



A TALE *of* DESPAIR

DOCUMENTING RAJSHAHI CITY ELECTION 2018

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A detailed report by

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City Corporation Election 2018 Series

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1. Introduction

Electioneering began in Rajshahi with the Election Commission announcing the schedule for Rajshahi city corporation election, so did the irregularities.

The mayoral election in Rajshahi was declared to be held on July 30. According to the election schedule announced, the last date for filing nomination was June 28 and withdrawing July 9.

The irregularities started in Rajshahi just after the election date was declared. The incidents of massive irregularities included poster terror, intimidating voters, arresting voting agents of opposition candidates, conducting raids at the home of opposition party leaders and activists by Police, barring opposition party voting agents to enter into the polling stations, stuffing the ballots mostly in favour of ruling party supported mayors, capturing polling centres by driving out opposition party supporters and so on.

The discrepancies in the election results have depicted the result of irregularities well.

But the role of the election commission was the most shocking.

The election commission, amid hundreds of media reports and credible official complaints, did not act accordingly to stop any of the mishaps.

The election of Rajshahi was marred by election irregularities, that resulted in due to the inaction of the election commission.

This document is aimed at providing all the information regarding the Rajshahi City Corporation election of 2018 and to prove that how inept the commission is, in Bangladesh.

2. It started with the campaign

Irregularities in Rajshahi began with the campaign phase. Inferential people, starting from officials of Prime Minister's Office, Mayor of other cities campaigned for the mayoral candidate of Awami League.

Awami League backed mayor candidate Liton spent the far larger amount of money than the prescribed amount of election commission in his campaign.

The election commission did nothing to stop them.

A) PMO official campaigns for AL candidate

In a clear violation of the electoral code of conduct, an official of the Prime Minister's Office took part in the campaign for Awami League's mayoral candidate AHM Khairuzzaman Liton in Rajshahi.¹

As per the electoral rules, Rajshahi Returning Officer Sayed Amirul Islam says, a "very important person" enjoying government benefits cannot participate in the electioneering in any electoral area during the pre-election period.

But Saifuzzaman Shekhor, who is holding a position at the personal wing of the PMO, talked one-on-one with voters in Saheb Bazar area, flanked by other ruling party leaders. Leaflets seeking vote for Liton were also distributed from the group Shekhor was part of.

Before this, he took part in a procession that began from Rajshahi Central Mosque at Saheb Bazar's Zero Point and paraded up to Sonadighi intersection.

A former student leader of Rajshahi University, Shekhor is an assistant personal secretary (APS-II) to the prime minister.

B) Khulna Mayor participates in the campaign

Khulna's newly elected Mayor Talukhder Abdul Khaleque was present during the campaign for Liton.²

But he cannot engage in the electioneering as he had already taken the oath of office on July 5, according to the returning officer.

¹ Polls code violated in Rajshahi, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/polls-code-violated-rajshahi-1610683>

² Polls code violated in Rajshahi, <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/polls-code-violated-rajshahi-1610683>

The Khulna mayor, who had been staying in Rajshahi for over a week, went to different local newspaper offices and took part in several election projection meetings of Liton.

C) Poster terrorism

The election campaign by the ruling Bangladesh Awami League (AL) mayoral candidate eclipsed the campaign of main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) candidate in Rajshahi civic polls.

The posters and banners containing ruling party's election symbol 'boat' are seen everywhere in the city ranging from walls to electric polls to trees while canvassers are crisscrossing the city and seeking votes for boat with numerous public address systems, breaching electoral rules.

City dwellers hardly find posters, festoons and banner containing the election symbol of opposition - sheaf of paddy - in the city.

A Prothom Alo investigation found that some 200,000 posters, and 28,000 festoons and banners of the AL candidate, AHM Khairuzzaman Liton, which have occupied most of over 96-square-kilometre city corporation area, have outstripped the election campaign of BNP's Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul.

Prothom Alo investigation also found that only for the purpose of printing festoons, posters and banners, the AL candidate has already spent three times the total election expenditure a candidate is allowed to do. He also violated the electoral code by printing posters and banners bigger than the approved size.

