



February 22, 2014

Election Working Group

Preliminary Statement on the First Phase of Upazila Elections

Held on February 19, 2014

INTRODUCTION & SCOPE OF OBSERVATION

The Election Working Group (EWG) is a non-partisan network of 29 leading civil society organizations in Bangladesh that was formed in 2006 with the shared goal of enhancing the transparency and accountability of elections and other democratic processes. EWG is governed by a strict code of conduct to carry out comprehensive election observation throughout the country. Since its establishment, EWG has observed elections at the national, City Corporation and local levels, as well as conducting advocacy on election-related issues. As part of its core mandate, EWG has planned to observe all phases of the 4th Upazila elections, starting with the February 19th polls.

In order to effectively observe election day on February 19th, EWG deployed 2,035 observers in 25 of the 97 upazilas where polls were being held. These upazilas were selected from all 7 administrative Divisions based on their diverse locations and taking into account the capacity of the EWG member organizations to deploy professional and well-trained election observers. All observers received a full day training, with many observers having previous experience in observation activities. EWG observation activities were comprehensive covering: (i) opening of the polling stations; (ii) voting operations and procedures; (iii) closing and counting; and (iv) the broader environment outside the polling stations.

FINDINGS

EWG found Election Day to be mostly peaceful with low incidences of violence and considerable voter participation. In general, voting was undertaken in an efficient and professional manner, with election officials adequately trained and voters able to cast their vote in an orderly manner. The mean average voter turnout in polling stations observed was 59.19 %.

Opening of the polling stations

EWG observed a high level of preparedness at polling stations, with 96.3% adequately prepared by 7.30 am and 88.3% of stations ready with all the polling personnel for voting operations at 8.00 am. At the opening of the polls, in 97.9% of stations ballot boxes were opened in front of the polling agents and observers to demonstrate that the boxes were empty; while in 98.9% of cases security seals were fixed properly. In only 5.5% of polling stations voting operations did not start on time. EWG also observed that in 56.2% of polling stations there was a long queue of voters waiting in front of the polling booths at 8.30 am.

Voting operations

During the course of voting, EWG observers found that in 96.9% cases voters were identified properly. The overall environment was considered good in the majority of polling stations with 9.7% of stations reporting some level of tension or unrest. The security situation was also observed to be under control of the security forces in 92.0% polling stations; with 3.7% of polling stations reporting that security forces were withdrawn.

In the polling stations where observers were present, EWG observed 63 cases of forged votes, 33 cases where ballot papers, boxes or the whole polling station was seized by unknown actors and 40 cases where polling personnel and security forces were found to be working in favor of a candidate(s). Voting operations were suspended by election officials in 16 polling stations, and campaigning by supporters of candidates within 400 meters of the station was observed at 4.5% of stations which is contrary to the election law. EWG recorded 20 cases of violence occurring inside the polling stations which included attempts by some to occupy the polling stations, unrest due to attempts to forge votes and acts of intimidation against voters.

Environment outside the polling stations

EWGs mobile observers recorded 11 cases of violence outside the polling stations and observed no incidents of intimidation to those identified as being minority or indigenous voters. Observers recorded 17 cases wherein voters were provided vehicles to go and come to the polling stations which is a violation of electoral law.

Closing and counting

The closing and counting procedures were found to be relatively peaceful. Incidents of violent activity were observed in 29 stations. In 89.8% of stations presiding officers ensured the presence of the candidates' agents, while unauthorized persons being present in the counting room were recorded in 13% of stations. Although in almost all stations the presiding officers followed all the procedures for counting accordingly, observers did witness that security seals were either not available or broken in 27 ballot boxes.

OBSERVER INCIDENTS

During the opening of a polling station in Manikganj, two EWG observers were not allowed to enter the station with no reason being provided by the presiding officer for their exclusion. In Singair and Saturaia upazilas in Manikganj observers were not permitted to witness counting in any polling stations. In Gournadi, Barisal two observers were harassed by officials during vote counting and were taken by police to the returning officers headquarters, where they were later released. In the majority of cases observers were treated fairly by all other stakeholders and were able to carry out their duties without impediment.

Md. Abdul Alim

Director

**THIS IS A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT. A FULL REPORT DETAILING OBSERVATION
ACTIVITIES WILL BE PROVIDED AT A LATER DATE.**