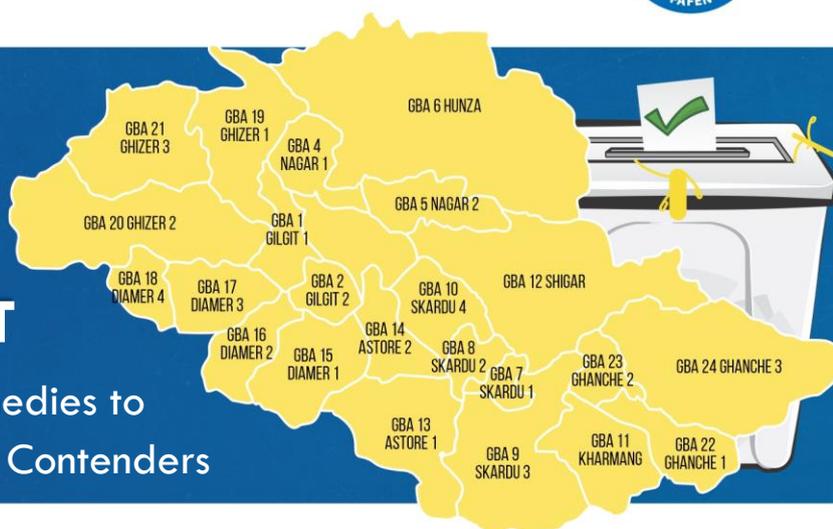


ORDERLY AND PEACEFUL BUT PROBLEMS WITH RESULTS MANAGEMENT

- ECGB Must Implement Legal Remedies to Address the Concerns of Political Contenders



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan went to the polls on November 15, 2020 to elect their representatives for 23¹ seats of the Gilgit-Baltistan Assembly. Braving harsh weather conditions in some areas and low temperatures in others, a high number of men and women in diverse regions cradled by the world's highest mountain ranges turned out to vote in the third consecutive general elections to the Assembly, expressing their support for democracy and political stability.

Coming on the heels of a constitutional amendment to grant Gilgit-Baltistan the status of provisional province, the impressive participation of people in the November 15 election was a reinforcement of their expression of the desire to be part of the Pakistani federation. More than 60 percent of registered voters turned out to vote, according to provisional results of 20 constituencies that have been received so far.

Although required by the law, the Returning Officers (ROs) did not provide gender disaggregated turnout data in seven of the 20 constituencies (one-third or 35 percent) for which the provisional results are available. In the other 13 where the ROs did provide this information on Form 47 (Provisional Consolidated Results of the Statement of the Count) female voter turnout was 53.8 percent as compared to 59.6 percent of male voters. Gender disaggregated turnout data is not available for GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-12 Shigar, GBA-13 Astore-I, GBA-15 Diamir-I, GBA-17 Diamir-III, which may prevent the Election Commission of Gilgit-Baltistan (ECGB) from implementing the provisions of Section 9(1) of the Elections Act, 2017 requiring re-polling in one or more polling stations or the entire constituency if female turnout is less than 10 percent of the total votes polled in that constituency. Although observers of the Free and Fair Election Network (FAFEN) did not report any restriction to women's voting, female turnout remained significantly low in at least two constituencies, namely GBA-16 Diamir-II and GBA-18 Diamir-IV. This may have been due to cultural factors that need to be addressed through long-term engagement with communities by ECGB, political parties and civil society organizations. In addition, the ECGB may take special measures for women voter education and registration as required by Sections 12 (c) and 47 of the Elections Act, 2017.

A vibrant and competitive election campaign by all major parties and independent candidates turned intense and heated towards the end over the controversy of federal ministers running election campaigns in violation of legal limits. As many as 320 candidates including four women – 127 representing 16 political parties and 200 independent candidates – were contesting in 23 constituencies. Nevertheless, the election day remained largely peaceful with no major incidents of violence reported from anywhere in the region throughout the day. However, a few incidents of protests and violence were reported from some constituencies of Gilgit, Ghanche, Ghizer and Diamer due to the delay in the release of results.

The election day was generally orderly, with voting and counting processes at the polling stations conducted mostly according to the law and prescribed rules, though the legally mandatory provision of Form 45 (the Result of the Count) to polling agents was reported to have not been fully ensured by the presiding officers. Election officials at polling stations appeared well-versed with the provisions of the Elections Act, 2017, which Gilgit-Baltistan had adopted for these elections. Impressively, the ECGB mostly ensured the enforcement of the law's ban against campaigning and canvassing

¹ Election in GBA-3 Gilgit-III was postponed due to the death of a candidate and has been scheduled for November 22, 2020.



on election day. Fewer than one-third of the observed polling stations had camps set up by political parties and independent candidates for wooing voters.

However, not all polling stations completely followed the prescribed procedure. Observers deployed by FAFEN reported an average of around three illegalities or irregularities per polling station. These included breach of the secrecy of the vote, stamping of ballots by others on behalf of voters, and voters registered at the polling stations turned away for various reasons despite having their National Identity Cards (NICs). Such issues could have been avoided with more diligent enforcement by ECGB. In addition, instances of allocation of more than the legally prescribed number of voters per polling booth led to over-crowding and disorder at some polling stations.