D) Public Address (PA) system rules violation

A total of five mayoral candidates and 160 councillor candidates are contesting the Rajshahi civic polls and the mayor candidates are allowed to use a single Public Address (PA) system in each of 30 wards.

But AL candidate Khairuzzaman Liton hired as much as 57 PA systems on Sunday for his electioneering in defiance of the electoral rule.³

³ Ruling AL's electioneering eclipses, the opposition's, en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/180283/Ruling-AL's-electioneering-eclipses-the

3. Campaign of intimidation

BNP leaders in Rajshahi alleged that law enforcement agencies were intimidating their party leaders and activists and sometimes arresting them in the campaign trail.⁴

As a part of the larger plan to rig the poll in favour of Awami League, leaders of BNP and affiliated bodies were intimidated, mostly by arresting them and raiding their houses without any charges or warrant.

More interestingly, when they did not find any charge against the activists of some particular area, they filed fake cases against them referring to some fake incidents of violence.

The spate of arrest

- By July 12, at least 18 BNP men, including city BNP Secretary Motiur Rahman Montu, was arrested since the election campaign began on July 10.
- On July 16, in Rajshahi, a group of plainclothes men and some uniformed policemen picked up Mohammad Sazzad, ward 26 BNP president, from his home in Chalkpara area early yesterday, said his brother Mohammad Alam. Besides Sazzad, police picked up Jubo Dal leaders Domon, Bachchu, and Chhatra Dal leader Rana.
- A similar thing happened with Shahriar Khondoker Nayan, a Rajshahi city Jubo Dal activist, was set to be a polling agent for BNP mayoral nominee Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul. A resident of Rajshahi's Pathanpara, he was trained by the party for the purpose.⁵

But a group of plainclothes men, claiming to police, picked him up from Fire Brigade intersection in the city on July 23. Nayan was later produced before a court in a case filed with Pabna Sadar Police Station on January 1.

- Two other Rajshahi BNP men, Jewel Rana of Kedur Mor area and Jahangir Alam of ward 15, were also arrested in the case.

⁴ **City Polls 2018: BNP men allege harassment**, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/city-polls-2018-bnp-men-allege-harassment-1610152>

⁵ **BNP voices concern over police role**, <https://www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/city-polls-2018-bnp-voices-concern-over-cops-role-1611862>

- More to add, with a view to harassing BNP men, the police filed three new cases against BNP leaders and activists, charging them with carrying out explosions and cocktail blasts and planning sabotages.⁶

BNP leaders, however, said there were no cocktail attacks since the announcement of the schedule in the area. They claimed the cases to be false.

- The latest case was filed on Thursday in Rajpara police station. TM Selim Reza, the sub-inspector, is the plaintiff in the case. It is said in the case statement that 15 to 20 BNP leaders and activists secretly held a meeting at Terakhaida cricket grounds allegedly planning a sabotage.

Although he left BNP five years back, Shafiqul Islam, former organising secretary of Rajpara BNP, was accused in the case, according to Prothom Alo investigations.

- Police earlier filed another two cases on 8 and 9 July Kashiadanga police station.

The case statement says, around 150 miscreants gathered in Uttar Math area of Kashiadanga at approximately 3:30 pm on 7 July.

Police in the drive arrested organising secretary of BNP Ward-1, Nurul Islam and former president of Ward-2 Swechchhasebak Dal, Aminul Islam.

Prothom Alo investigation found that a total of 11 BNP leaders and activists were detained from Rajshahi on July 23 night alone. The detainees were then transferred to several police stations -- in Pabna, Natore, Chapainawabganj districts.

- The BNP filed a complaint with the returning officer on July 25, saying 43 leaders and activists of the party were arrested by then. The BNP leaders alleged that the party's potential polling agents and active workers were selectively detained.

As it stands as practice, the opposition men are being detained from different spots of the city and later being transferred to different district police stations.

⁶ **Khulna's cloud hovers over Rajshahi!**, en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/179732/Khulna's-cloud-hovers-over-Rajshahi

- BNP activist Muktar Hossain Bhutto was arrested from Bulonpur Ghoshpara of Rajshahi Saturday night. Another BNP man, Raihan Ali aka Rana, was detained from Sreerampur the same night.⁷

Raihan's brother-in-law Jamal Hossain said, Raihan is a chatpati seller and active in the BNP candidate's campaign. He was picked up from the nearby areas of his home on Monday night. Later it was known that he was in Chapainawabganj jail.

