



# PROSES

Project in Support of Enhanced Sustainability  
and Electoral Integrity in Afghanistan

## Brief Guidelines to Election Reporting in the Field

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## About the Project

The European Centre for Electoral Support (ECES) is a not-for-profit foundation headquartered in Brussels which promotes sustainable democratic development through the provision of advisory services, operational support and management of large projects in the electoral and democracy assistance. ECES is implementing the Project in Support of Enhanced Sustainability and Electoral Integrity in Afghanistan (PROSES) funded by the European Union through the Instrument contributing to Peace and Stability (IcSP). PROSES outcomes are:

Outcome 1: Electoral integrity vulnerabilities are proactively identified and reduced through administrative planning and actions.

Outcome 2: Increased capacity of electoral stakeholders to apply evidence-based and effective leadership approaches to the conduct of elections and the adjudication of election disputes.

Outcome 3: Measures contributing to the accountability and inclusivity of political and electoral processes through the broad participation of relevant electoral stakeholders with specific emphasis on women.

PROSES' activities feed into a comprehensive electoral integrity strategy based on the analysis of integrity vulnerabilities from previous Afghan electoral cycles, recommendations from EU EOM/EATs and an upcoming electoral political analysis. PROSES is supporting vital electoral stakeholders' efforts in promoting enhanced integrity and credibility of the electoral process. In brief, our overall strategy is multi-stakeholder: partnering and supporting all individuals, organisations and processes (civil society, media, political parties, EMBs, Government, justice system) that can play a role as agents for reform and change in the Afghan electoral process and democracy. To identify and support Afghan-led and Afghan-owned collective actions to mitigate fraud and malpractice through the work of alliances and coalitions with key Afghan players. While the tangible impact of many integrity actions will take time, the strategy intends to lay the foundations, through multiple actions and milestones, to produce changes in the mid-term and long-term by identifying agents for change and meaningful actions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Further read on electoral integrity can be found at <http://www.eods.eu/publications>

## Introduction

Election observers are the guardians of any election. They can enhance the confidence of the public in the polls and help to deter fraud. To meet these expectations, they have to be impartial and professional. Critical to their work is that their reports are factual and based on a comprehensive methodology. Observers in the field play a crucial role in this as they collect and assess the information in their respective area. They provide the internal reports which will then be used by the headquarters for further analysis.

These guidelines aim at giving observers in the field - and particularly regional or provincial coordinators - some background on good practices in internal election reporting and observation. Although the overall roadmap for reporting will always be provided by the headquarters and should be universally respected throughout an observation mission, a good understanding of the different types of reports and the underlying methodology can contribute to a comprehensive, systematic and fact-based observation.

In addition, these guidelines give a brief overview of international standards which are considered the foundation of election observation. Further, these guidelines provide also an overview of possible areas of assessment and questions to ask in an observation.

These guidelines are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Nor should they be followed to the letter. The guidelines intend to be a toolbox with suggestions for consideration. A toolbox that serves larger citizen observer organisations or coalitions with the capacity to observe countrywide all aspects of the electoral process as well as smaller organisation with a more limited scope of observation.

## The Groundwork

The foundation for effective election reporting is laid long before the first sentence of any report is written. In fact, it begins with work that appears initially not even related to reporting: the planning of an election observation mission: What is the goal of my observation? What information do I need to meet this goal? What resources are required? How do I ensure accuracy and credibility?

Although the planning is mainly done by the headquarters, this stage is equally important for coordinators in the field. Particularly if they have to decide or contribute on the deployment of long-term observers and

identification of subjects, events and topics to be observed. It's critical where observers are located and what they focus on.

This also applies to election day and the short-term observers. Especially if an organisation doesn't have the resources to cover every polling station in their area of observation. To consider well in advance which polling stations to choose – urban and rural – female and male, to identify early security concerns and logistics make a critical difference to the quality of observation and reports.

