

**Election Observation Report
on
Bangladesh Ninth Parliamentary Election**

15 January 2009



**ওয়েভ ফাউন্ডেশন
WAVE FOUNDATION**

(Member of Election Working Group)

Bangladesh Ninth Parliamentary Election
December 29, 2008

PRELIMINARY ELECTION OBSERVATION REPORT

I. ABOUT WAVE Foundation

WAVE Foundation is established on April 24, 1990 in the border town Darsana under Chuadanga district, which is situated in the south-western part of Bangladesh. Since inception WAVE Foundation has been working in the field of microfinance, human rights, good governance, water & sanitation, agriculture and other development related issues. The aims of these activities are socio-economic empowerment and livelihood security of poor and marginalized people.

As a member of Election Working Group (EWG), WAVE Foundation shares a commitment to free and fair elections and good governance in Bangladesh with a focus on three primary objectives:

- To support free and fair elections through pre-election, election day, and post-election observation;
- To conduct voter education and awareness in key thematic areas to encourage all segments of society to participate in the electoral process. WAVE Foundation implemented activities to promote greater accountability and integrity among candidates and elected officials, women's participation, the needs and interests of youth voters, and the rights and participation of religious and ethnic minorities, disabled persons, and residents of geographically remote areas. And also aim to reduce the risk of election and post-election violence.
- To promote public dialogue on electoral reform.

II. VOTER AND CIVIC EDUCATION PROGRAM FOR THE NINTH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

WAVE Foundation has implemented the EWG designed voter education program that aimed to enhance voter knowledge, oversight, and engagement with candidates and elected officials, and to promote greater understanding of the roles and responsibilities of elected representatives and of candidate and political party perspectives on issues of priority interest to voters.

The voter and civic education program included:

- Establishment of Citizen's Alliances for Promoting Transparency and Accountability (CAPTA) at Upazila level in 21 constituencies. The member of CAPTA committees are business persons, school principals and teachers, women leaders, religious leaders, and other community members for contributing the planning and implementation of local voter and civic education activities.
- Meetings with candidates, rallies, cultural programs, video shows and other activities on the themes of accountability, election violence prevention, women and youth issues, and the electoral rights and participation of religious and ethnic minorities and disabled persons.

III. OBSERVATION OF THE NINTH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION

WAVE Foundation conducted pre-election observation, Election Day observation by stationary observers, and post-election observation.

A. Pre-Election Observation

WAVE Foundation conducted two pre-election environment assessment surveys in Chuadanga and Magura district by its district coordinators. The surveys brought interesting data to the public's attention concerning developments and trends in the election environment, including security concerns, confidence in election officials and observers, and awareness of EWG voter and civic education materials and program activities.

B. Election Day Observation

1. Deployment Plan and Reporting Structure

WAVE planned to deploy 12874 observers in 2466 centers deploying an observer at every polling booth. But it could finally deploy 10850 observers since WAVE received 10850 observer accreditation from the BEC.

Stationary polling booth observers were tasked with submitting their observation reports to their polling center team leader following the close of the polls and observation of the closing procedures on Election Day evening. The team leader was also responsible for observing the subsequent vote count in the polling center, and for passing all completed observation forms together with the results of the vote count observation form to the local union coordinator. The union coordinator then collected and passed all forms for polling centers in his or her union to the constituency coordinator. The constituency coordinator in turn delivered the forms to the district coordinator, and delivers all completed forms to the EWG secretariat for further aggregation and analysis.

2. Practical Challenges in Deployment

The large-scale mobilization of election observers was an ambitious undertaking that depended on the efforts of many individuals. WAVE Foundation is grateful to its Election Day observers for their hard work in pursuing the deployment target and demonstrating that ordinary Bangladeshis were committed to make a personal contribution to the electoral process. WAVE Foundation believes that such high levels of commitment and participation by voters are essential if democracy is to continue to lay deep roots in Bangladesh.

WAVE Foundation faced some external challenges in deploying Election Day observers. The external challenges included conformity with the strict conditions prescribed in the BEC's domestic election observation guidelines. While the domestic observation guidelines were generally well crafted, certain requirements proved highly cumbersome. Besides, some Returning Officers issued cards in the evening of 28th January when some issued less number of cards without explaining any reasons.