Muktar and Raihan were arrested from Rahampur intersection, claimed sub-inspector Shah Alam, who is in charge of Chapainawabganj Gomostapur police station's Rahampur outpost. They were shown arrested in connection with a local case.

- Tipu Sultan from Dashmar, Mamunur Rashid from Natun Budhpara, and Sabdul Ali, Saiful Islam and Sulaiman from Meherchandi, and Mofizul Islam from Namobhadra were picked up by plainclothes police on Monday night.

They were arrested from Tokiya of Natore, sadar police station officer-in-charge Kazi Jalal Uddin claimed on Tuesday morning. They were shown arrested in connection with three sabotage cases.

- Prothom Alo's Natore correspondent said a number of 11 activists of BNP mayoral candidate were allegedly arrested from Rajshahi and then sent to Natore prison in connection to three old cases. Two of them were denied bail by the Natore Sadar cognising court Wednesday morning. Hearing on others' bail pleas will be carried out Thursday.

⁷ 'Caught in city, shown arrested elsewhere', en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/180466/Caught-in-city-shown-arrested-elsewhere

List of arrested BNP men in Rajshahi

This paper can provide a list of 47 BNP men who were arbitrarily detained by police before the election.

Serial	Name of the victim	Position/Role	Date of arrest
1.	Shahinur Alam Maerfat	Vice President, Dhaka City BNP	26 th July
2.	Shakhwat Hossen Selim	General Secretary, Kapasia Upazila BNP, Gazipur	26 th July
3.	Engineer Tutul	Khilket thana BNP leader	26 th July
4.	Adv. A K M Motiur Rahman Montu	General Secretary, Rajshahi District BNP and Member, Central BNP	21 th July
5.	Moinul Islam Haru	Senior Vice President, Rajshahi Mahanagar Jubodal	20 th July
6.	Joynal Abedin Shibli	9 no. ward BNP Leader	20 th July
7.	Hafezul Islam Appel	General Secretary Rajpara Thana, Rajshahi Mahanagar Chatradal	20 th July
8.	Khandokar Wayesh Kurni Diamond	Joint Secretary, Rajshahi Mahanagar BNP	21 th July
9.	Iftekhar Mahmud Babu	General Secretary 26 no. ward BNP	21 th July
10.	Md. Golam Nabi Golap	President, 6 no. ward Rajshahi Mahanagar BNP	21 th July
11.	Bablu	General Secretary 15 no. ward BNP	21 th July
12.	Md. Yasin Ali	Polling agent	25 th July
13.	Md. Piyal Haydar Abu	Polling agent	25 th July
14.	Jahangir Alam Lavlu	Polling agent	25 th July
15.	Shamim Ahmed	Polling agent	25 th July
16.	Nurnabi Muktar	Polling agent	25 th July
17.	Ibrahim Hossen Bacchu	Polling agent	25 th July
18.	Md. Rana	Polling agent	25 th July
19.	Md. Domen	Polling agent	25 th July
20.	Md. Sazzad Ali	Polling agent	25 th July

Serial	Name of the victim	Position/Role	Date of arrest
21.	Md. Maruf	Polling agent	25 th July
22.	Abul Kashem	Polling agent	25 th July
23.	Al Amin Bidyut	Polling agent	25 th July
24.	Md. Mafiz Uddin	Polling agent	25 th July
25.	Md. Shahriyar Hossen Noyon	Polling agent	25 th July
26.	Md. Jewel	Polling agent	25 th July
27.	Md. Tipu	Polling agent	25 th July
28.	Md. Sabdul	Polling agent	25 th July
29.	Md. Saiful	Polling agent	25 th July
30.	Md. Iqbal	Polling agent	25 th July
31.	Md. Rahat Hossen	Polling agent	25 th July
32.	Md. Babu	Polling agent	25 th July
33.	Md. Manirul Islam Mona	Polling agent	25 th July
34.	Md. Hasnat	Polling agent	25 th July
35.	Md. Sairul	Polling agent	25 th July
36.	Md. Palash	Polling agent	25 th July
37.	Md. Tushar	Polling agent	25 th July
38.	Md. Fazlul Haq	Polling agent	25 th July
39.	Md. Tiya	Polling agent	25 th July
40.	Dildar Hossen Jony	Polling agent	25 th July
41.	Borhan Uddin Liton	Polling agent	25 th July
42.	Md. Meraz	Polling agent	25 th July
43.	Md. Nurul Islam	Polling agent	25 th July
44.	Md. Aminul Islam	Polling agent	25 th July
45.	Md. Sher Ali	Polling agent	25 th July
46.	Abdus Selim	Polling agent	25 th July
47.	Md. Selim	Polling agent	25 th July

