

Focus 88 – **5 DAYS IN LIFE In the World's Fifth Largest Democracy**

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Abstract

This text describes Madalena Casaca's (the writer) and Paulo Resendes' (the photographer) stay in Bangladesh, the world's fifth largest democracy, from 02 to 08.01.24, that is on the runup to the nation's Twelfth National Elections and on election day. We travelled to Dhaka as Election Observers, with the mission to observe both electoral procedures and the general pre-election environment [and this to the best of our abilities]. We were part of SADF's Observation Team, yet this article is not an official report. It's more of an observational account of the five days we stayed in the country's capital.

1. A Glimpse of the bureaucracy
2. A Glimpse of the Streets
3. A Glimpse of Student Politics
4. A Glimpse of Official Communication and the Media
5. A Glimpse of Election Day

Keywords

Bangladesh, Bangladeshi Elections 2024, Election Observers, Dhaka, Bangladesh Student Politics, Daily Star, Genuine Elections

1. A Glimpse of the Bureaucracy

We travel from Lisbon to Dhaka, via Dubai. When we arrive at Dhaka airport on 02.01.24, around 4PM, SADF had applied to be present as an Election Observation Team for over two months. Yet we had only received our visas 3 days prior, and still had no [supposedly mandatory] Election Observer Accreditation Cards. These Accreditation Cards are needed for us in our official capacity, no less regarding the freedom to record at will everything we see and hear.

Table 1 – A short timeline of bureaucratic hassles

The visa saga (excerpts of a timeline)	
07.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We are told that the Election Commission will shortly issue [Official Election Observer] Accreditation Cards. We are told to apply for our visas <i>after</i> that. ➤ We are transmitted the EC Guidelines regarding the type of visa we must apply for a T [tourist] visa (point 5.14 of the Guidelines). No diplomatic protection.
14.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We are told to apply for visas <i>immediately</i>, without Accreditation Cards. We are provided with the name of a hotel – the Pan Pacific Sonargaon.
17.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We receive a pdf with our data as staying at the Pan Pacific. ➤ We are told air tickets are not needed for us to get a visa. This is not the case. Luckily, we already have our tickets.
18.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We go to the Embassy with all the necessary papers and forms. We are told we'll receive our visas on the 26th.
26.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Embassy in Lisbon refuses to give us our visas. We are told a T Visa is out of the question. We are also told to get an Accreditation Card before we apply again.
27.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ We receive an email from the EC with a standard information form regarding our Election Observation stay to be filled and presented at the airport. ➤ We are told we'll get our Accreditation Cards at the airport. It remains unclear how to get our visas without them. ➤ The hotel is changed to the Lakeshore Hotel
28.12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The hotel is changed to the Pacific Sonargaon

29.12 (*the very last possible day for us to get our visas*)

- We forward the EC's email with the form to be filled to the Lisbon Embassy. Clearly some internal communication then takes place.
- We receive a direct call from the Lisbon Embassy confirming we'll receive our visas.
- We must fill the EC information form a second time. We spend 45 minutes on various papers.
- At the very last minute, we receive our visas. No accreditation Cards yet.

Note: Information gathered by the author from sharing in a WhatsApp group and from personal experience.



Note: Posters at the Election Commission desk, Dhaka Airport, 02.01.24. Photos by Paulo Resendes.

We had been told we would be waited for at the airport by the official Electoral Commission desk, that all our Election Observer information would be in the hands on those welcoming us, and that we would receive an [Official Election Observer] Accreditation card right away. Yet when we arrive, we are not on the list of those expected. Our flight number is there, there are people expected on that flight; our names aren't included.

The gentleman at the desk seems torn between the suspicion we are not worthy of his time and the need to be courteous and diplomatic in case we are.

Turns out there are several other lists in his possession, with loads of names on it. We scan through and find our names – on two separate lists. My name has the flight details right next to it.

We are then asked to fill the EC information form [for the third time]. Pictures of our supposedly mandatory pictures are taken. An extensive list of our humble technological gear is made, with all possible details. This all takes about 30 minutes.

[Update on 4.01: SADF Director Paulo Casaca personally travels to the Electoral Commission to pick up our Accreditation Cards. The forms we filled at the airport are not there. No accreditation cards.]

[Update on 05.01: we fill our information forms for the 4th time. A young volunteer from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs takes our forms and pictures and emerges with our Accreditation Cards.]

2. A Glimpse of the Street



Note: Flowers at a Flower Market stand, 03.01.24. Photos by Paulo Resendes.

One major element of election observation according to the [Handbook for European Union Observation](#) (European External Action Service, 2016) is the evaluation of the general pre-election environment. Our hotel, the Pan Pacific Sonargaon, is located next to the Metro station Karwan Bazar. We travel to Shahabag, where the Flower market and the National Museum are located.

The environment is extremely busy and entirely peaceful. We, our western-but-not-expensive-looking clothes, and the cameras around our necks are stared at intensely by many a passerby, but not once are we bothered in any way. We first make a round through the flower market stands. A measure of mutual suspicion is there – some sellers not being particularly fond of our pictures (refusing permission), us being somewhat cautious, believing too much eye-to-eye interaction could have negative consequences. As we go through, we examine the spectacular colours.

