



Gilgit-Baltistan Election: Orderly, Peaceful Voting as Procedural Irregularities, Discrepancies Persist

FAFEN Recommends:

- Release of Election Result Forms and Data
- Prompt Resolution of Election Disputes
- Action against Bar on Women Voting

A high number of people in Gilgit-Baltistan voted in an orderly, well-managed and peaceful election to the Legislative Assembly on June 8, 2015. However, the vote counting and result consolidation processes were not accessible to independent observers.

While Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) is unable to comment on the quality of the vote counting process at polling stations and the result consolidation process at the offices of Returning Officers as most of its accredited observers were not allowed to observe, FAFEN can conclude that the voting process largely remained organized under a relatively well-trained polling staff and watchful security personnel. The principles of electoral transparency held by the Election Commission of Gilgit-Baltistan (ECGB) by issuing accreditation cards to independent observers and media to enter polling stations appeared not to have been shared with government and security officials, who obstructed the observation – particularly of the results management process.

However, keeping in view the capacity and resources available to the ECGB, the electoral exercise was planned, managed and enforced in a fashion that largely inspired confidence of the people in this mountainous region as well as most political parties. The outgoing chief minister has already accepted the election results without raising any questions on the quality of the election.

The election was held under an improved legislative framework. The announcement on April 21, 2015 regarding extension of the electoral laws in vogue in Pakistan weeks before the schedule for the election was a challenge for the election administrators but also provided them adequate legal space and authority to oversee the conduct of election in line with the legal standards of independence, fairness and honesty. Equally important was the introduction of new electoral rolls prepared on the basis of Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs), which minimized the possibility of multiple voting and other related issues on Election Day.

The elections were due after completion of the tenure of the first Legislative Assembly, which was elected under the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order 2009 enacted by the then federal government led by Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarians (PPPP). A more empowered assembly with powers to legislate in 61 areas comprises 33 members – 24 elected directly on general seats on first-past-the-post basis and nine on reserved seats – six for women and three for technocrats. Members to the reserved seats are elected indirectly through a party list proportional representation system.

The Legislative Assembly also elects six members to the Gilgit-Baltistan Council on proportional representation basis by means of a single transferable vote. Headed by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, the Council is the key link between the governments of Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan and has powers to legislate on 55 subjects. In addition to six members elected by the Legislative

Assembly, the 15-member Council also includes the Governor of Gilgit-Baltistan, who serves as its Vice Chairman, the Chief Minister of Gilgit-Baltistan and another six members nominated by the Prime Minister of Pakistan from amongst federal ministers and members of Parliament.

The PPPP won a simple majority in the elections to the first Legislative Assembly in November 2009 held under the rudimentary Legislative Assembly (Elections) Order 1975 (Amended up to 2009) and a Chief Election Commissioner whose powers were not defined in the 2009 Order. The results were largely accepted by the then contending parties but not without raising questions on the quality of the elections, which, according to FAFEN's observation, were characterized by a weak electoral administration, procedural irregularities, erroneous voters' lists and considerable government interference.

The pre-election period for the 2015 election was also not free of questions regarding the neutrality of the federal government. Mainstream political parties were particularly critical over the appointment of the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan as the Governor of the region, which, they said, was against the spirit of the relevant provisions of the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self Governance) Order 2009. Political parties also criticized the appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner, which, they maintained, was not in line with the spirit of the 2009 Order.

However, the federal government has the authority to make amendments to the legal and administrative frameworks governing Gilgit-Baltistan through executive orders in areas not covered by the Council and Assembly legislative lists, also protected under Clause 3 of the Article 47 of the 2009 Order. On the recommendations of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, President Mamnoon Hussain amended the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self-Governance) Order 2009 twice through executive orders. The first amendment was meant to provide for setting up a caretaker government in Gilgit-Baltistan. Subsequently, Sher Jahan Mir was appointed as the caretaker Chief Minister, followed by installation of a 12-member interim cabinet by the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan. Another presidential order paved the way for the appointment of a federal minister as the Gilgit-Baltistan Governor.