4. A day in the mess

The common picture of Rajshahi on the election day was the ruling party supporters or activists wearing badges of boat, the electoral symbol of AL, turned up in huge number and took control of the premises, entrances and even inside of the many polling stations in a gross violation of the electoral law.

This paper can provide a brief overview of what happened on July 30 during Rajshahi City Corporation election.

i) **None but AL agent allowed in the centre**

Shiroil Government High School Centre

Some 15 polling agents of sheaf of paddy, the election symbol of BNP's mayoral candidate were stopped entering a polling station at ward No 21 in Rajshahi City Corporation, alleged the chief polling agent of Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) Tofazzal Hossain.

"All of our agents reached the centre by 7:30 am. They were stopped from entering the polling booth. I am waiting for about one hour, still not allowed to enter the centre even after requesting the presiding officer," Tofazzal told Prothom Alo. The incident took place at the polling station of Shiroil Government High School in Ward No 21 of Rajshahi city.⁸

When asked, presiding officer Bajendra Nath Sarker told Prothom Alo that the agents of BNP candidate did reach the polling station on time. "We allowed agents till 8:00 am. We cannot allow them to enter the centre after 8:00 am," Sarker defended.

ii) **Vote 'only for AL'**

Women Sports Complex Centre

No polling agent except an agent of boat, election symbol of ruling Awami League, was allowed to enter the voting centre in Women Sports Complex of ward No 3 in Bil Simla area, Prothom Alo came to know.

⁸ 'BNP agents not allowed in 2 Rajshahi polling stations',
<https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/180689/'BNP-agents-not-allowed-in-2-Rajshahi-polling>

iii) Journalists barred by police from covering rigging

Upashahar Model Government Primary School Centre

At Upashahar Model Government Primary School centre, police barred New Age team from entering the polling centre claiming that it would require permission of the presiding officer.

A policeman went to seek permission from the presiding officer, and he did not return in half an hour.⁹



Voters complaining about already sealed ballot papers

iv) Poll officials make fake rules to help to rig

Shishu Niketan Madhyamik Balika Bidyalay Centre

At Shishu Niketan Madhyamik Balika Bidyalay, presiding officer SM Nazmul Kamal said journalists are not allowed to enter polling booths.

At that time, assistant returning officer Shahidul Islam was present at the centre. When asked, he said there is no instruction to bar journalists at polling centres. 'But none

⁹ Rajshahi polls mired in irregularities, www.newagebd.net/article/47263/rajshahi-polls-mired-in-irregularities

other than the voter is allowed in the secluded place where voters put stamp on ballots,' he said.

v) Journalist not allowed while rigging

Kajala Government Primary School Centre

Locals alleged that all BNP candidate polling agents were ousted by ruling Awami league supporters from two centres at Kajla Government Primary School at about 10:30.¹⁰



Top, police pick up three youths for trying to stuff ballots closing the door of a polling booth in Sylhet city while, bottom, BNP mayoral candidate for Rajshahi City Corporation Mosaddik Hossain Bulbul observes sit-in at Islamia College polling centre, protesting at election irregularities on Monday. — New Age/ Sony Ramany

Rajshahi polls mired in irregularities

Opposition polling agents ousted, journalists barred from polling stations

Mohiuddin Alamgir and Suzon Ali from Rajshahi

OPPOSITION Bangladesh Nationalist Party mayoral candidate in Rajshahi Mosaddique Hossain Bulbul staged a sit-in at a polling station protesting at ousting or barring his polling agents from polling stations and other irregularities that mired the Rajshahi city polls on Monday.

