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Final Report

INTRODUCTION

To promote free and fair parliamentary elections in Bangladesh in October 2001, The Asia Foundation identified a comprehensive framework of mutually reinforcing election-related activities to ensure maximum effectiveness of programs supported by the donor community. To ensure the best enabling environment for open, transparent, and peaceful elections that will contribute to Bangladesh's democratic evolution, TAF conducted a comprehensive plan with three main objectives: 1) to deter violence; 2) to increase public confidence in the electoral process and in the election monitoring organizations; and 3) to expand voter awareness to focus on each voter's responsibility to ensure a free, fair, peaceful, and fully participatory election. To achieve these three objectives, TAF and its partners focused elections activities in three critical areas -- voter information and awareness, training and capacity building, and election monitoring activities.

The comprehensive plan was funded by eight different donors and managed under 11 separate cooperative agreements. The support provided by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) not only offered critical start-up funds, but also offered necessary funding for the complex coordination and capacity building support that was essential to the success of such an ambitious undertaking. USAID funds also supported activities in each of the three program areas and supported the production of comprehensive publications to ensure thorough documentation of these civil society activities for future reference.

The following report highlights specifically the achievements within the comprehensive 2001 elections program that were funded by USAID.

VOTER INFORMATION AND AWARENESS

The Voter Information and Awareness activities funded by TAF and implemented by its partners focused on three key precepts. First of all these activities sought to create and expand awareness among the electorate of their rights and responsibilities as voters. For example, the popular *pot gaan* shows performed by Rupantar actors did an excellent job of raising general voter awareness in southwestern Bangladesh. Secondly, these information and awareness programs used targeted communication campaigns to successfully encourage voter and citizen behavior modification and

citizen action. The slogan contest and posters that were developed by Democracywatch and BROTEE sent a clear message urging voters to choose the best candidates independently and rationally, to oppose violence in the elections, and to value women as an important part of the electorate. Finally, these targeted campaigns rallied citizen effort and action. The campaign to verify the voter list empowered citizens themselves to correct the roll and to initiate a process of rectification as they encountered errors.

Through consultations held at The Asia Foundation, partner organizations agreed that prior voter education investments had been successful in promoting a general understanding of the voting process. For the 2001 election, the participants would focus an intensive information campaign to address the perceived potential for violence against and intimidation of voters, to promote free and full participation of women in the elections, and to encourage voters to cast their ballots independently and thoughtfully. The great concern that significant pre-election violence and voter intimidation would disrupt polling made it imperative that these issues be addressed in a timely manner. There was further concern regarding the possibility that violence and political instability would exacerbate long-standing cultural factors already mitigating against the participation of women and minority voters, resulting in a situation more detrimental than usual to the likelihood of their turning out in significant numbers. TAF and its affiliated voter awareness organizations were also interested in addressing the issue of party intimidation and corruption by focusing on party performance instead. They agreed that this could be accomplished through large-scale saturation of the messages through leaflets, posters, other print media, radio and television spots, and *pot gaan* theater. Such communication campaigns have demonstrated in the past an ability to modify behavior and shape attitudes in Bangladesh.

In this broad effort, USAID funds supported a nationwide slogan contest, the development of voter awareness posters, a complementary mass communications campaign to disperse these messages throughout the country, and a community awareness theater program.

Slogan Contest

In an effort to ensure the greatest interest and involvement of members of the public in the upcoming elections, it was decided to hold a contest on "Popular Slogans for Free and Fair Elections." All Bangladeshi citizens were invited to submit slogan ideas in the three issue areas identified by civil society as critical for voters to understand. With United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding support, Democracywatch was identified as a TAF partner well-suited for conducting the contest.

Objectives: The objectives of the slogan contest were:

- To create awareness among the electorate of their rights and responsibilities as voters.
- To encourage voters to educate themselves in order to be able to choose candidates independently and rationally.
- To promote public opinion against election violence and misconduct and in favor of the free and full participation of women and the disabled.