Notwithstanding pre-poll appointments of the Governor, Chief Election Commissioner and the caretaker Chief Minister by the federal government, all mainstream political parties decided to participate in the electoral process. Thirteen political parties fielded their candidates to contest 24 Legislative Assembly seats in seven districts of the region. A competitive campaign enabled political parties and their candidates to rally the support of voters around their manifestoes and was followed by an impressive turnout of voters which by far exceeded the voter turnout witnessed in previous election. Warmer weather also supported the election process as most areas in this developmentally-challenged region were accessible for both voters and the candidates.

While minor incidents of electoral violence were reported through the election campaign as well as on Election Day, the polling day remained largely peaceful in a region where people are fragmented along political, sectarian and ethnic lines. Deployment of Pakistan Army also mitigated the possibility of violence on Election Day, especially in hotly-contested constituencies of Gilgit and Skardu which witnessed intense moments during the campaigning period.

FAFEN partnered with Gilgit-Baltistan Policy Institute (GBPI) in the observation of these elections and fielded 24 constituency coordinators and 183 Election Day observers to observe as many as 65 percent of the polling stations in 24 constituencies. Observation in GBLA-2 (Gilgit-2) was called off a night before the elections after one of the candidates' representative raised questions about the neutrality of some of the observers in the constituency. All FAFEN observers were issued accreditation cards by the ECGB.

Scale and Scope of FAFEN Observation

In line with its mandate to observe elections and advocate for electoral reforms towards transparent, accountable and responsive elections which enable voters and candidates to exercise their electoral rights without any inducement and fear, FAFEN conducted an assessment of the pre-election and Election Day processes in all 24 constituencies of seven districts of Gilgit-Baltistan – Astore, Gilgit, Diamer, Ghanche, Skardu, Ghizer and Hunza-Nagar.

Pre-Election Observation: Twenty-four trained FAFEN observers conducted interviews with District Returning Officers (DROs), Returning Officers (ROs), office-bearers of contesting political parties and contesting candidates. Group interviews with voters were also held during the pre-election phase. Qualitative tools were developed to gather information and perception on critical electoral areas – such as respondents’ understanding of election laws, ECGB’s support and facilitation, electoral rolls and voter registration, polling schemes, ECGB’s responsiveness to complaints (if any), allocation of election symbols, campaign environment and the role of the caretaker government etc.

Election Day Observation: FAFEN deployed 183 trained citizens to observe more than 700 out of 1,151¹ polling stations. All observers were issued accreditation cards by the ECGB.

FAFEN observers were trained on technical aspects of the voting and counting process in eight sessions. The training content was based on the Representation of the People Act (ROPA) 1976 and the Representation of the People (Conduct of Election) Rules 1977. Each observer was required to observe at least four polling stations to ensure optimum outreach and in-depth assessment of the quality of the electoral process.

The observers were trained to fill out standardized checklists based on laws and rules to optimize objectivity and ensure uniformity of observations. The following table provides a district-wise breakdown of accredited FAFEN observers:

District	Constituencies	Number of Observers
Astore	GBLA-13 Astore-I, GBLA-14 Astore-II	21
Diamer	GBLA-15 Diamer-I, GBLA-16 Diamer -II, GBLA-17 Diamer -III, GBLA-18 Diamer – IV	31
Ghanche	GBLA-22 Ghanche-I, GBLA-23 Ghanche-II, GBLA-24 Ghanche-III	28
Ghizer	GBLA-19 Ghizer-I, GBLA-20 Ghizer-II, GBLA-21 Ghizer-III	20
Gilgit	GBLA-1 Gilgit-I, GBLA-2 Gilgit-II, GBLA-3 Gilgit-III	21
Hunza-Nagar	GBLA-4 Hunza-Nagar-I, GBLA-5 Hunza-Nagar-II, GBLA-6 Hunza-Nagar-III	18
Skardu	GBLA-7 Skardu-I, GBLA-8 Skardu-II, GBLA-9 Skardu-III, GBLA-10 Skardu-IV, GBLA-11 Skardu-V, GBLA-12 Skardu-VI	44
Total	24	183

A call center was also set up in Gilgit for observers to report issues of urgent nature – such as restrictions on observation, incidents of violence, capture of polling stations or booths and suspension of polling etc. On Election Day, call agents contacted as many as 71 observers and acquired initial reports from 159 polling stations. The preliminary findings are based on these initial reports.