Mossaddique also refrained from casting his vote protesting at irregularities, saying that casting vote had no value in the current situation when democracy was in danger.

Police barred journalists from entering a number of



Awami League mayoral candidate Khairuzzaman Liton, with supporters, flashes V sign at the party office in Rajshahi city on Monday after unofficial vote count showed him winner. — Sony Ramany

polling stations citing instructions from the presiding officers.

Mossaddique's election conducting committee con-

venor Mizanur Rahman Minu alleged that the 'incompetent and inefficient Election Commission and

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Bangladeshi English-language daily New Age covers the election in Rajshahi on July 31, 2018 edition

On having credible information of vote rigging at two centres in Kajala government primary school centre journalists rushed to the centres to cover the incident.

When New Age went to the station, police barred New Age team from entering the polling centre claiming that they have no instruction from presiding officer about permitting journalists at the centre.

¹⁰ **Rajshahi polls mired in irregularities**, www.newagebd.net/article/47263/rajshahi-polls-mired-in-irregularities

vi) Voters protest vote stuffing

Atkoushi Government Primary School Centre

Several hundred people brought out a procession alleging that they were not allowed to cast their vote at two polling stations at Atkoushi Government Primary School after 4:00 pm.

Police barred New Age from entering Atkoushi Government Primary School premises.¹¹



In Rajshahi, supporters of the AL candidate took control of the entrance of centres violating rules

vii) 82pc vote cast in 4 hours!

UCEP Chhota Banagram City Corporation School centre

The presiding officer, Abdul Malek of UCEP Chhota Banagram City Corporation School centre, said that 1500 out of 1844 votes were cast by 1:00 pm.

¹¹ **Rajshahi polls mired in irregularities**, www.newagebd.net/article/47263/rajshahi-polls-mired-in-irregularities

No BNP polling agents were found at UCEP Chhota Banagram City Corporation School. Six BNP polling agents came to the polling stations were forced to leave the centre by noon in fear of attack and harassment.¹²

viii) Polling agents protest ousting of fellow

Rajshahi University School Polling Centre

Five BNP candidate polling agents leave the Rajshahi University School polling centre in protest of ousting of another fellow by the Awami League supporters at about 11:30 am.¹³

ix) Ballot ends by 10 am!

Islamia Degree College Centre

Balloting was temporarily put on hold at the Islamia Degree College centre in Rajshahi's Binodpur area because of a shortage of ballot papers.

Moreover, no polling agents for BNP and other opposition candidates were found at three of the five booths at the polling station. At about 3:30 pm, some voters alleged that they were not given mayoral ballots.¹⁴

Polling officers at booth 2 and 3 at the polling station said that counterfoil of ballots was finished and they were changing it. Polling officers at booth 1 said that they had two mayoral ballots while the number of the ballot for councillors and female councillors were about 20-25.

However, when asked about the shortage of ballot papers, the presiding officer at the polling centre, Abdullahil Shafi, refused to comment. "I do not want to talk about it," he said.

¹² **Rajshahi polls mired in irregularities**, www.newagebd.net/article/47263/rajshahi-polls-mired-in-irregularities

¹³ **Rajshahi polls mired in irregularities**, www.newagebd.net/article/47263/rajshahi-polls-mired-in-irregularities

¹⁴ **'My vote has no value'**, <https://www.thedailystar.net/rajshahi-city-election-2018/rajshahi-city-corporation-bnp-mayor-candidate-bulbul-fed-up-voting-1613353>

Upon hearing the news, BNP's mayoral candidate Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul rushed to the centre and refrained from casting his vote. He staged a sit-in at Islamia College centre for four hours, until the end of balloting.

"I did not cast my vote. I am concerned over democracy that is now in jeopardy," he said.

x) Ballot shortage left voters in frail

Khademul Islam Government Primary School Centre

A long line of voters was seen at the Khademul Islam Government Primary School centre.

One of the voters, Mosharraf Hossain, said he had been waiting for two hours on the same spot, with no sign of the line moving.¹⁵

When asked about it, the centre's presiding officer Azad Masud said: "Security checking of the voters has been intensified as we have received information that some of them are carrying hidden cameras, which is why it is taking longer."

xi) 9 of 10 polling agents ousted

Jatiya Tarun Sangha Government Primary School Centre

At Jatiya Tarun Sangha Government Primary School, nine of the 10 BNP polling agents were thrown out by Awami League activists.