Similarly, the ECGB did not consistently ensure the provision of Form 45 (the Result of the Count) and Form 46 (the Ballot Paper Account) to all polling agents present at the polling stations during the vote counting process, which would have helped to enhance the integrity of the election results management. The problem was largely due to insufficient numbers of these forms available at the polling stations. Resultantly, the presiding officers had to issue polling stations' results to the polling agents on plain papers under their stamps and signatures, the legality of which has yet to be established.

The voting and counting processes were mostly transparent, with FAFEN observers reporting the presence of polling agents of major political parties and independent candidates in most polling stations. However, instances of polling agents seated at a place from where they could not observe the voting process was reported from six constituencies. More serious are reports that candidates and their agents were barred from ROs' offices during the preparation of the preliminary results in at least three constituencies, and delays in the release of provisional results on Form-47 (Provisional Consolidated Statement of Results of the Count) in more than 10 constituencies. These problems shaped the political discourse on an otherwise orderly and peaceful electoral exercise conducted according to the law, which requires finalization of provisional results by 2:00 am on the day following the polling. These issues also caused major political contenders to question the credibility of the outcome and to raise allegations of electoral fraud. Many of these issues, however, could have been addressed by the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) using his clearly defined powers under Sections 4(3)², 8(b)³, 9(1)⁴ and 95(6)⁵ of the Elections Act, 2017 in order to strengthen the confidence of electoral contenders in the integrity of the process.

FAFEN observers faced almost no restrictions to their observation of the voting process at the start of the day, but encountered challenges particularly in Skardu for the observation of the counting process. Major contending parties promptly called upon the ECGB to ensure that independent observers were allowed to view the counting processes, as permitted by law, as a prerequisite for the integrity of the election outcome. Timely directions issued by the ECGB to the relevant District Returning Officers (DROs) ensured the presence of FAFEN observers at the counting process in most locations. Presiding officers disallowed FAFEN observers from observing the vote count at the polling stations in fewer than 10 instances.

Media and other observer groups were also allowed to cover and observe the proceedings on election day, with no incidences of restrictions reported. However, the ECGB could have released election results progressively as they were received from the polling stations to ensure that the media reported accurate official results promptly, instead of using a parallel system to gather information and report unofficial and potentially unreliable results. Incoherence in tallies of

² Elections Act, 2017 Section 4(3): *Anything required to be done for carrying out the purposes of this Act, for which no provision or no sufficient provision exists, shall be done by such authority and in such manner as the Commission may direct.*

³ Elections Act, 2017 Section 9 (1): *Power of the Commission to declare a poll void.—(1) Notwithstanding anything contained in this Act, if, from facts apparent on the face of the record and after such enquiry as it may deem necessary, the Commission is satisfied that by reason of grave illegalities or such violations of the provisions of this Act or the Rules as have materially affected the result of the poll at one or more polling stations or in the whole constituency including implementation of an agreement restraining women from casting their votes, it shall make a declaration accordingly and call upon the voters in the concerned polling station or stations or in the whole constituency as the case may be, to recast their votes in the manner provided for bye-elections.*

Explanation.—If the turnout of women voters is less than ten percent of the total votes polled in a constituency, the Commission may presume that the women voters have been restrained through an agreement from casting their votes and may declare, polling at one or more polling stations or election in the whole constituency, void.

⁴ Elections Act, 2017 Section 8 (b): *Review an order passed by an officer under this Act or the Rules, including rejection of a ballot paper.*

⁵ Elections Act, 2017 Section 95 (6): *The Commission may, before conclusion of the consolidation proceedings, for reasons to be recorded, direct the Returning Officer to recount the ballot papers of one or more polling stations.*



vote count by media and at the offices of the ROs created confusions that may be clarified after the release of official results as well as publication of all Forms 45 and 46 within 14 days of the day of the poll on the ECGB website as required by Section 95(10) of the Elections Act, 2017.

FAFEN trained and deployed 529 non-partisan observers, including 496 election day observers and 33 long-term observers (LTOs). Almost 30 percent of FAFEN observers were women. This preliminary report is based on the summary observation of 436 polling stations observed in 23 constituencies, more than 37 percent of 1,137 polling stations – 385 male, 386 female and 402 combined.

1 Legal Framework

The President of Pakistan, on the advice of the Prime Minister, promulgated the Gilgit-Baltistan (Elections and Caretaker Government) Amendment Order, 2020 on May 15, 2020. Under the Gilgit-Baltistan Order, the federal Elections Act, 2017 and its rules, regulations, and bylaws were adopted in Gilgit-Baltistan to conduct the polls after the Assembly's scheduled dissolution on June 23, 2020. The adoption of the federal law was made *mutatis mutandis*, implying that the ECGB may undertake

necessary alterations to operationalize and prepare for elections under the law, including for the process of voter registration. The ECGB also adopted the Codes of Conduct for political parties and candidates, election agents, polling agents, and civil society observers, which were introduced before the General Elections 2018 in Pakistan. The Gilgit-Baltistan Order also provided for the installation of a caretaker set up from June 24, 2020.

2 FAFEN's Observation: Scope and Methodology

FAFEN's observation methodology is based on the processes and requirements laid out in the Elections Act, 2017, its rules and regulations, and the Codes of Conduct notified under the law. In October 2020, FAFEN initiated its observation of the political environment and implementation of election-related laws, rules, and regulations as part of its multi-phased observation of elections. FAFEN systematically observed the nomination process, the campaign period, and the ECGB's preparations by deploying a total of 24 trained, non-partisan LTOs.

