trishal Sadar Union unit BNP; Abdul Kader Molla, a member of Trishal Municipality unit BNP; and a leader of the Trishal Union unit Juba Dal (Youth wing of BNP).<sup>28</sup>

### **Ishwarganj Municipality**

Supporters of the AL-nominated Mayor candidate, Habibur Rahman and his rival, a rebel candidate from the AL, Abdus Sattar campaigned for votes for their candidates by asking voters for votes in and around most of the polling stations in the municipality. Furthermore, there were incidents of scuffles between supporters of the AL-nominated candidate and the AL rebel candidate at the Dhamdi Government Primary School polling centre, although no casualties were reported.<sup>29</sup>

### **Bhuapur Municipality**

At around a quarter to 9:00 in the morning of the election day, clashes erupted between supporters of the Awami League (AL)-nominated Mayor candidate, Maksudul Haque

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<sup>28</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Mymensingh; Also found in the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015

<sup>29</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Mymensingh

Maksud and the independent candidate, Tariqul Islam Chanchal, who is also a rebel candidate from the AL and former General Secretary of Bhuapur unit Awami League, when supporters of Maksud allegedly attempted to cast fake votes. Clashes occurred at the polling station in the Bahadipur Government Primary School and left one man injured.<sup>30</sup>



*A rebel candidate from the AL, Tariqul Islam Chanchal was attacked and injured by supporters of AL-nominated mayoral candidate in Bhuapur Municipality under Tangail District. Photo: collected.*

At around 9:30 am, supporters of the AL-nominated candidate reportedly stopped the supporters of the BNP-nominated candidate on their way to the Kutubpur Government Primary School polling station under Ward No. 1 of the municipality. Clashes broke out at around 10:00 am, between supporters of two rival Councilor candidates, Abdur Razzaque Tarofdar and Ariful Islam Rubel Tarofdar, over casting of fake votes. This left six persons injured from both sides, including Upazila Vice-Chairman and AL leader Shahinul Islam Tarofdar Badol. Such incident happened at the Bhuapur Model Primary School polling station in Ward No. 4. In order to bring the situation under control, police fired nine rounds in the air. In another incident, that happened at around 10:00 am, at the Bhuapur Pilot Boys High School polling station in Ward No. 8, four people, including a senior Vice-President of the Bhuapur Upazila unit of BNP, Advocate Lutfar Rahman Bholā were injured as supporters of the AL-nominated candidate beat them. The police came in to fire blanks in the air for five times to disperse supporters of the AL-nominated candidate after the latter 44 ballot papers from the Bhuapur Model Pilot High School polling station at around 2:00pm. The centre-based vote counts from nine polling centres showed that the BNP-nominated candidate Abdul Khaleque Mondol was ahead of the AL-nominated candidate Masudul Haque Masud by nine votes. However, the AL-nominated candidate Masud allegedly made the Presiding Officer of the Bhuapur Model Government Primary School polling station, Lutfar Rahman (who was also the Assistant Upazila Education Officer of the Bhuapur Upazila) manipulate the election results in his favour by declaring that Masud got 300 more ballots in the final count than Khaleque. It was alleged that the Presiding Officer could not show a match between the

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<sup>30</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Tangail; Also found in the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015, Manabzamin 31/12/2015

election results and number of ballots submitted to the centre. Later on, he prepared a new count of ballots to match the results and submitted it to the polling centre.<sup>31</sup>



*Police baton-charging at Bhuapur Model Pilot High School polling station in Bhuapur Municipality. Photo: collected.*

### **Tangail Municipality**

The local unit of the central administration marked 21 of 39 polling centres under Tangail Municipality as potentially violent. Odhikar collected electoral information from 12 of these 21 violence-prone polling stations. Allegations of vote rigging was reported from Tangail Girls High School. Supporters of the BNP-nominated candidate alleged police inaction in maintaining law and order. It was alleged that Ruma Akter, the daughter of Monowara Begum, a Member of Parliament (MP) representing a reserved (women's) seat, entered into several polling booths and cast fake votes. Allegations of poll rigging also came from some other polling centres including the polling centres housed at the Bindubashini Government Boys High School, Patulipara Government Primary School, Bibekananda High School and College, Tangail Girls High School and Collectorate School and College. Later on, police came to disperse those involved in irregularities.<sup>32</sup>

### **Narshingdi Municipality**

There were allegations that the supporters of the Awami League-nominated Mayor candidates forced the polling agents of the BNP-nominated Mayor candidates and independent candidates to leave the polling stations in order to capture most of the 34 polling centres in the Narishingdi Municipality and stuff the ballot boxes for the AL-nominated candidates. It was reported that supporters of the AL-nominated candidate took control of ballots at the Brahminidi Government Primary School and Brahminidi KKM Government High School and completed stuffing boxes with ballots by 10:00 am, though voting was supposed to continue until 4:00 pm. In an incident of violence, Noore Alam (30), a supporter of the Independent candidate was shot and injured at the Boakur Government

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<sup>31</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Tangail; Also found in the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015; and the daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

<sup>32</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Tangail

Primary School polling centre.<sup>33</sup> Hundreds of people, who were voters under the the Birpur Government Primary School polling station, were denied their right to vote and staged a protest.<sup>34</sup>