When Bulbul went to the centre and asked the presiding officer about his agents, the presiding officer said the BNP agents had been around before and he did not know where they had gone.

xii) Journalists not allowed

Dashmari High School Polling Centre

¹⁵ 'My vote has no value', <https://www.thedailystar.net/rajshahi-city-election-2018/rajshahi-city-corporation-bnp-mayor-candidate-bulbul-fed-up-voting-1613353>

Police barred Dhaka Tribune reporters at Dashmari High School polling centre in Ward 29.

A similar experience was shared by New Age journalists on the spot. Law enforcers barred New Age team from visiting Dashmari Government Primary School and Dashmari High School.

Dashmari Government Primary School presiding officer Ranjit Kumar said that journalists were not allowed to enter polling stations.

xiii) AL men spared after caught stuffing

Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute Centre

At Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute, police and presiding officers initially refused to allow the media inside the voting centre. Later, Assistant Returning Officer (ARO) Shahidul Islam took them to different booths.

At one booth, the correspondents spotted an AL worker, Rashed, who said he was helping the “physically unwell” voters cast their votes. When the ARO was asked how he was allowed to do that, the official drove him out of the centre.¹⁶

In another booth at the centre, an outsider along with officials fled at the sight of the correspondents.

There was no effort to capture them, however.

¹⁶ 'My vote has no value', <https://www.thedailystar.net/rajshahi-city-election-2018/rajshahi-city-corporation-bnp-mayor-candidate-bulbul-fed-up-voting-1613353>

5. “Who would I fight?”



Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul, the BNP mayoral candidate in Rajshahi, stages a sit-in in front of Islamia College polling centre, alleging that his polling agents were driven out of many voting centres across the city.

"Who would I fight? Law enforcement agencies, presiding officers, polling officers -- everyone is involved."¹⁷

Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul, the former Mayor of Rajshahi City Corporation, and the mayor candidate from BNP in the civic poll of 2018 spoke in front of media, in sheer desperation.

He rushed to the Islamia College polling centre around 12:00 pm during the election and found that the voters were being given two ballot papers instead of three for mayor, general councillor and woman councillor. Ballot papers for mayor ran short.

“Ballot papers for mayoral candidates ran short,” Abdul Barek, a voter who waited for two hours for mayor candidate’s ballot paper, said to The Daily Star, adding, “They

¹⁷ **'My vote has no value'**, <https://www.thedailystar.net/rajshahi-city-election-2018/rajshahi-city-corporation-bnp-mayor-candidate-bulbul-fed-up-voting-1613353>

asked me to vote for councillors only and I refused. I'm waiting here for ballot papers.” Barek ultimately could not cast his vote.

Two polling officers were also seen sitting idle inside the booth as voters were refusing to vote without the ballot papers for mayoral candidates.

Bulbul immediately started a sit-in at the college ground and said he refrained from casting his own vote as a protest against the “state-sponsored irregularities”.

“Where will I complain? It's better that I sit here to protest,” Bulbul said.

He sat on the grass in the rain for four hours until voting ended at 4:00 pm.

The Daily Star correspondents visited at least 24 vote centres where the presiding officers claimed that 50 per cent of votes were cast by 11:30 am. The correspondents found the absence of polling agents of mayoral candidates other than Awami Leagues and some councillor candidates at three out of the 24 centres.

Mossadek Hossain was seen complaining to election officials many times, but all the time it fell into deaf ears.

The BNP leader of Rajshahi, Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul, was elected to the mayor's office in the 2013 Rajshahi City Corporation Elections and pledged to spearhead development in Rajshahi city area. He officially took charge of Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) on 18 September 2013.

But the local government ministry controlled by the Awami League government suspended him time and again during his five-year-tenure, on different charges.

He was even jailed for a year and 17 days.