After making a round, we start looking for the National Museum. We see a giant gate which we take for the entrance; at closer inspection we realise we were wrong. So we ask the closest flower seller for directions. ‘The National Museum, you say?’ His face lights up. A giant smile appears. He gives us directions, and insists on offering two beautiful red roses. Which is when we fully realize just how proud he is, how safe we are, and how at ease we can be.

From then on, we smile and establish eye contact. We ask to take pictures, but with a new attitude. We are seldom refused. We sometimes point the camera towards various citizens around, scanning reactions (implicit permissions); many citizens laugh and make victory signs; some explicitly ask to be photographed.

Never do we feel intimidation or even unease among citizens in the general environment. Never do we sense any fear whatsoever. Never do we feel any threat. Never do we feel anything but ‘Just Another Day in Dhaka’.



Note: Various bystanders between Karwan Bazar and Shahabag, 03.01.24. Photos by Paulo Resendes (all pictures were taken with explicit permission).

N.B. How to Cross the Street in Dhaka:

1. Look for the less dangerous spot *right now*
2. Get in position
3. Wait for enough other crossers to gather at that position
4. Get into the herd and manage obstacles as fast and swiftly as you can.

Signs of Election Time, however, are everywhere. Posters of various candidates – mostly with the boat symbol of the Awami League – dot various structures. Some streets are dotted throughout.



Note: a walking bridge near Karwan Bazar. Homeless citizens sleep inside.
03.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

We witness three political demonstrations.



Note: a political demonstration outside the National Museum. 03.01.24. Photo
by Paulo Resendes.

The first stands, with an improvised podium, outside the National Museum before its opening (around 10 am). It is provided with loudspeakers, yet these are not being used at the time we're there. The crowd is tiny. Everything around this activity is most peaceful, almost unenthusiastic.

The second form of political expression comprises a small group of young men, perhaps 30, moving throughout a main street near the Museum – and blocking traffic. This is around 10h30 am. It, too, is provided with a loudspeaker, which is used to the fullest possible extent. The sound is deafening. The speech is uninterrupted, and the tone is very-to-extremely aggressive. Strong shouts accompany the procession from within. Some young demonstrators at one point

start shouting at and pushing each other. It all seems like a big deal. In fact, the sound and tone and general mood in that group are so very thunderous that what strikes us, observers, most of all is the complete indifference of everyone around us. We scan faces and expressions looking for signs of support, or spite, or fear, or at least a level of interest – there are none. We witness a New-York-level of I-couldn't-care-less throughout.

The third political gathering occurs around 11h30 am, at Karwan Bazar, just across the street from the Pan Pacific where we are staying. An immobile gathering of some 50 young men at most. Again, general indifference outside the nucleus. No podium, but another very diligent loudspeaker. A couldn't-be-louder speech, but not in an aggressive tone. Many members of the local press are present at this demonstration. As we approach, we are engaged with immediately both by members of the local press and by local supporters. Way is made for us to take direct pictures of the speaker at the centre. One supporter gives his contact information and expresses keen interest in a meeting with an Election Observer group. We are immediately made to understand the speaker is with an opposition force.



Note: a political demonstration by Nurul Haq Nur. 03.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

3. A Glimpse of Student Politics

Turns out the last demonstration we witnessed, the one where local media was present, was by a well-known figure of Bangladeshi politics: Mr. Nurul Haq Nur. We can learn about Mr. Nur on [Wikipedia](#) (Wikipedia, 2024b) and on his [Facebook Page](#) (Nur, 2024a, 1.6 Million followers). Mr. Nur rose to prominence during the 2018 mass student protests against the nation's quota system in public posts. We can learn about those from The Economist's point of view [here](#) (The Economist, 2018); Wikipedia's account can be found [here](#) (Wikipedia, 2024a). The crux of the matter being that beyond pre-assigned quotas for public posts benefitting females, ethnic minorities, and others (26%), 30% of public posts were as of 2018 automatically reserved for descendants of Freedom Fighters. 'Students, who have been agitating for reform since February, want 90% of public posts to be awarded

on merit’ (The Economist, 2018). Mr. Nur was elected vice president of Dhaka University in the DUCSU (Dhaka University Central Student's Union) at this time. In 2021 Mr. Nur created a political party called ‘Gana Odhikar Parishad’ (GOP; People Rights Council in English). In the 12th National Elections, Mr. Nur sides with the opposition, calling for a caretaker government and boycotting elections.

We arrange an official meeting with SADF Director for the evening of 04.01.

