

High Turnout, Suspicious Voting Patterns and Procedural Irregularities Mark GBLA-19 Ghizer-I By-Election



ISLAMABAD, April 28, 2011: A high turnout, suspicious voting patterns at 16 polling stations, inadequate and disparate arrangements for voters, procedural irregularities and the flawed method of identifying genuine voters marked the GBLA-19 Ghizer-I by-election, held on April 28, 2011, reports the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) in its Preliminary Report of the Ghizer-I By-Election Observation.

The seat being contested was vacated due to the appointment of ex-MLA (Member of Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly) Pir Karam Ali Shah as Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan. Pir Karam Ali Shah had won the 2009 General Election in this constituency.

Only one polling booth was available in each of the 51 polling stations (of which 13 stations were for males, 13 for females and 25 for both combined) by the Gilgit-Baltistan Election Commission (GBEC). This provision was made irrespective of the number of voters at polling stations. As well as the lack of sufficient polling booths, only three to four member teams of election staffs were managing each polling station. As many as 28,071 voters are registered in Ghizer-I; 14,896 males and 13,175 females. Such inadequate staffing and arrangements make it difficult for voters to exercise their right to vote.

Procedures in Gilgit-Baltistan elections are more relaxed than elsewhere in the country. Voters must provide photographic identification, but not computerized national identity cards; and election staff are not required to take thumb impressions and fill counterfoils. The national norm, however, is to require these procedures, which are imperative to eliminate the likelihood of fraudulent voting.

FAFEN observed suspicious voting patterns at 16 polling stations, where the pace of voting was more than 45 votes per hour. If polling is very efficient and each voter takes approximately a minute and 30 seconds for processing (checking of name, checking of identification, issuance of ballot paper, going behind secrecy screen, stamping a ballot and returning the stamp to the polling officer), no more than approximately 45 votes could be cast in an hour at a booth. The higher rate of votes cast per hour at observed election posts suggests irregularities in voting procedures.

FAFEN deployed 10 trained observers on Election Day to monitor more than 90% of the polling stations in the constituency. Observers spent between 45 and 60 minutes in each polling station to document their observations and findings on a standardized checklist.

While FAFEN managed to observe the polling processes at more than 90% of polling stations, its observers also monitored the counting process at 9 randomly sampled polling stations. According to FAFEN observers reporting from these 9 randomly sampled polling stations (2 of which were for males, 4 for females and 3 combined) the turnout was high at 67.27 percent. The turnout at male polling stations was recorded at 68 percent, 66.8 percent at female polling stations and 67.6 percent at combined polling stations. However, these turnout figures are based upon a skewed sample and the constituency turnout figures may vary from the sampled polling station.

This preliminary report is based on our observation of polling processes of 33 polling stations – 9 males, 9 females and 15 combined. The detailed FAFEN report on this by-election will include the findings from all the observed polling stations.

Some of FAFEN's key findings include:

Suspicious Voting Patterns

There were 16 polling stations where FAFEN observers recorded suspicious voting patterns. If polling is very efficient and each voter takes approximately a minute and 30 seconds for processing (checking of name, checking of identification, issuance of ballot paper, going behind secrecy screen, stamping a ballot and returning the stamp to the assistant presiding officer), no more than approximately 45 votes could be cast in an hour at a booth. However, the rate of voting was higher than should be possible at the polling stations listed below. The following table gives booth-wise averages of polled votes per hour. An average higher than 45 brings into question the speed with which the voters were being processed.

Polling Station	Register Voters	PS Type	Average Vote per Hour Polling Station
PS-3	910	M	75
PS-4	971	F	90
PS-5	846	M	83
PS-8	980	C	68
PS-9	753	M	50
PS-12	484	F	50
PS-13	765	c	50
PS-15	620	C	45
PS-16	444	M	50
PS-19	1,108	M	99

PS-26	808	C	108
PS-27	821	M	63
PS-34	497	C	47
PS-36	693	C	52
PS-40	345	C	53
PS-49	503	C	48

Inadequate Arrangements and Staff

Only one polling booth was established in each of 51 polling stations, irrespective of the number of registered voters at polling stations. Only three to four member teams of election staff were responsible for managing each polling station, while the number of register voters varied from 200 to more than 1100. Such inadequate provision of staff and arrangements makes it difficult for voters to exercise their right to vote.