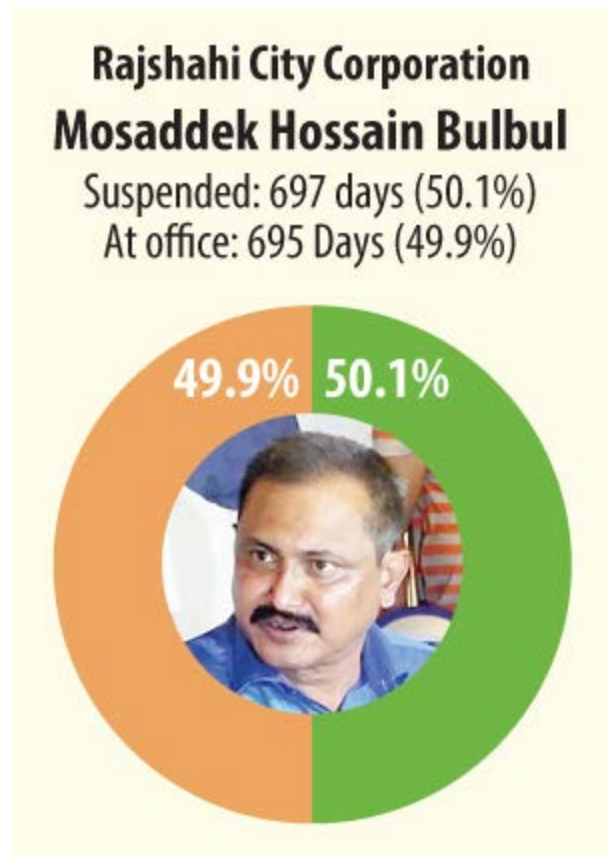
The legal bar forced him to remain out of duty for 22 months and 27 days, slightly longer than the days he spent in office – just 49.9% of his tenure.

Already accused in 19 cases, Bulbul was first suspended on May 7, 2015. The suspension was later ruled illegal by the high court.

Rajshahi residents complain they are being deprived of proper economic and infrastructural development because their mayor is being kept from performing his duties properly.

Local government experts concluded that, keeping popular mayors out of office by filing cases and harassing them was a part of government's more massive conspiracy to keep BNP and their leaders away from people.

The other layers of this larger conspiracy were unravelled when the latest election schedule was declared.



From the very beginning, it appeared that the battle is between BNP and the entire state.

All the state apparatus were used and utilised to ensure the loss of BNP candidate, a conspiracy that was hatched back in 2015.

Analyzing the incidents right after Bulbul took oath as the mayor, e.g. efforts to make him unqualified for the election, harassment of BNP leaders before the declaration of the election schedule, gross violation of electoral rules during campaign, inactivity of election

commission amid credible evidence of flouting rules, arresting BNP's polling agents right before the election, barring media from covering election irregularities, allowing AL-men to capture the centres and do not allowing BNP's polling agents to enter the centre, also force them off from the centre, prove that every part of the state was involved in staging the drama in the name of election.

6. Election Commission goes 'Numb'

Detention and harassment of the opposition party men, violation of the code of conduct during electioneering and tearing up of posters of the opponents are three main complaints the election commission (EC) has received from the candidates contesting in Rajshahi civic polls.

The returning officer, however, is not taking punitive measures except serving show-cause notices on the defaulters, the opposition-backed candidates alleged.

The accused, in some instances, are getting freed after signing at best a bond not to repeat such acts, they said.

BNP backed mayoral contestant in Rajshahi submitted 23 specific complains to the election commission.

The BNP candidate alleged that most of the 43 of his leaders and activists arrested until 23 July did not have any arrest warrant against them, while some of them were arrested in cases filed a long time ago.¹⁸

Other allegations of the party include the electioneering of MPs, which is a gross violation of the code of conduct.

Some of the allegations brought by the candidates of the two major parties are the same: tearing up of posters by the opposition men, vandalising their polls offices and issuing a threat to the activists.

However, there was hardly any solution to their allegations while the AL men said the office of the returning officer did not inform them about the actions taken regarding their complaints.

More interestingly, amid credible evidences of election irregularities in Rajshahi, the commission did not even cancel the polling of a single centre.