¹ According to the Draft Polling Schemes issued by the Election Commission of Gilgit Baltistan (ECGB), a total of 11,051 polling stations were set-up for elections in 24 districts.

Preliminary Observation and Findings

Overdue Election

The first Legislative Assembly completed its tenure on December 10, 2014. Under Clause 4 of Article 35 of the Gilgit-Baltistan (Empowerment and Self Governance) Order 2009, the elections are to be held within 60 days immediately after the day on which the term of the Assembly expired unless the Assembly has been dissolved sooner. However, the days following the completion of the Legislative Assembly tenure saw not only a delay in the stipulated period for election but also two presidential orders – one enabling the appointment of the caretaker government and the other installation of the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan as the Governor. While the first order made up for a weakness in the 2009 Order which was silent on the question of executive authority during the interim period after the expiry of the assembly term to the conduct of the next elections, the other presidential decree overrode Article 20(a) of the 2009 Order, which provided for only one-time exception for the appointment of a federal minister as the Governor.

While weather conditions might have been a cause for some delay in the conduct of elections within 60 days i.e. before February 10, 2015, there was no justification for the elections to be conducted as late as June 2015. Most political parties suggested that the delay was used by the ruling party at the federal level to strengthen its position in Gilgit-Baltistan ahead of the elections.

Strengthened Legislative Framework

On March 6, 2015, the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan issued an order to adopt and enforce electoral laws of Pakistan in Gilgit-Baltistan. The federal government extended these laws since the subject of elections to the Legislative Assembly is not enumerated in the legislative lists of the Council or the Assembly. Using the powers under clause (3) of the Article 47 of the Gilgit Baltistan (Empowerment and Self Governance) Order 2009, the federal government extended the following laws and rules:

- a. The Electoral Rolls Act 1974 (XXI of 1974)
- b. The Delimitation of Constituencies Act 1974 (XXXIV of 1974)
- c. The Representation of the People Act 1976 (No. LXXXV of 1976)
- d. The Election Commission Order 2002 (Chief Executive's Order No. 1 of 2002)
- e. The Political Parties Order 2002 (Chief Executive's Order No. 18 of 2002)
- f. The Allocation of Symbols Order 2002
- g. The Representation of the People (Conduct of Elections) Rules 1977

The extension of these laws replaced the earlier Legislative Assembly (Elections) Order 1975 (Amended up to 2009), which was weak and did not define exclusive powers and authority of the Chief Election Commissioner. An entire section on candidate disqualification based on Article 63 of the Constitution of Pakistan 1973 was appended to ROPA. While the complete change in the legislative framework a few weeks before the announcement of the election schedule without any political and public consultation might not have been appropriate, the decision helped strengthen the office of the Chief Election Commissioner to pave way for an improved electoral exercise.

However, the administrative capacity of the ECGB was not enhanced despite the strengthened laws which brought added authority as well as responsibility to the office of the Chief Election Commissioner. The ECGB continued to work from its single, understaffed office based in Gilgit, relying on executive assistance to meet its legal responsibilities in other districts of the region. This reliance also compromised the spirit of insulation of the election administration from the executive.

In addition, despite a major change in the legislative framework for the 2015 elections, neither the ECGB nor the government of Gilgit-Baltistan conducted education of voters and candidates on the provisions of the new laws. Many candidates were not prepared to fulfill the requirements

as enshrined in ROPA and therefore had to acquire relevant documents and information at the last minute.

Competitive Campaign

The election campaign for the 2015 elections was as competitive as the one witnessed during 2009 elections. As many as 268 candidates were in the fray for 24 seats, as compared to 264 in 2009. A total of 137 were fielded by 13 political parties, while the rest contested the polls independently. Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM), Awami Workers Party (AWP), Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), Islami Tehreek Pakistan (ITP), All Pakistan Aam Admi Party (APAAP) and All Pakistan Muslim League (APML) were among the parties which contested these elections for the first time. Pakistan Muslim League (PML), Awami National Party (ANP) and Gilgit-Baltistan Democratic Alliance (GBDA) did not field any candidates for these elections.