### **Madhabdi Municipality**

Early in the morning of the polls, supporters of the AL-nominated Mayor candidate, Mosharraf Hossain, ‘captured’ five of 12 polling centres of this municipality and stuffed ballots for their candidate. The polling centres that they captured included Madhabdi College, Fazlul Karim Master Kindergarten School, Char Ibtedia Madrassa, Wisdom Preparatory School and Noore Alam Bhuiyan Kindergarten. Supporters of the ruling party candidate even left the polling stations with the ballots they grabbed. Voting at these polling centres were suspended and elections to the Madhabdi Municipality were cancelled.<sup>35</sup>

### **Sreepur Municipality**

Supporters of the AL-nominated candidate forced the polling agents of the BNP-nominated candidate, Shahidullah Shahid, into leaving the polling station at the Keoa Tamir Uddin Alim Madrassa at around 9:00 in the morning. The incident was followed by the AL activists capturing the booths and casting fake votes. Casting of fake votes was also reported at the Maona High School-2. Examination of the counterfoils (from 47955 to 48000) of the ballot book at the Maona High School-2 polling station showed that 45 ballots had no signature of the Assistant Presiding Officer, which is mandatory according to the electoral laws. Later, the District Executive Magistrate on duty declared those 45 ballots invalid.<sup>36</sup>

### **Dhamrai Municipality**

Although the early hours of voting were satisfactory, soon after mid-day, supporters of the AL-nominated candidate took a grip on 20 polling centres in nine wards by forcing the polling agents of rival candidates out. What followed was fake votes cast by supporters of the ruling party candidates, with law enforcers looking on.<sup>37</sup>

### **Sonargaon Municipality**

Allegations of casting fake votes led to arrest of seven supporters of the Awami League-nominated candidate at around 9:00 am at the polling centre housed in Tamimul Qur’an Madrassa. Soon after midday, supporters of the ruling party allegedly started casting fake votes at the Bhattapur Model Primary School polling station, causing many people to leave the polling centre without voting. In a turmoil, the Presiding Officer of the polling station reportedly suspended voting for 15 minutes. Supporters of the AL-nominated candidate and the AL rebel candidate, Sadequr Rahman Bhuiyan, got locked into an altercation at around 12:15 pm, as leaders and activists of Jubo League, led by the Convener and Joint Convener of the Sonargaon Upazila unit Jubo League, Rafiqul Islam Nannoo and Ali Haider respectively moved towards the polling stations number six and seven, at G R Institute in Sonargaon

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<sup>33</sup>The daily Nayadiganta, 31/12/2015

<sup>34</sup>The daily Jugantor, 31/12/2015

<sup>35</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 31/12/2015

<sup>36</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Gazipur; Also found in the daily Prothom Alo, 31/12/2015

<sup>37</sup>The daily Jugantor, 31/12/2015

Municipality chanting slogans for the ruling party candidate and attempted to take control of the polling stations. The Officer-in-Charge of the Sonargaon Police Station, Manzur Kader was injured in the clash.



*Brick-bats used during violence in Panam area under Sonargaon Municipality in Narayanganj. Photo: collected.*

When a female voter, Rani Akter (50) went to cast her vote at the Booth No. 3 under polling station six in G R Institute, a polling agent of the ruling party candidate called Shahin grabbed her ballot and put the seal on symbol 'Boat' (the symbol for the Awami League-nominated candidate). As she protested against Shahin, she was intimidated into leaving the polling booth. When the journalists brought the issue to the notice of the Presiding Officer of the polling station, he said that after warning Shahin thrice, there was nothing more he could do.



*Supporters of the ruling party outside the G R Institute polling centre in Sonargaon. Photo: collected.*



At around 1:20 pm, supporters of the ruling party candidate, equipped with iron rods and sticks attacked the polling station again to capture it. They exploded four crude bombs outside the polling centre and one crude bomb inside the centre, spreading panic across the polling station area. A supporter of the ruling party candidate, Russell (28), was injured in the bomb blast inside the polling centre. Such violent incidents reduced the presence of the voters and led to suspension of voting for some time. Some 50 supporters of the ruling party candidate, carrying iron rods and sticks, launched another attack on the polling stations five and six housed at the G R Institute to capture the booths. They stopped the vehicles of the law enforcement agencies from approaching and also put up barricades by placing tree trunks on the road. The police fired a few rounds to bring the situation under control when the supporters hurled seven crude bombs at police. A Sub-Inspector of police, Abdul Malek and a constable, Ziaur Rahman were injured in the bomb attacks.<sup>38</sup>



*Supporters of the AL-nominated candidate attacked the G R Institute polling centre in Sonargaon. 15 crude bombs were exploded, spreading panic across the polling station area. Voters are running for shelters. – Photo: collected*

### **Munshiganj Municipality**

A large number of outsiders, who were not voters of the Munshiganj Municipality, reportedly gathered in all polling stations at this Municipality and cast fake votes for the ruling party-nominated Mayoral candidate Foysal Ahmed Biplob. After 9:00 am, in all polling centres, voters were intimidated into voting for the ruling party candidate. In the Purba Shilmandi Government Primary School polling station in the Purba Shilmandi area, when a male voter with voter identification number 397 collected three ballot papers from the Assistant Presiding Officer Md. Abul Bashar and was going to cast his votes for Mayoral and Councilor candidates, a polling agent of the AL-nominated candidate, Md. Moksedur Rahman, took the ballot papers from him, stamped them in favour of the ruling party nominated Mayoral candidate and Councilor candidates affiliated with the ruling party and said to him, “All your votes have been cast”. Another male voter had the same experience when a polling agent of the ruling party-nominated mayoral candidate, Sohrab, took the

<sup>38</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Narayanganj; Also found in the daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

