

# NARAYANGANJ CITY CORPORATION ELECTION

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## Observation by the Election Working Group

November 02, 2011

Prepared by



**The Asia Foundation**

For



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Prepared for **Bangladesh Election Commission**

**and**

**The Election Working Group (EWG)**

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## Background

The Election Working Group (EWG), established in 2006, is a non-partisan coalition consisting of 31 civil society organizations sharing a common commitment to help in the process of establishing good governance and democratic culture through free and fair elections in Bangladesh. Previously the coalition observed the 2008 Khulna, Sylhet, Rajshahi and Barisal City Corporation Elections, 2008 National Parliamentary Election, the 2009 Upazilla Election, the 2010 Chittagong City Corporation Election, the 2011 Pourashava Election and the 2011 Union Parishad Elections in Bangladesh.



Election plays a vital role in ensuring democracy and good governance in a democratic state. Establishing effective and impartial election observation is essential for countries with a fragile democracy. The Asia Foundation, in partnership with the Election Working Group (EWG), continued its commitment to assist the Bangladesh Election Commission to establish free and fair elections in the country by funding EWG partners to undertake and implement voter education programs, comprehensive election observation programs and preparing pre and post-election reports to contribute in ensuring transparent, participatory and fair elections in Bangladesh.

## Narayanganj City Corporation Election Observation

From the **EWG coalition** Democracy Watch (DW), Gono Kalyan Sangstha (GKS), Jatiya Nirbachan Porjobekkhon Parisad (JANIPOP), Khan Foundation, Manabik Shahajya Sangstha (MSS), and The Asia Foundation (TAF) observed the Narayanganj City Corporation Election on 30 October 2011, including monitoring of the ballot counting at some centers. The coalition split into 20 small groups and observed **all 163 centers of 27 wards**. The EWG's overall impression of the Election appeared to be peaceful and the voters participated freely to cast their votes without any visible pressure.



The EWG undertook the observation of the election with caution as couple of last minute changes appeared in the scenario:

- i. The Government was unable to provide the Army to ensure the security on behalf of the Election Commission, despite the Chief Election Commissioner's written request to the relevant Ministry.
- ii. The Opposition Party's declaration of withdrawal of their Mayoral candidate in the early hours of the day.

However, despite the above two issues, the EWG felt that the regular law-enforcement agencies deployed to ensure security worked diligently **to ensure peace** in the centers. Election officials were generally well prepared to open the polls. They received transparent ballot boxes, the voters list, a supply of indelible ink, and other key materials in advance on Election Day.

Women and minority voters presence was strong in most centers. Speaking to the voters, the polling agents, the returning officer, the presiding officers, and observing the environment, the EWG members felt most of the voters casted their votes without



pressure or intimidation and **with festive mood**.

**Women empowerment** was strongly visible through the longer lines of female voters. Speaking to some of them, it appeared women were waiting in the line longer than the male voters; nevertheless, they were pleased to be able to

cast their votes without any fear or influence.

Small number of voters in few centers complained of waiting in the line longer than expected; however, as the day progressed the process was expedited. In majority of the centers, there had been **no special arrangement** for elderly or physically challenged voters which needs to be taken care of in future to ensure each citizen can cast their votes with physical comfort and dignity.





In some centers, **the privacy** of casting the votes needs to be further assured as the voting booths were next to open windows, or the curtain covering the booths was nearly transparent. This hinders the safety of the voters too for likely being identified and targeted to post-election

violence.

Despite these issues, the voters cooperated with the law enforcement agencies, and the polling agents were also seen in a positive mood due to assurance of the **friendly environment** around and in the centers.

The **Electronic Voting Machine (EVM)** was taken quite well by the voters. However, the elderly and the less educated voters had some difficulty understanding the process and appeared to be confused. In a small number of booths, the guidelines on how to use EVM were missing and the assistant presiding officers were having tough time to explain to the voters the process of voting. In a couple of centers, that the EWG observed, the EVM broke down twice. However, the technical person assigned in the centers worked as fast as possible to solve the issues.



While most of the **assistant presiding officers** were knowledgeable and welcoming the voters with friendly attitude, some of them appeared to be slightly under pressure to expedite the process which deemed impatient to the voters. At some centers, the law-enforcement staff seemed too harsh to voters which was not necessary as the voters appeared to be very disciplined and patient naturally.

In many centers, the EWG teams did not see all of the candidates' **polling agents**. A couple of the polling agents were not allowed in a small number of centers as the agents did not have photo IDs or their home address was located out of Narayanganj. We were informed by the presiding officer that as per regulation, the agents should be residing in the city where the elections take place.

The EWG also noted that the one large center (Narayanganj Club) had **too many booths** and appeared overcrowded and too noisy. The voters looked exhausted. In



some centers, despite many empty space and rooms on the ground floor, the booths were placed in 1st or 2nd floors where the voters, especially the senior citizens, and voters in special needs, had to climb steep stairs to vote. The list of voters needs **to be written clearly with large fonts** and posted to as many locations as possible as the observation teams met a number of voters who struggled to find their designated booths.

In a few centers, the **presiding officers** requested the international and national observers to leave during vote counting. This was due to lack of knowledge on the observation policies. However, the observers were later allowed to stay until the counting was completed after a discussion and sharing of knowledge with the presiding



officers. Nevertheless, all the presiding officers were friendly and supportive and had welcomed the EWG members to their centers to observe voting and speak to pertinent groups.

The **close circuit cameras** were installed in

about 20 high risk centers for the first time which played a role in assuring the voters on security. The **media** presence was significantly high and almost all the television channels were broadcasting the election stories live from the ground which also played a role of monitoring security and encouraging voters to come out from home and cast their votes.

The Narayanganj Election became a high profile event and a much talked about subject in the media, among the civil society, and the general population. The key challenge of this election had been ensuring security. The EWG feels, after the observation, that the **challenge was tackled well**



and the event was completed without any major incident.

The significance of this election had been how the voters exercised their rights peacefully. Speaking to some of the voters, the EWG understood that the people of Narayanganj have taken the election as their own responsibility since the military was

not assigned to protect the centers. This demonstrated a case of **people's power** to ensure their democratic rights and protecting the democracy in peaceful, calm and disciplined way.

## Recommendations

The EWG recommends following points based on Election Day observation:

- The curtain or screen to ensure privacy of polling booths should be further assured. The transparent screens and setting up of the booths next to window reduces the privacy of the voters and their safety.
- Further awareness on use of EVM is required for both voters and the presiding/assistant presiding officers. Though the EVM was taken well by most voters, the time to cast votes could be further reduced if activities are taken before the elections to raise awareness among the voters. The relevant polling officers could be given further training on delivering clear communications with the voters to reduce anxiety of using EVM. While many officers were extremely patient and polite, some had difficulty on reducing the anxiety level of the voters.
- The EVM's technical capacity could be further tested to ensure none of the machines fail during voting hours. Although only few machines had problem and the issue was handled well by the technical person, the smoothness of the registering votes could be further assured if all machines function without any technical problems.
- Signs and instructions should be printed clearly in large fonts and should be placed in multiple locations inside the centers to avoid confusions.
- A special booth can be arranged on the ground floor for the elderly and physically challenged voters to ensure they can cast their votes with comfort and dignity. The presiding officer should be responsible for assuring the management of the special booths.
- Enhance opportunities for observers' to witness the elections processes without any difficulties by sharing knowledge on observation rights with the polling officers.
- The law-enforcement agencies could receive further training on proper communication and conduct with voters, media and observers.
- Washroom facilities should be assured for voters, particularly for women.