



**Quarterly Report**  
**BANGLADESH: Strengthening Cooperation Between Political Parties in Parliament**  
**USAID Grant #388-A-00-99-00027-00**  
**January 1- March 31, 2001**

## **I. SUMMARY**

Following popular protests against the military government, Bangladeshis re-established democratic elections in their country in 1991. Since then, they have taken significant steps toward strengthening their country's governing institutions. Unfortunately, as in many other democracies in transition, Bangladeshis continue to face considerable challenges. Democratic advances have been impeded by a lack of institutional mechanisms that encourage citizen input in the legislative process, a low level of confidence in election processes and the lack of cooperation among the political parties in parliament.

This quarter NDI played an active role in addressing the objectives set out by this grant through: 1) taking steps to increase citizen involvement in the parliamentary process through the development of the *Study Circles* citizen forum program; 2) increasing the legitimacy of the electoral process through ongoing work with the election commission; 3) planning for election related activities including an international election monitoring delegation and a political party pollwatching training of trainers program; and 4) strengthening parliament by ongoing engagement with party leadership and civil society regarding political party reform. Additionally, the Institute hired trainers Dominic Cardy and Richard Klein to initiate party pollwatching training efforts; Klein and Cardy will be arriving in Bangladesh in mid-April.

In upcoming months, NDI will continue to monitor the political environment and prepare for pre-election activities as well as an international election monitoring delegation. This work will take place through continued coordination with the political parties, and local and international organizations working on election issues. In addition to the preparation for the international election monitoring delegation, experts will implement a nation-wide training-of-trainers program for political party pollwatchers. The effort to continue fostering citizen's engagement with Parliament will be supported by the implementation of the study circles as a forum for discussion and the development of advocacy strategies.

## II. BACKGROUND

In 1991, Bangladesh held multiparty elections that were broadly accepted by all political parties. Since these elections, Bangladeshis have struggled to develop an independent legislature that is effective and accountable. Unfortunately, a legacy of mistrust between the major political parties continues to plague Bangladeshi politics. Rather than working within the parliament to resolve differences, political parties have regularly boycotted parliamentary proceedings and have held street demonstrations that limit the effectiveness of the country's government. Recently, opposition parties have called for the government to resign immediately and to hold early elections, highlighting the need for a strengthened parliament.

The strengthening of parliament requires concrete legislative reforms and an increase in citizens' involvement in the parliamentary process. Many Bangladeshi political party members, government officials, civil society representatives and media members are committed to improving the quality of governance in their country and have asked NDI for its continued assistance.

Recently, however, Bangladesh has been filled with strikes, inter-party disagreements and violence. The rocky political landscape has resulted in the government's increased use of the Public Safety Act (PSA). On several occasions political activists were arrested during political marches; opposition members have been complaining that the government's use of this act is excessive and unjust. There have been both inter- and intra-party struggles throughout this reporting period and *hartals* (strikes) were held regularly. February was fraught with extensive strikes; 6 separate hartals were held in total. Early in March, Muslim holiday of Eid put a temporary hold on political party striking, protests and violence. With the exception of the Eid holiday there has been little respite from the ongoing disturbances. Hundreds of party activists and citizens have been killed and wounded as a result. General elections that may have been called for June, are now according to the Prime Minister's most recent public statements, more likely to be held in October.

## III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The overall goal of this program is to strengthen the parliament's role in the political process and increase the political effectiveness of civil society and its engagement in the legislative process.

### **Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process**

In an effort to increase the role of citizens in the legislative process, NDI began consultations with civic group leaders on ways to increase their role and influence within the legislature. After investigating a number of techniques used to foster citizen participation, NDI decided to use the *Study Circle* method, a technique used successfully in a number of countries to engage civil society in advocacy efforts. Study Circles are small discussion groups of no more than ten people organized by a trained leader and focused around a topic-directed discussion. The meetings are participatory and the participants are all provided with simple resource materials before the discussion begins. The discussions are aimed at building an action strategy.