Activities: Democracywatch developed a highly successful contest soliciting “Popular Slogans for Free and Fair Elections.” While this may seem like a simple and rather obvious idea, it had unique impact in Bangladesh, a country born when their love for their native tongue united millions of Bengalis under the demand *Rastra bhasha Bangla chai*, “We demand Bangla as our state language.” Rhythmic, easily chanted slogans were important to a population still largely illiterate, and they continue to be a unifying force after independence.

Most slogans used in past elections, however, were party-centric and the products of political professionals. In 2001, the time was ripe to utilize this approach to emphasize non-partisan messages, namely the right of voters to make informed, individual choices, free from violence and intimidation, and for women to be able to express their will equally through the electoral process. The idea of a popular contest to develop and identify the best slogans would further spread the impact of these messages.

Contest: Democracywatch published advertisements in two daily and two weekly national newspapers, soliciting slogans in three categories:

- Encouraging the right and responsibility of voters to cast their votes independently and thoughtfully.
- Discouraging violence and voter intimidation.
- Encouraging the full-fledged and spontaneous participation of women voters.

The contest was open to all Bangladeshi nationals. Each contestant was entitled to submit up to three slogans, written in Bangla, in each category. The winner in each category had to agree to make his/her slogan freely available to all organizations conducting voter education. The three first place winners each received Tk 5,000.

A total of 3,316 contestants from the Bangladesh divisions of Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal, and Sylhet, as well as those living overseas in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Malaysia submitted over 16,500 slogans, more than 5,000 in each of the three categories. A panel of five professionals (an advertising executive, a journalist, a social researcher, a representative of Democracywatch, and a representative of TAF) selected five slogans from each category as finalists.

Slogan Selection and Field Tests: The fifteen selected slogans were field tested in ten constituencies (six rural, three urban, and one semi-urban) to determine which conveyed the desired message most clearly. The field testing consisted of 175 face-to-face interviews based on a prepared, structured questionnaire and 20 focus group discussions with representatives of professional fields (teachers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen) and laborers (rickshaw pullers, vendors, day laborers). A special effort was made to adequately represent young people. The ratio of male to female participants in both the interviews and focus groups was about 60:40. The panel of judges made the final selection of three winning slogans using the field test results.

Winning Slogans: The winners were recognized at a ceremony held at the British Council Auditorium on May 6, 2001, which was attended by around 200 people, including nine of the 15 finalists. The winning slogans were:

- *Deshar shebai jaake pabo amaar vote taake debo*, “I will vote for him/her who will best serve my country.”
- *Deshe akhon projojon shantrashmukto nirbachan*, “Our country needs violence free elections.”
- *Naree kimba purush noi voter amaar porichoy*, “Our identity is not as women or men but as voters.”

Impact and Analysis: A slogan contest remains a uniquely appropriate and effective tool given the prevailing socio-political culture in Bangladesh, the continuing low literacy rate, and the populace’s shared love of their language and literature. The contest also served to enhance a sense of participatory democracy for a great many voters, as it is estimated that between 82,500 and 66,000 individuals worked together to enter 16,500 slogans, since each entry represented the collaborative effort of family and friends of the official entrant.

The contest was held at a time when the entire nation was eagerly anticipating a free and fair election under a neutral caretaker government. While in terms of voter turnout Bangladesh is in a much stronger position than many mature democratic nations, the chance of those voters making truly informed choices is slim. This is true for a variety of reasons, including the lack of information regarding candidates’ backgrounds and platforms and the paucity of any issue-based campaigning; the generally low level of education and lack of knowledge about candidates’ obligations and qualifications to carry them out; and the tendency of political parties, candidates, and their supporters, and, in some cases, local administrations, to adopt unfair means of influencing voters. To the extent that the slogans represented the true voice of the people, they enabled the electorate to become more thoughtful and informed about their rights and more cautious about the choices they made.

Voter Awareness Posters

The Slogan Contest identified three winning slogans that addressed the three targeted issues – deterring violence, encouraging women to vote, and encouraging citizens to vote independently and thoughtfully. TAF support for the design of posters illustrating these messages aimed to:

- Increase the impact of the messages by saturating the environment with the same three core messages illustrated by the same three posters.
- Use a visual medium appropriate to a highly illiterate population.
- Use a network of coordinating NGOs (i.e., the Election Monitoring Working Group, or EMWG) to ensure the rapid, widespread, and inexpensive dissemination of the posters.

