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# Paurashava Election 2011

EWG Observation Report



ELECTION WORKING GROUP (EWG)

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## **1. Election Working Group**

The Election Working Group (EWG), a non-partisan citizen's coalition consisting of 31 member organizations, established in 2006, share a common objective to help in the process of establishing good governance and democratic culture through free and fair elections in Bangladesh. They share the following primary objectives:

- To support free and fair elections through pre-election, Election Day, and post-election observation;
- To conduct voter education and awareness in key thematic areas to encourage all segments of society to participate in the electoral process. EWG activities promote greater accountability and integrity among candidates and elected officials, women's participation, the needs and interests of youth voters, and the rights and participation of religious and ethnic minorities, disabled persons, and residents of geographically remote areas. EWG activities also aim to reduce the risk of election and post-election violence.
- To promote public dialogue on electoral reform.

The EWG has observed the Paurashava Election 2011 in seven division of the country and the observation plan is described in detail in the Election Observation Methodology section.

## **2. The stance of the Election Commission**

The Paurashava Election 2011 was held during the political regime of the 9<sup>th</sup> elected government of Bangladesh, the Awami League Party. Opposition party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, a key constituent of the BNP-led-four-party political alliance, demanded that army should be deployed at all polling centers to ensure fair elections.

The Election Commission (EC) however decided to deploy army only in those areas where law and order was perceived to be risky and vulnerable to trouble. Armed forces were deployed at 56 paurashavas<sup>1</sup> in 29 districts and required to be present at the location two days prior to election and also the day after.

The EC continued to hold in place the requirement that all election monitoring civil society organizations must obtain their accreditation centrally.

## **3. Election Observation Methodology**

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<sup>1</sup>Source: [http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest\\_news.php?nid=27787](http://www.thedailystar.net/newDesign/latest_news.php?nid=27787).

### **3.1 Observation Deployment Plan**

16 member organizations of the EWG deployed a total of 400 mobile observers, consisting of five members each, to observe elections in 80 paurashavas out of a total of 264 (30%) across seven divisions of the country. Elections were observed in 23 paurashavas of Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions on 12th January, 16 paurashavas of Khulna and Barisal divisions on 13th January, 21 paurashavas of Dhaka division on 17th January and 17 paurashavas of Chittagong and Sylhet divisions on 18th January, 2011.

The EWG observed election in two paurashavas in Chittagong division that had been postponed to be held on 27<sup>th</sup> January, 2011 as they were included in their initial deployment plan. Therefore, a total of 19 paurashavas was observed in Chittagong and Sylhet division. The EWG planned to observe election in Brahmanbaria Paurashava but it was stayed due to High Court order issued on 17th January 2011.

### **3.2 Voter and Civic Education (VCE)**

VCE activities were conducted by the EWG in almost all observed paurashavas through distribution of voter guides in an attempt to increase voter participation. The voter guides contained basic information on what constitutes a paurashava, and the importance of exercising ones voting rights. The guides were distributed through newspaper hawkers and in bazaars and tea stalls.

### **3.3 Observer Training**

Training was provided to focal persons, from each of the 16 member organizations of the EWG on election day observation checklists and reporting structures. The focal persons in turn trained the election observers.

### **3.4 Deployment of Field Monitors**

A total of 16 field monitors was deployed to observe field activities of the EWG members. This included monitoring of not only their election day observation but also training of observers and distribution of voter guides in the observed paurashavas. In a time span of two weeks, the field monitors visited 46 paurashavas to oversee voter guide distribution and attended 31 training sessions in different districts.

### **3.5 Reporting Structure**

The observation plan included collection of information through a quick impression survey by 11:00 in the morning. Observation reports based on the entire day's electoral process including vote count was also collected. Each mobile observer team visited on average ten to twelve polling stations at each of the Paurashavas and their overall impression of the entire days electoral process is based on these observations. The quick impression survey was based on observation in three polling stations. The counting procedure observation is based on one polling center at each paurashava. The findings of the quick impression

survey formed the basis of the press statements made by the EWG on each of the four election days. The statement of the EWG made during the press conference held on January 19, 2011 was based on not only the quick impression surveys but overall observation reports including counting procedures from all four days.