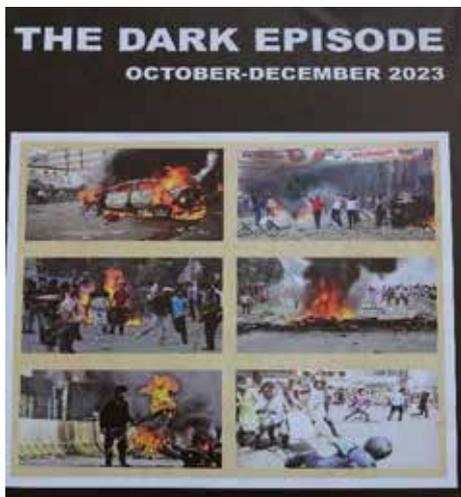


Note: Posters across a department at Dhaka University. 04.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

On the morning of 04.01, we again take the metro from Karwan Bazar, this time to Dhaka University. We never get to find the University itself – not only because the campus is huge, but also because we also stumble across the start of a massive student political demonstration supporting the Awami League.

Awami League supporters clearly dominate Dhaka University – or at least the buildings and sections closest to the metro station. Giant Posters of Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Mujib and a young Awami League candidate literally cover the front of a whole department. Posters with graphic depictions of violence dot the entrance of that department and the yard in front of it.

Note (pictures below): Posters outside of the department at Dhaka University. 04.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.





We arrive at 9h30 am. As we walk along the streets, we merge into an enormous, gradually increasing student demonstration in support of the Awami League. The loudspeakers – duly attached to electricity posts up high – create a sound level so high we can hardly hear our own thoughts. Although the songs and chants accompanying intercalating with the speakers clearly suggest a highly organized, symbolic political demonstration, we only begin to understand the true scale of the event as we are leaving, around 12h00 am. Unlike the opposition gatherings we had witnessed, this activity involves many hundreds of citizens – and is clearly provided for in terms of space and infrastructure. We have to leave early both because we are needed elsewhere and because the metro stops its operations around 12; we regret not to have witnessed the true impact of this huge event.

On our way towards the garden where the official action is taking place, we see many workers (don't look like students) painting walls – symbols of Bangladesh, of the Awami League, phrases in Bengali. Among all this, freshly painted, in English: 'I have never seen the Himalayas, but I have seen Sheikh Mujib and Fidel Castro'. This reminds us that Sheikh Mujib himself met Gandhi when the first was so young and the latter so older. Together with the many stained-glass murals, we are reminded in no uncertain terms of a whole worldview, a way of living world history.

There is also a huge level of energy – as it should, this being a university campus full of twenty-year-olds. The mood is festive, powerful. Everyone greets us warmly (although some demonstrators, particularly some girls, don't appreciate being photographed at a distance). Already around 10 a large podium has been set up in the main garden; loads of media are present and everything looks very important and very official. More and more groups, each with their own banners and flags and colours, keep pouring in. As time passes, moods energize even further. We are engaged with: 'Joy Bangla!', 'Sheikh Hasina is not alone!', 'Victory to Bangladesh!'. Many a group poses for our pictures. Huge smiles and many pairs of fiery eyes. Young people being young, and fun. With the clear blessing of many a powerholder.



Note: A Student political group at the Dhaka University campus. 04.01.2024.
Photo by Paulo Resendes.



Note: Graffiti's being created, along with the necessary materials, at Dhaka University Campus. 04.01.2024. Photos by Paulo Resendes.



Note: Trying to convey the actual size of these student political groups.
04.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.



Note: An enthusiastic group of students arrives at the main garden where the central political demonstration is being held. Note the giant Awami League political poster. 04.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

Note (pictures below): Three details of the ever-larger student political gathering in support of the Awami League. Huge posters, chariots, and electoral paraphernalia. 04.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.



These are the images and feelings in our minds and spirits at the time of our meeting with Mr. Nur.

We go for the meeting with high expectations. First, we had been told that opposition forces were not interested in talking to election observers, yet Mr. Nur’s supporters couldn’t be more eager to do so. Second, the quick background check we had made on Wikipedia about Mr. Nur also mentioned his being a victim of both police and student violence (Wikipedia, 2024b). Student Politics in Bangladesh have a wide fame of being authoritarian and dysfunctional (e.g. The Economist, 2021); we are eager to hear about this from Mr. Nur. Third, we are eager to hear his side of the story on electoral violence since October 2023. For instance, the supporter who established contact with us at the demonstration on 03.01 reported on Whatsapp that the crowd had been ‘attacked’ and dispersed through violent means, including by police agents in plain clothes.

Unfortunately for our records, Mr. Nur speaks in a very low tone; combined with the piano playing at the Pan Pacific lobby, the audio recording of our interview is quite poor. However, even missing the exact words, it is inescapable that we fail to receive appropriate feedback on any of the issues that interest us. Mr. Nur talks of the need for a caretaker government, of the need to boycott these elections, and of the need to get rid of the current government. He does this in the vaguest terms. We specifically ask about three points: (1) Specifics on the quota scandal; (2) Specifics on governmental misconduct during the elections; (3) Specifics regarding the GOP party’s program. We receive no specific answer whatsoever. Mr. Nur is clearly neither prepared to answer these questions nor interested in answering them. This in spite him being a noted Student Union Leader much involved in politics and according to himself ‘an icon of Bangladesh’s youth’. Again, he tells us of the need to boycott these elections, to which he adds a few phrases about his party’s commitment to ‘true democracy’ and ‘youth involvement’ to renew Bangladesh’s politics.