For election day, FAFEN trained and deployed 529 non-partisan election observers to observe the polling and counting processes at 820 of 1,173 polling stations (71 percent) in the region, covering all 23 constituencies. FAFEN observers, who included 369 men and 128 women, recorded their observations on a standardized checklist based on the provisions of the Elections Act, 2017, Elections Rules 2017, Codes of Conduct, and the handbooks for training of election officials. The consolidated observations from all observed polling stations will be part of FAFEN's detailed report, to be finalized in December, 2020.

3 Election Day

Opening of Polls: The election day remained generally peaceful and orderly with voting continuing uninterrupted during the polling hours (8:00 am to 5:00 pm) designated by the ECGB. Most of the polling stations were open for voters to cast their vote at the assigned hour, with a few exceptions reported from Astore, Ghizer and Ghanche where weather conditions and administrative hurdles delayed the opening of polling stations. The first vote was cast between 8:00 am and 9:00 am in at least two-third of observed polling stations (299 of 436 polling stations, or 68.6 percent), and one-quarter (123 or 28.2 percent) started voting between 9:00 am and 10:00 am. Only 11

polling stations (2.5 percent) received their first vote between 10:00 am and 11:00 am, and three polling stations started voting after 11:00 am.

Observers reported that voters were waiting in organized queues inside and outside of a majority of the polling stations (358 or 82.1 percent) in all constituencies. Three-quarter of the polling stations (338 or 77.5 percent) in all constituencies had organized polling, while the polling process at 52 polling stations (11.9 percent) in 15 constituencies was not fully organized. Observers reported an unorganized polling process from 10 polling stations (2.3 percent) in six constituencies.



Violence and Security: FAFEN observers reported exchange of harsh words between voters of contesting parties and candidates at 43 polling stations (one-tenth or 9.9 percent) in 14 constituencies. Incidents of minor violence inside polling stations involving candidates, polling agents, political workers and polling staff were observed in almost half of constituencies (11 or 47.8 percent). These incidents happened mainly because of entry to the polling stations by unauthorized persons who were resisted by the polling staff. Minor incidents of violence between contesting parties and supporters of independent candidates were observed outside 10 polling stations in eight constituencies where supporters of rival parties exchanged harsh words, had minor scuffles, and at least in one case resorted to aerial firing. No injuries or fatalities were reported from violence inside or outside of the observed polling stations.

The security staff deputed on the entry points of polling stations was observed to behave with voters in a polite manner at most polling stations (399 or 91.5 percent) from all constituencies. Security officials were observed to be unnecessarily harsh at four polling stations in three constituencies.

Campaigning on Election Day: FAFEN observers reported relatively consistent control by the ECGB in curtailing campaigning and canvassing inside and outside polling stations on election day. In more than half of the observed polling stations (258 or 59.2 percent) in all constituencies, FAFEN observers did not report any camps of parties or independent candidates. However, camps were found within the prohibited limit of one-third of polling stations (131 or 30.0 percent) in 18 constituencies. A majority of the observed polling stations (363 or 83.3 percent) in all constituencies did not have any campaign materials within their perimeter. However, the polling and security staff at 31 polling stations (7.1 percent) in 10 constituencies did not remove such materials from polling station buildings. FAFEN observers reported from more than three quarters of polling stations (346 or 79.4 percent) in all constituencies that there was no campaigning or canvassing inside the stations. However, this problem was observed in 49 polling stations (11.2 percent) in 13 constituencies.

Polling Officials' Preparation: Considering the elections were being held under the new law, the ECGB appeared to have adequately invested in the training of presiding officers to conduct the voting and counting processes at the polling stations as per the election law and rules. Most presiding officers had received a day-long training that detailed their responsibilities on the

election day, and had received a handbook. As a result, only 10 of 436 polling stations observed on election day (2.3 percent) reported any critical violations of voting procedures as defined by the law and the rules. Exceptions included violations of voter identification procedures by polling officers and ballot issuance procedures by assistant presiding officers.

Voters Turned Away: FAFEN observers reported from one-fifth of the polling stations (88 or 20.2 percent) in 19 constituencies that some voters were turned away without being facilitated to vote by polling staff for various reasons. In 30 such instances in 12 constituencies, the voters did not have their original NIC, and in four cases in three constituencies polling staff did not allow voters with expired NICs to vote. According to the law, the polling staff should have facilitated voters with expired NICs. Some voters at 21 polling stations of nine constituencies found that they were not assigned to the polling station where they had come to vote. In four polling stations in as many constituencies, voters were told that their vote had already been polled by someone else. Similarly, some voters at four polling stations in three constituencies were told by polling staff that they had been issued a postal ballot.

Secrecy of the Vote: FAFEN observers reported multiple instances of violations of voters' right to secrecy of the ballot from more than one-sixth of polling stations (75 or 17.2 percent) in nine constituencies where someone else was stamping ballots on the behalf of voters. Instances of voters being accompanied by another person behind secrecy screens – including polling agents, election officials and other unauthorized persons – were reported from 67 polling stations (15.4 percent) in 15 constituencies. Similarly, secrecy screens at 21 polling stations (4.8 percent) in 10 constituencies were observed to be set up in a way that voters could have been seen marking their ballots.