## **4. Election Day Observation Findings**

### **4.1 General Findings**

On the basis of the overall assessment of the electoral process by the EWG observers in the observed paurashavas, an important institution of the local government, it can be concluded that the Paurashava Elections 2011 were conducted in a peaceful and fair manner barring the occurrence of a few isolated incidents. Participation of voters in this election, in particular women's participation, was encouraging. Tendency among the candidates to adhere to electoral rules, tolerance of candidates, and voter awareness improved and incidence of violence was seen to have reduced in the observed centers. However, despite such improvements there still remain issues where the Election Commission can play a stronger role to improve the polling process. Such issues and incidents have been noted below.

### **4.2 Observer and Polling Agent**

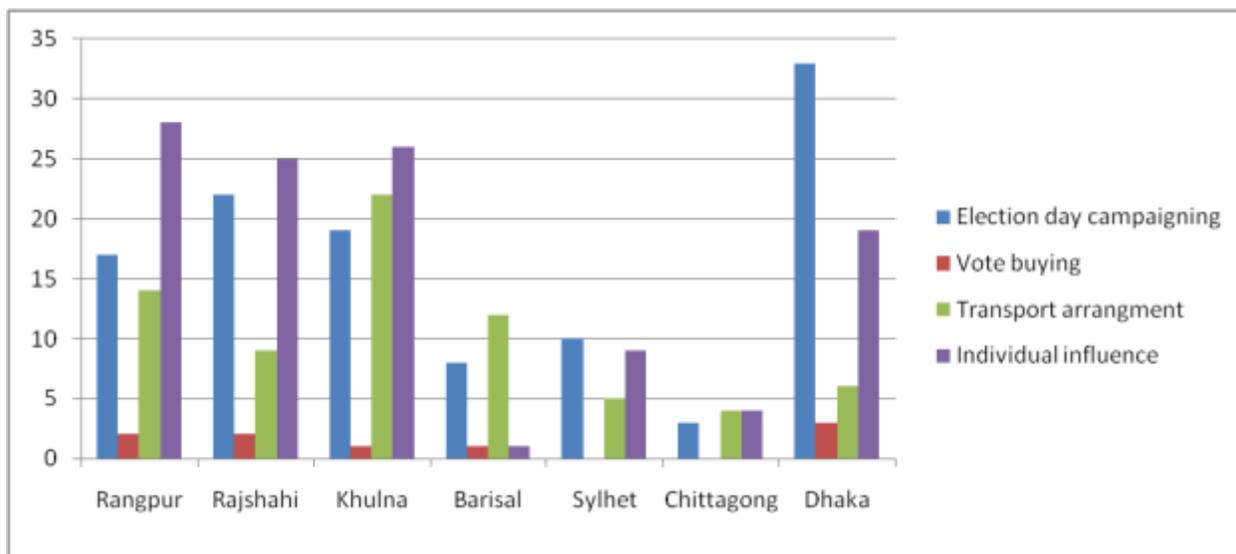
While EWG observers were granted access to most polling centers, on certain occasions they had been prevented from observing the counting procedure. EWG observers were not allowed by presiding officers to observe the counting procedure at 1 center in Hakimpur Paurashava of Dinajpur district, 1 center in Lalmonirhat Paurashava, 1 center in Noapara Paurashava of Jessore district and 4 centers in Bagerhat Paurashava. Polling agents were present in majority of the centers during vote count.

### **4.3 Voting Environment at the Polling Centers**

While voters in general accessed the polling centers without any intimidation, there were attempts to influence voters in several polling centers. Such incidences were seen in the form of election day campaigning (which is prohibited), arrangement of transport for voters, provision of snacks for voters, and incidence of vote buying (Bishupara Government Primary School of Tahirpur Paurashava of Rajshahi). Unauthorized individuals attempts to influence voters had been noticed by observers at Munshigonj Paurashava.

Shown below in Figure 1 are the different forms of influence on voters at the polling centers according to each individual division.

**Figure 1 No of polling centers in each division which experienced different forms of influence on voters**



### 4.3.1 Election day campaigning

The Paurashava Act 2009 prohibits election day campaigning within 400 yards of any polling center. In spite of this, campaigning was carried out at 112 out of 773 observed polling centers across seven divisions. Mechanism such as deployment of women and children to carry out campaigning was devised at some centers. Outside Jalmachmari Government Primary School in Shibganj of Chapainababgonj district children were assigned to distribute caps and badges to voters. There was also report of arrest of an individual in Bhola Sadar for campaigning inside the polling station.