## **Internal Reporting**

Election observation missions may follow different organisational structures and different internal and external reporting strategies. Below are suggestions for good practices with a focus on internal reporting. This model is based on a systematic approach with headquarters, consisting of the leadership and a core team of analysts who cover specific areas of the electoral process such as the legal framework, electoral and political affairs, media, etc. They are complemented with regional observer coordinators and long- and short-term observers in the field. The different mission hierarchies produce distinct types of internal reports, addressing all aspects of the electoral process and observation. The internal reporting provides the basis for comprehensive public reports such as the preliminary statement and final report. This overview can help regional coordinators as it gives insight into the bigger picture of established internal reporting structures.

All information from the field must be verified and put in perspective. The credibility of an election observation mission depends on the accuracy of its findings. It is critical to keep internal reports confidential. Published without context they might distort public perception of the overall observation.

Also, field reports from one area do not necessarily represent the situation in the entire country. This should be particularly taken into consideration when publishing ad hoc statements and incident reports.

## **Definition of Reporting Tasks and Reporting Lines**

Reporting tasks and reporting schedule correlate directly with the planning of an observation mission. Reporting roles and these lines should be developed well, with a distinct definition of roles and responsibilities. Channels of communication between mission members and hierarchies must be clear and reliable.

### **Reporting by Short-Term Observers**

Short-term observers are the eyes and ears of an observation mission on election day. They collect quantitative and qualitative data in polling stations throughout the country and follow possibly counting and certain stages of the tabulation where applicable. Those data are collected through specific forms based on quantitative and qualitative methodology.

### **Reporting by Long-Term Observers**

Long-term observers are the extended arm of the core team in the region. They follow all aspects of the electoral process in their area of responsibility and provide regular reports to the core team. Those reports often correlate closely with the election calendar and also serve as the basis for interim reports (see below). Core team analysts frequently task them with specific requests to get detailed information for further analysis.

### **Reporting by the Core Team**

The core team analysts collect information at the central level and also evaluate material from the field. Their assessments contribute to regular internal interim reports on the electoral process as a whole but also on specific topics. The core team prepares the preliminary statement and the final report. Ideally, their sections for the interim internal reports are written in a way that the content can be easily used in the public reports and statements.

All observers should be briefed on how to interact with the media. They should be encouraged to provide basic facts such as the composition of the mission, duration and mandate. They should not comment on specific incidents or findings in their area as this can distort the overall assessment and harm the credibility of the organisation.

## **Types of Internal Reports**

### **Baseline Assessment**

The baseline assessment is essentially a needs assessment and is produced by the core team at the beginning of the election observation. Although not mandatory, this report is very helpful to determine the scope of an observation and key issues that might arise during an election. Regional coordinators might be asked to contribute as they have in-depth knowledge of the electoral process in their specific geographic area of responsibility. It's important to keep in mind that challenges and issues might differ from province to province.

The baseline assessment provides an overview of:

- electoral context (type of elections, political environment)
- legal framework and changes since the last elections (amendment of constitution, electoral code, regulations) and whether laws provide for the minimum conditions for elections. It helps to find possible mayor legal gaps.
- election administration (structure, composition etc.)
- status of recommendations issued after previous elections. Which ones are implemented? Which ones are pending or partly executed?

The baseline report may be used in the final external report and to some degree in the preliminary statement. Further, it serves as an excellent basis for a possible public statement at the opening of an election observation that can identify initial issues of the process and provide suggestions on how to rectify them.

### **Interim Reports**

Interim reports are often produced in close correlation to particular phases of the electoral process as defined in the election calendar and give regular updates on the electoral process as a whole. They are critical elements of a systematic observation as they help observers to assess the electoral process also against international standards, obligations and commitments a country has committed itself to and the national legislative framework.

Hence these interim reports shouldn't be considered as mere summaries. Ideally, they target specific elements of the electoral process such as voter registration, the participation of women etc. (See below). They should be based on the findings by the long-term observers in the field and an in-depth analysis of the responsible core team analysts. This approach allows for a comprehensive and timely analysis of all stages.