Because the simple, clear pictures and symbols typically employed on a poster can effectively communicate even quite complex ideas to a still largely illiterate population, the Foundation

worked with Democracywatch and BROTEE to design, print, and distribute voter awareness posters in all 300 constituencies of Bangladesh with USAID funding support. The posters carried the three winning slogans from the contest.

Democracywatch chose to develop the first two posters which stressed independent thinking, the importance of performance based campaigning versus party intimidation and buy-offs, and the need for violence free elections. BROTEE, which is particularly concerned with women's issues, undertook the task of developing and distributing a poster to illustrate the winning slogan that directly addressed women's participation in the 2001 election.

BROTEE has long been concerned with the limited involvement of women and the disabled in past elections in Bangladesh. However, during the last three elections under a caretaker government, and as a result of previous voter awareness programs, women's participation has increased. According to BROTEE, "The caretaker government creates a comparatively secure environment where women feel more confident in coming out to vote." Despite this increase, there are still "hard line areas where women have not voted for decades." According to BROTEE, women's participation is considerably lower in nine areas of the country where they are restricted by religious *fatwa* (an edict from a religious authority), *purda* (confinement to the home), or general fear and insecurity. These areas include single villages in Madaripur, Patuakhali, and Noakhali, among others. Because of the overall increase in women's participation in other parts of the country, BROTEE believed that pre-election motivational materials such as posters could be used to good effect to encourage and bolster the rising political consciousness of women everywhere, and in particular in some of these more recalcitrant areas.

Objectives: The objectives of the poster design and distribution activities were:

- To develop posters for three winning slogans from the Popular Slogans for a Free and Fair Election contest.
- To print 555,000 copies of an 18"x23" four color poster illustrating the slogan which addressed the issue of the right and responsibility of voters to cast their votes independently and thoughtfully, "I will vote for him/her who will best serve my country."
- To print 750,000 copies of an 18"x23" bi-color poster illustrating the slogan which addressed the issue of violence and intimidation, "Our country needs violence free elections."
- To print 900,000 copies of an 18"x23" bi-color poster illustrating the slogan, "Our identity is not as women or men but as voters."
- To distribute the posters to the district and upazila levels so that the messages would be communicated to voters at all levels and in all communities.

Poster Design and Printing: Cartoons attract people of all ages and are particularly effective in a population largely illiterate or only marginally literate. From a variety of designs submitted by prominent Bangladeshi artists and cartoonists, Democracywatch selected the design of Maksudur Rahman, famous for his cover designs, as most appropriate for the slogan regarding the rights and responsibilities of voters. For the second slogan, regarding violence and intimidation, a

design submitted by a renowned cartoonist, Shishir Bhattayacharya, was chosen. For the third poster which stated "Our identity is not as women or men but as voters," BROTEE's in-house designer and graphic artist prepared three draft designs which were field tested at six sites before the final design was chosen. BTT Communications was selected to finalize this design and produce the BROTEE poster. Democracywatch was able to have 550,000 posters of the first slogan printed in four colors and 750,000 posters with the second slogan printed. BROTEE had 900,000 posters printed with the last slogan.

Distribution: Democracywatch distributed their posters equally in the 300 constituencies. The distribution was facilitated by members of the Elections Monitoring Working Group (EMWG) and other social activists which enabled the posters to be hung at the upazila and union levels throughout the country. The distribution effort was monitored through a combination of direct visits to 27 districts, concurrent with press conferences held in 19 districts, news of which reached newspapers in all 64 of the country's districts. In addition, all distributors were contractually obliged to provide photographs of their posting activities. In all, about 1,000 people were involved, directly or indirectly, in the poster distribution activities. Their enthusiasm and dedication to the job was matched by the curiosity and interest of the villagers who observed them on the job and took the messages of the posters they placed to heart. BROTEE's staff distributed 795,000 of its posters in 56 districts the third week of September, right before the elections. With assistance from seven other members of the EMWG as well as five local organizations outside the EMWG, BROTEE also distributed another 60,000 of the other posters in the countryside.