We explain our interest to receive specific information that can be analysed and fact-checked. Mr. Nur’s supporters show us some social media posts [from afar] with images of violence asking whether that's what we meant. We lend our notes from the EU EOM Handbook in this regard, which are not returned to us at the end of the meeting. Before leaving, Mr. Nur does show us some pictures of himself with UN Representatives and other important figures we fail to recognize.



Note: Mr. Nur's political crew poses with SADF Director Paulo Casaca after their meeting at the Pan Pacific Sonargaon, Dhaka. 04.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

After the meeting, we search Mr. Nur's Facebook page for an account of the demonstration we had witnessed the day before. The pictures on Facebook show a much larger crowd than that we had seen (we were only there for about 15 minutes). There is no visual record of violence or intimidation. The text, in Bangla and translated by Facebook itself, is as follows (Nur, 2024b):

In today's road meeting in front of Bangla Motor Rupayan Tower and at Karwan Bazar (...)

As part of the mass connection programme demanding unilateral election boycott and neutral government, Public Rights Council [GOP] started distribution and leaflets in front of Kauranbazar Petto Bangla at 11:30 pm today, Wednesday, as part of the mass connection programme demanding fair elections.

Awami League leaders, government MPs, ministers are talking about 'suddenly sabha and intelligence'. Government's second highest person (...) Obaidul Qader says BNP has fixed agents to cause secret killings. Police's IGPO talking about sabotage. How will they plan sabotage, secret murder where senior BNP leaders are in jail, unable to walk in public?

IGP-Obaidul Qader sahib is planning secret murders and sabotage by the Awami League; government agencies are already trying to impose responsibility on opposition including BNP. Did you see a few days ago, a letter from DMP to the health department to prepare emergency services, including ambulances, in the hospitals in Dhaka before the Mohanganj Express. *Because they planned a terrible destruction, Allah is protecting. In the same way they planned big sabotage, massacre ahead.* They can kill police, military members as of October 28 in opposition hanging, **reported 4k polling stations will burn. So that the peaceful movement of the opposition can be shown as violence in the international arena by imposing responsibility on opposition including BNP.** The people need to be alert and vigilant.

The government is not allowing the people to get on the streets, the day the people can get on the streets, the mass coup will happen. We will establish democracy in the country by removing this Indian tabeddar government with the people. Appeal to the people, you should boycott this one-sided election to destroy the country of Indian liquor. No one should go to the center to vote on 7th.

Request to the members of the administration and military force not to ban yourself by performing this unilateral election duty. **Europe-America will ban those involved in this one-sided election.**

At the end of the road meeting at the Karwan Bazar junction, mass connection in Hatirpul, Bangla motor areas, public rights council distributed leaflets and also conducted a road meeting in front of the Bangla Motor Rupayan Tower. Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal's election camp workers of Dhaka-12 seat candidate on Iskaton Road to Magbazar after the road meeting. **The attackers also come to the journalists when they try to video the attack.**

4. A Glimpse of Official Communication and the Media

Which brings us to the subject of Official Communications and the Media.

SADF’s contacts and invitation to observe the elections were managed by Citizens Secular Bangladesh, directed by Mr. Tapas Baul. Of course, we were invited on the clear premise that we would be entirely independent and objective in our views. However, we were also invited because SADF Director Paulo Casaca has much experience with violence by the political opposition and is otherwise disposed, for reasons entirely of his own, to understand the motives of Awami League forces. In any case, our contacts not only encouraged us to roam the streets and ‘witness the environment for ourselves’, but also never tried to prevent us from taking any action such as meeting Mr. Nurul Haq Nur.

Mr. Tapas also brings us to [ELCOP](#), Empowerment through Law of the Common People. ELCOP is an NGO specialized in legal matters and organising information about Bangladesh’s socio-economic and political environment with clear ties to the current government. There we receive a short speech on the history of Bangladesh and on the BNP not only fostering violence across the country, but also representing retrograde political forces once allied to Pakistan.

Another source of information provided to all observers is sponsored by the government itself. This includes an official Reception with a wonderful cultural display (dance and music) sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFa) on 05.01 and a Briefing to Election Observers by the Electoral Commission (EC) on 06.01.



Note: Two dancers pose after their show during the MoFa reception. 05.01.2024.
Photo taken by Paulo Resendes.

Both meetings can be said to be ‘politically neutral’ – even as MoFa sponsors the first, and as the Minister of Foreign Affairs makes a short speech. The cultural spectacle is impressive and meant to be so, showcasing the best of Spiritual Bangladesh to foreigners, as is part of every Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ duties. There is much scope to mingle and meet people, although we don’t make the most of that opportunity. We do meet two Dhaka University teachers who note that ‘as long as there is more than one candidate [per polling station], we expect strong competition!’ [Giggles]. A gentleman approaches us later in the evening,

transmitting at length and in a low voice his general views on the current government’s destruction of democracy.

