



March 18, 2014

Election Working Group

Preliminary Statement on the Third Phase of Upazila Elections

Held on March 15, 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 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 activities on election-related issues. As part of its core mandate, EWG has planned to observe all phases of the 4th Upazila Elections in 2014.

In order to observe the third phase of the Upazila Elections held on March 15th, EWG deployed 2,336 observers in 2,336 polling stations across all 81 upazilas where polls were held. Within each upazila, the location of observers in polling stations were assigned using a random sampling technique from the complete list of polling stations prepared and gazetted by the Election Commission Bangladesh (ECB). All observers received a full day's training, with many observers having previous experience in observation activities. EWG's observation activities were comprehensive, covering: (i) preparation and opening of the polling stations; (ii) voting operations and procedures; (iii) closing and counting; and (iv) voting environment inside the polling stations.

FINDINGS

EWG found efficient and professional polling operations undertaken in a majority of the polling stations, however cases of violence, voter intimidation and other violations compromised the integrity of the vote in a significant number of polling stations. The mean average voter turnout figure in polling stations observed was 64.6%.

Opening of polling stations

EWG observed a high level of preparedness on Election Day with almost all polling stations equipped with the necessary materials (99%) and found ready for voting at 8.00 am (95%). Security forces were deployed at all observed polling stations. Proper processes were followed in almost all stations with the demonstration of empty ballot boxes (99%) and the fixing of security locks on the ballot boxes (99%). At the opening of the polls, there was moderate queuing of voters with between 1-20 voters waiting in 56% of stations and 33% recording a queue of more than 20 voters.

Voting operations & violations

EWG observers found voting operations were carried out proficiently in the majority of stations, with 97% of polling personnel carrying out their work in a knowledgeable manner. The quality of training provided to polling officials by the ECB was considered good by 65% of Presiding Officers and 28% considered it very good. Procedures put in place to avoid multiple voting by citizens were found to be used effectively with indelible ink applied in a visible way in 85% of stations.

The layout of polling booths was considered inadequate in a minority of stations with voter privacy compromised in 3% and inadequate space provided in 7% of stations. EWG also received a large number of reports from 270 stations (12% of stations observed) of accessibility difficulties for disabled voters due to the station location and setup. Female polling personal were only found to be present in 66% of female polling booths.

Reports of electoral violence and polling violations were significant throughout the day. The table below outlines the recorded violations

Violations	No. of Reports	No. of Upazilas Reporting
Violent incident within station	258	54
Intimidation of voters	143	38
Violation of campaign law	87	34
Citizen denied ability to vote by other actor	14	10
Polling station declared closed	90	25
Polling station declared reopened	78	25
Polling agents removed from station	77	22
Arrest within station	40	25
EWG observer not allowed into polling station	8	7
EWG observer not allowed to observe counting procedure	90	49

Closing and counting

At the closing of polls, EWG observers found significant queuing still occurring at many stations, with 35 voters on average waiting to cast their vote. However in only 4% of cases were queuing voters disallowed to cast their vote after the official closing time, contravening electoral law. Although in most of the polling stations, counting of votes was found to be carried out in a largely peaceful and professional manner there were some irregularities.

In Langolcoat Upazila, ballots from a station were transported to another station and combined prior to counting, while a polling station in Dagonbhuyian upazila began counting at 3.30 pm prior to the closure of polls. The stealing and burning of ballot papers prior to counting was also observed at a station in Gouripur

Upazila. Protests or objections by candidate agents were recorded in 9% of stations, and the hanging of poll results as required by law was not undertaken in 13% of stations. A concerning number of invalid ballots were also recorded by observers, with 5% of ballots considered spoilt and not included in the count.

Observer incidents

In an extremely concerning event in Daganbhuyian Upazila, an EWG observer was taken against his will, beaten and finally released on the condition that he would not observe the election. The incident was reported to the ECB. In some cases the provision of accreditation cards was hampered at the district level with requests by Presiding Officers of inappropriate verification processes that are not required by the ECB. Polling officials also refused entry to eight EWG observers to their assigned stations, while 90 observers were barred to observe the vote count, compromising the transparency of the counting process.

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