Following consultations with a number of local civil society groups, the First Secretary of the Swedish Embassy Jonas Wendel, two Swedish study circle experts and other individuals involved in civil society organizations, NDI assisted in developing a program to implement pilot study circles. These citizen groups would use the *Study Circle* model to discuss topics that are of public importance and that could appear on the parliamentary committees agenda. Presently, the Institute is preparing materials for these discussion sessions. In coordination with the local groups, NDI is looking to select appropriate participants and train a group of moderators. This method is widely used in Sweden and has been met with great success; the Swedish Embassy put NDI in contact with the Swedish Institute, an organization specializing in advocacy and civic development. Subsequently, the Swedish Institute has volunteered a pro-bono trainer to assist with the program's development.

### **Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process**

Numerous activities have taken place this quarter to advance the goal of increasing the legitimacy of the electoral process in Bangladesh. As the pre-election political environment has intensified, the Institute has increased preparatory activities for the election. NDI has been meeting with the Election Commissioner and local election monitoring groups like the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) as well as the United States Embassy, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to discuss the planning of election monitoring efforts.

Country Director Jim Oliver continued engaging in discussions with the Chair of the Election Commission (CEC) through the *hartals*. NDI has provided the CEC with materials and methods used in other countries to engage the opposition in the process of moving forward with election laws and reforms.

NDI has begun planning for a pre-election mission, and an international election monitoring delegation of approximately 20 people. Preparations for both the pre-election and election day delegations include the drafting of budgets, delegate lists, agendas and timelines for election related activities. In Dhaka, the Institute has begun logistical preparations for the delegation. NDI staff members traveled to Chittagong to observe bi-elections and begin logistical planning in the districts. The information collected during the observation of the bi-election, along with NDI recommendations for reform were shared with the Chair of the Election Commission.

In addition to the Institute's own election program planning, NDI has been in consultation with other organizations planning for international election observation delegations. NDI held meetings with Don Collier, the leader of the UNDP election coordination effort, to discuss logistical planning for the international election observations delegations. The Institute critiqued the UNDP's proposal for election coordination and has provided feedback based on its experiences monitoring past elections in Bangladesh. NDI met with US Embassy representatives to discuss security and planning for aspects of the international election monitoring delegation. The program has also continued engagement with USAID representatives to discuss plans for the election.

As part of an effort to develop a party poll watching program, NDI has hired two expert party poll watch trainers to design and implement the training of party members to be poll

monitors. Canadian trainer Dominic Cardy, and long-time NDI trainer Richard Klein will be leaving for Bangladesh on April 19th to follow up on the implementation of the training program. Both Cardy and Klein have conducted similar programs internationally. Workplans, checklists and manuals for the trainings are being drafted both in Bangladesh and Washington DC.

### **Assisting Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures**

NDI's work with parliament this quarter has taken place through engaging with political party leadership. The Country Director has continued to engage party leadership in discussions about party strengthening through meetings and conferences. Through this party networking NDI has gained the support of all of the major political parties for a party pollwatching training of trainers.

NDI met with the Parliamentary Committee Chair of the Women and Children's Committee, M.S. Akbar. The discussion with the Chair, included recommendations on ways that committees can engage NGOs and citizens in the legislative process and ways to institutionalize such interactions. Additional party meetings have been held with the Awami League, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Liberal Party of Bangladesh. The Country Director met with BNP leader Mannan Bhuiyan, attended the Awami meeting on 'Bangabandhu – Sheikh Hasina,' and held additional meetings with the Awami leadership including MP Alhaj Syed Abul Hossain. In addition to meeting with the Liberal Party of Bangladesh, NDI provided the parties with resource materials on democracy building.

