Despite COVID-19 associated challenges, the PS-52 Umer Kot-II by-elections witnessed an encouraging male and female turnout with low incidence of procedural violations indicating improved election management by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP). This was the first by-election held after the ECP’s decision to postpone polls due to the outbreak of COVID-19 last year. The by-elections were necessitated due to the death of Pakistan Peoples’ Party Parliamentarians (PPP) lawmaker Syed Ali Mardan Shah in January 2020.

On Election Day, FAFEN’s trained citizen observers reported a total of 76 procedural irregularities regarding the campaigning and canvassing, voting and counting processes, and security arrangements – averaging less than one violation per polling station. FAFEN deployed a total of 30 non-partisan and duly accredited observers – 25 men and five women – to observe the polling processes at 99 stations including 22 male, 26 female, and 51 combined.

The polling process was generally observed to be organized at the observed polling stations. Nearly 85 percent of the observed polling stations had polling booths in separate rooms; however, around 15 percent of the polling stations – 23 percent male, 27 percent female, and six percent combined – housed more than one booth in a single room. The polling agents of contesting candidates were present at 97 percent of the polling stations, and all of them were seated at a place where they could easily observe the process.

FAFEN observers also inquired voters of their level of satisfaction with the voting process. None of the voters expressed dissatisfaction with the voting process. Voters outside 87 percent polling stations – 86 percent male, 85 percent female, and 88 percent combined – expressed their full satisfaction with the process, while the voters outside the remaining polling stations were somewhat or partially satisfied.

The election materials were observed to be in adequate quantities at all of the observed polling stations except one combined polling station. The observers did not witness any incident of polling staff disallowing a voter from casting his or her ballot. With the exception of two incidents of unauthorized persons going behind the secrecy screens at two polling stations, there were no other incidents that compromised the secrecy of voters.

1. Campaigning and Canvassing:
The election code of conduct prohibits campaigning and canvassing in and around polling stations on the Election Day. The code was observed to be effectively enforced inside all 99 polling booths.
policing stations. FAFEN observers did not report any incidence of persuasion of voters or presence of campaign materials from these stations. On the contrary, they did report the presence of political parties or candidates’ camps in the vicinity of 40 out of 99 observed polling stations.

2. Conduct of Security Staff:

The behavior of the security officials was also generally observed to be hospitable and warm voters. However, at one polling station, the observer noted unnecessarily harsh behavior of the security personnel. With the exception of minor brawls and clashes among political party workers, no major incident of violence was reported. At PS 68, observers witnessed a minor clash among political workers with no injuries or casualties. Similarly, at PS 21, FAFEN observer witnessed an exchange of harsh words among voters and/or polling staff.

3. Enforcement of SOPs to contain COVID-19:

Lax enforcement of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to contain the outspread of COVID-19 was observed at a majority of the polling stations. According to observers’ reports, COVID SOPs were completely followed at only 11 percent polling stations, partially followed at 84 percent, and altogether ignored at five percent of the observed stations.

4. Counting Process:

FAFEN observers were allowed to observe the counting process at 25 out of 28 polling stations. At three stations, the polling or security staff did not allow the observers to observe the counting process. At the observed polling stations, the polling staff was providing copies of Form-45 (Result of the Count) to polling agents at all polling stations. However, the copies of Form-45 were not provided to observers at two polling stations, and not pasted outside one of the observed polling stations.

5. Voter Registration and Turnout:

The number of voters in the constituency registered an increase of 15,932 (12 percent) since 2018 General Elections. As many as 7,687 (10 percent) male voters, and 8,245 (13 percent) female voters were added to electoral rolls between GE-2018 and the by-polls. Though the voter registration recorded an increase in majority of the census blocks (115 out of 169, or 68 percent), there was a considerable number of census blocks (51 or 30 percent) where the number of registered voter declined as compared to previous elections.

Nearly 60 percent of the registered voters exercised their right to vote on the polling day. The election turnout, though encouraging for a by-election, was lower than the turnout recorded during GE-2018 at 66.20 percent.

No reports of any bar on women voters were received during the
polling day.

FAFEN observers noted voters queued outside or inside 94 percent of the observed polling station buildings during the polling day, confirming the encouraging voter turnout trend. Both women and men voters were seen visiting polling stations to cast their ballots. However, a FAFEN observer reported that no voters were present in one of the observed female polling stations at the time of observation in the afternoon.

A party-wise analysis suggests slight changes among the vote-share of two major political players in the constituency. PPPP vote share increased from 60.5 percent in GE-2018 to 62.1 percent in the recent election, while the Grand Democratic Alliance's (GDA) share decreased from 37 percent to 34.2 percent.

### 6. Contesting Parties and Candidates:

A total of 12 candidates contested the by-election in PS-52 – four less than the number of candidates contesting the GE-2018.

For GE-2018, six political parties including PPPP, GDA, Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Sindh United Party (SUP), Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal Pakistan (MMAP), and Pak Sirzameen Party (PSP) had nominated their candidates while for recent elections only PPPP and GDA fielded their candidates. The remaining 10 contesting candidates were independents. Unlike the GE-2018 when three women – MMAP, PML-N, and independent – had contested this seat, only one woman independent candidate contested the recent by-election.

### 7. Setting up of Polling Stations:

ECP had set up a total of 128 polling stations – 33 male, 30 female and 65 combined – with 423 polling booths (male 226, female 197) for 153,935 registered voters of the constituency, averaging 1,202 voters per polling station. Six improvised polling stations were also set-up – three combined, two female and one polling station. During the GE-2018, a total of 118 polling stations – 29 male, 29 female and 60 combined – with 284 booths (male 144, female 140) for 138,003 voters, averaging 1,169 voters per polling stations.

The Elections Act, 2017 highlights a limit of 1,200 voters to be assigned to a polling station and 300 to a polling booth for smooth voting process. However, additional voters may be assigned in exceptional circumstances with the reasons to be recorded in writing. The election authorities assigned above 1,200 voters to 61 (48%) polling stations in the Final List of Polling Station issued for the by-election in PS-52 Umerkot-II.

### 8. Independent Observation:

Section 238 of the Elections Act, 2017 permits duty verified and accredited elections observers to observe the proceedings including the voting and counting process. In compliance with legal provision, FAFEN’s trained, non-partisan and accredited observers were allowed to observe the polling process at 99 polling stations without any restrictions while they were barred from observation at three polling stations despite producing their ECP accreditation cards. At two polling stations, the Presiding Officers stopped the observers from conducting the observation while at one place the security officials did not allow the observer to enter the polling premises. Similarly, FAFEN observers were allowed to observe the counting process at 25 polling stations and barred from observation at three places.

Findings of this by-election observation were collected by using a standardized robust methodology based on the Elections Act, 2017, Election Rules 2018, respective codes of conduct and Election Commission of Pakistan’s (ECP) handbooks for election officials. For this report, FAFEN analyzed the checklists received from 99 out of the total 128 polling stations.