C. Post-Election Observation

WAVE Foundation will conduct a post-election environment survey in Chuadanga and Magura district, the third in a series conducted by its district coordinators. Conducted in mid January, the survey will assess public satisfaction with the parliamentary elections, the impact of voter and civic education activities in promoting increased citizen engagement in public affairs, and expectations for the new government and the role of the opposition.

IV. ELECTION DAY FINDINGS

A. General Findings

WAVE Foundation, based on its election observation findings, concludes that the Ninth Parliamentary Elections held on December 29, 2008 were credible elections, consistent with international standards of freedom, fairness, and transparency. WAVE Foundation is confident that the election results represent the clear will of the Bangladeshi electorate.

- **Exceptional voter participation and enthusiasm:** WAVE Foundation commends the people of Bangladesh for their overwhelming enthusiasm to participate in the first parliamentary election to be held in seven years. The voter turnout is exceptionally high by international standards, and demonstrates that citizens attach great importance to parliamentary democracy.
- **Women voters:** WAVE Foundation is especially pleased with the high turnout of women voters and first-time voters on Election Day, as evidence by its observation of long queues of women voters in its assigned 21 constituencies.
- **Confidence of religious and ethnic minorities:** WAVE Foundation is also pleased to note that the ethnic and religious minority communities that faced significant threat and incidence of violence in the 2001 parliamentary election voted in large number and generally felt very secure in casting their votes.

- **Minor administrative irregularities and incidents had no impact on the overall quality and integrity of the elections:** WAVE Foundation observers noted minor administrative irregularities and incidents in 21 constituencies and it had no impact on the overall quality and credibility of the election.

B. Findings of the Observers

The following sections report WAVE Foundation stationary observer findings with respect to several elements of the election, including preparations for the opening of the polls, polling procedures over the course of Election Day, security, security environment at the polling center, accessibility, counting procedures, and observation.

1. Preparations for Opening the Polls

Election officials were generally well prepared to complete opening procedures in polling centers and individual polling booths across the country. Transparent ballot boxes, voter lists, ballot papers, indelible ink, and other essential materials reached individual polling centers and booths in good time. With the exception of minor variations noted in isolated cases, election officials followed correct procedures in sealing ballot boxes and setting up the polling booths. Polling agents were present in polling booths in 21 constituencies, with most adequately prepared for their assignments.

2. Polling Process

The polling process between the 08:00am opening of polling booths and 16:00pm closing set a consistently high standard across the country. While no major problems affected the overall quality of the polling process, WAVE Foundation observers noted certain issues that may be remedied in future elections:

- **Challenges and delays in locating polling booths and voter names on the voter list:** In many polling centers especially those that operated in large school facilities with numerous polling booths on multiple levels voters faced challenges and time delays in locating their designated polling booths and finding their names. Voter names were listed by serial number rather than alphabetically. The provision of chits with registration details by political parties expedited the process in most polling centers, but in many cases considerable time and effort was needed for voters to confirm their polling booth, locate their names on the voters list, verify their identity, and complete the voting process.
- **Long voter queue:** Many polling centers experienced long queue during peak voting hours. While most men and women voters were content to stand patiently in long lines to cast their votes, in some cases voters discouraged by the long wait left the polling center without voting.
- **Voting patterns:** Some observers reported a striking variation from past elections, when voters who lacked confidence in earlier national electoral rolls would arrive at the polling center early in the morning to cast their vote with the aim of reducing the risk of identity theft. Public confidence in the integrity of the electoral roll with photographs prompted voters to take a more leisurely approach in visiting polling centers later on Election Day.
- **Application of national ID cards:** Inconsistencies were observed in the application of national ID cards, which technically were not required to establish a voter's identity. While most election officials followed the correct procedures of applying the voters list with photographs as proof of identity, some insisted on the national ID card as proof.
- **Individuals missing from the voters list:** WAVE Foundation observers noted isolated cases in which voters held a voter registration chit but could not locate their names on the voters list. In some cases, those turned away from the polling center without voting were upset and protested vigorously.
- **Voter privacy:** Polling station officials were left to their own ingenuity and available materials in preparing screened areas in which voters could cast their votes in private. While the overall quality of arrangements was satisfactory, the privacy afforded varied significantly between rudimentary privacy screens made of light fabric and more substantial screens.
- **Placement of ballot boxes:** In most cases, election official placed ballot boxes in prominent locations that were easily visible to polling station officials, party poll agents, and election observers; however, in some cases the ballot box was placed in a less prominent location.