The most hotly-contested seats were in Astore and Gilgit. As many as 28 candidates contested for GBLA-14 (Astore-II), 24 candidates were in the contest for GBLA-1 (Gilgit-I) and 21 for GBLA-2 (Gilgit-II). The following table gives a constituency-wise breakdown of contesting candidates:

Constituency	District	Contesting Candidates
GBLA-1, Gilgit-I	Gilgit	24
GBLA-2, Gilgit -II		21
GBLA-3, Gilgit -III		11
GBLA-4 Hunza-Nagar-1	Hunza-Nagar	8
GBLA-5 Hunza-Nagar -II		20
GBLA-6 Hunza-Nagar -III		11
GBLA-7 Skardu-I	Skardu	8
GBLA-8 Skardu -II		7
GBLA-9 Skardu -III		6
GBLA-10 Skardu -IV		9
GBLA-11 Skardu -V		9
GBLA-12 Skardu -IV		4
GBLA-13 Astore-I	Astore	11
GBLA-14 Astore-II		28
GBLA-15 Diamer-I	Diamer	8
GBLA-16 Diamer-II		13
GBLA-17 Diamer-III		10
GBLA-18 Diamer-IV		7
GBLA-19 Ghizer-I	Ghizer	9
GBLA-20 Ghizer-II		17
GBLA-21 Ghizer-III		15
GBLA-22 Ghanche-I	Ghanche	2
GBLA-23 Ghanche-II		7
GBLA-24, Ghanche-III		3

However, the number of women contestants for the general seats remained low, as only five women were in the contest for six seats. PPPP and PTI gave one ticket each to women candidates, while three women candidates contested independently. The PTI's woman candidate was contesting from two seats in Ghanche.

As many as 13 political parties fielded candidates for the elections. The following table gives a party-wise and district-wise breakdown:

Party/ District	Astore	Diamer	Ghanche	Ghizer	Gilgit	Hunza- Nagar	Skardu	Total
IND	25	21	2	20	33	21	9	131
PML-N	2	4	3	3	3	3	6	24
PPPP	2	3	2	3	3	3	6	22
PTI	2	4	2	3	2	3	5	21
MWM	2	-	1	-	3	3	6	15
APML	-	-	-	3	2	2	5	12
JUI-F	2	4		1	3	-	-	10
MQM	1	2	1	1	3		1	9
PAT	1		1	2	2	1	1	8
ITP	-	-	-	-	-	2	4	6
APAAP	1	-	-	3	-	-	-	4
JI	1	-	-	-	2	-	-	3
BNF	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	2
AWP	-	-	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total	39	38	12	41	56	39	43	268

According to data gathered from the ECGB, there were a total of 498 nomination papers received. After the scrutiny process, 56 papers were rejected, leaving 442 validly-nominated candidates. However, there appeared to be 174 withdrawals, leaving the number of final contestants at 268. The details of withdrawals could not be acquired from the ECGB. The following table gives a district-wise analysis of the accepted and rejected nomination papers:

District	No. of Nominations Filed	Accepted	Rejected
Gilgit	105	96	9
Hunza-Nagar	70	58	12
Skardu	109	88	21
Astore	56	53	3
Diamer	54	53	1
Ghizer	72	71	1
Ghanche	32	23	9
Total	498	442	56

Improved Electoral Rolls

In a major electoral development, the ECGB adopted computerized voter rolls based on CNICs for the 2015 elections. The list was finalized after a 21-day display period in March 2015. As a result of this measure, the number of registered voters decreased by 91,572 (12.9%) from 709,936 in 2009 to 618,364 in 2015. The estimated population rose from 1,141,970 to 1,249,000 during the same period. As much as 47 percent of all registered voters were women, while 53 percent were men.

Gender-wise, the number of female registered voters decreased by 37,436 (11.4%) from 326,325 in 2009 to 288,889 in 2015 and the number of male registered voters who witnessed a decrease of 54,136 (14.1%) from 383,611 in 2009 to 329,475 in 2015. The highest decrease

in the number of registered voters was recorded in GBLA-2 (Gilgit-II) where 27,264 fewer voters were registered in 2015 compared to 2009.

