

Chapter 4

The Poll and Count

The Poll

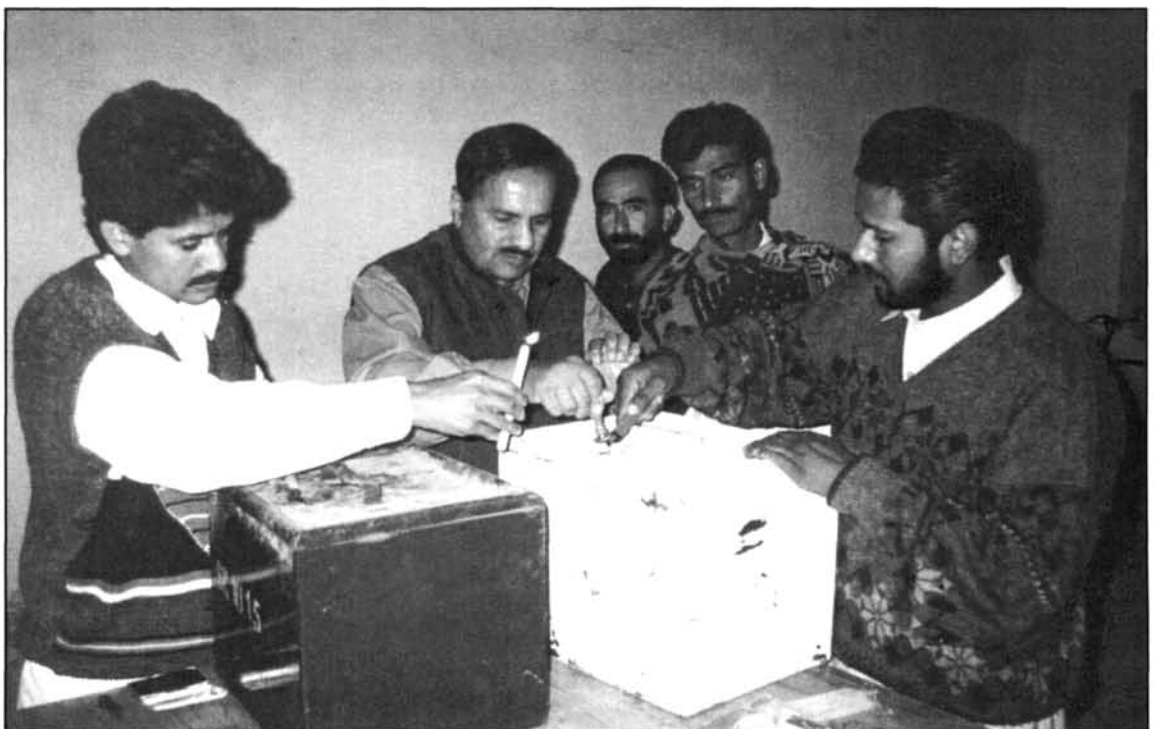
Polling stations were due to open at 7 a.m. on Election Day, Monday 3 February, so our teams of Observers were in place at their designated polling stations from 6.45 a.m.

In some cases, the polling station staff and security personnel had stayed at the polling station the night before to protect the election materials and to be ready on time. Nevertheless, many stations did not open at 7 a.m., with some opening as much as two hours later than scheduled. The reasons for this varied. In some places materials arrived late, despite the plans of the Election Commission which had told us that ballot boxes and other election material would be delivered the previous day or, in some cases, very early that morning, but in either case well in time for the opening. In other cases while the materials were present the appropriate personnel were not. In Karachi, one station opened as late as 2 p.m.

At a number of polling stations where our Observers were present, the opening of the polls was delayed because party agents arrived late. Although the election rules provide for the opening of the stations without the presence of party agents, it seemed that most Presiding Officers preferred to wait for the agents and thereby avoid complaints from them later regarding procedures they had not observed.

To guard against the presence of unauthorised personnel at the polling stations each agent had to show a letter of accreditation before they were admitted. Party agents from the major parties were present at most of the polling stations where our Observers witnessed the opening. However, in Karachi the MQM(A) complained that its party agents had been prevented from being present at a number of polling stations: as a result just one party was represented at these stations.