Distribution during Re-election: BROTEE was able to distribute another 45,000 posters for the re-elections held in eight districts – Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Maulovibazar, Shariatpur, Lakhshampur, Mymensingh, Kishorganj, and Bagerhat.

Impact and Analysis: The posters generated considerable interest and were particularly appealing to people in small villages and rural areas. There was some concern regarding the projected life span of the posters, given the fact that as election day neared more and more political posters were competing for the available space. The actual hanging of the posters was accomplished without much difficulty, although the cost of the labor involved proved to be higher than expected. Because of the number of political posters being hung, labor costs became quite competitive. Democracywatch attempted to alleviate this problem by using voluntary labor where possible. In addition, posters were sent by courier to organizations responsible for the larger areas, thus reducing carrying costs and enabling them to use some of the savings to hire labor. However, in some cases partner organizations found themselves out of pocket to get the job done.

It also proved to be difficult to hang posters in some villages, where there tend to be few large walls or other surfaces to accommodate them. Some villagers allowed posters to be hung on the walls of their homes; others were hung on the walls of shops, schools, and government buildings, and on large trees. Given the lack of competing diversions in most of the villages, the posters

that did find a place to hang had a considerably larger impact than the more numerous posters hung in urban areas.

BROTEE's mobile monitors were asked to check the status of the posters on election day. The feedback was very encouraging as many polling centers were adorned with the posters. BROTEE district and constituency coordinators also reported lots of enthusiasm and favorable comment on the posters in the week right before the elections. The very attractive blue, black, and white posters depicting many kinds of women voting alongside men was a very effective tool in encouraging women who traditionally have not participated in the political process to vote in the October elections.

Community Awareness Theater

To promote informed citizen participation in the electoral process, TAF with USAID funding support, selected Rupantar, a long time TAF partner, to provide voter awareness programs through theater. The popular *pot gaan* drama format was chosen to provide an intensive information campaign in four districts of rural Bangladesh -- Khulna, Bagerhat, Satkhira, and Norail. Rupantar agreed to focus on the pre-election and election period in 17 constituencies of these southwestern districts.

Using a method called alternative living theater, Rupantar has adapted issues of democracy and governance to a traditional form of theater or *pot gaan*. This method involves the participation of the actors in developing the script, draws on local experiences, and demonstrates practical ways to overcome obstacles. Local folk music is used for the performance and the plays can be staged without the use of lights, props, and expensive stage construction. These performances can be played for large audiences and will accommodate about 1,000 people per performance.

Rupantar has had a great deal of success with the *pot gaan* shows, especially in rural areas with low levels of literacy. They have used this popular form of drama to successfully promote a greater understanding of the voting process as well as a general voter awareness initiative.

Objectives

- To educate voters on their rights and responsibilities, the role and responsibility of candidates, local election authorities, and the Election Commission through 300 live *pot gaan* theater performances in 17 parliamentary constituencies in southwest Bangladesh.
- To publish the following voter awareness materials: 50,000 *punthi kabitas* (booklet using a traditional lyrical poetry style); 25,000 booklets in Bengali; and 20,000 posters.
- To produce the voter awareness materials through community level workshops.
- To distribute these materials during live *pot gaan* performances and through other local NGO organizations.

Activities

Pot Gaan Shows: Four theater teams of 12 members each staged 342 traditional *pot gaan* shows in 17 constituencies of southwest Bangladesh. The show involved a troupe of singers with instruments that used catchy tunes with a repeated chorus to focus on particular voter education issues. With music and song the performers pointed to a picture scroll that reinforced the meaning of the song. Within the theater group itself Rupantar produced songs and pot scroll paintings for two different productions presenting several different messages against violence and intimidation, encouraging women to participate in the political process, and repeating the importance of voting thoughtfully and independently.

Informal Community Workshops: Rupantar developed two theater productions for the October elections and then field tested the shows for average citizens on the street as well as for several groups of teachers and civil servants in Khulna and in districts outside the targeted areas. Comments and suggestions were solicited in these informal workshops and were then incorporated into the productions which were tested yet a second time. Suggestions concerning lighting and staging as well as content were incorporated. Even as the *pot gaan* shows were performed, the actors and crew continued to ask for audience feedback, and people enthusiastically provided their input for the next performances.