Other forms of attempts to influence voters were seen in the form of arrangement of transport for voters which was seen in 76 observed polling stations. Candidate supporters were found to provide snacks to voters in centers in Hakimpur Paurashava of Dinajpur district and Jamalpur Paurashava. Incidence of vote buying was reported in Bishupara Government Primary School of Tahirpur Paurashava of Rajshahi district.

### 4.4 Poll preparation and voting materials

Majority of polling stations opened on time at 8:00 am with the necessary materials such as ballot papers, ballot boxes and indelible ink. However, there were problems with the indelible ink at a couple of centers either because it was drying up or finished. Such problems were noted in centers at Savar, Jamalpur Paurashava and Singra of Natore district. In Town Kamil Madrasah and PTI Parikkhon School at Maulvibazar Paurashava, indelible ink was not being used as it was finished. Insufficient lighting caused

inconveniences for voters at Tahirpur and Arani of Rajshahi, Shibganj of Chapainababgonj, Singra of Natore, Hakimpur of Dinajpur, Bhola and Lalmonirhat Paurashava.

#### **4.5 Voting Booth Secrecy**

One of the issues that came up in a couple of centers was that voting booth secrecy was not observed to be satisfactory. In particular, in Sherpur Paurashava and Jaigunnessa Private Primary School in Arani Paurashava of Rajshahi district, arrangement was not reported to be satisfactory by EWG observers. In a center in Sherpur Paurashava of Sherpur district and Shibganj of Chapainababgonj district and two centers in Maulvibazar Paurashava, two individuals were seen voting together at the same time. This can also compromise voter's privacy.

#### **4.6 Electoral Administration**

The Electoral Administration was seen to be neutral and unbiased by observers in 751 centers visited. The polls were carried out in a fairly well-organized, efficient manner as reported by observers. Dissatisfactory performance in this matter was noted in only 38 centers.

#### **4.7 Accessibility of polling stations**

In about 90% of the observed polling centers, EWG observers noted that the centers and individual polling booths were accessible to voters of all ages and mobility level. Greater sensitization to the needs of elderly people and persons with disability can improve accessibility even further in the future. In general, in majority of the places the convenience and neutrality of the polling centers were reported satisfactory.

#### **4.8 Allegation of false votes**

Allegation of false vote being cast was brought up in Ward 7-Centre no 13 of Munishigonj Paurashava. In the same center, absence of the assistant presiding officer and polling official for 30 minutes affected polling process.

Mobile court arrested 3 individuals at a polling center in Madargonj Paurashava of Jamalpur district on allegations of casting false votes. Voting was stalled for 15 minutes in another polling center upon discovery of a false vote being cast.

