

DEMOCRACY RESOURCE CENTER

Elections Preparations Nearly Complete for May 14 Polls

Pre-Election Statement

May 11, 2017

This pre-election statement focuses on a few key findings identified by observers since May 1. A more comprehensive preliminary statement of observer findings will be released after the elections, and a final observation report will be released at the completion of observation.

I. Summary of Pre-Election Findings to Date

Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN) observers have found that election preparations are nearly complete at the local level for May 14 elections. In all locations visited, polling stations and requisite supplies are arranged, candidate nomination was viewed as generally successful, and campaigns are underway. The country is nearly ready to enter a two-day silence period before polls open at 7AM on election day.

In the immediate period before the elections, the main concern reported by observation teams is a lack of voter awareness that could lead to voter confusion, particularly when marking ballots. Stakeholders believe that this could lead to a high level of ballot invalidation during counting. DRCN encourages all stakeholders to make all possible efforts to inform voters about the voting process and the local elections ballot before May 14. DRCN also encourages that election officials make all efforts during counting of ballots to respect the will of the voter, this being done within the scope of the law and procedures outlined by the Election Commission of Nepal.

Security incidents have occurred and some concern exists about potential attempts to interrupt polling on election day. Most stakeholders have said they are satisfied with security preparations for the elections. DRCN encourages all political parties and actors to respect the election code of conduct and laws of Nepal through the elections and counting. DRCN also encourage security forces to respect the code of conduct, laws of Nepal, and to exercise restraint while safeguarding the polls.

Looking beyond May 14, DRCN urges all stakeholders to make concerted efforts to create a political environment that is conducive to holding a successful second phase of polls on June 14.

II. DRCN Observation To Date

On May 1, 2017 DRCN deployed three teams of observers to observe the pre-election environment before the first phase of polling on May 14 in Provinces 3, 4, and 6. Mobile DRCN observer teams have been travelling within their assigned provinces since

deployment, and have met with stakeholders in municipalities and rural municipalities to better understand Election Commission of Nepal (ECN) preparations for polling, the candidate nomination process, campaigning, the security environment, and to interview citizens, among other aspects of the election process.¹ DRCN observer teams will continue to observe polling on election day, counting, and then the post-election environment of the first phase polls, and then the second phase of polls scheduled for June 14.

III. Key Pre-Election Findings To Date for May 14 Phase I Elections

A. Election Commission Preparations, Trainings, and Supplies

DRCN observers have found in all places visited that ECN preparations for the first phase of elections are nearly complete at the local level for May 14 polls. Technical preparations, including delivery of supplies and training of election officials, have either been completed or will be by election day. All Chief Returning Officers and Returning Officers interviewed told observers that they had received requisite supplies, or are in the process of receiving supplies without delay before elections, including voter lists, ballot boxes, stamps, and other materials. Political party leaders and civil society leaders interviewed confirmed that they are generally satisfied with ECN preparations.

A concern raised by different stakeholders was that voter identification cards required for voting would be distributed shortly before election day, or on election day, which could lead to problems if there are any delays in delivery of cards to their respective locations. Election officials have expressed confidence that all cards will be delivered on time.

B. Candidate Nominations and Campaigning

The candidate nomination process happened May 2-5, with independent candidates receiving their symbols and campaigns beginning on May 5. Candidate nominations were completed with isolated problems in a few locations. Campaigning is underway, and citizens have expressed enthusiasm about having newly elected officials in their local units.

Political parties and independent candidates in some locations expressed frustration that the nomination process was conducted in too short of a period of time, making it disorganized and extend late into the evening. For example, in Chaukune of Surkhet and Pokhara-Lekhnath of Kaski, candidate nomination ran well after midnight.

Observers reported the campaign as vibrant in places visited, particularly after the candidate nomination process began. Observers across districts visited were told that several parties and candidates did not begin campaigns until they were convinced elections would occur after nominations began. Most parties and

¹ In Province 3 teams have visited Lalitpur, Kavre and Dolakha districts. In Province 4 teams have visited Kaski and Lamjung districts. In Province 6, teams have visited Surkhet, Dailekh and Jajarkot districts. In each district, teams conducted interviews with stakeholders at the district headquarters level, and visited at minimum one municipality and one rural municipality to assess election preparations.

candidates spoken with have decided to conduct door-to-door campaigns, mostly due to limitations on campaign expenses, although some parties will hold larger rallies.