The highest decrease in the number of female voters was witnessed in GBLA-15 (Diamer-1) where it fell by 8,734 (39%) from 22,576 in 2009 to 13,842 in 2015. It was followed by GBLA-1 and GBLA-2 – both constituencies in Gilgit – where the number of female registered voters decreased by 5,574 (29%) and 7,663 (33%), respectively. The following table gives a constituency-wise breakdown of registered voters in 2009 and 2015:

Constituency	2009			2015		
	Male voters	Female Voters	Total Voters	Male voters	Female Voters	Total Voters
GBLA-1 Gilgit-I	28,303	19,122	47,425	16,849	13,548	30,397
GBLA-2 Gilgit-II	38,695	23,154	61,849	18,734	15,491	34,225
GBLA-3 Gilgit-III	18,528	16,508	35,036	18,226	16,187	34,413
GBLA-4 Hunza-Nagar-I	10,691	10,263	20,954	10,024	8,794	18,818
GBLA-5 Hunza-Nagar-II	7,042	6,459	13,501	6,353	5,639	11,992
GBLA-6 Hunza-Nagar-III	17,580	16,541	34,121	18,931	17,486	36,417
GBLA-7 Skardu-I	16,026	11,734	27,760	8,871	7,613	16,484
GBLA-8 Skardu-II	20,701	18,680	39,381	18,461	15,820	34,281
GBLA-9 Skardu-III	12,573	10,596	23,169	11,070	9,510	20,580
GBLA-10 Skardu-IV	12,079	12,044	24,123	11,316	10,490	21,806
GBLA-11 Skardu-V	12,038	11,228	23,266	11,766	10,192	21,958
GBLA-12 Skardu-VI	15,933	15,090	31,023	15,806	14,607	30,413
GBLA-13 Astore-I	14,091	13,718	27,809	15,016	12,683	27,699
GBLA-14 Astore-II	14,059	12,544	26,603	12,916	11,536	24,452
GBLA-15 Diamer-I	16,611	22,576	39,187	13,238	13,842	27,080
GBLA-16 Diamer-II	25,168	11,583	36,751	15,439	12,498	27,937
GBLA-17 Diamer-III	13,999	11,786	25,785	13,063	12,559	25,622
GBLA-18 Diamer-IV	9,878	7,313	17,191	8,936	6,764	15,700
GBLA-19 Ghizer-I	14,384	13,450	27,834	16,547	14,709	31,256
GBLA-20 Ghizer-II	17,282	15,375	32,657	18,695	15,705	34,400
GBLA-21 Ghizer-III	13,094	12,065	25,159	14,986	12,591	27,577
GBLA-22 Ghanche-I	13,314	13,085	26,399	13,079	11,642	24,721
GBLA-23 Ghanche-II	12,801	12,404	25,205	12,416	10,870	23,286
GBLA-24 Ghanche-III	8,741	9,007	17,748	8,737	8,113	16,850
Total	383,611	326,325	709,936	329,475	288,889	618,364

Polling Scheme

Section 8(2) the Representation of People Act (ROPA) 1976 states that “subject to the direction of the Commission, the District Returning Officer may make such alterations in the list of polling stations submitted under subsection (1) as he deems necessary and shall, at least fifteen days before the polling day, publish in the official Gazette the final list of polling stations specifying the electoral area the electors whereof will be entitled to vote at each polling station.”

Despite the adoption of ROPA, the final list of polling stations was neither gazetted by the respective DROs nor was it published and distributed among the contesting candidates and other election stakeholders. When FAFEN representatives contacted the ECGB, a list of polling stations was provided, which contained neither the polling station numbers nor the type of polling stations (male, female or combined) for some constituencies. Moreover, the information regarding the polling booths was also not available.

While the registered voters in the region decreased by around 13%, the number of polling stations increased from 1,022 in 2009 to 1,151 in 2015 – an increase of around 12.6%. As many as 365 male, 333 female and 453 combined polling stations were set up in 24 constituencies. An average of 537 voters was allotted to each polling station. The highest average of voter per polling stations was recorded in Diامر with 678, followed by 652 in Ghizer. The lowest ratio was in Ghanche with 438 voters per polling station.