#### **4.9 Voter list discrepancy**

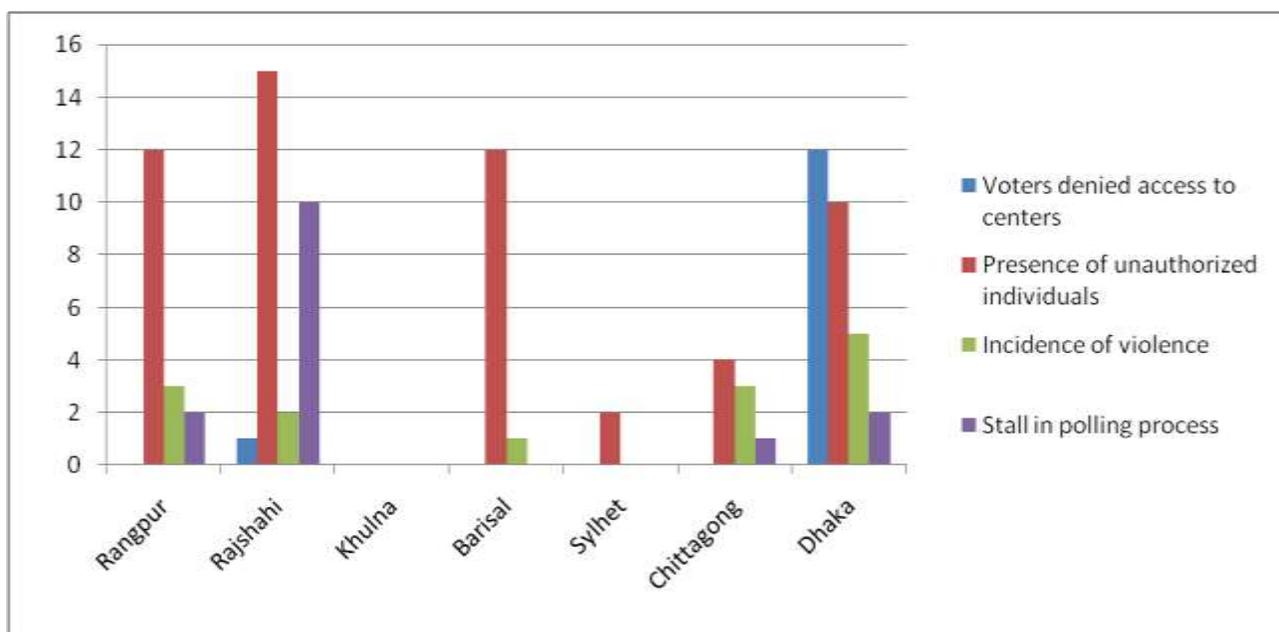
Voting was seen to be slow in a center in Bhola Paurashava as the polling agents did not have the voter list given to them. In Kaliakair of Gazipur district, election was stayed in two of the observed centers due to discrepancy in voter lists. Election in a total of 8 centers was stayed there.

#### 4.10 Security Environment of Polling Centers

Performance of law enforcement agencies was seen to be satisfactory in 96% of the observed polling centers. Despite that there were a few isolated issues with the security environment at a few places. However, ethnic and religious minorities did not face intimidation which would negatively impact their participation in the polls.

Factors which posed a problem for the security environment at centers in each division included denying access to voters in polling centers, presence of unauthorized individuals inside the centers, incidence of violence and incidents causing the polling process to stop at some centers. A look at Figure 2 given below indicates the no of centers in each individual division where such incidents had been observed.

**Figure 2 No of centers in each division which encountered security related problems**



In addition, EGW observers made note of some specific incidents that took place around the country in their observed paurashavas during election time.

At Adarsha Bidya Niketon in Tarabo of Narayangonj district, local miscreants were seen trying to influence and intimidate voters. However, law enforcement agents arrested the individuals and the polling process was stalled for 20-25 minutes. In another incident in Mirgonj Government Primary School in Sherpur Paurashava of Sherpur district, a polling agent named Kamal was expelled on allegation of attempting to influence voters and 5 individuals were arrested for forcefully attempting to stamp ballot papers.

Other incidents involved a polling agent named Abul Kashem being threatened at a polling center in Madargonj Paurashava of Jamalpur district while protesting the casting of a false vote. In Mardana Government Primary School of Shibgonj Paurashava in Chapainababgonj district, an individual was found attempting to influence voters standing in line by putting