- **Voters in the queue at poll closing time:** With few exceptions, election officials permitted voters who were in the queue by the 16:00pm closing time to complete the polling process. In some cases, election officials took initiative to reduce the wait for those in line by dividing the voter list in half and creating two shorter lines.
- **Election observers and party agents:** Though WAVE Foundation observers were not permitted to observe the polls first in isolated circumstances after discussion with the presiding officer it has been minimized and they performed their duties without any barrier, in most polling centers election observers and polling agents were permitted to observe the polling process.
- **Finger marked with ink:** The indelible ink markers used to identify voters generally worked well; in some instances, observers reported that the markers dried out and had to be replaced otherwise; ink could be removed quite easily.
- **Names and numbers of voters called out clearly:** Polling officials were generally well informed of their administrative duties, including clearly calling out the name and number of voters and stamping ballot papers.

3. Security Environment between Polling Centers

WAVE Foundation election observers reported that the security environment within the polling centre was generally acceptable.

- **Election campaign posters displayed within 400 yards of polling centers:** In several cases candidate campaign posters were observed hanging within 400 yards of polling centers in contravention of BEC guidelines.
- **Instances of illegal Election Day campaigning observed:** WAVE Foundation observers noted some unrelated incidents around the 21 constituencies in which candidate loyalists engaged in obvious or discrete campaigning on Election Day in contravention of BEC guidelines.
- **Voter intimidation or denial of access to polling centers:** There was no evidence of any widespread effort to intimidate voters or deny them access to polling centers.
- **Candidate arrangement of transport or refreshment for voters:** WAVE Foundation observers reported that there were no cases of candidates or their supporters arranging rickshaw and other transportation of voters to or from polling centers and providing midday snacks and refreshments.

4. Security Environment at Polling Centers

The security environment at polling centers was significantly improved from previous parliamentary elections. Voter expressed confidence in the security of polling centers and adjacent areas of particular significance, members of ethnic and religious minority communities that have historically faced particular security challenges expressed confidence in casting their votes without fear, intimidation, or pressure. Law enforcement officials present in polling centers and polling booths generally discharged their security functions in a neutral manner.

- **Isolated incidents:** WAVE Foundation observers noted that there were no remarkable incidents of violence involving clashes between rival political factions. In some cases, there were some disturbance created due to huge number of voters had come to cast their vote at a time.

5. Accessibility

WAVE Foundation observers found most polling centers and individual booths to be accessible to voters of all ages and mobility levels. The widespread designation of schools as voting centers ensured convenient and secure central access in all but the most remote communities. Issues noted for future improvement include:

- **Inadequate arrangements for polling center access by elderly or women voters:** The efficiency of arrangements for polling center access varied among different centers. In the case of large polling centers in urban schools, multiple levels and a labyrinth of narrow corridors posed access challenges for elderly and disabled voters and pregnant women and resulted in significant crowding at peak times. While election officials and voters were generally respectful of voters with special assistance needs, future elections will benefit from better arrangements as discussed in

the recommendations section. Some polling centers had few windows and inadequate ventilation, while others had inadequate water supplies and sanitary facilities to support voters, election workers, polling agents, and observers for the day.

- ***Inadequate guidance:*** While election officials and party agents were generally helpful in assisting or directing voters once they reached their designated polling booth, the voting process was slowed by the absence of persons to provide directions at the entrance to polling centers.

6. Counting Procedures

Election officials were generally well prepared to complete the ballot counting procedures in polling centers, ensuring an efficient transition from voting hours to closing procedures and the counting process. WAVE Foundation observers noted that in most cases polling agents of all political parties were permitted to observe the counting process, with no unauthorized persons allowed access to the counting center. The counting process was generally free from intimidation or threats, while in most cases election officials properly reconciled used, unused, and spoiled ballots and applied the same standards for determining valid and invalid ballots for all parties and completed the counting process with no objection or demand for recounting. Likewise, in most cases polling sheets were signed by the presiding officers and distributed to all polling agents, while observers were permitted to record the polling results posted by the presiding officer.

- ***Periodic delays in the start of counting procedures:*** In some polling centers counting procedures were delayed for some time following the closure of the polls.