District	Total Registered Voters	Total Polling Stations	Average Voters per Polling Station
Gilgit	99,035	215	461
Hunza-Nagar	67,227	119	565
Skardu	145,522	279	522
Astore	52,151	105	497
Diامر	96,339	142	678
Ghizer	93,233	143	652
Ghanche	64,857	148	438
Total	618,364	1,151	537

Preliminary Election Day Observations

This section is based on reports received from 159 polling stations from at least 20 constituencies in seven districts, making up for almost 14% of a total of 1,151 polling stations. These findings, however, may not be generalized to reflect an overall picture of the quality of the elections. However, these findings are instructive and give an indication about critical aspects of the voting process observed on the Election Day. The following table shows the district-wise coverage of Election Day reporting:

District	Constituencies	Total Polling Stations	Polling Station Observed	Percentage of PS Observed
Skardu	6	279	40	14%
Ghanche	3	148	37	25%
Ghizer	3	143	35	24%
Gilgit	3	215	15	7%
Hunza-Nagar	3	119	15	13%
Astore	2	105	13	12%
Diامر	4	142	4	3%
Total	24	1,151	159	14%

i. Restrictions to Observation

Despite an efficient accreditation process by the ECGB, FAFEN observers faced obstacles in their work and were stopped from observing the voting and counting process in many areas. As many as 30 FAFEN observers were obstructed either by the polling officials and local committees or by security personnel deployed at the polling stations. While FAFEN's call center was inundated with calls from its observers complaining they were not being allowed by military officials to enter the

polling stations in the first half of the Election Day, ECGB's intervention and public reinforcement of the importance of independent observation by media and observers improved the situation.

Restrictions on observation were reported from 19% of the polling stations from where the reports were received on Election Day. Due to the heavy presence of army and police officials inside and outside polling stations, FAFEN observers faced difficulties entering polling stations. In most of the incidents (at 22 polling stations), security officials did not allow FAFEN observers to observe the polling and counting process. The local committees at two female polling stations also barred the observers. FAFEN observers also reported instances in which military officers or Returning Officers inspecting a constituency asked the observers to leave the polling station, although they were performing their duties with permission of the relevant presiding officers. In most cases, the security officials would refuse to accept the ECGB accreditation card and instead demanded an authority letter, which was beyond the standard operating protocols related to observation.

An even greater restriction was placed on the observation of counting process. A majority of FAFEN observers were obstructed from observing the counting process at the polling stations. Furthermore, the results consolidation process was totally out of bounds for independent observers.

The following table shows the district-wise breakdown of the incidents of obstacles to FAFEN observation of the voting process. The details of bar on observation of the results management process will be part of FAFEN's later report.

District	Local Community	Election Officials	Returning Officer	Security Officials	Total
Skardu	-	2	1	9	12
Hunza-Nagar	1	1	-	6	8
Ghizer	-	1	-	3	4
Diamer	-	-	-	2	2
Gilgit	-	-	-	2	2
Ghanche	-	1	-	-	1
Astore	1	-	-	-	1
Total	2	5	1	22	30

ii. Election Day Complaints

Election Day complaints were registered with ROs in five constituencies. The presiding officers in GBLA-13 (Astore-I) complained that voters were not aware of the election symbols allotted to the contesting candidates and that female voters were totally unaware of the voting process. In the same constituency, JUI-F and PTI registered complaints that the voters at certain polling stations were being forced to vote for specific candidates, while an independent candidate complained that unauthorized persons were present in some polling stations of the constituency. A brawl between the workers of different political parties was also reported from some areas.

Political parties also accused the polling staff of favoring certain political parties at some polling stations of GBLA-3, Gilgit-III. Similarly, independent candidates, along with political parties, complained that the voting process was progressing too slowly and that the RO did not allow the candidates to visit polling stations in GBLA-21, Ghizer-III. Furthermore, a candidate in GBLA-4, Hunza-Nagar 1 complained of misbehaviour by army personnel.

iii. Polling Station Security

The preliminary findings showed a heavy presence of police and army personnel inside 129 of the 159 polling stations from where the observers reported their findings. Under electoral rules, security officials are only authorized to maintain order outside the polling stations for smooth

voting process. They can only enter the polling stations or booths when requested by the presiding officer.

As many as 258 army and 146 police officials were deployed at 129 polling stations in 24 constituencies. Deployment of army on the Election Day mitigated the possibility of violence, especially in constituencies of Gilgit and Skardu, which witnessed intense moments during the election campaigning.

