**Sanghar LG Election: Peaceful but procedurally flawed**

ISLAMABAD, January 23, 2016: Voters in Sanghar finally got to vote for their local government (LG) representatives on January 23, 2016 after the election was postponed twice due to security concerns.

FAFEN observed a total of 1,307 violations of the ECP’s Code of Conduct for Political Parties and Contesting Candidates and other electoral laws and rules regulating LG election in the province at 193 polling stations and 522 polling booths from where the information could be acquired on the Election Day. On an average, 6.8 violations were recorded in each of observed polling stations.

The election was originally scheduled to be held on November 19, 2015 but the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) postponed it through a notification on November 14 under apprehension of reaction to violence in Khairpur which had claimed 11 lives during the first phase of the local government election. On December 9, 2015, the ECP issued a notice for holding election on December 17 but it had to be postponed once again, this time under the request of Sindh government fearing that the law and order in the district was still not under control.

The polling took place in 68 union councils, three municipal committees and 10 town committees. Election for one municipal committee and two union councils did not take place as their delimitation was challenged in the Sindh High Court. In addition, the PPP candidates won a town committee (TC), containing three wards in the rural town of Kandiari, unopposed. The district is conventionally known to be a PML-F stronghold but PPPP has strong inroads in district’s politics as well. There are 845,706 registered voters in the district, of which 454,682 (53.8%) are male and 391,024 (46.2%) female.

FAFEN deployed 51 – 44 male and seven female – trained, non-partisan observers in order to observe the processes on Election Day. Each observer was required to observe at least four polling stations in every union council/committee and one in each ward and spend approximately 45 to 60 minutes at each polling station to collect information and document his/her findings on a standardized checklists. Each observer was to observe opening and counting processes at one polling station each as well. Each observer was to document his/her observation at three levels — polling environment outside polling stations, voting processes inside polling stations and voting environment in each booth of a polling station. To complement its direct observation, FAFEN set up a call center where six representatives collected information from observers throughout Election Day. This preliminary report is based on the information collected from the observers contacted on polling day.

FAFEN observers were barred from observation at four polling stations. Of the 193 polling stations where observation was allowed and from where observation reports were received, at least six percent were not set up according to the polling scheme. Polling scheme was reported to be missing from 23 percent of the 193 polling stations.

Information regarding opening process could be received from 49 polling stations. Eight percent of these polling stations did not open at the official opening time of 7:30 am. Unauthorized persons were seen to be present inside the polling station during the pre-voting process at 24 percent of these polling stations. At one polling station, the presiding officer did not seal all the ballot boxes while at 12 percent polling stations, one or more polling agents objected to the procedure being followed during the pre-voting processes. Additionally, at eight percent of the polling stations where opening process was observed, voter list was not present at the time of opening.

Candidates and/or political parties had established party camps around 26 percent polling stations. Voters were being expressly asked to vote for a certain candidate at 31 (62%) of these party camps, while voters were being issued slips carrying their serial number from 44 (88%) such camps. At 20 (40%) of such camps, armed individuals were seen to be present.

Further, certain candidate’s campaigning material was present inside 11 percent polling stations, while individuals wearing party badges or symbols were present inside 20 percent of the observed polling stations. At 32 percent of the observed polling stations, some unauthorized person accompanied the voters behind the secrecy screen. At another five percent polling stations, some polling official accompanied the voter behind secrecy screen. Additionally, polling staff at five percent polling stations asked the voters about their voting choice while at another three percent polling stations they tried to influence the voters by pointing towards a certain party symbol.

Assistant Presiding Officers (APOs) were not putting their official stamp on counterfoil at three percent of 522 polling booths observed while at an alarmingly high 44% of the booths, ballot papers were issued but the counterfoils were not filled.

FAFEN observers from eight percent polling booths reported that polling officials were stamping the ballot instead of voters while at another six percent of the observed polling booths, polling agents were found stamping the ballots on voters’ behalf.

FAFEN observers were barred from observing closing and counting process at six (16%) of the polling stations. Reports for closing and counting process was received from 31 polling stations. Of these, 10 percent were not closed at the official closing time of 5:30 pm. At 39 percent of the polling stations observed for the closing process, voters already present inside the polling station were not allowed to vote while at another 26 percent polling stations, more voters were allowed to join the voting queue after the official closing time.

At 16 percent of the polling stations, people other than the polling staff were touching the ballots during the counting process. Polling officials at 19 percent of the observed polling stations were not making separate piles for all the candidates on general seat. At 16 percent polling stations they were not checking the back of the ballot for official stamp and signature while at 29 percent polling stations officials were seen putting clearly marked ballots in pile for invalid ballots.

Officials at 48 percent of the observed polling stations did not share a copy of Ballot Account Form with the FAFEN observer. Similarly, they did not share a copy of Statement of the Count for the general seat with FAFEN observer at 11 percent polling stations. At 26 percent polling stations each, the officials did not display Statements of the Count for general seats in the ward and the District Council outside the polling station. At another 32 percent polling station, they did not display Statement of the Count for Chairmen/Vice Chairmen.