Polling Agents: While polling agents of contesting parties and candidates were present at the majority of the polling stations, FAFEN observers reported three polling stations in as many constituencies where polling agents were not present. Observers found 24 polling stations (5.5 percent) in six constituencies where polling agents were seated too far away to see the ballot boxes and observe the voting process. FAFEN observers reported that the election staff established more than one polling booth in a single room in two-third of the polling stations (299 or 68.6 percent) across all 23 constituencies, which could have potentially created problems for voters in exercising their right to secrecy.



Independent Observers: At almost all polling stations (420 or 96.3 percent) in all constituencies, duly-accredited FAFEN observers were allowed to observe the polling process. However, at 16 polling stations (3.7 percent) in nine constituencies, accredited observers were not allowed to observe the polling process. Security personnel did not allow FAFEN observers to enter and observe the voting process at seven polling stations, and presiding officers or other polling staff barred FAFEN observers from six other polling stations.

Women Voters: Restrictions to women voting was not reported from any polling stations. However, the female voters' turnout remained significantly lower than the male turnout. GBA-18 Diamir-IV registered an overall turnout of 48 percent, with the male turnout at 70.2 percent as compared to female turnout of 15.7 percent. Similarly, GBA-16 Diamir-II had an overall turnout of 57 percent, with male turnout at 69.2 percent compared to 37.7 percent female turnout.

Voter Satisfaction: As part of its observation methodology, FAFEN observers interviewed three voters who came out of the polling stations after casting their ballots to inquire about their satisfaction with the polling process. Voters outside almost three-quarter of the observed polling stations (312 or 71.6 percent) in 21 constituencies expressed complete satisfaction with the polling process. However, voters outside 68 polling stations (15.6 percent) said they were only somewhat satisfied with the polling process. The voters outside two observed polling stations in as many constituencies reported outright dissatisfaction with the polling process.

COVID-19 Procedures: The Gilgit-Baltistan elections were held amidst a second wave of the Coronavirus

Disease 2019 (COVID-19). The ECGB had made efforts to implement COVID-19 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the safety of polling officials and voters at polling stations. Three-quarter of the observed polling stations (339 or 77.8 percent) from all constituencies adopted preventive measures in compliance with the SOPs to varying degrees. However, FAFEN observers reported non-compliance with the SOPs at more than one-tenth of the observed polling stations (55 or 12.6 percent) in 15 constituencies.

Counting Process: This report includes the data from 174 polling stations in 19 constituencies where FAFEN observed the counting process. From these polling stations, FAFEN observers were allowed to observe the counting process at almost all polling stations (165 or 94.8 percent) in 19 constituencies. However, observers were barred from observing the counting processes at nine polling stations (5.2 percent) in five constituencies – GBA-1 Gilgit-I, GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-9 Skardu-III and GBA-15 Diamir-I.

At three-quarter of the polling stations observed during the counting process (137 or 78.7 percent) in 17 constituencies, the presiding officers provided copies of Form 45 (the Result of the Count) to polling agents of parties and independent candidates. However, at 24 polling stations (13.8 percent) in 12 constituencies, the polling agents were not provided copies of Form -45 as required by the law. FAFEN observers did not get copies of Form-45 at one-third of the observed polling stations (54 or 31.0 percent) in 13 constituencies. Similarly, the presiding officers at one-quarter of the polling stations (48 or 27.6 percent) in 15 constituencies did not discharge their legal duty of posting a copy of Form-45 on the outer wall of the polling stations.

4 ECGB's Preparations

The ECGB issued a notification on May 18, 2020 to enforce its powers under the election law by directing the Pakistan Muslim League – Nawaz (PMLN) government in Gilgit-Baltistan to stop recruitments in various public departments, and to refrain from announcing or inaugurating any new development schemes and projects. The ECGB also froze all development funds already allocated for new development projects, and barred the government from introducing new policies, rules, or regulations. It also disallowed notification of new members of the Zakat council and committees, and instructed the Deputy Commissioners to take over Zakat's distribution in their respective districts.

On July 2, 2020, the ECGB announced an election program through a notification after Pakistan's President declared August 18, 2020, as the region's poll day. However, the Gilgit-Baltistan Chief Court first suspended the program notification on a writ petition before setting it aside on August 13 through a judgment. The court's judgment directed the ECGB to hold elections within a period of three months. On August 26, the ECGB held an All-Parties Conference attended by major, regional and religious parties. Its joint declaration agreed to hold elections before November 20, 2020. On September 23, Pakistan's President Arif Alvi announced November 15 as poll day, and the ECGB notified the new election program



on the same day. The ECGB had already notified the DROs, ROs, Assistant Returning Officers (AROs), and the appellate tribunal in July 2020. Similarly, the ECGB had issued circulars banning wall chalking and pasting of election-related material on public buildings on July 21, which was massively violated by all contesting parties and candidates.

The ROs processed 547 nomination papers of candidates belonging to 16 political parties and independents between September 25 and September 30, 2020. A total of 327 individuals appeared on the final list as contesting candidates in 23 constituencies. The death of a candidate belonging to Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Mr. Jaffar Shah, led to the postponement of the election in GBA-3 Gilgit III.

The ECGB notified the Code of Conduct for political parties, contesting candidates, election agents, and polling agents on October 6, 2020. It appointed ten District Monitoring Officers, and constituted as many monitoring teams on October 8, 2020. The ECGB issued the terms of reference of the officers and teams on October 9 to monitor and report on compliance with the Code of Conduct. According to the legal provisions, the monitoring teams had the authority to report, inquire, investigate and decide on violations of the Code of Conduct.