These interim reports also serve as the basis for the respective chapters of the preliminary statement and final report. They can be used for public statements, press releases or ad hoc reports during the electoral process with specific recommendations. (E.g. on voter registration, verification of voter lists and their final publication.)



The organisational capacity permitting, examples of events and topics that are possibly covered in interim reports are:

- performance and transparency of the election commission on all levels pertaining for example to
  - voter registration
  - candidate and party registration
  - operational aspects (e.g. printing of ballots (if feasible), procurement of sensitive and non-sensitive material, logistical aspects such as the distribution of election material
  - regulations issued by the election commission
- amendment of the legal framework and other administrative regulations
- adjudication of pre-election disputes, such as appeals of rejected candidates
- the ability of women, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and people with disabilities to participate in all aspects of the elections
- campaign environment (e.g. violence, abuse of state resources, level playing field)
- role of other state actors, such as the military, police and other security forces
- performance of the media.

Similar to the baseline report, these interim reports are useful contributions to the preliminary statement and the final external report.

### **Regular Field reports by Long-Term Observers**

Field reports by long-term observers serve two purposes: firstly, they provide periodic – usually weekly - updates on the electoral process in the respective geographic area of responsibility of the observers. As the long-term observers are usually deployed well in advance of the polling – sometimes several months – these reports may cover everything from voter registration to campaigning, voting and tabulation of results to complaints and appeals.

Secondly, the format of field reports is also often used by a core team to request information on specific topics. Those topics are aligned with the content of the interim reports (see above) and critical quantitative and qualitative contributions to these internal reports.

Field reports might be based on a template, which is developed in accordance with the particularities of the electoral process. They are fact-based and subject for further analysis. Their structure is similar to checklists and forms used on election day. (See election day reports).

### **Ad Hoc Reports**

Ad-hoc or spot reports are unscheduled, short and urgent reports produced by long-term observers focusing on developments that have to be reported to the headquarters without delay. Examples are major campaign activities or incidents which impact or sometimes even threaten the electoral process, such as violence disruptions or electoral irregularities with a serious impact on electoral integrity

### **Election Day Reports**

Election day reports are mostly submitted by short-term observers during and at the end of the voting and counting process. These reports are usually based on templates, such as checklists and forms developed ahead of election day by the election analyst, data analyst and other core team members. They might cover specifically the opening of the polls, give regular information of the voting in general and cover closing and possibly counting in the respective polling station. If applicable and depending on the organisation of the polls and logistics, these reports might also cover tabulation of results on the different levels of the election administration.

### **Forms and Checklists**

The headquarters usually provide forms and checklists. However, it is helpful for regional coordinators and observers in the field to understand how to develop effective forms. Most importantly, forms should be designed in a way to limit mistakes and false information. This also applies to electronic forms which are increasingly used to gather information from short-term observers on election day. These forms are transmitted electronically to the headquarters through cell phones or computers. Immediate processing in a database allows for timely analysis of key aspects of the polls. Note: electronic forms must always have a back-up option in case cell phone networks are down or no internet is available. That allows for later electronic submission or manually, e.g. printing of forms and checklists to be sent has hard copy.

When developing forms, it is helpful to keep the 5W in mind: what, where, when, who, why?

It is also helpful to ask yourself ...

- Do you need to know this information?
- Will your questions provide the information?
- Can the question be misunderstood?
- What assumptions does it make?
- Is it time-specific?
- Will respondents answer truthfully?

- Is the question relevant to the respondents/the objective of the observation?
- Does it contain unclear terminology, for example, electoral terms or acronyms that might not be widely known or could be misunderstood?
- Will your questions collect data reliably and validly?

Some key principles are:

**Clarity:** Questions must be clear, concise and unambiguous. Eliminate the chance that the question will mean different things to different people. For example, if asking a question about frequency, rather than supplying choices that are open to interpretation such as: Very Often, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never. It is better to quantify the choices, such as: Every Day or More, 2-6 Times a Week, About Once a Week, About Once a Month, Never. Example: Were any voters seen not allowed to vote? Yes, several, often, frequently. It's better to ask: Were voters rejected at the polling station? Not registered at the polling station, voted already according to voters list, documents not provided, other (explain).