Safely sealed ... polling station officials in Sukkur fixing the seals on the ballot box with hot wax before voting begins. This was invariably done in the presence of party agents, who were also shown the empty boxes beforehand



The Presiding Officer showed the party agents the empty ballot box before fixing the lid and unnumbered string seals with hot wax. Similarly, the books of ballot papers were removed from their packaging in full sight of the party agents. In one polling station where party agents only arrived after the ballot boxes were closed and were about to be sealed the Presiding Officer agreed to open them again. In one place the Presiding Officer did not know how to seal the ballot boxes. In fact, the procedure varied in small ways from place to place.

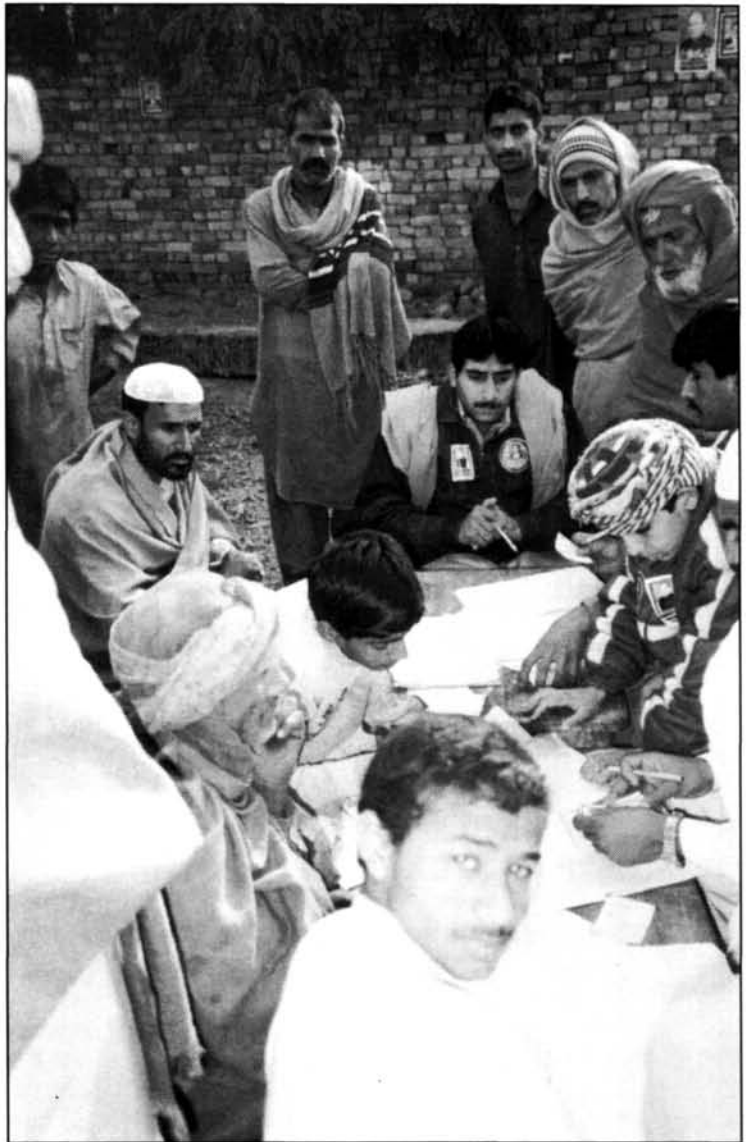
Almost all polling stations were in government buildings, often schools or colleges. They consisted of several separate booths, each a mini polling station with a ballot box, a private (and usually screened) area for voting and at least three members of polling station staff. The parties were entitled to agents in each booth. There were usually separate polling booths for men and women. Sometimes whole polling stations were dedicated to women or men voters. Some polling booths were located on verandahs in front of public buildings and were therefore almost in the open air. Most were located inside.

Voting was very slow at first in most of the stations we visited and queues were short or non-existent until well after opening. Polling station staff and security personnel did not vote first, as is the practice in many countries, as they had been given the opportunity to vote by post (although many seemed not to have availed themselves of this).

We gained the impression that polling stations were within reasonably easy reach of voters. All the polling stations we visited were accessible, and no one told us that they had to travel a long distance. We detected no confusion or ignorance as to their location, probably because the same buildings are often used for this purpose. In areas where there was a low turnout, voters often did not have to wait at all to cast their votes, or only for the briefest of periods. In others there were sometimes long queues.