The briefing by the EC is entirely, well, informative. Many media agents are present everywhere. So many media agents are filming everything from every angle that we can’t see (or photograph) most of the PowerPoint slides accompanying the EC Representative’s speech. A glimpse of the information we manage to record is as follows:

Table 2: A glimpse of the information provided by the EC during its briefing to election observers on 05.01.2024

Legal provisions in pre-election times
<p>Constitutional Obligation Article 7A Any person alleged to have committed the offence mentioned in this article shall be sentenced with the highest punishment prescribed for other offences by the existing law</p> <p>Conduct rules violations (PowerPoint) 300 Electoral Inquiry Committees 653 Judicial Magistrates 1965 Executive Mandates</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ 720 Notices ➤ 484 Reports ➤ 51 Cases ➤ 1 candidature cancellation ➤ Tk 3.315.3000 fined. ➤ Penalized 1.051 persons
Voters and candidates
<p>Candidates (PowerPoint)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Parry nominated: 1534. ➤ Independent: 436 ➤ Total: 1970 ➤ Male 1872 ➤ Female 97 ➤ Transgender 1 <p>Participating Political Parties (poster in the main Hall) 28 Male Candidates (poster in the main Hall) 1.872 Female candidates (poster in the main hall Hall) 97 Transgender candidates (poster in the main Hall) 01</p> <p>Eligible voters <u>Male</u> 60.769.741 (dots in wrong place in hall posters) <u>Female</u> 58.918.699 (dots in wrong place in hall posters) <u>Third Gender</u> 849 <u>Total</u> 119.689.289</p>
Polling procedures
<p>Constituencies: 300 Polling Stations: 42.025 (on posters at the hall 42.148)</p>

<p>Ballots on Polling Day 39.054 (92.93%)</p> <p>Returning Officers 66 Assistant Returning Officers 592 Presiding Officers 42.148 Assistant Presiding Officers 261.564 Polling Officers 523.128</p>
Smart election management Bangladesh
<p>[an app where voters can register and follow election updates every two hours]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Vote centre information with google maps. ➤ Voter number ➤ Candidate’s information ➤ Polling updates every 2 hours. ➤ Centre-wise results ➤ Previous election information
Law enforcing agencies.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Police 174.767 ➤ Ansar 514.288 ➤ Rapid Action Battalion 5560 ➤ Bangladesh Air Force (BCG) 44.912 ➤ Coast Guard 2355 ➤ Army 38.154 ➤ Navy 2827
Observers
<p>Local organisations 84 Local individuals 20773 All accredited journalists</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Overseas countries 34 ➤ 4 (OIC, SAARC, FEMBoSA, Commonwealth) ➤ Foreign journalists 76 ➤ Foreign Individuals 126

Note: Information personally gathered during the briefing.

Checking all this information for accuracy demands a wider, in fact as all-encompassing as possible, most thorough background check of electoral events since at least October 2023.

The very strong media presence makes itself well heard. Most questions and answers are in Bengali. There are many. Some observers ask questions about the boycott by the BNP. Overall, for English speakers, the PowerPoint is the most informative piece of the puzzle.

The third direct source of information we come across during our visit occurs on the morning of 06.01, that is, the last day before the elections. One of the team members acquires that day’s edition of Dhaka’s Daily Star daily newspaper. A wide range of terrorist attacks had taken place in the night of 05 to 06.01. That most publicised, the terrorist arson of a train in Dhaka, led to four deaths, many injuries, and what can only be described as psychological terror. We can read on the front page (Daily star, 2024a):

4 killed as moving train ‘set on fire’

‘At least four people were burnt to death and several others were injured as three carriages of Benapole Express went up in flames in the capital's Golapbagh last night. (...) After dousing the flames around 11:00pm, firefighters brought out the bodies that were burned beyond recognition. (...) Video footage given to reporters by an Ansar spokesperson shows the train carriages engulfed in flames and the motionless silhouette of a person at a window. Shaheen Alam, an employee of Dhaka South City Corporation, who was near the scene, said he saw people throwing small children out the windows of the carriages that were on fire.

Then he saw a man stuck while trying to come out of a window. "As I and a few others tried to help him, the man said, 'My wife and child are inside. Please save them first. I am trying to get myself out,' Shaheen told this correspondent. "The moment we tried to open the door, the flames suddenly rose, forcing us to stand back. That man on the window was burnt to death within moments." (...)

The incident takes place at a time when over seven lakh law enforcement members are deployed across the country for the January 7 national election. (...)

Images of mothers throwing their children out of a moving train. Images of people ‘instantly’ burned to death. Images of sacrifices for one’s family. Needless to say, all innocent bystanders. Mental images alone – the newspaper only depicts the train burning from afar. The true dimension of these tragedies is very difficult to fully comprehend.

Had we scrutinised the newspaper further – on page 12 and page 6, quite engulfed in an ocean of other information – we would have learned of many other terrorist happenings between 04 and 06.01. Quoting this article (Daily star, 2024):

At least five schools that are designated polling centres and 10 election camps came under arson attack... No casualties or injuries were reported.