Mayoral candidates' ballot from him, stamped the ballot for the ruling party candidate in front of the Assistant Presiding Officer and the polling officer and said to him, "Stamp the remaining two ballots and put them in the ballot box". While collecting election-related information in the Purba Shilmandi Government Primary School polling station, the Munshiganj District correspondent of the daily Shokaler Khabor (who is also associated with Odhikar), Arafatuzzaman, was wounded in the head, as the supporters of the AL-nominated candidate hit him with a pistol.<sup>39</sup>



*Supporters of the AL-nominated candidate hit the District correspondent of the daily Shokaler Khabor (who is also associated with Odhikar), Arafatuzzaman with a pistol while gathering information in the Purba Shilmandi Government Primary School polling centre in Munshiganj. Photo: collected.*

At around 11:00 am, supporters of the AL-nominated Mayoral candidate Foysal Ahmed Biplob was locked in altercation, including exchange of gunshots with the supporters of the councilor candidate, Makbul Hossain, who was being patronised by the local MP from the AL, Mrinal Kanti Das. The incidents occurred at Hatlakshmigaj and Idrakpur polling stations. At around 1:00 pm, the Munshiganj High School polling station witnessed outsiders standing in queue and casting fake votes on one hand and valid voters being intimidated in public, into voting for the AL-nominated Mayoral candidate.<sup>40</sup>



*A youth holding pistol while gunfight between supporters of the AL-nominated Mayoral candidate Foysal Ahmed Biplob and the supporters of the Councilor candidate, Makbul Hossain in Munshiganj. Photo: collected.*

<sup>39</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Munshiganj

<sup>40</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Narayanganj; Also found in the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015

## Matlab Municipality

Until 8:15 am, the electoral environment was quite normal at the Matlabganj J B Pilot High School polling station, with voters queueing up in front of the polling booths to vote. An on-duty police sub-inspector, Zinnah said that, as he was from Rangamati and knew none there there was no scope for polling rigging. However, the situation altered within an hour when the supporters of the AL-nominated candidate took control of the polling station before the very eyes of the police and journalists. When asked about his response to the situation, this time the same police sub-inspector Zinnah said that they were under orders from the police ‘high-ups’.<sup>41</sup>

## Ramgati Municipality

Although the early hours of voting in the Ramgati Municipality were peaceful, allegations of vote rigging in different polling stations against the AL-nominated candidate, Mezbah Uddin Mezu started to emerge from 10:00 am. On-spot investigation found that supporters of the AL-nominated candidate took control of different polling stations in a series of incidents between 10:00 am and 11:30 am and forced out the pollings agents of the BNP-nominated and JP-nominated candidates. They took control of the polling centre at the Alexander Pilot Girls School around 10:00 am, which was followed by ‘capturing’ of the Maddhochar Abdullah Government Primary School at around 11:00 am. They also took over the polling station at the Char Sekender Shafique Academy at around 11:30 am. The polling agents of the candidates nominated by the BNP and JP, who were forced to leave the polling centre, reported that they were ousted when they protested against the AL-nominated candidate’s polling agents intimidating voters into voting for the AL candidates. In an immediate reaction to the incidents, both the BNP candidate and the JP candidate declared their boycott of the elections.<sup>42</sup>

## Choumuhni Municipality

It was only into an hour of the start of voting that the supporters of Akter Hossain Foysal, the AL-nominated candidate, established control over all of the 20 polling stations in the Choumuhni Municipality and started casting fake votes with the assistance of the police and election officials. Allegations of booth capture, vote rigging, grabbing of ballot boxes and violence led to suspension of voting at 10 of the 20 polling stations in the Choumuhni Municipality. The polling stations in which voting was suspended included Uttar Nazirpur Government Primary School, Uttar Nazirpur Noorani Madrassa, Begumganj Pilot High School, Ganipur Government Primary School, Uttar Hajipur Government Primary School, Choumuhni Government S A College (Men), Choumuhni S A College (Women), Maddhom Karimpur Government Primary School (Boys) and Maddhom Karimpur Government Primary School (Girls). Of these polling stations, Ganipur Government Primary School, Uttar Nazirpur Government Primary School, Uttar Nazirpur Noorani Madrassa, Begumganj Pilot High School and Hajipur Government Primary School witnessed clashes over the casting of fake votes Salah Uddin, Mojibul Haque and Bablu Mia, who were voters and BNP activists

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<sup>41</sup>The daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

<sup>42</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Laxmipur; Also found in the daily Manabkantho online, 30/12/2015

from the Uttar Nazirpur, alleged that the AL activists vandalised their houses and business premises before the very eyes of the police in retaliation.<sup>43</sup>

The police allegedly beat a man called Babul and broke his cell phone because of his videorecording of the incidents of booth capture and casting of fake votes. In the afternoon of the election day, counterfoils and ballot papers littered roadsides, the banks of ponds and even graveyards. It was also alleged that the AL candidate's supporters took away the ballot stamp from Booth No. 4 at the Karimpur polling centre at around 10:00 am.<sup>44</sup>



*Ballot papers spreading out on street in the Choumuhni Municipality – Photo: collected.*



*Ballot papers spreading at various places, including dustbin in Choumuhni Municipality – Photo: collected.*

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<sup>43</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Noakhali; Also found in the daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

<sup>44</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Noakhali; Also found in the daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

