Thakurgaon-1 By-Election Observation Findings

AFED observes orderly polling but raises concerns over election day campaign activity

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The Alliance for Fair Election and Democracy (AFED) observed orderly polling during the Thakurgaon-1 by-election, with orderly queues, a visible security presence and no reported incidents of physical violence, intimidation or pressure inside the polling stations observed. However, during the morning, supporters of one of the contesting candidates were observed distributing party symbols around polling centres, which were subsequently left scattered on the ground as litter. Campaign materials were also visible near polling centres, raising concerns about election day campaign activity.

"*Generally orderly polling is a positive finding, but the rules governing election day campaigning should be respected by all contestants and enforced consistently, regardless of political affiliation. The authorities should assess these observations against the applicable electoral rules and communicate their findings clearly*," said Md. Harun-Or-Rashid, founder and Chief Executive of Light House and Member Secretary-AFED.

Observation mission and scope of the assessment

AFED deployed 52 short-term observers for election day. This preliminary statement draws on 126 reports from observers in unique polling centres across Thakurgaon-1, complementing the work of three long-term observers monitoring the pre-election environment. The mission used mobile observation, with observers visiting designated centres for limited periods. Its findings therefore relate to the locations, booths and stages actually observed and cannot establish what occurred in every centre or throughout the day.

Preparations and opening of polling

Polling centres remained insufficiently accessible to persons with mobility limitations. Although more polling centres were located on the ground floor than during the general elections, 24 percent of locations assessed remained inaccessible without assistance for persons with mobility limitations. Even small steps at entrances could create barriers, indicating that ground-floor placement alone does not ensure accessibility. Polling premises should provide a continuous, step-free route so that voters can enter and move around independently and with dignity.

The opening of polling was generally orderly, with election officials demonstrating a high level of preparedness. Polling rooms were arranged to protect secrecy in the majority of the centers (98 percent). However, a limited concern arose where CCTV cameras were positioned so that voters could be seen while marking their ballots inside the voting compartments, potentially compromising ballot

secrecy. Ballot boxes were shown to be empty and then sealed in 98 percent of observed locations, and 96 percent of polling centers visited were ready to open at 8 AM. Representatives of at least the two major political parties were present during the opening procedures observed.

Campaign activity and environment around polling centers

Campaign materials were visible outside or near polling centres in the majority of the centers. During the morning, one candidate distributed materials bearing party symbol around polling centres in Thakurgaon-1, these were subsequently left scattered on the ground as litter. Party booths providing voter slips were also used to encourage voters to vote for a particular candidate (8 percent). Observers recorded groups of voters arriving together in shared vehicles in 72 percent locations, with some transport arrangements facilitated by candidates. While such arrangements may assist voters in reaching polling centres, candidate involvement warrants scrutiny to establish whether transport was offered without conditions or linked to electoral support. These findings raise concerns under Article 79 of the RPO which restricts canvassing and soliciting votes within 400 yards of a polling station on polling day, as well as certain campaign displays.

Voting procedures, security, and observer access

Queues were described as orderly in almost all centers (99 percent). And identity or photograph checkers were checked against the voter list consistently in 83 percent of observed locations. There was one case of suspected proxy voting among the 126 centers AFED observed. Security personnel were reportedly present in 98 percent of locations. One situation of physical violence inside a polling stations was reported. AFED observers were permitted to remain inside polling centres throughout their visits in 87 percent of observations, while in 13 percent they were occasionally asked to leave but could still observe the process from the windows. They also noted the presence of election officials from other constituencies serving as observers. Their role was distinct from independent citizen observation.

Inclusion and participation

Women served as polling officials in the locations observed, but none of the presiding officers at those locations were women. Their participation in polling operations was therefore not reflected in leadership at polling-centre level. This highlights the importance of examining women's representation across different electoral roles and strengthening opportunities for their appointment to positions of responsibility.

Priority or facilitated access for older voters, persons with disabilities and pregnant women was reported in 95 percent locations. Equal treatment of national minority voters was reported in 93 percent observed centers. Election arrangements should continue to support inclusive participation, with assistance that preserves the voter's own choice and the secrecy of the ballot.

According to official figures, voter turnout in the Thakurgaon-1 by-election was 64.77 percent, compared with 76 percent in the constituency during the February parliamentary election, a decline of 11.23 percentage points. Nevertheless, turnout exceeded the official rates recorded in the earlier Bogura-6 and Sherpur-3 by-elections. Participation was therefore lower than during the general election but comparatively stronger than in the two preceding by-elections. The figures alone do not establish the reasons for these differences or provide a basis for conclusions about public confidence or electoral integrity. Within AFED's coverage, voter presence was predominantly described as moderate, in 74 percent of observed centers, compared with 18 percent described as low and only eight percent of observed locations as high.

Counting transparency and allegation of manipulation

Counting was generally orderly in the locations observed. Consistent assessment of valid and invalid ballots was reported in 95 percent locations and posting of results in 96 percent. In the observed locations, AFED found two complaints from agents during the counting. But observed no interference, intimidation or harassment during counting reported.

"*AFED welcomes the post-election exchange between the two candidates as a positive gesture of mutual respect. Such engagement can help reduce tensions and encourage peaceful relations among supporters. We encourage all candidates and parties to sustain this approach, reject violence and intimidation, and pursue any electoral grievances through the applicable complaints procedures. Constructive dialogue and the timely, impartial resolution of complaints can together support a peaceful post-election environment*," said Taleya Rehman, *Founder and Chairperson, Democracywatch.*

Recommendations:

1. **Compliance with election day campaign restrictions.** The competent authorities should examine the morning distribution of materials bearing party symbols and the other campaign-related findings against Article 79 of the Representation of the People Order. Review should establish the location and nature of the activity and any relevant permission, with reasoned decisions and appropriate action where a breach is substantiated. The same standards should apply to all candidates and parties.
2. **Use applicable channels for complaints.** Submit specific allegations through the applicable complaint channels, identifying locations, timing, conduct and available supporting material. Preserve relevant records and avoid presenting an allegation as an established finding before it has been examined.
3. **Timely and transparent resolution of complaints.** The competent authorities should promptly and impartially examine allegations of post-election violence through transparent complaints and dispute resolution procedures. Complainants and witnesses should be able to submit evidence safely, receive timely updates and access reasoned decisions and appropriate remedies where allegations are substantiated. Measures should also be taken to protect those at risk and prevent further violence.

AFED (Alliance for Fair Election and Democracy) is a national platform comprising 30 distinguished civil society organizations. It was established ahead of the 2026 elections to conduct independent, impartial, and citizen-based election observation. For the by-elections held on 29 October 2026, AFED deployed a total of 52 observers in 126 polling centers.

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