On October 13, the ECGB issued an order to political parties and candidates to strictly refrain from using photographs of officials of the armed forces and other department heads in their campaigns. On November 6, the ECGB issued another circular establishing compliant cells led by DROs to work around-the-clock until the completion of election processes.

Through separate notifications on November 13, the ECGB authorized the DROs, ROs, presiding officers, and officers-in-charge of polling station security (police and paramilitary forces) the powers of a magistrate first-class, authorizing them to take action against those involved in corrupt practices and personation as defined

under the Elections Act, 2017, and to exercise other powers as defined in the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1898. The DROs and ROs were authorized to exercise this power until the consolidation of election results, while the presiding officers would have this power on the poll day, and the security officers for the period of their entire deployment.

The ECGB had set-up a total of 1,173 polling stations, including 385 for men, 386 for women, and 402 combined polling stations. These polling stations had a total of 2,024 polling booths, including 1,033 for men, 877 for women, and 114 combined booths to facilitate 704,001 registered voters in 23 constituencies.

FAFEN's LTOs interviewed ROs in all 23 constituencies to gauge their perceptions and opinions about the powers allocated to them under the Elections Act, 2017. A majority of the interviewed ROs mentioned that they felt empowered by the new law for holding free and fair elections. Three ROs highlighted that they faced some difficulties in exercising their powers for enforcing the law. All ROs mentioned that they actively remained in contact with the District Monitoring Officers and monitoring teams for prompt actions against any campaign violations.

For facilitating out-of-station voters as defined by the law, ROs from 10 constituencies reported that a total of 4,264 postal ballots were issued. ROs from six constituencies provided the breakup of postal ballots issued, with 1,565 issued in total in these constituencies, including 1,267 for government employees, 287 for polling and security officials on election duty, ten for prisoners, and one for a voter with a disability. In four other constituencies, the ROs issued a total of 2,699 postal ballots but did not provide the breakup as to how many ballots were issued to which category of eligible voters. As per the information provided by ROs in these constituencies, 800 ballot papers were issued in GBA-10 Skardu-IV, 727 in GBA-18 Diamer-IV, 621 in GBA-11 Kharmang and 551 in GBA-4 Nagar-I.

5 Campaign Period

FAFEN LTOs reported a competitive and mostly peaceful campaign by political parties and independent candidates. However, violations of the Code of Conduct by political parties and candidates were observed in terms of using oversized publicity materials, federal ministers and public office holders participating in

campaign activities, and the announcement of development schemes.

FAFEN LTOs reported the use of campaign materials that exceeded the legal size limit in 176 instances. Independent candidates used oversized material in 72 cases (40.9 percent of the total), PTI in 35 cases (19.9

percent), Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 33 cases (18.8 percent), PMLN 28 (15.9 percent), and five other political parties in eight cases. The LTOs noted the use of oversized panaflex publicity material in 100 instances, followed by 31 oversized posters, 25 banners, 12 portraits, and illegal use of wall chalking in four cases. In six cases, political parties and candidates used government buildings to affix campaign materials — PPP and PMLN two cases each, and Islami Tehreek Pakistan (ITP) and an independent candidate one each.

FAFEN's observers also interviewed 152 contesting candidates representing 16 political parties or running independently. They also held key informant interviews with 65 journalists, lawyers, and poets/authors regarding the political and electoral environment in their respective constituencies, including the level playing field and impartiality of the caretaker setup, the ECGB, and the media's role.

Three-quarter of the interviewed candidates (119 or 78 percent) found the ECGB to be impartial. However, 19 candidates (13 percent) from GBA-1 Gilgit-I, GBA-4 Nagar-I, GBA-5 Nagar-II, GBA-8 Skardu- II, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-10 Skardu-IV, GBA-16 Diامر-II, GBA-17 Diامر-III, and GBA-20 Ghizer-II expressed dissatisfaction with the ECGB's role. Fourteen candidates opted not to comment. Two-third (41 or 63 percent) of the key informants including lawyers, journalists, and poets said that ECGB was impartial and had no political party affiliation. One-fifth of key informants (13 or 20 percent) from GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-5 Nagar-II, GBA-6 Hunza, GBA-7 Skardu-I, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-19 Ghizer-I, GBA-22 Ghanche-I, GBA-23 Ghanche-II, and GBA-24 Ghanche-IV were not satisfied with the role of the ECGB. The remaining ten key informants from GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-4 Nagar-I, GBA-6 Hunza, GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-11 Kharmang, GBA-15 Diامر-I, and GBA-23 Ghanche-II declined to comment on the ECGB's role.

About half of the contesting candidates interviewed by FAFEN (82 or 53 percent) stated that the caretaker government's role was unbiased, and the remaining half (70 or 47 percent) expressed dissatisfaction. Dissatisfied candidates pointed out that the caretaker government

had limited authority and alleged it worked under the federal government's influence. Similarly, about half of the interviewed key informants (36 or 55 percent) highlighted the caretaker government's impartial role, while one-quarter of respondents (16 or 25 percent) expressed dissatisfaction.

Almost two-third of the contesting candidates (96 or 63 percent) said that the media's role in Gilgit-Baltistan elections was neutral. The remaining one-third of candidates (56 or 37 percent) belonging to GBA-1 Gilgit-I, GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-4 Nagar-I, GBA-5 Nagar-II, GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-11 Kharmang, GBA-12 Shigar, GBA-14 Astore-II, GBA-15 Diامر-I, GBA-19 Ghizer-I, GBA-20 Ghizer-II, GBA-21 Ghizer-III, GBA-22 Ghanche-I, GBA-23 Ghanche-II, and GBA-24 Ghanche-III were unhappy with the media coverage.