### **Sandwip Municipality**

By 8:30am, only within half an hour of start of voting, the supporters of the AL-nominated candidate, Jafar Ullah Titu, gathered outside the polling stations at the No. 34 Bouria Government Primary School and Dinbandhu Mustafizur Rahman High School, equipped with weapons and sticks. They had altercations with the BNP-supporting voters when they stopped the BNP-supporting voters from going to the polling station. When it was around 10:00 am, supporters of the AL-nominated candidate forced the polling agents of the BNP-nominated candidate to leave two polling stations housed in the Khademul Islam Madrassa. Although polling agents were present at one or two of the polling stations at the start of voting, no pollings agents of the BNP-nominated candidate were found in any of the polling stations after 10:00 am. The BNP-nominated candidate, Ajmat Ali Bahadur declared his boycott of the elections at 10:45 am, alleging that AL-affiliated outsiders took control of the polling booths before 9:00 am, and stuffed ballots for the boat symbol.<sup>45</sup>

### **Chandanaish Municipality**

The voting process was scheduled to begin at 8:00 am. However, supporters of the AL-nominated candidate, Mahabubul Alam Khoka, reportedly captured eight or nine polling centres at 7:00 am, one hour before the start of voting; and started stuffing ballots into boxes. Massive scale vote rigging led to the returning officer suspending voting at the polling stations at the Gachbaria N G High School in ward-9, Aslatun Choudhury Forkania Madrassa and Uttar Badurpara Primary School in ward-1. The police baton-charged and fired 100 blanks in the air at the Uttar Badurpara Primary School polling centre and outside the Harla Shamabai Primary School polling centre as tension was mounting between the supporters of the AL-nomianted candidate Mahabubul Alam Khoka and supporters of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-nominated candidate Ayub Kutubi. The police also arrested 23 men from both sides.<sup>46</sup>

### **Roujan Municipality**

Ten of the polling stations of this municipality witnessed the activists of local unit of BCL and Juba League and outsiders freely casting fake votes for the AL-nominated Mayor candidate, Debashish Palit. The pollings stations that also went under the control of the supportrs of Debashish before 11:00 am, included Gahira Government Primary School, Gahira Younus Sufia High School, Gahira High School, Sultanpur High School, Nandipara High School, Roujan College.<sup>47</sup>

### **Bhola Municipality**

The observers saw many engaged in the casting of fake votes in eight polling centres, including those housed at the Alia Madrassa in Bhola Sadar Municipality area, Maddho Charnoabad Government School, Town Committee Secondary School, Government Girls School, Jameya Islamia Mohammadia Madrassa while visitng these polling centres between 8:00 am and 12:00 noon. Testifying to the questioned credibility of the elections, a councilor

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<sup>45</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Chittagong; Also found in the daily Manabkantho, 30/12/2015

<sup>46</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Chittagong; Also found in the daily Manabkantho, 31/12/2015, Manabzamin

<sup>47</sup>The daily Manabzain, 31/12/2015

candidate for ward-8 of Bhola Municipality, Helal Uddin (with electoral symbol ‘camel’) shared that he went to the polling centre only to find his vote already cast. He alleged that representatives of his rival candidate had cast fake votes after forcing his polling agents to leave the polling stations. His rival candidate, Atiqur Rahman denied the allegations of ballot stuffing. In Bhola Municipality, Islami Andolon Bangladesh candidate Aatur Rahman Momtaz declared his boycott in writing, to the Returning Officer Subrata Kumar Shikder around 1:30 pm.<sup>48</sup> While explaining his vote boycott he said that massive cast of fake votes by the followers of the AL-nominated candidate forced him to boycott the elections. The chief polling agent of the BNP-nominated candidate (who was also a joint secretary of the Bhola District unit of the BNP) for the Bhola Sadar Municipality, Aminul Islam Khan (who was also a senior vice-president of the Bhola District unit of the BNP) demanded the suspension of voting in a press conference. He also registered a complaint in writing to the returning officer about poll rigging and demand the suspension of voting.<sup>49</sup>

### **Borhanuddin Municipality**

What characterised the six polling stations monitored in the Borhanuddin Municipality, were the presence of a substantial number of voters, many involved in casting fake votes and outsiders gathering around in significant numbers. The monitored polling centres were Ideal School, Office of the Muktiyoddha Sangsad, Abdul Jabbar College, Pourashava Primary School. In one case of fake votes at the Pourashava Primary School in ward-9, the concerned Executive Magistrate Abul Bashar, sentenced an outsider Humayun Kabir to two months in prison. The same polling centre reported the arrest of a woman called Rajubibi (45) by police for casting a fake vote. Another woman Chamirunnessa, who attempted to cast a fake vote, was beaten and turned away. The BNP candidate for the Borhanuddin Municipality, Maniruzzaman Kabir (who was also the general secretary of the Borhanuddin Municipality unit of BNP) demanded suspension of voting in a press conference. He also submitted a written demand to the Returning Officer. While placing his demand for suspension of elections, he complained that the supporters of the AL candidate forced his polling agents to leave almost all polling stations within half an hour of the start of voting. He also alleged that when voters who support him went to the polling booths, the AL men grabbed their ballot papers and stamped on the electoral symbol (boat) for the AL candidate.<sup>50</sup>

### **Kolapara Municipality**

Odhikar collected electoral information from eight of nine polling stations in the Kolapara Municipality, housed in the Khepupara Model Secondary School, Kolapara Women’s Degree College, Rahmatpur K G A Government Primary School, Khepupara Secondary Girls School, Rajendra Prasad Government Primary School, Upazila (Sub-district) Livestock Development Centre, Khepupara Nessaruddin Fazil Madrassa and Mojahar Uddin Biswas Degree College.