The standard of the facilities, for the most part, was consistently good, with little variation from station to station. On the whole, the layout of the polling stations was adequate although sometimes there was too little space. Apart from other considerations, this often made it difficult for us to distinguish between polling officials and party agents. The problem of identifying the election officials and party agents was compounded by the fact that they had no identification badges, a matter which we believe the Election Commission will want to look at for the future.

Voter education and previous experience meant that the voters were generally familiar with the voting procedure. Where this was not the case the polling station staff were invariably helpful.



Just checking ... before entering the polling station electors check their numbers on the register with party officials sited nearby. Other party officials sat inside the polling station where they were able to check the voters' identity and enter a challenge if this was disputed



Arms and the men ... armed men waiting to vote outside a polling station in Balochistan Province. For many of the inhabitants of this province the carrying of guns is not uncommon, even at election time

There were two ballot boxes – green for the National Assembly elections and white for the Provincial Assembly. The voting procedure was straightforward.

On entering the polling booth the voter first showed the polling station staff her/his identity card and the official found the voter's name in the register. The voter was also identified to the party agents, who were usually seated some feet away. The agents then either entered a challenge or signified their assent to the voter proceeding with the rest of the process. In some cases, we noticed that all voters coming into the polling booths reported to their party agents first, who verified their names on their lists at the outset.

Usually the voter also showed the officials a slip of paper bearing her/his voter number, as on the register of electors. This slip of paper was normally provided by the voter's party, at 'election camps' established nearby to the polling stations. These camps consisted of tables, chairs and a lean-to structure. Voters would check there on their number before going to the polling station. The slip of paper with which they were issued normally bore the name of the candidate and other information regarding the party in question, and we noticed that the polling booths were by the end of the day littered with these slips. While the parties claimed that this system helped the voters and polling officials, we could not help but observe that it also resulted in party material being visibly present in the polling booth – and that therefore there was a constant reminder to the voters of the existence of certain parties right through to the point at which the voter marked her/his ballot paper.

Once the polling station official had traced the voter on the register and crossed off her/his name, the voter's identity card (National Identity Card, as no special voters' cards were issued for these elections) was pierced by a polling station official. We noticed that the indentation was relatively superficial but there were no complaints from party agents or others.

The voter's thumb was then marked with indelible ink. The location of the marking varied from station to station. Of greater concern was the quality of the ink, which our Observers were in some cases able to rub off quite easily.

The ID card system was also not fool-proof. We were told on the highest authority that it was possible to forge cards with relative ease and that for this reason an international



Just a matter of time ... almost everywhere the atmosphere on election day was calm and peaceful and voters were generally relaxed: this queue was at a polling station in Multan

company was being contracted to provide a much improved system incorporating many sophisticated safety features which it was hoped would be in place in time for the next general election. In the meantime Pakistan's identity cards, while assisting the polling station staff in identifying voters, do not provide a secure method of guarding against personation and double-voting.

We were concerned to find that it was possible for names to appear on the roll at more than one polling station. The only safeguard against this was the diligence of the parties in checking one polling station's register against another. In most cases, we found that party agents on the day were in possession of the polling station's register, suggesting that there was no problem for the parties in obtaining the required information to enable them to check against double entries before polling day and then make objections as voters presented themselves on the day. However, this did not apply in Karachi, according to complaints from the MQM(A) who said that up-to-date lists had been provided only to its opponents.

We are not aware of the extent of the problem of names being on more than one list and nor are we aware of any organised fraud through the exploitation of this feature. The likelihood is that any such exploitation by one candidate would have been

Security presence ... a soldier inside a women's polling station in Peshawar, with party agents and election officials seated. Security arrangements for the poll and count were good and voters generally regarded the soldiers' presence as reassuring





Women only ... specific booths and sometimes whole polling stations were dedicated to women voters and staffed by female officials. Women voted in large numbers in most areas

cancelled out by that of another. Nevertheless, this is an aspect of the arrangements which we believe the Election Commission will wish to look at for the future. It should be possible, for instance, to produce a complete list for the whole constituency organised in alphabetical order and for this to be available both in advance and on election day at every polling station.

Equally, we believe that the Election Commission will want to look at three further matters. First, there were allegations that in a number of cases the register was incomplete. In Karachi, for instance, we came across several polling stations where it was said that whole pages of the register, containing large numbers of names, were missing.