Publications: Rupantar produced 60,000 *punthi kabitas*, 30,00 booklets, and 10,000 posters that were distributed or posted during *pot gaan* shows. This material was also sent to other NGOs.

Impact and Analysis

The bright and lively *pot gaan* shows drew large crowds and were very well received. People appreciated the neutral, non-partisan nature of the messages presented in the performances. Shows were well attended with as many as 1,000 people in each audience. Rupantar estimates that almost 340,000 people saw these live theater productions including about 88,000 women. The female audience was approximately 26% of the total, smaller than anticipated. Perhaps fewer women attended because many of the shows were in busy markets, places women are not as free to attend.

During each of the *pot gaan* performances, members of Rupantar handed out booklets and *punthi kabita* raising voter awareness and providing voter education material. Rupantar teams distributed 29,350 booklets and 59,020 *punthi kabita* and put up 9,560 posters during shows. In addition Rupantar also gave 650 booklets, 980 *punthi kabita*, and 440 posters to other NGOs for distribution.

An informal survey of 30 polling centers in the districts where *pot gaan* was presented showed that on election day more than 85% of registered voters participated and the number of women voters was very high also.

TRAINING AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Like Voter Information and Awareness programming, the second set of election activities, Training and Capacity Building Strategies, focussed on three democratic principles that are key for ensuring the growth of a young democracy. First, TAF funded activities that increase women's political participation. The women's candidate training program showed that women political candidates could be effectively trained and equipped to campaign confidently. Secondly, TAF sought to encourage issue-based campaigning which promotes performance-based assessments of public service and offers a model for opposition parties to reframe issues and establish national priorities through dialogue. The pilot project, in which a series of dialogues between the candidates of major parties and garment workers were organized, offered just such a model for issue-based campaigning. Finally, TAF sponsored training that encouraged the development of in-depth, analytical thinking and reporting rather than politically based information gathering, reporting, and decision making. The Gatekeeper Training targeted key personnel in the media and offered them the opportunity to improve their ability to provide accurate news coverage and political analysis as well as critically shape the broader focus and priorities of their papers, stories, and staff.

These efforts were funded by four donors (i.e., American Center, Swiss Embassy, Swiss Development Cooperative, and DFID) under three cooperative agreements and well complemented the activities supported by USAID.

USAID's support of capacity building and training involved building a common vision among the donors for a comprehensive elections program and establishing a broad-based coalition of civil society organizations willing to undertake a coordinated and unified nationwide elections monitoring and advocacy effort.

Elections Monitoring Working Group

To establish such a broad-based monitoring effort, the Foundation began with its long-standing relationship with the two main monitoring alliances, FEMA and the Coordinating Council on Human Rights in Bangladesh, to bring solid experience and technical expertise to the challenge. The Foundation then identified a wide range of organizations, including women's rights organizations, advocacy or watchdog groups, and organizations with experience in governance programming. The objective was to establish a temporary working group that was inclusive of many different types of organizations representing the full diversity of interests within the country while encouraging a collaborative monitoring strategy that focused on coordination, standardization, and efficiency of organizations involved. This approach drew on the institutional resources of the organizations within each of these alliances and ensured cost-effectiveness and accountability. The Asia Foundation also supported a number of other civil society organizations outside the two alliances that were interested in monitoring the election independently for broader ownership of the monitoring process, and the potential for nationwide coverage.

The result of this collaboration was the Elections Monitoring Working Group (EMWG). This broad-based coalition of civic organizations, monitoring alliances, and NGOs embraced the goal of a comprehensive civil society election monitoring program for the 2001 elections in order to achieve 100% coverage of polling units on election day. Key to the effectiveness of this strategy was increasing the number of individuals and organizations involved in monitoring, developing a common monitoring methodology, and creating a system for sharing information between organizations. The Asia Foundation facilitated meetings and discussions among the EMWG members to assist them in formulating a methodology and plan of action for comprehensive domestic monitoring. These meetings brought together large NGOs with a national presence, small- and medium-sized NGOs with domestic monitoring experience, and others interested in fielding volunteers on election day. Through programming, technical assistance, and coordination efforts the Foundation encouraged smaller community-based NGOs across the country to participate in election monitoring in their area. These NGOs were reached through the district- and constituency-level coordination committees, and were important for filling in critical gaps in coverage.