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<sup>48</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Bhola; Also found in <http://www.lalmohanbdnews.com/2312/>

<sup>49</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Bhola; Also found in <http://www.lalmohanbdnews.com/2312/>

<sup>50</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Bhola; Also found in <http://www.lalmohanbdnews.com/2312/>



*A supporter of the AL candidate taking ballot papers from the Presiding Officer's room at the Mojahar Uddin Degree College in Kolapara Municipality. – Pjphoto: collected.*

The scene of the polling station at the Mojahar Uddin Degree College at around 9:00 am, took a turn when an agent of the AL candidate, Kamal Bepari, continued grabbing ballots from voters and stamping them with the boat symbol (of the AL candidate) and the assistant presiding officer G M Nazrul Islam intimidated the voters before the very eyes of the law enforcers including RAB, the BGB, Armed Police, police and a mobile court led by an Executive Magistrate, all responsible for free, fair and credible elections; and a group of journalists coming from Patuakhali district headquarters. While these were happening at Booth No. 2, hundreds of voters were in queue to cast their votes. What was notable was the quiet departure of the law enforcers after 20 minutes of their silent stay, clearing the way for the AL supporters to fall upon the general voters. In their sudden attack, the voters left their queues and scattered in different directions. What followed were physical attacks on the polling agents of different mayoral and councilor candidates other than the AL-nominated mayoral candidate and councilor candidates affiliated with the AL. Though they initially tried to fight back, they had to leave the polling station. A women voter, Nazma Begum, who entered the polling booth at the time of the booth capture, was turned away by the supporters of the AL-nominated mayoral candidate and AL-affiliated councilor candidates. The AL supporters also assaulted the women voters who protested against the AL men for turning Nazma away from the polling booth.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Patuakhali



*Female voters are forcibly ousted by the ruling party activists from Mojahar Uddin Degree College polling centre in Kolapara Municipality. Photo: collected.*

Then the AL men established their complete control over the polling centre by forcing the journalists to leave. The Patuakhali District Correspondent of Channel I (a satellite TV channel), Enayetur Rahman was forced to leave the polling centre when he was going to photograph the booth capture. What happened behind closed doors in the room of the presiding officer G M Nazrul Islam was ballot stuffing by the supporters of the AL candidate, with the law enforcers keeping their distance apparently to endorse what was happening. Even though the law enforcers got back to the polling station half an hour later, the AL candidate's supporters still continued their grip on the polling station. More interestingly, while the law enforcers were apparently on duty outside the polling station, ballot stuffing continued unchecked inside the polling booths.<sup>52</sup>



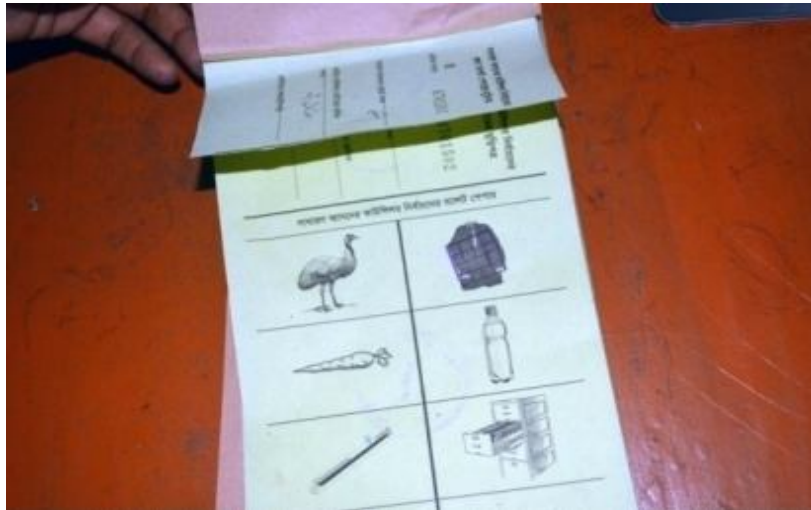
*Supporter of the ruling party stuffing ballots in favour of the AL-nominated Councilor candidate at Khepupara Nessaruddin Fazil Madrassa polling centre in Kolapara Municipality. – Photo: collected*

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid



While going back home after the panic created by attacks from the AL supporters, one woman voter, Shahida Akter said, “It has been a mockery of an election. I could not exercise my voting right”. Another aggrieved voter, Shafiqul Haolader who was one of those who were intimidated into leaving the polling centre, said, “If they wanted such elections, we should have been told before so that we need not have come here by leaving our work”. However, quite opposite to what the evidence suggested, the presiding officer of the polling station number 9, Suman Chandra Debnath said, “We find no irregularities. Voting is progressing in a fair manner”.<sup>53</sup>



*Stamped ballots in favour of the AL-nominated Councilor candidate found in booth numbered 3 in Khepupara Nessaruddin Fazil Madrassa polling centre in Kolapara Municipality. Photo: collected.*

As soon as a micro-bus carrying journalists reached the polling station at the Upazila Livestock Department in ward-6 at around 10:00 am, a group of BCL men, supported by the Patuakhali District unit of the AL, told the journalists that they had better visit center 7 because, as they said that voting has ended. Some people were seen stamping ballots for the AL-nominated mayoral candidate and a councilor candidate supported by the AL. One voter, Nurul Haque, who could not cast his vote and was leaving the polling station, said in frustration, “Strange voting! journalists, have you ever witnessed such elections?”. The supporters of the AL-nominated candidate continued to take control of the remaining eight polling stations in the same manner.<sup>54</sup>

