

Elections during COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh

Bangladesh Election Commission conducted a good number of parliamentary by-elections and local government elections during March-July 2020 amid COVID 19. The elections have been peaceful with good turnout. BEC set Standard of Operations for the election conducting officials conducive in a pandemic situation.

March was the month when Corona virus diseases started hitting Bangladesh with lot of panic all around and government to ponder as how to handle. By then BEC prepared two sets of Elections: one on March 21 and another on March 29. BEC could make the elections of the first set to happen but could not go for the second set.

Three Parliamentary by-elections: Gaibandha-3, Bagerhat-4 & Dhaka-3 and number local government elections were held on March 21. Voters' turnout of these elections was more than 65% on the average. Electronic Voting Machine was used in the elections of Dhaka-3 constituency. Negative campaign had taken place against the use of EVM with plea that touching a machine by figure would help spread the Corona virus among the voters. It had caused a poor turnout in the elections of this constituency.

The elections of Bogura-1 and Jashore-6 constituencies and that of Chattagram City Corporation and other local government elections were initially scheduled on 29 March 2020. COVID 19 situation in Bangladesh started deteriorating from the 4th week of March. Government by now have shut down the public offices until further order and imposed restrictions on movement of people. The Chief Election Commissioner had to exercise his Constitutional power to postpone elections for a period of 90- days. The BEC has conducted the elections of Bogura-1 & Jashore-6 constituencies on 14 July 2020 at the end of expiry of postponing period though COVID 19 situation was still prevailing. The BEC, however had taken extra precautionary measures for voters, polling staff, polling agents and members of law enforcing agencies such as:-

- a) disinfecting polling booths before starting polls;
- b) polling personnel to hand gloves and face masks while issuing ballot papers;
- c) voters maintain safe distance while casting votes;
- d) arrangement of hand sanitizer for voters before entering the polling booths;
- e) maintaining distances of minimum one meter in the queue and in the polling booths;
- f) deployment of additional staff for managing voter queues;
- g) checking of voters' body temperature on entry to the polling station;
- h) instructional posters regarding awareness of COVID -19 outside of polling booths;
- i) distribution of ballot papers in the morning, so that polling staff needed not to stay in the poll center at night;
- j) polling staff and agents to wear protective equipment; and
- k) Constrained campaigning of the candidates with no rally and mass gathering.

The voter turnout has been 63% and 45% respectively of Jashore-6 and Bogura-1 by-elections.

Photographs



Picture-1: The CEC of Bangladesh K M Nurul Huda holding meeting with the Candidates..



Picture-2: Voters provided with hand sanitizer before entering the polling booth.



Picture-3: Female voters standing in a queue during poll time on 14 July, 2020 maintaining social distance.



Picture-4: Voters on queue maintaining social distance