Second, our Observers also noticed that the copies of the register at polling stations were printed on flimsy paper and were rather fragile documents.

Third, a number of practical problems seem to have arisen on election day from the fact that while the Election Commission is responsible for the register a government department is responsible for the issuing of ID cards (e.g., change of names being recorded by one and not by the other).

Once the voter's name was crossed off the list she/he was first issued with the green ballot paper for the National Assembly election and then with the white ballot paper for the Provincial Assembly election. In the case of minority voters there were special ballot papers bearing the names of the minority candidates. Practice varied, however, as to whether or not

there were separate ballot boxes for the minority voters.

Once they had their ballot paper each voter was given a rubber stamp with which to mark the paper – written or thumbprint markings constituted a spoilt paper.

The voter then went to mark her/his ballot paper. In two polling stations the marking of the ballot paper was done at an unscreened desk, in view of all. But in all the other places we visited the secrecy of the ballot was assured. A variety of furniture was used to screen the voting area: upturned desks and beds, sheets, curtains, filing cabinets and lecterns. Sometimes entire rooms were dedicated purely to the marking of the ballot paper.

Card check ... to guard against double-voting, voters' National Identity Cards were clipped by officials, as here in Rawalpindi





End of the line ... after waiting patiently a voter reaches the head of the polling station queue. There were two ballot boxes – green for the National Assembly elections and white for the Provincial Assembly

At all stations where our Observers were present at 4 p.m. the polling station officials allowed those who were still in the queue at that stage to vote. In Karachi, some polling stations stayed open until 6 p.m. (because they opened late).

Overall, the voting system seemed to work reasonably well, except that after marking the ballot papers the voter had to go back to the original table and place them in the ballot boxes, which usually meant that they got mixed up with the queue of voters who were being processed.

Most Presiding Officers and their staff had been well trained and a significant proportion were women. Most electoral officials performed satisfactorily and, as far as we could see, in all cases the Presiding Officers adhered to the prescribed procedures. Supplies were generally good and we did not come across any significant logistical failure once the stations had opened.

The party agents were diligent and conscientious. Generally they said that they were satisfied with the arrangements made by the polling station officials, although there were complaints from some agents when people were turned away because the names on their ID cards did not correspond exactly with the names as given on the register. The exception was Karachi, where MQM(A) complained that their agents had been unable to get to polling stations in the alleged 'no-go' areas.

We did not come across any cases of party agents interfering in the process. In general, the agents played an important role. They were, in our view, an essential element in ensuring the integrity of the elections.

Although there must have been cases of attempts at fraudulent voting, we came across no cases of under-age voting, personation or attempted double-voting.

In the North-West Frontier Province the tribal leaders, and men in general, had made clear that there would be severe repercussions for women should they attempt to vote. In one case, in the Khyber Agency, our Observers were told in advance that women who voted would be fined and have their houses burnt down. On polling day we were again told by male voters there that women would not be voting and that they, the male voters, did not wish to discuss the matter with us any longer. We did not see any women voting in the Federally



Out for the count ... the counts our Observers saw were efficient and well organised, as here in Punjab Province: in all cases they took place at the polling stations

Administered Tribal Areas.

Elsewhere, we were told that in some areas women would vote only if allowed to do so by their husbands and that the nature of their choice would be influenced, if not determined, by their husbands. We have no way of knowing whether women voters were so influenced.

Other than the dedication of specific polling booths or even whole stations for women, we were unaware of any special arrangements to facilitate voting by women.

In line with the provisions of the Code of Conduct, polling stations were relatively free of graffiti and party posters, except in Karachi. We noticed that the occasional party agent was wearing party colours inside the polling booth.

Almost everywhere the atmosphere was calm and peaceful and voters were generally relaxed, although there was some jostling at polling stations when numbers in the queue grew later in the day and in some places there was rowdiness from crowds of people who had remained outside the polling stations after voting.

Security at polling stations was provided by police with the support of members of the armed forces. Further military units patrolled town centres and rural areas. Altogether a total of 250,000 armed forces personnel were used in support of the Election Commission – guarding and transporting supplies before the polls opened, providing security for the stations and voters on the day and, at many of the places we visited, regulating the flow of voters into the polling stations. All our Observers reported that armed soldiers were also present in the polling booths themselves.