### **Kuakata Municipality**

At least 20 people were reported injured in clashes over grabbing and breaking ballot boxes in the Panjupara polling station in ward-8 of the Kuakata Municipality. Activists of the AL, BNP and JP were involved in these clashes that left seven BNP men, including BNP candidate’s polling agent Shirina Begum, Habibur Rahman and Shahin. To restore control over the situation, the police fired 25 blanks in the air. To avoid further clashes, the BEC stopped voting at the Panjupara polling station. The JP-nominated mayoral candidate, Anowar Hossain Haolader, accused the AL-nominated candidate, Abdul Barek Molla of vote robbery. He demanded re-elections to the Kuakata Municipality in a press conference. When

<sup>53</sup> Ibid

<sup>54</sup> Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Patuakhali

his attention was drawn to the situation, the returning officer of the Kuakata Municipality elections, Nazmul Kabir said that voting had been stopped as directed by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC).<sup>55</sup>



*Criminals vandalised ballot boxes in the Panjupara polling station in ward-8 of the Kuakata Municipality.  
Photo: collected.*

### **Narail Municipality**

Despite a peaceful start of voting at 8:00 am, the temperature of the electoral environment began to rise at around 10:30 am, when rival candidates brought allegations of the election officials and administration cooperating with supporters of the ruling party candidates in their involvement in incidents of booth capture and casting fake votes. At around 11:00 am, a mobile court arrested four polling agents at the Narail Technical School and College polling station, for influencing voters inside the polling station; and sentenced each of them to six months in prison. One of the polling agents was representing the AL candidate, one was a polling agent of the Workers Party candidate while two others were working as polling agents for two different councilor candidates. At the same time, the mobile court also arrested two other polling agents of the AL candidate from Machimdia Government Primary School and one polling agent of the same candidate from Rupganj Secondary Girls School and sentenced all to six months in prison. Allegations of control of polling stations at the Rorashula Shishusadan Complex, Technical School and College, Dumurtola Government Primary School and Narail Government Women's College and casting fake votes at around 2:00 pm, were brought against the AL-nominated candidate. Unavailability of ballots in the abovementioned polling stations after 2:00 pm testified to the allegations. However, voting for the councilor candidates continued even after 2:00 pm. The independent candidate, Advocate Sohrab Hossain Biswas, who was a rebel candidate in the elections from the AL,

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid

declared his boycott of the elections for alleged poll rigging by the AL-nominated candidate.<sup>56</sup>

### **Kalia Municipality**

As early as 6:00 am on the election day, there were allegations of violence around the outside of the polling centres to intimidate voters, take control of the polling centres and cast fake votes. At around 6.30 in the early morning, a commotion and sound of 8 to 10 gunshots were heard in Purba Kalia. Before the start of voting at 8:00 am, a group of AL leaders and followers entered the polling station at the Purba Kalia Government Primary School and tried to stuff ballot boxes. To spread panic among the people to keep them from voting, the AL men fired a few rounds of gunshots. A mobile court came in at a later stage to arrest two and sentence them to two months in prison. The AL men became agitated at the operation of the mobile court. When the situation went out of control, voting at the polling station was declared stopped. At around 9:00 am, the BNP-nominated candidate, Wahiduzzaman Milu declared his boycott of the elections. Clashes then erupted around 10:00 am over casting of fake votes, between supporters of the AL-nominated candidate and AL-rebel candidate. This left two agents of councilor candidates injured. The incidents led to suspension of voting at this polling centre from 11:00 am to 12:00 noon. In a press conference organised at around 3:00 pm, the AL-nominated candidate Wahiduzzaman Hira boycotted elections, alleging that the local MP from the AL, Kabirul Haque Mukti was patronising the AL-rebel candidate and was involved in poll rigging to get him elected.<sup>57</sup>

### **Jessore Municipality**

Although voting started at 8:00 am, the followers and supporters of the AL-nominated candidate took control of several of the polling stations of the Jessore Sadar Municipality at around 7:00 am. The polling stations in which they established their control included Zila School, Government M M College, Raipara Government Primary School, Railway Station Government Primary School, Barandipara Government Primary School, Jessore Institute Government Primary School, Abdus Samad Memorial, Police Lines Secondary School and Khoyertola Secondary School. It was reported that around 8:00 am filled ballot boxes were recovered from the polling stations at the Government M M College, Shebasangha Secondary Girls School, Alia Madrassa and Barandipara Madrassa. The boxes were allegedly stuffed with ballots on the eve of the election or in the early hours of the election day. The general secretary of the Jessore District unit of the BNP, Advocate Syed Saberul Haque Sabu alleged the agents of the BNP-nominated candidate were forced to leave the polling stations before voting started.<sup>58</sup> A private satellite TV station, Independent, aired a video of assistant presiding officers taking filled in ballot boxes from the room of the presiding officer to the three polling booths. At around 11:00 am, conflict over booth capture reportedly led to a series of hand bomb blasts at the polling stations at Shankarpur Primary School, Golam Hossain Patel Primary School and Alhaji Matiur Rahman Alim Madrassa. Violence in these

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<sup>56</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Narail; Also found in the daily Prothom Alo, 30/12/2015 (online)

<sup>57</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Narail; Also found in the daily Prothom Alo online, 30/12/2015; and the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015

