

**FREE AND FAIR ELECTION NETWORK**

**Observation and Analysis of NA-246 Karachi-VIII By-Election**

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| **Relatively Better Managed By-Election Held amidst Heavy Security Measures** |

ISLAMABAD, April 23, 2015: Thousands of Rangers and Police personnel supervised a peaceful, relatively well-managed, keenly contested and closely monitored by-election in the central Karachi constituency of NA-246 on Thursday, says Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) in its preliminary statement.

Preceded by an intense triangular election campaign which was dotted with incidents of brawls among political workers and clouded by bitter verbal exchanges among the leaders of contesting parties, voters started to turn out at most polling stations at 0800 hours when the polling was scheduled to begin. However, delay in voting was reported at few polling stations.

Unlike the perception of insecurity and fears of Election Day violence, the polling generally remained peaceful with a few incidents of verbal exchanges among supporters of rival candidates and among keen voters and security personnel at few polling stations. FAFEN observers reported such incidents of minor nature from five polling stations. There have been reports of clashes and brawls among the supporters of the contesting candidates soon after the polling; however, timely calls to remain peaceful from the contestants helped in controlling the situation

Although, the Rangers personnel were deputed to only perform security duties, they appeared to be effectively in control in most polling stations visited by the FAFEN observers. From identification and security checks of voters outside polling stations to standing guard inside the booths, the Rangers personnel were managing the process to ensure that only genuine voters can cast their ballots. These excessive checks; however, were resented by some voters mostly because they had to wait for longer to be able to cast their votes.

The by-election was necessitated after the resignation of Sardar Nabeel Ahmed Gabol, who won the seat by securing 137,834 of a total of 189,405 votes, polled for NA-246 seat in General Election 2013. PTI was runner-up in the constituency with 31,875 votes. The turnout in the constituency with a total of 357,781 registered voters had remained 56.3% in General Election 2013.

For the by-election, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) set up 213 polling stations - 15 male, 15 female and 183 combined for a total of 357,801 registered voters - 196,230 male and 161,571 female. Interestingly, only 20 voters have increased in the constituency since May 2013.

FAFEN deployed 55 trained, non-partisan election observers in the constituency to observe the by-election and observed more than 150 polling stations. A detailed report will be released early next week.

In general, the Rangers personnel allowed the FAFEN observers to enter polling stations and monitor the voting process. As many as 10 FAFEN observers were either denied entry to the polling stations at all or their observation was restricted to outside the booths. At these polling stations, the Ranger personnel disregarded the ECP-issued accreditation cards to FAFEN observers and instead wanted some ECP letter, which is not covered by any procedure. However, most FAFEN observers were disallowed by the security personnel to observe the counting process despite ECP’s permission. FAFEN acknowledges the support provided by the District Returning Officer when restrictions to observation were brought to his notice.

Though FAFEN observed improvements in the polling process; however, its observers reported instances where secrecy of voters appeared to have been compromised. While CCTVs at few polling stations were affixed in such a manner that they could capture the voters stamping ballot papers, in others the secrecy screens were fixed either in front of open windows or not in the extreme corner of booths to maximize privacy. In a few instances, the security personnel were standing too close to the secrecy screens.

With the electoral procedures generally followed, there have been instances of changes in the polling schemes such as few in the Liaqatabad area of the constituency. Similarly, polling camps were set up within 400 yards of few polling stations and voters were seen bringing slips with signs of political parties inside the polling stations.

Equally concerning has been the polling station arrangements as in most cases multiple booths were set up inside one room causing inconvenience to voters. Such arrangements also allowed an otherwise avoidable clogging of voters inside as well as outside polling stations. In addition, polling stations were set up in many cases on the second floor, totally disregarding the special needs of voters with disabilities as well as senior citizens.

FAFEN recommends:

1. The ECP should ensure that its officials are empowered to enforce electoral procedures as effectively as was done by the security personnel in NA-246 in order to ensure that better quality of elections can be held in general and local government elections.
2. Polling officials should ensure all campaign materials and party camps are removed within 400 yards of the polling stations.
3. The ECP must instruct its officials as well as security personnel to be more sensitive to the voters’ right to secret ballot. The use of CCTVs should be restricted to capture polling stations environment in such a manner that it doesn’t compromise voters’ right to secrecy.
4. Specific procedures should be developed on polling station arrangements in view of specific needs of voters with disabilities as well as senior citizens.
5. The ECP should encourage and facilitate local observers to monitor the polling process for transparency. A better coordination with security agencies is; however, essential to ensure the observers are allowed to observe voting and counting processes.