- In Khulna-3, **a security guard of an election camp of AL candidate SM Kamal Hossain was set on fire** at Jogipole area in the city early yesterday. (...) The police officer said the security guard was asleep around 3:00am when two to three unidentified criminals poured kerosene on him and set fire. Police are investigating ...
- In Jamalpur, **at least ten people were injured in a clash between the supporters of two candidates** on Thursday night.
- In Rajshahi, **four schools were torched in three constituencies early yesterday.** (...) Police recovered two crude bombs from Akkelpur High School premises ... Police are investigating ...
- In Feni, **arsonists set fire to the Charshaha Bhikari High School polling centre** in Char Darbesh union under Sonagazi upazila yesterday morning. (...) Some furniture was damaged in the fire... Police were investigating ...
- In Naogaon-5, **at least six election camps of AL candidate Nizam Uddin Jalil were torched** between Thursday night and early yesterday morning.

Istiaq Ahmed Imran, AL candidate's election campaigning coordinator, alleged that supporters of the independent candidate Dewan Sekar Ahmed Shishan carried out the arson attacks. However, Shishan denied the allegation. No police complaints were filed over the incidents until the report was filed last evening.

- In Barguna-1, **two election camps of AL candidate Dharendra Debnath Shambhur were torched ...** Police are trying to trace the criminals...
- In Natore-4, **an election camp of independent candidate Asif Abdullah Bin Quddus was torched...** Police are trying to trace those involved ...

- In Chattogram-15, an election camp of independent candidate **Abdul Motalab** was set on fire at Borohatia union ... "We're looking into the matter and trying to find out the miscreants."



Note: The Daily Star as it falls into our hands on the morning of 06.01.2024.

It's worth noting not only the number of occurrences, the extent of the tragedies – including a police officer soaked in kerosene! – but also that not one culprit had been found at the time of publication. Odd accusations back and forth do not improve the situation. Needless to say, we become nervous. This level and type of violence against innocent citizens is mind-boggling. Yet it is also so recurrent that it doesn't even make front page anymore. This is just staggering.

Before the final section of this article, regarding Election Day itself, we must present a short analysis of the Daily Star's writings on 06.01. We came back and analysed this newspaper after our return. Here is a short, statistical glimpse of what was observed:

Table 4: A statistical analysis/ word count of politically charged newspaper articles found on the Daily Star, 06.01.2024

Total number of articles about political matters: 20

Number of articles one-sidedly criticizing the government: 8

- Three about overall corruption (top-down)
- Two about voter intimidation (bottom-up)
- Two about legal actions against Muhamad Yunus
- 1 op-ed (997 words) about the lack of freedom of speech

Total number of words: 4244 (we assume 500 words for the opinion article by Zonayed Saki, 'Intimidation Tactics Won't Work On Voters' [Saki, 2024], which we couldn't find online).

Number of articles which, while accusing the government of misconduct, mentioned a more cautious view at least once: 9

- 2 criticizing the Election Commission
 - 3 suggesting threats to Awami League candidates in national polls
 - 4 about intricate local politics
- Total number of words: **3466**

Number of articles on ‘neutral topics’: 3

- One about the BNP’s pledge to abstain from aggressivity
 - One about a critic against foreign observers
 - One about the spread of law enforcement units on election day
- Total number of words: **1007**

Number of articles by a supporter of the present electoral setup (quotes by a member of the Election Commission): 1

Total number of words: **200**

Note: information gathered by the author from an analysis of the Daily Star, 06.01.2024 edition, both in paper form and online.

Note be taken of these numbers: in the Daily Star of 06.01.24, we find 4244 words strongly and one-sidedly criticizing the current government – and 4673 words of everything else. If we add articles that still criticize the government, but mention a more cautious point of view at least once, we obtain $4244 + 3466 = 7710$ words.

We must also note the strong language not always, but often used when criticizing the government. Very strong, which a number of grave accusations (not always, but most often not further substantiated). A quick read of critical articles, for example the editorial ‘[Why such lacklustre handling of pre-polls violence?](#)’ (Daily Star, 2024c) is most revealing of the extent of freedom of speech in Dhaka. A quick read of the op-ed ‘[The price we pay with each deleted word](#)’ by Sushmita S. Preetha (Preetha, 2024), a nearly 1000-word article on the emotional trauma created by the lack of free speech, is also informative.

In the entire newspaper we find only one ‘pro-government’, or more accurately ‘quoting EC’s work’, article. 200 words.

5. A Glimpse of the Election Day

And so we come to our election day observations. We observe 10 Polling Stations in Dhaka 10. For each we fill a form provided by the European Union’s Handbook of Election Observation (European External Action service, 2016, pp.198-200). The form is long, and most thorough. It comprises three large sections: (1) on the general environment outside the polling station (is it peaceful? Are there any signs of intimidation? Vote-buying? Unrest? Etc.); (2) on the general set-up inside the polling station (Is there enough space? Enough materials? Adequate privacy? Do Polling agents look well-trained? Etc.); (3) on voting procedures (Is every step duly followed? Is the ballot box well sealed and in plain view? Is there professionalism/automatism in the procedures followed? Are there observers from parties and civil society? Etc.)