<sup>58</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Jessore; Also found in the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015; the daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

polling places resulted in suspension of voting for an hour. Due to the supply of ballots being exhausted, voting was declared closed at around 11:30am at many of the polling stations including Government M M College, Doctor Abdur Razzaque College, Shebasangha Girls School and Institute Government Primary School. Because of their protesting against the casting of fake votes, the police arrested Rumana, a woman polling agent of the BNP-nominated mayoral candidate, from Zila School and Maniruzzaman Masum, a councilor candidate and BNP leader, from Jessore M S T P Girls High School.<sup>59</sup>



*Snatching ballots in the Police Lines Secondary School polling centre in Jessore. Photo: collected.*

### **Kotchandpur Municipality**

At around 10:00 am, the BGB reportedly seized 300 ballots, all stamped with symbols of boat (symbol for AL candidate), from Kotchandpur Dudhchora Primary School polling stations. At around 2:00 pm, they also seized another 50 ballots, stamped with the same symbol, from Akh Centre. The ballots were seized while being stuffed into ballot boxes.<sup>60</sup>



*The electoral officials cancelled ballots stamped with symbols of boat collected from Kotchandpur Dudhchora Primary School polling station. Photo: collected.*

<sup>59</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Jessore; Also found in the daily Naya Diganta, 31/12/2015; the daily Manabzamin, 31/12/2015

<sup>60</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Jhenaidah; amadershomoy.com, 30/12/2015 (online)

## **Shoilkupa Municipality**

Electoral information were gathered from 10 of 15 polling stations in the Shoilkupa Municipality. The monitored polling stations included Khulna Bazar Government Primary School, Lolit Mohan Bhuiyan Primary School, Satgachi Government Primary School, Jhaodia Government Primary School, Shahi Masjid Government Primary School, Shoilkupa Pilot Girls High School, No. 18 Shoilkupa Government Primary School, Shoilkupa Government Degree College, Ananto Badalsho Government Primary School, Khalkula Community Primary School and Kabirpur Secondary School and Resource Centre. In none of the abovementioned polling centres, the monitors did not find any polling agents of the BNP-nominated candidates. The voters and rival candidates alleged that agents of the ruling party candidate were forcing voters into casting their votes for the AL candidate. It was alleged that Rajib Hassan, the son of the AL candidate Kazi Ashraf Azam forced himself into a polling booth at Kabirpur City College and stuffed all the boxes with ballots. Supporters of the councilor candidates Nazim Uddin and Abdus Sabur were locked in altercations at the Lolit Mohan Bhuiyan School polling centre at around 8:30am. The BNP-nominated mayoral candidate, Khalilur Rahman submitted an application in writing to the Upazila Nirbahi Officer (the Chief Executive Officer at the Sub-district level) at around 12:00 pm, demanding suspension of voting and re-elections to the municipality.<sup>61</sup>

## **Naohata Municipality**

Between 2:45 pm and 3:00 pm, two followers of the AL-nominated mayoral candidate Abdul Bari, organising secretary of the Naohata Municipality unit of the Juba League (youth wing of the AL), Joynal Abedin and his nephew seized control of the polling station at the Bhuiroil Government Primary School by forcing the voters to leave the area. In spite of the RAB and BGB taking control of the polling station within 20 minutes, they continued intimidating voters outside the polling station.<sup>62</sup>

## **Sujanagar Municipality**

Supporters of the AL-nominated candidate allegedly tried to take control of the polling stations at the Charbhabanipur Primary School, Bhabanipur Maddhopara, Sujanagar Model High School, Sujanagar N A College and Niogir Bongran. Supporters of the AL-nominated candidate Abdul Wahab, BNP-nominated candidate Azam Biswas and independent candidate Tofazzal Hossain (who is also a rebel-candidate from the AL) got involved in clashes at the Charbhabanipur Primary School. The clashes also involved gunshots and hand bomb explosions. At least 10 were injured in the incidents. One of those injured, Delowar, who was severely injured, was sent to the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital. The police and RAB arrested a few in connection with the incidents.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Jhenaidah; Also found in the Inquilab online, 30/12/2015

<sup>62</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Rajshahi

<sup>63</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Pabna; Also found in <http://www.jugantor.com/old/current-news/2015/12/30/32066>



*A violent altercation in Bhabanipur Primary Schoiol polling centre in Sujanajar Municipality under Pabna District. Photo: collected.*



*Police and RAB arrested some criminals from the Bhabanipur Primary Schoiol polling centre in Sujanajar Municipality. Photo: collected*

### **Sirajganj Municipality**

Chak Kobdaspara Government Primary School polling centre in Siranganj Municipality allegedly saw supporters of the AL-nominated candidate, Syed Abdur Rauf Mukta, cast fake votes. Many of the voters went to the polling centre but many found that their were votes already cast. The AL candidate’s supporters allegedly forced Advocate Mir Ruhul Amin, the chief polling agent of the BNP candidate, Advocate Mokaddes Ali, to leave the polling station at around 11:00 am. Amin alledged that the voters got ballots to vote for councilor candidates, but they were not provided with ballots for the mayoral candidates.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup>Report of a human rights defender affiliated with Odhikar from Sirajganj



*Advocate Mir Ruhul Amin, the chief polling agent of the BNP candidate, Advocate Mokaddes Ali, was attacked by the AL supporters and vandalised his car. Photo: collected.*