Some political parties and candidates have expressed frustration about the short campaign period, particularly independent candidates who had about six days to campaign with their assigned election symbol. A political representative in Surkhet compared the campaign period to previous elections and said it was too short and inadequate, especially considering the new local units are much larger compared to the old ones.

C. Voter Awareness and Possible Invalidation of Ballots

The efforts made by the ECN and other civil society organizations have been important for raising voter awareness and should be lauded. There however have been strong concerns raised to observers in Provinces 3, 4, and 6 that the time period for voter education was too short, and that the amount of awareness raising fell short of what is required, particularly given the local elections are being held under a new local government structure.

Observers heard particular concerns about voters not understanding the new voting system, including how to vote on the new ballot. The sixth and seventh column for the open candidates was said to be very confusing. Misunderstanding could lead to voters incorrectly mark ballots and therefore high level of ballot invalidation during the counting of ballots.

D. Security Environment

The election period has not been without security incidents. Several clashes have occurred between party cadres, and there have been reports of candidates being intimidated to withdraw nominations. Over 30 election-related incidents have been recorded across Nepal since April 22.² One casualty was reported by the media on May 10 in Gaurishankar rural municipality of Dolakha district.³

The Netra Bikram Chand 'Biplav'-led Communist Party of Nepal - Maoist (CPN-M) has been identified by the Government of Nepal (GoN) as a potentially serious security threat to the elections. CPN-M leaders have made statements that they will attempt to disrupt the elections, and over 15 local elections related incidents have been reported between April 22 and May 10 involving CPN-M cadres.

CPN-M has been active in Surkhet, Kalikot and Jajarkot, with cadres intimidating party representatives and candidates to the extent of threatening to abduct them. Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist-Centre) cadres in Puchhegaun of Jajarkot explained that CPN-M cadres had attacked their cadres in an attempt to disrupt their

² Election-related incidents can be searched on the [Nepal Monitor website](#). DRCN and Nepal Monitor's last statement on election-related incidents recorded 51 incidents from April 1-21, [find that report here](#). DRCN and Nepal Monitor intend to release one more analysis update on election-related incidents from April 22 to May 10 prior to the election silence period.

³ 'CPN-UML cadre killed in Dolakha'; original news reported in Nepali available at <http://radiokantipur.ekantipur.com/news/2017-05-10/20170510090553.html>

campaign. DRCN observers have also been told that CPN-M cadres are most active in the more remote areas of Province 6, and that there are concerns about potential CPN-M efforts to disrupt polling activities in these areas. Further east in Kaski district, CPN-M reportedly distributed pamphlets in some locations urging parties to withdraw their nomination.

Despite the above incidents, nearly all stakeholders interviewed were satisfied with the security arrangements made by the GON and ECN to date, and did not believe there would be disruption of polling on election day, outside of the potential of a few isolated cases.

IV. June 14 Phase II Election Observation Planning

DRCN will deploy an additional four teams of observers to Provinces 1, 2, 5, and 7 to observe preparations for the second phase of elections on June 14. These teams will observe the pre-election, election day, and post-election environment.

V. DRCN's Objectives and Methodology

Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN) is conducting observation of Nepal's first local elections in 19 years to provide an assessment of the process that can be used to evaluate the electoral process, and make recommendations for improving future elections in Nepal.

In addition to conducting national-level meetings, monitoring media-reported events, and liaising with other observation missions, DRCN is deploying eight teams of mobile observers to observe the pre-election, election day, and post-election processes across all seven of Nepal's provinces for both phases of local elections. The teams have been trained to use long-term and short-term observation methods to assess the different aspects of the electoral process.

DRCN's observation aims to provide an independent and high-quality assessment of the elections, as well as recommendations for improving the process going forward. DRCN's observation is a "limited observation" as DRCN will not have representative coverage across polling booths on election day, and DRCN will not make an overall assessment of the polls, including whether they are "free or fair".⁴ DRCN's observation will focus on assessing the broader electoral and political context, using specific observations as indicative of policy and implementation challenges to be addressed during future elections.

⁴ DRCN's observers will visit approximately 140 polling stations across both phases of the elections in districts located in the mountain, hills, and Tarai regions.