



April 2, 2014

Election Working Group

Preliminary Statement on the Fifth Phase of Upazila Elections

Held on March 31, 2014

SCOPE OF OBSERVATION

In order to observe the fifth phase of the Upazila Elections held on March 31st 2014, the Election Working Group (EWG) deployed 1,004 observers in 1,004 polling stations across 34 upazilas (out of 73 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), 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 23 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 63.7%, however EWG holds 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 (96%) 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 60% of stations and 11% 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 95% of polling personnel carrying out their work in a knowledgeable manner. The majority of stations had been laid out adequately to aid efficient voting (92%), however EWG did receive 81 reports of accessibility issues for disabled voters due to the station location and setup. Female polling personal were found to be present in 77% of female polling booths. Indelible ink pens were used effectively in 80% of polling stations.

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	% of Upazilas Reporting
Violent incident within station	51	18 of 34	53
Intimidation of voters	59	17 of 34	50
Suspected fraud	183	26 of 34	76
Violation of campaign law	54	22 of 34	65
Citizen denied ability to vote by other actor	13	7 of 34	20
Polling station declared closed	22	13 of 34	38
Polling agents removed from station	65	20 of 34	59
Arrest within station	13	10 of 34	29
EWG observer not allowed to observe counting procedure	39	13 of 34	38

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.

- **Laksmipur Sadar Upazila:** Observers at three stations reported ballot boxes containing a large number of ballots prior to the opening of the polling stations were presented and used when polling began.
- **Laksmipur Sadar, Satkhira Sadar, Tangail Sadar Upazilas:** Observers reported that indelible ink was applied to the fingers of voters waiting in line, and then when they proceeded inside the polling booth they were informed they were ineligible to vote as they already had their fingers marked, disenfranchising the citizens from their right to vote.
- **Belkuchi Upazila:** An EWG observer reported 13 supporters of a candidate entered into the polling booth, seized a significant number of ballot papers, stamped them and put into the ballot box. The law enforcement agency present did not take any action against the perpetrators.
- **Sreepur Upazila:** During counting, a EWG observer reported a group of 5 people forcibly entered the counting room, ordered the presiding officer to stop the counting process and to record the final vote count with fraudulent figures.

The above cases are representative of many violations reported, and highlight the type of fraudulent behavior undertaken with the intent to alter the outcome of the vote in multiple upazilas.

Counting & Closing

The counting and closing procedures were found to be carried out adequately in most stations (94%). 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 12% of stations. EWG holds concerns regarding the validity of the vote counts in some stations due to fraudulent activities carried out during voting.

OBSERVER INCIDENTS

Eight EWG observers were prevented by Presiding Officers from entering the polling station to carry out observation activities, while 39 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 several polling stations in Satkhira Sadar and Laksmipur Sadar Upazilas, EWG observers felt their safety was compromised by remaining in the polling station due to violence and therefore departed. In Tekhnaf Upazila, EWG applied for 30 observer accreditation cards, and while the relevant authorization was sent by the Election Commission to the Returning Officer, only 25 cards were issued with explanation as to the discrepancy.

Md. Abdul Alim

Director

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