



May 21, 2014

Election Working Group

Preliminary Statement on the Six Phase of Upazila Elections

Held on May 19, 2014

SCOPE OF OBSERVATION

In order to observe the six phase of the Upazila Elections held on May 19th 2014, the Election Working Group (EWG) deployed 358 observers in 358 polling stations across 12 upazilas. 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), with each upazila having a statistically significant number of observers deployed. All observers received a full day's training, with many observers having previous experience in observation activities. EWG's Election Day 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 Election Day to be hampered by a significant level of electoral violations despite a reduction in the level of violence observed from the March 31 polls. Despite adequate polling operations in the majority of stations observed, the overall integrity of the polling process was undermined by the scale of violations relating to fraudulent activity. The mean average voter turnout figure in polling stations observed was 58%, however EWG expresses concerns that this figure does not reflect actual turnout due to incidences of ballot stuffing.

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 (96%). Sufficient security forces were deployed in almost (99%) all observed polling stations. Proper processes were followed in almost all (99%) stations with the demonstration of empty ballot boxes and the fixing of security locks on the ballot boxes. At the opening of the polls, there was moderate queuing of voters with between 1-20 voters waiting in 61% of stations and 10% recording a queue of more than 40 voters.

ABOUT EWG

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 been observing each phase of the 2014 Upazila Elections.

Voting operations & violations

EWG observers found voting operations by officials were carried out proficiently in the majority of stations, with 96% of polling personnel carrying out their work in a knowledgeable manner. The majority of stations had been laid out adequately to aid efficient voting (96%), however EWG did receive over one hundred reports of accessibility issues for disabled voters due to the station location and setup. Female polling personal were found to be present in 76% of female polling booths. Indelible ink pens were considered to have been used effectively in 80% of polling stations.

Reports of electoral violence and polling violations were considerable throughout the day, with Comilla Adarsa Sadar and Comilla Sadar South recording the highest number of incidences. The table below outlines the recorded violations

Violations	No. of Reports	No. of Upazilas Reporting	% of Upazilas Reporting
Violent incident within station	38	6 of 12	50.0%
Intimidation of voters	40	4 of 12	33.3%
Suspected fraud	217	6 of 12	50.0%
Violation of campaign law	37	5 of 12	41.7%
Citizen denied ability to vote by other actor	8	1 of 12	8.3%
Polling station declared closed	12	1 of 12	8.3%
Polling agents removed from station	41	4 of 12	33.3%
Arrest within station	11	3 of 12	25.0%
EWG observer not allowed to observe counting procedure	22	2 of 12	16.7%

To further understand the nature of the above listed violations, EWG has documented several reported cases below. Where possible, the EWG secretariat has sought confirmation of the reported violations by speaking with either an attending electoral official, district electoral official or other attending representatives.

- **Comilla Sadar South Upazila:** Significant levels of violence and voting irregularities were observed across this upazila. An EWG observer reported 5-6 supporters of a candidate entered into several polling booths, removed the attending polling agents, seized a significant number of ballot papers, stamped them and put into the ballot boxes. In another polling station, a group of men blasted several small handmade bombs and subsequently stamped and deposited a large number of ballot papers in the ballot boxes. Ballot stamping was observed in 5 other polling stations in this upazila. People with local arms were also seen in 2 polling stations observed by EWG in this upazila.
- **Comilla Sadar Adarsha Upazila:** Ballot stamping was observed in 5 polling stations of this upazila. One instance of ballot boxes containing stamped ballots prior to the opening of the polling station was recorded, while fighting was observed between the supporters of AL-backed and BNP-backed candidates in three polling stations. Gunfire was also exchanged in one polling station, while at another station police were seen taking strong action by removing men who were threatening electoral officials.
- **Kamarkhand Upazila:** Violence was observed between the supporters of AL-backed and BNP-backed candidates in 2 polling stations.

Counting & Closing

95% polling stations were closed at 4.00 pm – the official closing time. However, in 4% of polling stations observed voters who reached the polling stations at or before 4.00 pm were prevented from exercising their right to vote. The counting and closing procedures were found to be carried out adequately in most stations (95%). However, in some stations reports were received of attempts to alter final counting figures through fraudulent counting and recording procedures. For example, in a polling station in Taltoli upazila, counting was stopped in the middle and all the ballot papers and boxes were taken to another location with election officials explaining that counting would be held there. Protests or objections by candidate agents were recorded in 8% of stations, and the hanging of poll results as required by law was not undertaken in 13% of stations.

OBSERVER INCIDENTS

Five EWG observers were prevented by Presiding Officers from entering the polling station to carry out observation activities, while 21 were prevented from observing the count. In accordance with electoral law, Presiding Officers and security forces do not have the authority to bar the entry of accredited observers or to prevent them from observing the count. In Comilla Sadar South upazila, the concerned officer suggested to the EWG member NGO not to deploy observers prior to 11.00 am. In a polling station in the same upazila, an EWG observer was taken outside the polling station by the activists of a political party and was forced to stay in a shop close to the polling station for the whole day. EWG is grateful to the Election Commission for ensuring the issuance of all requested observer accreditation cards.

Md. Abdul Alim

Director

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