Voter Turnout

According to FAFEN observers reporting from 9 randomly sampled polling stations (2 male, 4 female and 3 combined polling stations) the turnout was 67.27 percent. The turnout at male polling stations was recorded at 68 percent, 66.8 percent at female polling stations and 67.6 percent at combined polling stations.

Unauthorized Persons Inside Polling Stations

FAFEN observers reported the presence of unauthorized people in 3 of the observed polling stations. At 32 polling stations, security officials were present inside polling stations and polling booths. Under electoral rules, even at sensitive polling stations, the police are only authorized to maintain order outside polling stations in order to ensure smooth polling. They can only enter polling stations or booths when requested to do so by the presiding officer. At one polling station, paramilitary troops were observed to be present inside the polling station. At 2 polling stations, government officials were present inside the building, and at one polling station the workers of political parties were observed to be present inside polling station.

Campaigning and Canvassing around Polling Stations

FAFEN observers reported from 31 polling stations that the workers of contesting candidates were campaigning and canvassing within 400 yards of polling stations, in violation of election laws. Armed civilians were also observed to have been present at party camps around one polling station. Such a display of arms inhibits voters from turning out to vote, as well as leading to the possibility that votes are cast under pressure.

Partisan Election Officials and Breach of Right to Secret Voting

FAFEN observers reported from three polling stations that unauthorized persons were stamping ballots on behalf of voters. At another polling station, election officials themselves were observed to be stamping ballots on behalf of voters. Instances of the breach of the right to secret voting were observed at 2 polling stations, where unauthorized persons were going behind the voting screen to help voters. At one polling station, political party agents were observed to be going behind the secrecy screen with voters. In another polling station, irrelevant persons were observed to be accompanying voters while they were going behind the secrecy screen to stamp their votes.

Interference with FAFEN Observers

FAFEN observers were stopped from observing the voting and counting processes at Polling Station No. 29 (FG Boys School Pakora) by a polling officer. The GBEC allows accredited observers such as FAFEN to monitor all stages of the election, including the opening of polling stations, voting and the counting process.

FAFEN Recommendations

Having observed the aforementioned irregularities during the by-election, FAFEN recommends:

- The Gilgit-Baltistan Election Commission (GBEC) should ensure that security officials perform only their designated duty of maintaining law and order outside polling stations, and do not attempt to manage election officials.
- The GBEC should discipline all election officials who fail to enforce the election rules and laws.
- To eliminate unauthorized people from being in polling stations:
- Polling Officers should be encouraged and provided adequate protection to use their magisterial powers.
- All polling officials must be required to carry their Government Service Cards to prove their identity on Election Day.
- Polling officials should ensure that only one polling agent representing each political party – and carrying proper identification from their party – is permitted in each polling booth.
- Only people carrying proper identifications should be permitted inside polling stations and allowed to vote.
- Adequate security checks should be performed in order to prevent unauthorized and armed persons from being in and around polling stations.
- All polling officials must be required to carry their Government Service Cards to prove their identity on Election Day.
- Adequate training of all polling officials must be ensured for all by-elections to avoid serious procedural irregularities.
- GBEC should refine its systems and procedures to make the polling process more transparent.



- CNIC should be pre-requisite for vote registration and polling. Establishing the genuineness of a voter is the basic principle of transparency in any election.
- Polling officials should ensure that all campaign materials and are removed from around the polling stations, and political parties are not allowed to camp nearby.

About FAFEN: The Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN), a coalition of 43 leading Pakistani civil society organizations, was established in 2006 to observe election processes, educate voters, and advocate for electoral and democratic reform.