District	Number of PS Observed	Police Personnel	Army Personnel
Ghanche	36	40	72
Ghizer	31	39	65
Skardu	28	34	59
Gilgit	13	10	24
Astore	12	10	22
Hunza-Nagar	7	5	9
Diamer	2	8	7
Total	129	146	258

iv. Inconsistent Implementation of Voting Processes

Although the overall quality of elections in Gilgit-Baltistan was better compared to the election quality in other regions of Pakistan, some inconsistencies in implementation of voting processes were visible, which point towards the need for improvement in training of the election staff. Polling staff continued to overlook important steps, such as filling and stamping the counterfoils and marking the back of the ballot with the official stamp and signature, which may render a vote objectionable and lead to the rejection of the vote during the counting process. Presiding officers at some polling stations did not call out the names of the voters so that the polling agents could hear them and match the names with their copy of the voters' list.

Presiding officers allowed some polling agents to sit and observe the polling without their candidate's signature on their authority letter while others were not allowed to do so. Similarly, security personnel were constantly present inside most of the polling stations. In some instances they were standing too close to the secrecy screens, compromising the secrecy of the ballot.

Likewise, there were violations of prescribed rules related to opening and closing of the polling stations, sealing the ballot boxes on all four sides, putting one ballot box per polling booth, getting signatures of all polling agents on Form XIV and XV for every polling station and handing a copy of the result forms to each polling agent and observer, etc.

v. Campaigning and Facilitation of Voters outside Polling Stations

Political parties and contesting candidates were freely breaching the legal restriction against canvassing within a 400 meters radius around polling stations. At 73 polling stations political parties and independent candidates had set up camps very close to the polling stations. Campaigning and canvassing of voters went on freely at these camps, with no action reported from anywhere to curb these activities. The following table gives a party-wise and district-wise breakdown of illegal campaigning near polling stations:

Party	Ghizer	Ghanche	Gilgit	Hunza-Nagar	Astore	Diamer	Skardu	Total
PML-N	9	5	4	2	1	2	1	24
PTI	4	5	1	2		2		14
PPPP	8	2	1		1	-	2	14
MWM	-	-	2	2	1	-	1	6
IND	4	-	-	-	2	-	-	6
ITP	-	-	3	-	-	-	-	3
MQM	2	1	-	-	-	-	-	3
APML	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
BNF	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	1
PAT	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
APAAP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
AWP	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
JI	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
JUI-F	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	30	13	11	6	5	4	4	73

vi. Breach of Voter Secrecy

Of the 159 polling stations from where FAFEN observers reported on Election Day, there were at least four cases – two each in Gilgit and Hunza-Nagar – where the polling staff stamped the ballots instead of voters. Similarly, polling agents at two polling stations in Astore and one in Skardu stamped the ballots in place of the voters. At another two polling stations, helpers stamped the ballot instead of the voters. At six polling stations in Ghanche and one in Gilgit, the polling officials tried to influence voters and asked them about their voting choice.

Similarly, there were several polling stations where the secrecy screens were set in a manner that allowed polling agents and/or polling staff to see the voters stamping the ballots. In addition, army personnel stood too close to the secrecy screen, which again compromised the secrecy of the ballot. There was at least in one instance in Gilgit where an army officer was seen assisting voters behind the secrecy screen.

vii. Unauthorized Changes in Polling Schemes

The ROPA 1976 states that the polling station list should be finalized at least 15 days before the Election Day. In addition to the type of polling stations, a polling scheme includes details of the number of polling stations and booths along with electoral areas allotted to each polling station. No changes to this polling scheme can be made without the direction of the Chief Election Commissioner. However, FAFEN observers reported at least 11 combined polling stations where only one polling booth was established for both the male and female voters, in violation of statutory requirements. Four such instances were reported in Ghanche and Skardu, in addition to three in Hunza-Nagar where observers reported that the presiding officers had established one polling booth.