On the other hand, almost all key informants (59 or 90.8 percent) said that the media were impartial or neutral, with only six respondents (9 percent) sharing that some media were partial towards one political party or the other, promoting favoritism and spreading false information. These respondents belonged to GBA-5 Nagar-II, GBA-11 Kharmang, GBA-13 Astore-I, GBA-14 Astore-II, GBA-20 Ghizer-II, and GBA-24 Ghanche-III.

FAFEN LTOs interviewed 728 voters in 23 constituencies for their experiences and opinions about how the political parties and independent candidates were campaigning. About nine percent of the voters said the contestants used places of worship to campaign. Four percent of the interviewed voters noted that new development projects were initiated in their neighborhoods during the last month before elections by the candidates or the government. They claimed to have witnessed the implementation of development projects such as construction of roads, schools, water pipelines, and sewerage systems. Around seven percent of the interviewed voters said that candidates distributed some food, goods and services to attract voters in their areas. Similarly, five percent of the interviewed voters said their neighborhoods were forced or intimidated to support a particular candidate. Only one percent said that there was an incident of electoral violence in their communities.

6 Voters' Access to Polling Stations

As mentioned earlier, the ECGB established a total of 1,173 polling stations and 2,024 polling booths to facilitate 704,001 registered voters in 23 constituencies.

The ECGB adhered to the legal provisions of the Elections Act, 2017 of assigning not more than 1,200 voters to a polling station for the orderly conduct of polls. On



average, each polling station was established for 600 voters. However, the ECGB did not fully comply with the legal requirement of not ordinarily assigning more than 300 voters to a polling booth. On average, every polling booth had 348 voters, with three-quarter of the constituencies (17 out of 23 or 73.9 percent) having polling stations that crossed the 300-voter limit. GBA-21 Ghizer-II had, on average, 560 voters assigned to every polling booth, while six other constituencies had an average between 400 and 500 voters. Processing ballots of a large number of voters at a polling booth slows down the voting process, leading to long queues inside and outside the polling stations.

FAFEN observers inspected the buildings of 412 polling stations in 21 constituencies before the election day. They found that at 30 percent of the inspected stations, the ROs had not physically visited the polling station buildings. Personal verification of the building by ROs is a mandatory legal requirement. FAFEN observers also noted that three percent of the polling stations did not have a usable road to access the building. The entry points of 28 percent of the observed polling station buildings were not wheelchair-friendly. Seven percent of the polling station buildings did not have a drinking water facility, while six percent of the polling stations were without bathrooms and boundary walls.

The law requires that the distance between a voter and the polling station should preferably not be more than one kilometer. However, the candidates, key informants, and voters interviewed by FAFEN LTOs during the campaign

period highlighted some accessibility issues for voters, particularly women, the elderly and people with disabilities.

Two-third of the interviewed contesting candidates (94 or 63 percent) and key informants (41 or 63 percent) mentioned that the assigned polling stations were easily accessible due to the proximity with their respective neighborhoods. One-third of the contesting candidates (51 or 34 percent) said that polling stations are difficult to access because of long distances, challenging terrain, and lack of transport infrastructure in the region, representing a significant challenge for the elderly, women and persons with disabilities. These candidates were from GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-4 Nagar-I, GBA-5 Nagar-II, GBA-6 Hunza, GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-10 Skardu-IV, GBA-11 Kharmang, GBA-14 Astore-II, GBA-15 Diamer-I, GBA-16 Diamer-II, GBA-19 Ghizer-I, GBA-20 Ghizer-II, GBA-21 Ghizer-III, GBA-22 Ghanche-I, GBA-23 Ghanche-II, and GBA-24 Ghanche-III.

Similarly, nine key informants (14 percent) from GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-6 Hunza, GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-10 Skardu-IV, GBA-19 Ghizer-I, and GBA-20 Ghizer-II pointed out that the existing number of polling stations was not sufficient amid the COVID-19 situation, and the approaching harsh winter. A similar percentage of the interviewed voters (14 percent) said that their polling stations were not within walking distance. Two percent of the interviewed voters noted that women's access to polling stations was not easy.

7 Nominations and Scrutiny

FAFEN LTOs observed the process of nominations and scrutiny of candidates. A total of 547 candidates submitted nomination papers between September 25 and 30, 2020, while 327 candidates appeared on the final list to contest 23 constituencies. The final list available on the ECGB's website had a total of 320 candidates. The observers found that the ROs generally adhered to the due process while scrutinizing the candidates' nomination papers in accordance with the legal and regulatory requirements.

The observation of the scrutiny process recorded the acceptance of nomination papers of 95 percent (313 out of 331) candidates. The ROs rejected the remaining five percent of the nomination applications (18) on technical grounds. FAFEN observers also reported compliance by almost all ROs regarding displaying scrutiny schedules at

their offices except for three constituencies, namely GBA-4 Nagar-I, GBA-9 Skardu-III, and GBA-15 Diamir-I. In two-third of the nominations (214 out of 331 or 64.7 percent), the ROs carried out an inquiry to scrutinize the nomination papers. In a majority (88 percent) of the observed cases, the ROs did not object to candidates' nomination papers. However, in 12 percent of cases, the ROs questioned the authenticity of the information provided in the applications.