**Leading Questions:** A leading question is one that forces or implies a certain type of answer. It is easy to make this mistake in the choice of answers. A closed question must supply answers that not only cover the whole range of responses, but that are also equally distributed throughout the range. For example, these answer choices are weighted more towards a favourable response: superb, excellent, great, good, fair, not so great. A better way is to offer a more balanced set of responses e.g. Totally agree, partially agree, neither agree or disagree, partially disagree, totally disagree.

**Phrasing:** adjectives, verbs, and nouns have often either a positive or negative connotation. It is advisable to try to use words that have neither strong negative or positive overtones.

**Hypothetical Questions:** Avoid hypothetical questions because they ask for guessing.

**Prestige Bias:** Prestige bias is the tendency for respondents to answer in a way that makes them feel better. For example, many women complained about that having their picture taken in the polling station would prevent them from voting. Do you agree? Better: On a scale from 1 to 4: Did photographing voters in the polling station as part of the biometric verification process affect the participation of female voters negatively? (1 no, 4 yes).

## International Standards

International election standards are a set of norms and guidelines for elections and can be considered the core of many observation methodologies. Usually observation missions assess the quality of elections - including credibility, transparency and inclusiveness - against those standards and against regional commitments and national legislation.

International election standards are based on international human rights law instruments and vested in universal and regional treaties, international customary law, political commitments, internationally agreed principles of good practice. They define minimum standards as obligations and are legally binding for the states that have adopted and ratified them. They are not imposed by the international community or other third parties. It is left to the signatories to decide on how they implement them.

### Key Instruments applicable in Afghanistan

- **UDHR** Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (1948 ratified)  
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is the foundation of the international human rights protection system. It defines also the general framework for electoral matters
- **ICCPR** International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1966 (1983 ratified)  
The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights is one of the cornerstones of the international bill of rights. It aims at protecting civil and political rights of citizens of the states that have ratified this treaty.
- **ICERD** International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 1969 (1983 ratified)
- **CEDAW** Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, 1979 (2003 ratified)
- **CPRW** Convention on the Political Rights of Women, 1952 (1966 ratified)
- **CRPD** Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006 (2012 ratified)
- **UNCAC** UN Convention against Corruption, 2003 (2008 ratified)

## Key Articles related to Elections

### UDHR Article 21

1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly through freely chosen representatives;
2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
3. "The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage<sup>2</sup> and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

### UDHR Article 19

1. Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference.
2. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice.

### ICCPR

*Article 25.* Every citizen shall have the right and the opportunity, [...] without unreasonable restrictions:

- (a) To take part in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives;
- (b) To vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the will of the electors;
- (c) To have access, on general terms of equality, to public service in his country.

### ***Article 25 Comment***<sup>3</sup>

... Whatever form of constitution or government is in force, the Covenant requires States to adopt such legislative and other measures as may be necessary to ensure that citizens have an effective opportunity to enjoy the rights it protects. Article 25 lies at the core of democratic government based on the consent of the people and in conformity with the principles of the Covenant.

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#### <sup>2</sup> **Universal suffrage:**

The right to vote of all adult citizens, regardless of wealth, income, gender, social status, race, or ethnicity, subject only to minor exceptions

#### **Equal suffrage**

Each voter shall have the same number of votes.

This includes measures that prevent fraudulent or erroneous votes from being recorded.

- Only votes cast by eligible voters shall be counted, and only the permitted number of votes for that voter.
- An authentication system shall exist to distinguish eligible voters from others, and those who have successfully cast votes from those who have not.

<sup>3</sup> The General Comment provides additional interpretation and clarification of the ICCPR. It's not legally binding, but have a highly authoritative basis with legal basis.