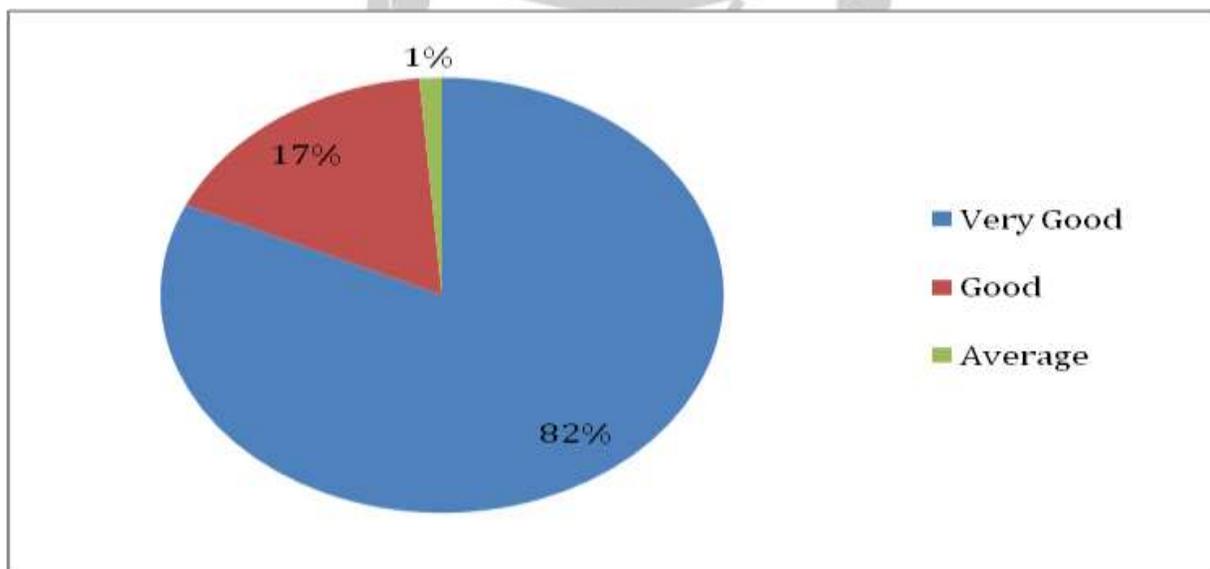
on a police uniform. However, upon being discovered he was immediately taken away from the center by law enforcement agents.

In a few centers in Feni Paurashava, there were reports of clash and bombs being used. In Chengharchar Government Primary School at Matlab North of Chandpur district, clash between supporters of opposing candidates stalled the polling process for some time.

## 5. Counting Procedures

The observation plan involved observation of one polling center in each of the 80 paurashavas. It has been mentioned earlier that in a few places EWG observers had not been granted access to be present during vote count. Observers rated the quality of vote count from *Very Good* to *Good* in most of the observed centers with only one center rated to be *Average* in Feni Sadar Paurashava of Chittagong. A rating of *Very Good* signifies that there were no irregularities during vote count and *Good* signifies that only minor irregularities occurred. *Average* quality refers that despite a few irregularities they did not have significant impact on the outcome of the polling process. A look at Figure 2 below shows that in 82% of the observed centers the counting procedure was perceived to be *Very Good*.

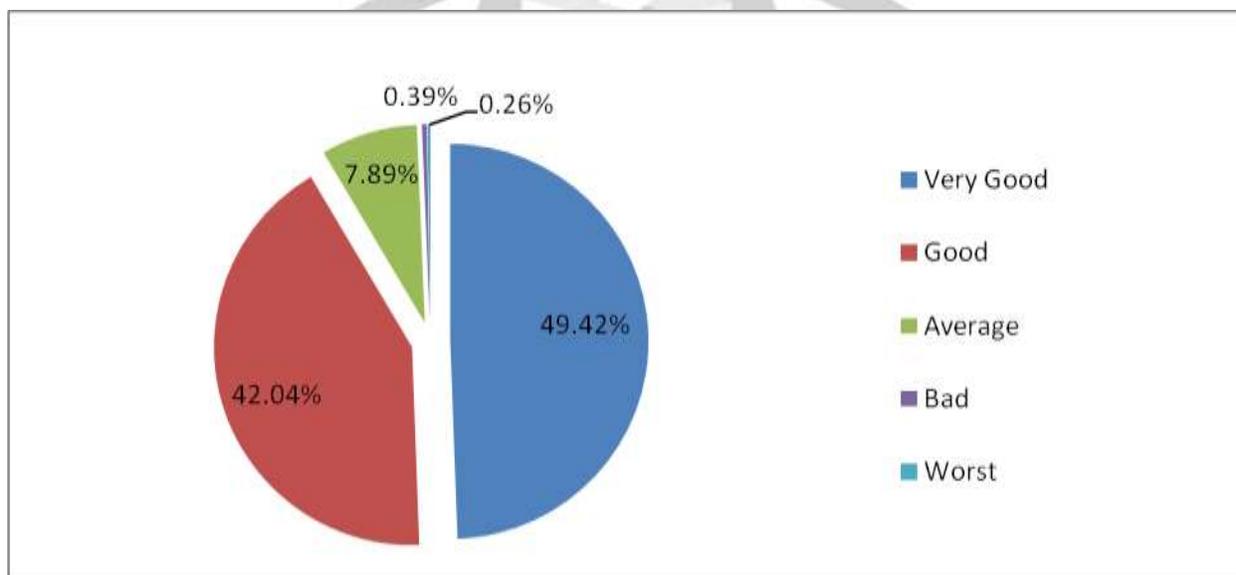
Figure 3 Overall Comments on Counting Procedure