Military officers were temporarily given the power of a magistrate so that action could be taken on the spot if necessary. There was some criticism of this, but on the day we observed few cases in which the military seriously abused their power, although they sometimes acted without reference to the Presiding Officer. Indeed, in only one case did we see any unusual activity by soldiers, following the challenging of a voter, when a crowd was asked to leave the polling station by the army. While Observers may have been concerned at the presence of armed men inside polling stations and sometimes thought that security was intrusive, the voters themselves did not seem to share these worries. They were generally relaxed about the presence of soldiers and regarded their attendance at polling stations as reassuring.

The Minister of Defence told the voters before election day that on this occasion the armed forces would not be monitoring the voting (in 1993 an Election 'Cell' was formed at the centre). There were still suspicions amongst some of those we met that army radios were in fact being used for this purpose. We were unable to ascertain how well founded these suspicions were.

Overall, the security forces' role appears to have been positive and their presence was appreciated by the voters, who appeared to have little fear of the armed forces personnel or their guns.

Some 3,000 local observers were deployed by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan at polling stations in 100 constituencies which they deemed to particularly merit their presence. We came across a number of their observers and in all cases they were dedicated and in some cases very well informed. The process benefited from their presence.



Showing the flag ... after the polls closed, party supporters paraded through the streets in celebration. These scenes, from Rawalpindi, show supporters of two of the parties



As noted above, a number of foreign observers were present in addition to the members of our Group. There were large teams from the European Union and the US. We co-operated with these foreign observers to avoid duplication of coverage in particular constituencies, while ensuring that our Observer Group itself did not as a result have an unbalanced impression of the events of polling day. Neither we nor any of the international or domestic observers we encountered had any difficulty in gaining access to the polling stations or booths.

The Count

When voting was complete the Presiding Officer went through the closure procedure, taking note of the number of unused ballot papers and making physical arrangements for the count.

In all cases the count took place at the polling station. People began gathering outside the polling station from just before 4 p.m. to await the results.

Following the closure at 4 p.m. or as soon as possible thereafter, the seals were inspected and the ballot boxes opened in the presence of party agents. The officials and agents were sometimes locked into the counting room, often with security personnel present. (It should be noted that in some places the army appeared to be taking down figures during the count.) Facilities were adequate for accommodating candidates and their representatives to witness the count. National Assembly ballots were counted first, Provincial Assembly ballots second, and minority ballots third. The votes from each polling booth were counted separately.

Those counts that we witnessed were quite efficient, with ballot papers being placed in the middle of a table of polling officers then separated into piles according to the vote, following which they were counted and checked. Each lot was placed in a separate envelope. The Presiding Officer ruled on the matter of invalid ballots promptly, and there was no protest from party agents. All took a break for *iftar* (the breaking of the fast) and returned to count minority ballots.

In many cases the count was completed in as little as an hour. Particular interest was shown in allegedly invalid ballots. The procedure here was to keep these separate and their numbers were noted at the end. All party agents present were asked to sign a tally sheet and the Presiding Officer made available the detailed results to the agents, which they were asked to verify and sign. The results (unofficial until the Election Commission satisfies itself that candidates have submitted correct campaign expenditure returns) were then posted on the doors of the polling/counting station. The Presiding Officer then went personally to the constituency Returning Officer with the signed results sheet to which her/his thumbprint as well as signature needed to be affixed. Only in a few cases did we observe any prolonged dispute over the figures and arguments were generally good natured.

When counting took place after dark, lighting was adequate where we were present. We did not come across any cases of essential materials being missing. The small size of some of the rooms used for counting was, however, sometimes a problem. The counts were generally well organised and we observed no irregularities.

Finally, it should be noted that while voter turnout was not as low as had been feared – there was talk on election night of 25 per cent – it was still very low in some areas. Overall, turnout seems to have been around 37 per cent. In the 1993 National Assembly elections the turnout was 40.28 per cent. In 1990, it stood at 45.46 per cent and in 1988 43.07 per cent.

SUGGESTIONS: The Election Commission may wish to consider:

- preparing one register for each constituency, to include the names of all those registered in that constituency, for use before the general election and at each polling station on election day itself;
- whether there was any foundation to allegations that names were missing from certain of the polling station registers;
- whether there is a method of producing more robust and durable registers for use at polling stations;
- whether there is a means of ensuring that ID cards and registers carry the same names.