Furthermore, the presiding officers at these polling stations divided the time for polling such that the male voters would vote during the first four hours while the female voters would vote during the latter half of the day. This is again a violation of the electoral laws which allow for all eligible voters to be able to vote at any time during at least eight hours of polling as defined in ROPA. In at least one instance, female voters in Hunza-Nagar were turned away as they were not comfortable casting their ballots in a polling booth managed by male staff.

viii. Women Voting

As many as 333 female polling stations, in addition to female booths at 453 combined polling stations, were set up to facilitate 288,889 women voters in the region. Moreover, female staff was also deployed by the ECGB wherever possible to help ensure a higher female turnout in elections by removing institutional and cultural barriers. Similar measures were also taken in Diamer district, where pre-election reports of local arrangements to bar women from voting, particularly in picturesque Darel valley, had raised red alerts.

Subsequent meetings of FAFEN representatives with local community members in Darel indicated the need for female polling stations where female staff was available to manage the polling process. The community had also communicated similar concerns and demands to the government and ECGB. Keeping in view the sensitivity of the matter, ECGB did not set up any combined polling stations in the entire Diamer district and appropriate staffing was made at the female polling stations. However, initial reports suggested that the local communities continued with their practice of disenfranchising women in many polling areas. FAFEN can confirm that women in the Gumari area of Darel valley were barred from voting. Some other yet unconfirmed reports suggest women voting took place only at a few polling stations in some districts. A detailed assessment of the nature and scale of barriers to women voting will be made public as part FAFEN's final detailed observation report.

Preliminary Recommendations for Immediate Actions to Ensure Electoral Transparency and Accountability

1. Release of Election Result Forms and Data

To ensure transparency and legitimacy of the elections, FAFEN's most urgent recommendation is that before certifying any election results, ECGB must release the actual polling scheme as implemented on Election Day as well as key election result management documents from all 1,151 polling stations of 24 constituencies. The required documents include Form XIV (Statement of the Count), Form XV (Ballot Paper Account), Form XVI (Consolidation Statement of the Results of the Count) and Form XVII (Result of the Count).

These forms, which are public documents, are the most important evidence of the quality of elections and the validity of results in each constituency. Withholding such crucial information causes unnecessary speculations.

FAFEN refers the ECGB to Section 104 of ROPA that empowers the CEC to take any action regarding anything required to be done for carrying out the purpose of this act (ROPA) for which no provisions or no sufficient provision exists.

1.1. Certification of Election Results

ECGB must not gazette any constituency election results before publishing/posting all Statements of the Count, Ballot Account Forms, and RO result consolidation forms. In addition, the ECGB must ensure that all forms have been checked and cross-checked before gazetting any results, and must not certify any election result until all anomalies are investigated and resolved with public disclosure of the process and conclusions

2. Resolving Election Result Disputes

Another set of time-sensitive recommendations relates to the ECGB's management of election dispute resolution mechanisms, which must be made much more transparent and efficient. Prompt response to complaints enhances people's trust in electoral processes.

FAFEN urges ECGB to immediately clarify and publicize the procedures to address both Election Day complaints and post-election results petitions in order to ensure that election dispute

resolution is timely, systematic and transparent. This is more relevant as the election disputes will now be settled in line with the provisions of Chapter VII of ROPA.

ECGB should design standardized forms and simple case tracking systems for election complaints and results petitions. Case tracking should be shared openly with the public. For full transparency, media and observers must be permitted to witness adjudication processes, including all Election Tribunal proceedings.

ECGB should impose a deadline of one week for its simple internal administrative processing of each case before forwarding it to a tribunal. In addition, lawyers' adjournments must be strictly limited, and other procedural adjustments can be introduced to expedite election-related cases. Election Tribunals must be empowered to enter summary judgments against litigants who violate the expedited procedures.

Immediate reform measures would add credibility to electoral process and could help mitigate post-election political tension and violence, according to FAFEN.

3. Action against Bar on Women Voting

ECGB must not gazette an election result from any constituency where women were prevented from voting in any polling station or polling booth (i.e. where the number of ballots from any female polling station or polling booth is zero). The ECGB must investigate all instances of zero percent turnout at female polling stations and/or female polling booths in combined polling stations, and must take appropriate legal action against those who were responsible for disenfranchising women. Re-polling in constituencies/polling stations must be ordered in case it is established that women were barred from voting under local agreements and arrangements either by candidates or local notables.