## Post-election situation

### *Unusual voter turnout*

Analysis of election results published by the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) show that 207 municipalities have seen a 73.92% turnout of voters in average. While five municipalities have recorded a voter turnout of above 90% in 74 municipalities have shown more than an 80% voter turnout. According to the election experts, the rates of voter turnout made public by the BEC appear unusual. According to them, the voter turnout in local body elections should range from 60% to 65%. Reflecting on experiences from previous elections, they commented that no elections to the local bodies in the past saw such a high level of voter turnout.<sup>65</sup>

### *Post-election violence*

When ballot counting was in progress on the night after the polls and news of councilor candidate Mayeen Udding Liton being ahead of his rival in the Hajipur Fazil Madrassa polling centre in Choumuhani Municipality vote count, went viral, a group of miscreants opened fire on Mayeen Uddin Liton and his supporters. At least 50 were injured as the criminals beat and stabbed them.<sup>66</sup> Supporters of the Councilor candidate Aman Ullah attacked the houses belonging to the activists and supporters of another Councilor candidate of Shalukia Village after the declaration of polling results in Borura Municipality under Comilla District. A few people were injured during this incident.<sup>67</sup>

## Holding of postponed elections

On January 12, 2016, re-elections to the municipalities where elections had been postponed, were held. These municipalities included Ulipur, Thakurgaon, Syedpur in Nilphamary District, Kalkini in Madaripur District, Madhabdi in Narshingdi District and some polling centres in the Barguna Municipality. Re-elections at the polling centres where voting was

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<sup>65</sup>The daily Manabzamin, 01/01/2016

<sup>66</sup>The daily Manabzamin, 01/01/2016

<sup>67</sup> The daily Manabzamin, 01/01/2016

suspended earlier, met again with booth capture, fake votes and hand bomb blasts even in the presence of the officials from the Election Commission. Violence and irregularities led to the postponement of voting at the polling centres for the second time.<sup>68</sup>

Despite the presence of a Magistrate in each of the 12 polling stations and eight officials from the Election Commission, re-elections to the Madhabdi Municipality in Narshingdi District, which was held on 12 January, was marked again by similar incidents of booth capture and outsiders stuffing ballot boxes. At around 10:30 am, after a joint secretary of the BEC, Mihir Sarwar Morshed, left the SP Institute polling centre after his visit, the AL-nominated mayoral candidate, Mosharraf Hossain and his supporters entered into the polling booths, chanting slogans for his electoral symbol and continued ballot stuffing. In the presence of the BGB and RAB on patrol, incidents of hand bomb explosion occurred early in the afternoon at the Choto Madhabdi Private Madrassa and Fazlul Karim Master Kindergarten. The violent incidents led to the postponement of voting at the Choto Madhabdi Private Madrassa around 4.30 pm, only half an hour before polls ended.<sup>69</sup>

Re-elections to the Kalkini Municipality in Madariour District was allegedly marred by the huge number of fake votes cast by the supporters of the AL-nominated candidate at the Kastgorh Government Primary School polling centre in ward-1 and Jonardondi Government Primary School polling centre in ward-8. Notably, elections to these polling stations were earlier postponed allegedly due to stamping ballots for the AL candidates on the night before the election day.<sup>70</sup>

Re-elections were held in 10 of the polling stations in the Choumuhni Municipality in Begumganj Upazila in the Noakhali District. Of the 10 polling centres, the Dakkhin Nazirpur Government Primary School polling station met with postponement of voting for a second time allegedly due to fake vote cast by the supporters of the AL candidate. What led to the voting postponement were a series of hand bomb blasts and ten of the BNP men being injured in attacks by AL men.<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusions

Most of the electoral violence and irregularities was introduced by the former military autocrat, Lieutenant General Hussain Mohammad Ershad, in the form of vote robbery and snatching ballot boxes. However, this was left behind with the introduction of a transparent and popularly accepted electoral system of a non-partisan interim government called Caretaker Government (CTG) system, after Ershad was overthrown in a popular upsurge in December 1990. However, the AL government pushed the country towards an extremely conflicting situation by scrapping the CTG system unilaterally through the 15th amendment to the Constitution, clearing the way for next parliamentary elections to be held under an incumbent government. The cancellation of the CTG system led to the widely flawed and disputed (which many political commentators have called 'failed') parliamentary elections

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<sup>68</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 13/01/2016

<sup>69</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 13/01/2016

<sup>70</sup>The daily Prothom Alo, 13/01/2016

<sup>71</sup>The daily Jugantor, 13/01/2016



held under the ruling AL-led government, despite boycott of elections by major opposition political parties including the BNP, who were demanding reinstatement of the CTG system. The Upazila Parishad (Sub-district level local government) elections of 2014, City Corporation Elections of 2015 and the municipality elections that followed witnessed wide scale irregularities, poll rigging and electoral violence. By staging such elections, the government and the election commission have caused severe damage to the democratic system and overlooked people's participation in the elections to the local government bodies. Odhikar maintains that it is the constitutional responsibility of the Bangladesh Election Commission to ensure transparent, free and fair elections. However, the BEC itself has put itself in the dock by displaying its loyalty to the ruling party in contravention of its constitutional oath to hold elections in an unbiased, orderly and peaceful manner that ensures unhindered participation of the electorate and all legitimate political parties. Odhikar considers it absolutely imperative to constitute a new Election Commission to replace the present Commission. From Odhikar's perspective, the potential new Election Commission should work independent of the ruling party and exercise all its Constitutional powers to ensure that the electorate can freely elect their representatives. Odhikar also believes that holding parliamentary elections with the participation of all political parties in a shortest possible time may be the best way to repairing the damage done to the democratic system of the country.