The observers noted that some ROs were asking candidates a few irrelevant questions. According to FAFEN observers, 11 of the 331 candidates (3.3 percent) were asked questions not related to their nomination papers. Some irrelevant questions pertained to religion, while one question was about a candidate's disinclination to back a specific political party. The nomination and



scrutiny process otherwise remained within the legally prescribed framework.

The PPP had fielded 23 candidates for contesting the polls, followed by PTI and PMLN with 21 each, Pakistan

Muslim League (PML) 15, and Jamiat Ulema Islam (JUI) 12. Overall, 16 parties fielded 127 candidates, while 200 independent candidates ran for the election. The region had 71 more candidacies as compared to the 2015 elections.

8 Women's Participation

The Gilgit-Baltistan elections reinforced the need for strategies for a more gender-responsive electoral system. As in other regions of the country, women's participation during the Gilgit-Baltistan elections was low, both as voters and as candidates. Of the 547 total candidates who filed nominations, only eight were women (1.5 percent). Only four out of these eight women candidates appeared on the final list of candidates. While the number of women candidates remained the same as in the 2015 elections, the number of men candidates increased by 28 percent. However, women's candidacy decreased by one constituency as one of the women candidates in the 2015 elections contested election from two constituencies. In 2020, the four women candidates contested elections from GBA-6 Hunza, GBA-18 Diamir-IV, GBA-20 Ghizer-II, and GBA-23 Ghanche-II. Only one woman filed nomination papers as an independent candidate, while the remaining three were affiliated to different political parties.

Section 206 of the Elections Act, 2017, requires the parties to award five percent of their tickets for general seats to women. The legal requirements mandate at least one woman ticket-holder if a party grants 20 tickets, but only three parties fielded a sufficient number of candidates for this legal provision to take effect. Of these three parties, PPP and PTI met the minimum requirement and fielded at least one female candidate. However, PML-N did not comply with the legal requirement by not fielding any woman candidate among its 21 candidates.

With regards to women's participation as voters, the final electoral rolls published by the ECGB on October 2, 2020, had 745,361 registered voters, including 405,350 men (54.4 percent) and 339,992 women (45.6 percent), indicating a gender gap of 65,358 voters (8.8 percent). Since the 2015 elections, the ECGB added a total of 126,997 voters to the electoral rolls for the 2020 elections, compared to 618,364 voters on the 2015 voters' lists, a 21 percent increase. The relatively higher number of men among the new registrations — 75,888 men (59.8 percent) to 51,109 women (40.2 percent) — has increased the gender-gap since 2015. The overall gender-gap increased from 6.6 percent during the

previous elections to 8.8 percent on the 2020 electoral rolls.

Since an NIC is a prerequisite for voter registration, women must acquire them to get registered as voters. However, sociocultural and administrative factors are some of the core issues that hamper women from obtaining their NICs. Almost two-third (63 percent) of the contesting candidates interviewed by FAFEN observers before the elections highlighted that the ECGB took no special measures to encourage or facilitate women to get NICs and register as voters in their constituencies. Only one-third of the candidates (33 percent) mentioned that the commission took extra measures in their constituencies. These steps included provisioning of mobile registration vehicles (MRVs) in remote areas by National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), establishing display centers for women, elderly, and people with disabilities, and setting up separate polling stations.

One quarter (24 percent) of the key informants interviewed by FAFEN observers mentioned that the commission took various steps for enhancing women's participation. These included provisioning of MRVs and door-to-door registration by NADRA teams, designating NADRA Registration Centers (NRCs), polling stations, and display centers, and increasing accessibility to computerized voter lists. However, three-quarters (74 percent) of key informants reported that the ECGB took no special measures for women NIC and voter registration in their respective constituencies.

In October 2020, FAFEN conducted 24 focus group discussions (FGDs) with 188 socially and politically active women from across 24 constituencies. The FGDs shed light on institutional, cultural, and administrative issues that hamper women's electoral and political participation. Limited accessibility to polling stations was the most commonly raised issue by women in all the constituencies. A majority of women said that the assigned polling stations were too far away, making it difficult for them to take time from housework to vote on the election day. They stated that many women could not exercise their right to vote due to the mountainous terrain and lack of



transport. They also pointed out that women usually have to travel four or five kilometres to reach their assigned polling stations. This issue was also echoed in FAFEN observers' interviews with voters on the election day. Eight percent of 728 voters interviewed on the election day mentioned that it was difficult for women to reach their polling stations. The FGDs also highlighted lack of awareness among women of their electoral rights as the primary hindrance to their electoral participation. The

FGD participants also reported that women voters in some remote areas were not allowed to step out of their homes to cast their ballot. These places include GBA-2 Gilgit-II, GBA-3 Gilgit-III, GBA-4 Nagar-I, GBA-5 Nagar-II, GBA-8 Skardu-II, GBA-9 Skardu-III, GBA-12 Shiger, GBA-17 Diamer-III, and GBA-18 Diamer-IV. Moreover, due to the patriarchal customs in these regions, women usually vote based on the choices made by their male family members.