7. Observation

WAVE Foundation observers noted polling agents representing several major political parties were present in most polling booths. While in most instances, observers were permitted to observe the entire process, in several cases election officials or other administrative officers refused access to polling centers or ordered WAVE Foundation observers to leave. Observers frequently met and interact with the representatives of BEC and local administration and solved the problems. Observers wore their identifying orange t-shirts produced by the EWG.

V. CHALLENGES FOR ELECTION OBSERVERS

- ***Delayed accreditation:*** In some constituencies, the accreditation of individual observers carried on until the evening prior to the election, leaving little time to complete logistical and other arrangements for individual observers. In some cases, observers were subject to a supplementary tier of accreditation review involving questions from the police and/or members of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). These interviews by law enforcement agencies made some observers sufficiently uncomfortable that they abandoned plans to observe the election.
- ***Denial of access to polling centers:*** While most observers were permitted to perform the election observation duties for which they were accredited without any hindrance, in some areas observers were refused access to the polling center or polling booth by election officials. The problem resulted from miscommunication between the BEC secretariat and election officials in the field, or cases of local election officials taking independent decisions in contradiction of BEC guidelines.

VI. WAVE Foundation RECOMMENDATIONS

The WAVE Foundation makes the following recommendations to improve Election Day procedures and the environment for election observers to carry out their duties and responsibilities.

A. Election Day Procedures

(1) Before Opening

- There should be a booth outside each polling station to provide voters with their serial numbers and to help find the correct voting booth.
- The BEC, rather than the political parties, should ideally provide voters with information on their serial number and polling station. If political parties are to continue to provide chits to assist voters, it is recommended that the chits be prepared in conformity with a standard format specified by the BEC, which should not include candidate photographs.

- Future arrangements for the presence of accredited, non-partisan volunteers inside the polling centers would help voters find the correct polling booth. Bangladesh Scouts or student volunteers could potentially perform this role.

(2) Polling Process

- Rather than depending on party poll agents, the BEC should designate officials to guide voters to their designated polling booth. Again, if the practice of political party chits is to continue, it is recommended that the BEC specify a standard format with no party designation, as the existing practice constitutes campaigning.
- In future the BEC should prepare standard, reusable screens for all polling booths and avoid independent arrangements at each polling booth. The standardized screen should ensure full privacy, be easily installed and removed, and be easily stored between elections.
- Provide voters with information on the basic steps to be followed in completing the polling process, including the format of the ballot.
- Ensure that election officials are clearly instructed on the placement of ballot boxes in a prominent place, where they can be clearly seen by officials, voters, poll agents, and election observers.

(3) Accessibility

- Polling centers and booths should be designated with the aim of ensuring optimal access and assist those that require assistance, and arrangements made to provide assistance to voters. For example, all polling centers with multiple floors should include one ground-floor facility for elderly or physically disabled voters, pregnant women, and others who will otherwise struggle to ascent and descend steep stairs.
- Encourage election officials to grant preference in voting queues to the elderly, disabled persons, and pregnant women.

(4) Security Environment between Polling Centers

- The BEC should strictly enforce the prohibition on election campaign posters within 400 yards of polling centers, Election Day campaigning, and transportation and other incentives offered by candidates.

(5) Security Environment at the Polling Station

- Increase the number of female security personnel for female voting booths

(6) Counting Procedures

- Provide election officials with supplementary training in counting procedures.

B. Election Observation

(1) Election Specific

- Ensure that all election officials at the local level receive correct and consistent information about who is permitted to observe elections, and provide training on the formal grounds on which observers may be barred from entering the polling center.

(2) Future Enabling Environment for Domestic Observation

- The limit on the number of organizations per constituency permitted to observe elections should be relaxed to permit more than just two accredited organizations.
- The minimum age limit for observers should be the same as for voters.
- All restrictions on where observers can observe should be dropped
- Any accreditation process of observers should ideally be completed at least 6 weeks prior an election.
- Once an organization receives BEC accreditation to observe elections, candidates should not have the ability to reject individual observers at the local level.

C. Voter and Civic Education

- Plan and conduct voter education program on the basic technical aspects of voting, including the layout and procedures of polling stations, the format of the ballot paper, stamping and folding the ballot, and other basic details.
- Ongoing efforts should be made to strengthening the capacity of domestic election observation organizations.