## **Areas of Assessment and Questions to ask**

Areas that could be assessed and questions to be asked in the observation of an electoral process could be:

### **Legal Framework**

Do the election laws provide for the conduct of elections in accordance with international standards, especially on the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms related to democratic elections?

- International Principles and Commitments
- Constitutional Human Rights
- Electoral Legislation
- Election System and Constituency Delimitation

### **Electoral Administration**

- Is the election administration transparent, impartial, accountable and professional?
- If there are problems: what are the reasons? E.g. appointment procedures, the administrative and financial means at the disposal of the IEC, a possible dependence on governmental services, etc.
- Is the public confident in the election administration?
- Is it in compliance with legal requirements?
- How open is the election administration to electoral actors, including citizen observers?
- Was the voter education and information sufficient?

### **Voter Registration**

- What is the quality of the voter register?
- Does the public trust its accuracy and reliability?

### **The Right to Vote**

- Are all eligible voters allowed to vote?

### **Registration of Candidates and Political Parties**

- Where there any issues related to registration to contest the elections?

### **Campaign Environment**

- Had all candidates/parties equal opportunity to campaign?
- Was there level playing field
- Violence?

## **Campaign Finance**

Follow the Money:

- Are party/campaign financing regulations violated?
- If yes: are regulations enforced?
- Is there state financing of parties/campaign, subsidies for media coverage, is this an issue in the campaign?
- If relevant: Is there fair access to state resources for campaigning for all?

## **Media**

- Are there violent incidents towards journalists/media?
- Is election reporting of media regulated in any way?
- Are those regulations implemented and enforced (sanctions, criminal legal proceedings, campaign silence?)
- What is the performance of the most important media/social media?
- Is fake news/hate speech an issue?
- Do media provide equitable coverage to the parties/candidates e.g. state/private national media (balance, quality of coverage e.g. were there special programmes, voter education, debates, fair and equitable access for all parties/candidates) – a particular emphasis on the state-owned or public service media.

## **Participation of Women?**

- What is the access of women to candidacy?
- Are there legal barriers and limits to women's participation in all aspects of the elections
- Was the effective exercise of the right to participation affected?
- Implementation of quotas? (If applicable)

## **Participation of Persons with Disabilities?**

- Are there issues with access to candidacy, legal barriers and limits to Persons with Disabilities?
- Limitations in participation in all aspects of the elections?

## **Participation of National Minorities?**

- Issues related to access to candidacy, legal barriers and limits to participation in all aspects of the elections?
- Does equal access translate into equal participation?
- Implementation of quotas?

## **Civil Society Observation**

- Has Civil Society in general access to the process and the ability to observe effectively, Is there freedom of movement?
- Is freedom of expression respected?
- Are there accreditation issues?

## Electoral Disputes

- Right to remedy?
- Independence of the judiciary?

## Voting

- How is voting carried out – calm, disruptions, where?
- Are polling procedures carried out well?
- Is the secrecy of the vote respected?
- Are security forces affecting polling?
- Is the counting/tabulation carried out transparently, competently, are procedures followed, do the procedures work? (*e.g. whether results are posted and candidates are provided with copies of results.*)
- If problems: Is the integrity of the vote affected?

The areas and questions above provide a general overview. They focus on the entire electoral process and reflect the topics that are usually addressed in public statements of an election observation mission. This includes mainly a preliminary statement published shortly after election day and a final report once the electoral process is concluded.

## Further Reading

The links below refer to sources for framework and methodology used for example by the European Union Election Observation Missions and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, ODIHR. Although they target international observation missions, they provide also examples of good practices and food for thought for citizen observers.

Election Observation and Democracy Support EODS

<http://www.eods.eu/methodology>

Compendium of International Standards for Elections

<http://www.eods.eu/library/Compendium-EN-N-PDF.pdf>

Handbook for European Union Election Observation

[http://www.eods.eu/library/EUEOM\\_Handbook\\_2016.pdf](http://www.eods.eu/library/EUEOM_Handbook_2016.pdf)

OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Handbook

<https://www.osce.org/odihr/elections/68439?download=true>

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