The Institute participated in two major democracy events including the Democracy Festival organized by Democracywatch, a Bangladeshi civic group conducting democratic development projects. This forum allowed NDI to disseminate information about our present work in Bangladesh and to provide an international comparative perspective on the difficulties of engaging in democratic development work. Representing NDI at a number of conferences and conventions, the Country Director was able to share materials on strengthening the internal democratic structures of political parties. At the Millennium Democracy Festival, NDI held a session called, "Know, Think and Vote." The workshop engaged both members of parliament and academicians in discussion on civic and voter education.

### ***NDI's Regional Director visits Bangladesh***

NDI's Director of Asia Programs Peter Manikas and Senior Program Officer Makram Ouais visited the NDI office in Bangladesh to meet with civil society leaders, politicians, USAID and embassy representatives and academics. This trip also saw further planning for the anticipated parliamentary elections and related parliamentary and election programming.

#### IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As a result of NDI's efforts:

- Local civil society groups with NDI's assistance and the support of the Swedish Embassy have developed a new program to engage citizens in the parliamentary process.
- The Swedish Institute has volunteered an expert in civic education development to provide support and expertise to the design of a study circle program to increase citizen participation in parliamentary matters.
- The main parties have expressed support for NDI's work and have appointed contact people within their parties to work with NDI on the party pollwatch training-of-trainers (**see appendix**).
- Positive communication has been maintained between NDI and the political party leadership throughout the tense months of this quarter.
- The Chief Election Commissioner was motivated to continue to press both the BNP and the Awami League to meet with the election commission on matters of election reform. NDI has submitted recommendations to the CEC and continued urge the CEC to facilitate discussion with all the parties. The public approval of the CEC announced by the opposition leadership is a mark of the success of the CEC in continuing outreach with all of the parties.
- NDI has shared its past experiences monitoring elections in Bangladesh with the UNDP, the Asia Foundation and other groups planning election-related activities for the 2001 elections.
- Support mechanisms have been put in place for both the international election monitoring delegation and the party poll watching programs.
- As a result of NDI's participation in a Democracywatch Democracy Festival and the Millenium Democracy Festival, information on NDI and comparative resources on party strengthening have been distributed to interested parties.

#### V. EVALUATION

This quarter NDI has met the program objectives through the following ways:

- **Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process**  
By engaging citizens and citizen leaders in the process of developing the study circle program, NDI has increased the capacity of citizens to translate their interests in working with parliament into program design by creating forums, which allow citizens to address parliamentary issues. Also this quarter, NDI has assisted civil society groups in

developing a coalition of groups working to address parliamentary issues and citizen participation in politics.

- **Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process**

NDI leveraged its relationships with the political parties and the Election Commission to continue to push for all parties to engage in discussion about election reform. NDI's Country Director has provided experience and advice to other organizations in planning of NDI's international election delegation mission along with the development of several other coordinating groups election missions including the UNDP, and the European Union.

- **Assisting Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures**

NDI's work with the political parties this quarter addressed the problems that disrupt parliament. By gathering support of all of the political parties to participate in the party poll watch training of trainers, NDI found one point of consensus between all of the parties. NDI's constant engagement with the main political parties supports the Institute's work to foster communication between party leadership by sending the message to the political parties that there are common interests between them.

## **VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

Looking ahead to the next quarter, NDI will work toward strengthening the activities of civil society organizations by connecting them to parliamentary work, increasing thoughtful preparation for upcoming elections, and working with parties and parliament to smooth the election process for the next parliament through the following activities:

- NDI with the pro-bono expertise of the Swedish Institute will facilitate the development of a series of citizens' forum to establish lines of communication and cooperation between civil society and Parliamentary committees;
- NDI will meet with party leadership, MPs, and Committee Chairs, to discuss elections, parliamentary reforms, and NDI program efforts;
- NDI will place two expert trainers in Bangladesh to design materials, develop and execute party polling agent training of trainers throughout the country.
- NDI will continue participation in the donors meetings called by the Asia Foundation and other organizations to help in coordinating activities around the election.
- NDI will finalize the programmatic and logistical preparations for observing the parliamentary elections.
- NDI will hold meetings with the Election Commission on electoral reforms and electoral areas of concern.