## 6. Overall Assessment of the Polling Process

Overall assessment includes the mobile observers' impression of the entire days polling process. A look at the overall impression, based on observation in seven divisions, show that in approximately 49% of the observed centers, observers felt that the elections conducted were *Very Good*. This implies that they did not observe any untoward incidents or irregularities in those polling centers. In approximately 42% of the observed centers, observers felt that the polling process was *Good*, implying that a few irregularities were observed but they had no significant impact on the integrity of the electoral process. In 8% of the observed centers it was noted that elections held were *Average* indicating that many untoward incidents or irregularities had been observed but yet again they had no significant effect on the integrity of the electoral process. In less than 1% of the observed centers, observers commented that the elections held were *Bad* which shows that untoward incidents and irregularities had been observed that could have had significantly affected the integrity of the polling process. This assessment is based on observation in 773 polling centers in all of the seven divisions. Please see Figure 5 for breakdown of overall assessment of the polling process according to each individual division of the country.

**Figure 4 Overall Comments on Polling Process**

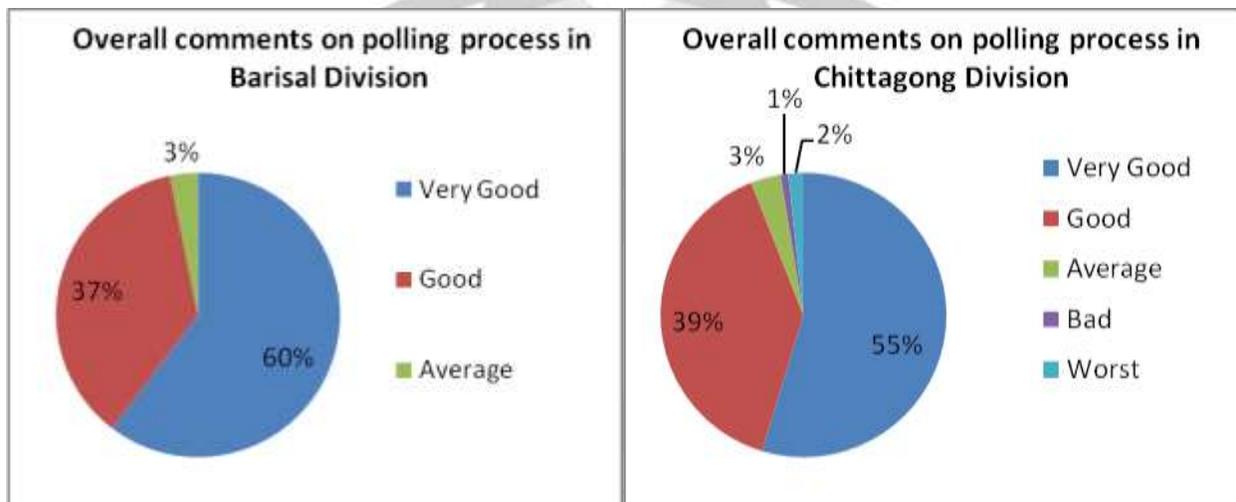


## 7. EWG Recommendations

EWG believes that holding of a free, fair and peaceful election by the Bangladesh Election Commission will help to build public confidence and credibility in the electoral process. Based on their findings from observation of the Paurashava elections, the EWG makes the following recommendations in order for the Election Commission to further strengthen their capacity:

- The EC can consider decentralization of the accreditation process which would make it easier for civil society organizations located at the districts level to complete their registration procedures.
- The EC should reconsider deployment of stationary observers as it allows for better quality of monitoring.
- Steps should be taken to ensure that the counting procedure is carried out in a less cramped space in order for officials to do their job better.
- The EC can take into reconsideration registration of EWG members who had been denied access for accreditation.
- Polling officials should be trained properly and adequately equipped with polling materials in order to carry out their duties better.

**Figure 5 Breakdown of Overall Assessment of the Polling Process Division-Wise**



Election Working Group

