**FREE AND FAIR ELECTION NETWORK**

**Observation and Analysis of NA-108 By-Election**

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| **Mandi Bahauddin By-Poll Marked by Strong Police Presence, Unlawful Campaigning** |

**Islamabad, June 08, 2015:** Strong presence of police and unauthorized personnel inside polling stations marked the by-election held in NA-108 (Mandi Bahauddin-1) on Monday, says Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) in its preliminary report.

The by-election was held in the wake of PTI leader Muhammad Ijaz Chaudhry’s disqualification in a fake degree case. Chaudhry had secured the seat with 36% of the polled votes as an independent candidate in the 2013 General Elections, defeating the PML-N candidate with a margin of 5% of the polled votes.

The Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) set up a total of 289 polling stations (63 male, 56 female and 170 combined) for 431,269 registered voters (246,830 male and 184,439 female) – slightly higher than the 430,517 voters (246,594 male and 183,923 female) registered in the constituency during the 2013 General Elections. The 289 polling stations had 806 booths (478 male and 328 female) for the voters.

FAFEN deployed a total of 76 trained, non-partisan observers (45 male and 31 female) to observe the election process at 279 polling stations in the constituency. Each observer spent between 45 and 60 minutes at four polling stations to observe the election process and document his/her findings on a standardized checklist based on the provisions of the Representation of the People Act 1976, Conduct of Elections Rules 1977 and instructional handbooks provided to the election officials by the ECP. This report is based on the observers’ findings from 121 polling stations till 12pm.

One of the observers at Polling Station 196 was stopped from observing the electoral process by a *numberdar*, who also snatched the observer’s checklist and accreditation card from his possession. The ECP allows its accredited observers to monitor all stages of the election, including the opening of polling stations, voting and the counting process. However, the concerned presiding officer, despite being present on the occasion, did not take any action against the incident.

The initial findings also showed a heavy presence of police inside 111 polling stations from where the observers reported their findings. Similarly, officials of the Frontier Constabulary were also present inside five polling stations. Under electoral rules, police officials are only authorized to maintain order outside the polling stations to ensure smooth voting process. They can only enter polling stations or booths when requested by the presiding officer.

The observers also reported the presence of armed civilians inside five polling stations, in addition to presence of government officials at 15 polling stations and ministers at two polling stations. Candidates were also seen along with their guards/workers at three other polling stations, while voters who had already polled their votes were present inside another 17 polling stations.

Political parties were freely breaching the legal guidelines against campaigning and canvassing near the polling stations. The observers reported from 27 polling stations that the workers of contesting candidates were campaigning and canvassing in violation of election laws that bar the same within 400 yards of polling stations. Similarly, voters holding party symbol and badges were also seen inside 33 polling stations. Furthermore, the observers reported that the polling officials preferred certain voters from the queue at 23 polling stations.

The observers also saw polling agents going behind the secrecy screen with voters at two polling stations, while other unauthorized persons accompanied voters behind the secrecy screen at another three polling stations. Additionally, the observers reported political leaders, government officials and other influential persons pressurizing voters to vote for a certain party/candidate at eight out of 121 polling stations.

**Recommendations**

1. Security officials should not be deputed inside polling stations and should be instructed to allow local as well as international election observers to carry out their observation to ensure a transparent voting process.
2. The ECP should ensure all campaign materials and party camps are removed from near the polling stations.
3. The ECP should take disciplinary action against polling officials who interfere with the voting process.