9 Constituencies' Demographics

The Gilgit-Baltistan region is administratively divided into three divisions and 14 districts with its headquarters in Gilgit. The Assembly has 24 general seats and nine reserved seats (six for women and three for technocrats). Though harsh weather and mountainous topography are typical, to a varying degree, to all electoral constituencies, the constituencies vary in terms of demographics and political choices. FAFEN LTOs assessed the basic profile of the constituencies during their pre-election observation. Only half of the constituencies (12) have some urban settlements, while the other half are entirely rural constituencies with poor communication and transportation infrastructure. There is also linguistic

diversity among and within constituencies. There are only five single-language constituencies – three Balti and two Shina speaking constituencies – the other 19 constituencies are multi-lingual. Major languages include Balti, Shina, Burushaski, Khwar, Wakhi, Pashto, Gojri, and Kohistani. Urdu is also spoken across the region.

Notwithstanding a distinct sectarian identity in many constituencies, the presence of all major political parties is a significant commonality. All mainstream and relatively smaller political parties as well as religious parties have their support bases in the region. Some regional political parties also have their strongholds in electoral politics.

10 Voter Registration

At the divisional level, Gilgit recorded the highest growth of voter registration (with an increase of 55,053 voters), followed by Baltistan (38,581 new voters) and Diamer (33,363 new voters). As with the division level trends, the number of registered voters compared with 2015 reflects a universal yet varying increase. The variance in the

number of new voters to the list ranges from as low as 643 new voters in GBA-7 Skardu-I to 8,133 new voters in GBA-20 Ghizer II. The following table-1 shows the change in number and percentage of registered voters in constituencies between 2015 and 2020:

Table 1 Change in Number and Percentage of Registered Voters by Constituency: 2015 vs 2020

Constituency	GBA Election 2015	GBA Election 2020	Increase in Number of Voters	% Increase
GBA-1 Gilgit-I	30,397	35,840	5,443	18%
GBA-2 Gilgit-II	34,225	41,259	7,034	21%
GBA-3 Gilgit-III	34,413	41,360	6,947	20%
GBA-4 Nagar-I	18,818	23,171	4,353	23%
GBA-5 Nagar-II	11,992	14,001	2,009	17%
GBA-6 Hunza	36,417	43,603	7,186	20%
GBA-7 Skardu-I	16,484	17,127	643	4%

Constituency	GBA Election 2015	GBA Election 2020	Increase in Number of Voters	% Increase
GBA-8 Skardu-II	34,281	39,567	5,286	15%
GBA-9 Skardu-III	20,580	25,562	4,982	24%
GBA-10 Skardu-IV	21,806	26,839	5,033	23%
GBA-11 Kharmang*	21,958	26,869	4,911	22%
GBA-12 Shiger**	30,413	36,183	5,770	19%
GBA-13 Astore-I	27,699	33,378	5,679	21%
GBA-14 Astore-II	24,452	29,023	4,571	19%
GBA-15 Diamir-I	27,080	35,185	8,105	30%
GBA-16 Diamir-II	27,937	35,405	7,468	27%
GBA-17 Diamir-III	25,622	29,955	4,333	17%
GBA-18 Diamir-IV	15,700	18,907	3,207	20%
GBA-19 Ghizer-I	31,256	37,808	6,552	21%
GBA-20 Ghizer-II	34,400	42,533	8,133	24%
GBA-21 Ghizer-III	27,577	34,973	7,396	27%
GBA-22 Ghanche-I	24,721	29,104	4,383	18%
GBA-23 Ghanche-II	23,286	27,522	4,236	18%
GBA-24 Ghanche-III	16,850	20,187	3,337	20%

* GBA-11 Khanmang was GBA 11-Skardu V in 2015 Elections

**GBA12-Shigar was GBA 12-Sakardu VI in 2015 Elections

The disproportionately higher number of new male voters to the voters' list has added to the gender-gap in 20 constituencies. The gender-gap increased by two percent in 12 constituencies, four percent in five constituencies, and six percent in the remaining three constituencies. The gender-gap decreased in only one constituency, and remained consistent in three. The following table shows the gender-gap on the electoral rolls in constituencies:

Table 2

Gender Gap by Constituency: 2015 vs 2020

Constituency	Gap% 2015	Gap% 2020	Change in Gender Gap
GBA-6 Hunza	4%	2%	-2%
GBA-7 Skardu-I	8%	8%	0%
GBA-11 Kharmang	8%	8%	0%
GBA-24 Ghanche-III	4%	4%	0%
GBA-3 Gilgit-III	6%	8%	2%
GBA-19 Ghizer-I	6%	8%	2%
GBA-23 Ghanche-II	6%	8%	2%



Constituency	Gap% 2015	Gap% 2020	Change in Gender Gap
GBA-1 Gilgit-I	10%	12%	2%
GBA-2 Gilgit-II	10%	12%	2%
GBA-8 Skardu-II	8%	10%	2%
GBA-9 Skardu-III	8%	10%	2%
GBA-13 Astore-I	8%	10%	2%
GBA-15 Diamir-I	-2%	0%	2%
GBA-16 Diamir-II	10%	12%	2%
GBA-20 Ghizer-II	8%	10%	2%
GBA-21 Ghizer-III	8%	10%	2%
GBA-4 Nagar-I	6%	10%	4%
GBA-5 Nagar-II	6%	10%	4%
GBA-12 Shiger	4%	8%	4%
GBA-14 Astore-II	6%	10%	4%
GBA-22 Ghanche-I	6%	10%	4%
GBA-10 Skardu-IV	4%	10%	6%
GBA-17 Diamir-III	2%	8%	6%
GBA-18 Diamir-IV	14%	20%	6%