(1) On the general environment outside the polling station



Note: A group of transgender voters stands in line to vote in Dhaka 10. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

The environment outside polling stations can only be described as ‘deeply impressive’ and ‘contrary to all expectation’. Entirely peaceful and even, yes, festive – perhaps not by Bangladeshi standards, yet certainly by our own. We witness a deep level of solidarity towards the elderly and those with reduced mobility. We witness what seems like the exact opposite of ‘intimidation’. We witness smiles and even laughs around. We are asked to take selfies with dozens of people. Children are there, and solemnly dressed they are. In a country where prayer calls never fail, loud up high, six times a day, we encounter a large, giggling group of transgender voters. We are deeply inspired by what seems a very, very beautiful display of democratic values and attitudes.



Note: an elector with reduced mobility is helped getting into the polling station; children are part of the event; several citizens are more than happy to take selfies with us and being photographed. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

Again, we do not speak of the background. We are aware of the games of mirrors and illusions everywhere. We can only speak of what we witnessed then and there. Nervousness and fear turned into hope and enthusiasm. Upon our return, and quite by chance (it was on our car playlist as our eldest child did a school dance performance to its sound) we discovered the song to us most aptly translating the 180° surprise and deep emotion we felt on 07.01.2024: [‘Uptown Funk’](#) by Mark Robson and Bruno Mars.

Things are very well organised, too. In a ‘cold’ winter morning, there are few voters before 11 am. But the lines soon form – orderly and peacefully.



Note: A line formed outside a (male voter) polling station. 07.01.2024. Photo taken by Paulo Resendes.



Note: Gathering outside a polling station to register as voters before entering. 07.01.2024. Photo taken by Paulo Resendes.



Note: Rickshaw drivers near a polling station smile at us, engage, and ask to be photographed. 07.01.2024. Photo taken by Paulo Resendes.

(2) General Set-up inside Polling Stations

Inside polling stations, everything is simply top-notch. Every box in our EU handbook form is checked. Every item is there, everything is adequate, everything seems perfectly organised and entirely smooth. Every polling agent seems perfectly prepared and fully synchronized with the team at every polling station. Everything perfectly ordered and fully efficient. There are some security guards, but no more than two or three per row. We are allowed full entrance to every single room, plain view of every single corner, and all possible recording of every single thing we see around us. This, too, deeply impresses us.



Note: Inside of a Polling station. Everything is perfectly illuminated, arranged, and adequate. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.



Note: Three polling agents from three different parties collaborate at each step of the procedure. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.



Note: A voter casts his secret vote in the sealed box in plain view. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

(3) Voting procedures

Perhaps above all, we are impressed by the efficiency of the voting process itself. We are so impressed, in fact, that we film the whole step-by-step procedure at Dhaka 10, Polling Station 12.

- The first step happens when registered voters receive their voter identity 'cards' at home. Voters bring this paper to their Polling Station (according to place of residence).



Note: An example of the voting ‘card’ received at home. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

We were made to notice later in the day some irregularities in the process, such as voters who passed away or are living abroad receiving voter cards they don’t use, hence making them part of the ‘abstention’.



Note: The first step of registration outside a polling station. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

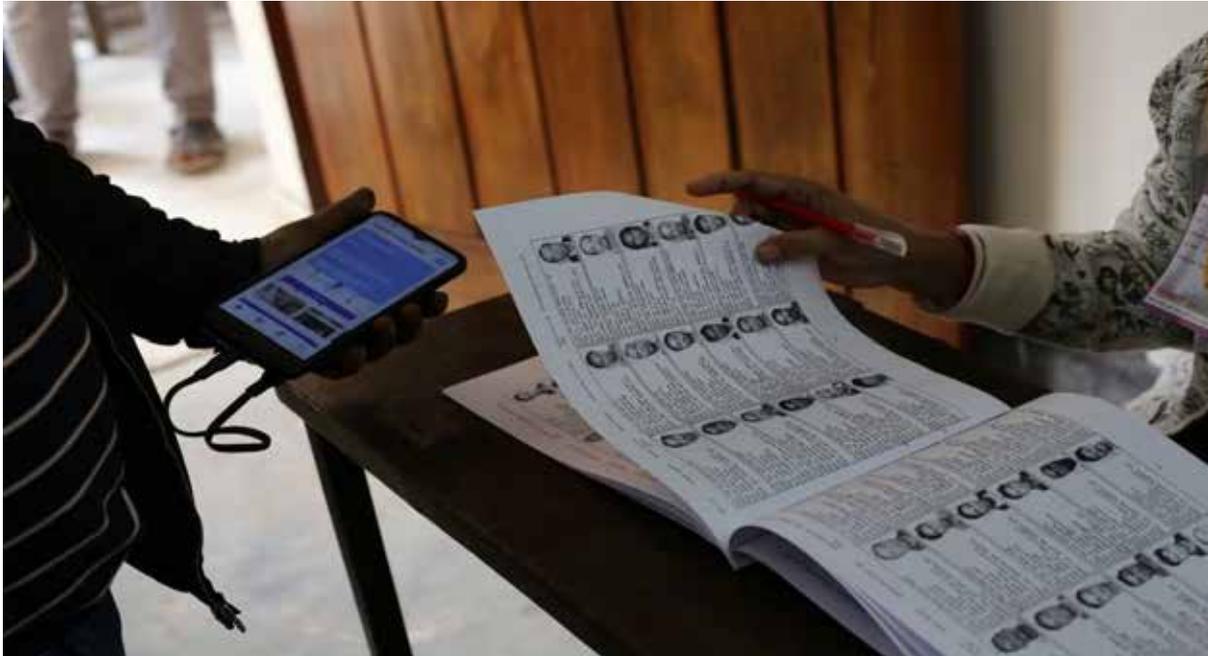
- Provided with this card, citizens can register as voters outside the polling station. They must do this before they get in line to vote. Many a polling agent, mostly very active young men, stand at a large table outside each polling station sorting out voter information and register prior entrance into the polling station.