¹⁸ **EC coy about addressing opposition complaints?**, en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/180479/EC-coy-about-addressing-opposition-complaints

7. All but one unhappy

According to the unofficial results announced by the returning officers, AL mayoral candidate in Rajshahi AHM Khairuzzaman Liton polled 1,65,096 votes and BNP candidate Mossaddique Hossain Bulbul bagged 77,700 votes in all 138 polling stations. Ganasamhati Andolan-backed independent candidate Md Murad Murshed bagged 1,051 votes while Bangladesh Jatiya Party's M Habibur Rahman got lowest 320 votes.

The election bore nearly all the hallmarks—from ballot stuffing to expelling election agents—of a heavily manipulated election and dissatisfaction were heard from all the quarters, except the Awami League's subservient election commission and its chief commissioner.

A glimpse of the reaction recorded before and after the election is given below.

*"The voting in all the 138 polling stations was held in a peaceful manner in Rajshahi. Yes, I am happy."*¹⁹

KM Nurul Huda

Chief Election Commissioner, Bangladesh Election Commission

"The most recent elections were not free. If the elections are held in the same manner, fair election cannot be possible under a party government."

Dr Kamal Hossain

President, Gono Forum

*"I will not vote. This is not going to be counted as a fair election."*²⁰

Mosaddek Hossain Bulbul,

BNP's mayoral candidate for Rajshahi City Corporation

¹⁹ **I'm happy: CEC Huda**, <https://en.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/news/180718/I'm-happy-CEC-Huda>

²⁰ **Rajshahi city polls: Bulbul refuses to cast vote**, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/07/30/rajshahi-city-polls-bulbul-refuses-to-cast-vote>

“The situation around the voting centres was “terrifying” for voters as AL men were crowding the venues and shouting slogans.”²¹

Murad Morshed

District Coordinator, Gana Samhati Andolon

“Votes were rigged at Wards 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30. A group people entered the polling centres and put seals on the ballot papers.”²²

Shafiqul Islam

Mayoral candidate, Islami Andolan Bangladesh

“Not just on the election day, the EC turned a blind eye to numerous election rule violations—mainly by the ruling party and the police—in the run-up to the polls.”²³

Mahfuz Anam

Editor, The Daily Star

“I don't know whether this happened due to intimidation, indifference or aggression by a certain political party (Awami League).”

Tofail Ahmed

Executive member, Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik

²¹ **'My vote has no value'**, <https://www.thedailystar.net/rajshahi-city-election-2018/rajshahi-city-corporation-bnp-mayor-candidate-bulbul-fed-up-voting-1613353>

²² **Rajshahi votes peacefully but allegations of fraud persist**, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/07/30/rajshahi-votes-peacefully-but-allegations-of-fraud-persist>

²³ **Three city polls replicate the previous two**, <https://www.thedailystar.net/editorial/three-city-polls-replicate-the-previous-two-1613977>

8. Conclusion

The election of Rajshahi, along with the other two cities, was the last major election to take place before the national election which is expected to be held by this December. And the people in Bangladesh expected that the election will be the precursor of the national election and therefore the election commission will ensure the right of the people to vote.

The scenario on the field was much stark than that of the expected one.

The election commission led by Nurul Huda, “Nurul Huda Commission” in other words, has set a pattern of controlled votes where using all the apparatus of the state, the ruling party stages an election where voting is rigged in favour of them.

A controlled vote includes, harassment of opposition men by filing cases and raiding their houses before the election, gross violation of electoral rules during campaign, arresting polling agents right before the election, barring media from covering election, allowing ruling party men to capture the centres and do not allowing BNP's polling agents to enter the centre, also force them off from the centre and therefore stuff the ballot with the help of election officials.

Rajshahi city poll bears all the hallmark of an “electoral farce”, starting from intimidation of voters and opposition activists to the stuffing of ballots, and therefore has proven that no free, fair and credible election can take place under this government and by this election commission.

It is high time for the friends of the people of Bangladesh to consider the levers they have to pull and ensure the people's right to vote.

Bangladesh is a signatory of UN Resolution 52/129, and according to the resolution Bangladesh appreciates “Strengthening the role of the United Nations in enhancing the effectiveness of the principle of periodic and genuine elections and the promotion of democratisation”. Therefore, the UN is bound to foresee a credible and genuine election, periodically, in Bangladesh.

Time has come for the international community, who has commitments for democracy to take the necessary steps to make the voice of the people of Bangladesh heard.