The process, meant to facilitate the voting process inside the polling station, can seem somewhat cumbersome. It means voter identity is checked twice at each polling station.

In contrast with this traditional bureaucracy, there is the ‘Smart Bangladesh’ voting app. In the words of Apple AppStore (2024):

The Smart Election Management BD app is an informative and trustworthy tool for the citizens of Bangladesh who want to stay updated on the elections. The app allows users to access historical and current data on electoral candidates and associate parties. It also helps users to know about the number of voters related to each constituency and their turnout rate. And if voting is in progress, users may also see brief information about how many votes have been cast at regular intervals.

Furthermore, the app assists the voters to locate their assigned voting centers, view their locations, and see some pictures of their assigned voting centers. Users may also be able to see information related to other voting centers besides their own. Moreover, they will find all the candidates and their election-related information. The Smart Election Management BD app is designed to facilitate the electoral process in Bangladesh and inform the voters with relevant knowledge.



Note: A citizen using Smart Bangladesh to check his voter number as he provides it to the second level of voter identification [inside the polling station].
07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

Citizens have instant access to a wide array of information regarding the election, both at the national level, the regional level, and in each particularly constituency. There are updates every two hours regarding voter participation, again nationally and by circumscription, for instance. This app is used not only by our MoFa volunteer accompanier, a tech-savvy youngster of around 20, but also by Polling Agents themselves. For instance, when we ask the Polling Station's Presiding Officer about the voter turnout at his Polling Station, invariably the app is checked – and very precise numbers are given 'as of 10 am, 12 am, 2 pm', etc. This, too, is frankly impressive.

- In the third step, voters get inside the polling station to actually vote. The following process then unfolds:
 - a) Identity is checked a second time – on a list containing voters' pictures.
 - b) Indelible ink is painted on the voter's left thumb, so that she or he cannot vote twice.
 - c) A print of the voter is taken and marked on the book containing the ballot papers.
 - d) The ballot paper is ripped from the book. The polling agent shows the voter how to fold it so that no one sees what is marked before she or he casts the ballot in the box.

e) A stamp is provided – no writing involved at all.



Note: Identity checked, indelible paint on left thumb; fingerprint and stand on ballot book to account for every ballot. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.

We witness this process, again and again, several times per polling station, in all polling stations. Never is there a glitch whatsoever. We are also made to note that, as per the relevant legislation, polling agents are all drawn from the various political parties represented in the election, so that full ‘observation’ and transparency are guaranteed in the process. This, too, deeply impresses us.

Note (below): A table with polling agents performing each step of the process. 07.01.2024. Photo by Paulo Resendes.



A final note, however, must be made. When questioning the Polling Stations' Presiding Officers, the EU Handbook (European External Action, 2016) requested we asked about previous experience. Three Presiding officers corrected their stated previous experience when asked if it included the last, 2018 elections.

We did not personally witness counting, although others in the SADF Team did – and filmed it.

Election Day was exhilarating, probably for all observers. SADF Director Paulo Casaca was no exception. In the press conference he did later that day, available here, he expressed the view that the process was free and fair. We are unaware of any observer having stated otherwise. SADF Director also mentioned, in response to a question by a BBC Journalist, the soul-drenching horrors of previous violence by the BNP. When asked about the lack of choice in these elections, he mentioned an opinion we fully share – the BNP chose not to participate, thereby reducing democratic choices for all voters.

Conclusion

This article is meant to provide an account of what we witnessed in Dhaka between 02 and 08.01.24. We took a flight back to Lisbon via Dubai at 1am on the 08, so perhaps it would be more accurate to speak of what we witnessed between 02 and 07.01.

We tried to refrain from further interpretations of these events, as SADF's report on the matter is ongoing and we are far from having gathered all the necessary material.

Many of the issues we touch upon – namely bureaucratic hurdles, electoral dynamics between October 2023 and January 2024, the relevance of student politics, and an outlook on political communication in Bangladesh – demand the widest possible further exploration indeed. This is not the place. Our goal was simply to record what we saw, and what we thought, when we were on location.

Recording fleeting impressions, feelings and thoughts. Because these are the most prone to be swiftly forgotten – and because they can be seen as just as important as more ‘abstract’ or ‘academic’ work.

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