EMWG Objectives

The member organizations agreed through collective discussion facilitated by TAF advisers on the following goals:

- To achieve 100 % coordinated coverage of the polling booths throughout the nation by civil society organizations;
- To actively involve a sufficient number of civil society organizations through the two monitoring alliances and independent organizations in the monitoring activity so that the monitoring reports would have credibility and could not be viewed as politically biased;
- To encourage the use of a common monitoring methodology and standardized reporting, evaluation forms, and procedures by the different monitoring organizations;
- To report on election results for each polling booth and constituency in a way that allowed the identification of specific polling stations or constituencies where the validity of the election was confirmed and where it was problematic;
- To issue timely and thorough reports on the election process; and
- To build the capacity of organizations in Bangladesh to develop a structure for large-scale domestic monitoring that was effective, cost-effective and sustainable with declining foreign funding.

EMWG Activities

EMWG Coordination Office: The EMWG established a neutral location for their weekly coordination meetings, sub-group meetings, and press briefings at the BRAC Center. The Asia Foundation supported the rental of this coordination office. The office was made available daily from August 20 to October 15. A full-time administrative officer was hired by The Asia Foundation to support the EMWG. The officer was present whenever the EMWG office was open. Two additional people seconded from EMWG member organizations worked on media

issues, logistics, and deployment. The Asia Foundation contracted with the BRAC Center for 24-hour security coverage of the office space. The office was equipped with two computers, two UPS, one printer, three fax machines, and one photocopy machine. TAF also purchased necessary office supplies and tea-making facilities.

Meetings: EMWG members held meetings and discussions to formulate a methodology and plan of action for comprehensive domestic monitoring. The EMWG held a total of 20 working group sessions. These meetings, chaired on a rotating basis by heads of participating NGOs, were essential for coordinating accreditation, advocacy, publication of the observer manual, election day observers, and press statements.

Workshops: Two workshops were held, one in March and one in July, 2001. These were facilitated by the TAF Election Adviser, Tim Meisburger, and they focused on the accreditation process, network development, development of the observer manual and form, and a strategy for meeting with the Chief Election Commissioner.

Sub-Groups: Sub-groups were formed to address particular aspects of the observation process that needed the work of smaller groups and focused attention. There were four sub-groups initially:

1. **Materials Development.** To write and oversee the printing of necessary material, particularly to design and develop the observer manual and forms;
2. **Deployment.** To advise and coordinate on recruiting and training of observers, and to organize and administer the data collection process on and after election day;
3. **Media.** To deal with the press, radio, and television, which entailed coordinating press releases, organizing press briefings, and responding to and correcting misinformation in the press regarding coordination and the election monitoring process;
4. **Advocacy.** To hold discussions with the Election Commission (EC) and lobby for changes in the regulations regarding observers on behalf of the entire working group.

In addition, one other sub-group was added as Election Day grew closer and the EC had still not issued accreditation cards for observers who met all the requirements. This Accreditation sub-group led the negotiations and lobbying efforts with the EC to ensure that the EMWG's goals could be met.

Thirty-one sub-group meetings were held during the reporting period. Of this total, there were 10 Media sub-group sessions, 15 Materials Development meetings, five Deployment sessions, and one Advocacy sub-group meeting.

Materials Development: Drawing on materials previously used in election monitoring, particularly those developed by the TAF Elections Adviser and used in other countries, the EMWG sub-group adapted and revised this document to fit the Bangladesh context. The resulting document, "An Election Observation Manual," was printed in both Bangla and English. It included a code of conduct for election observers, the rights and responsibilities of observers,

and a list of irregularities that might possibly occur so that observers would know what kinds of fraud to look for. The manual also outlined the entire process of voting, from before election day to the opening of the polls, from the voting procedure to the counting process.

At the recommendation of the TAF Election Advisor, the observation form was contained in the manual itself. Member organizations agreed that the most important characteristic of the form was that it require objective information. As a result, almost all the questions require a “yes” or “no” answer only. Furthermore, member organizations wanted to ensure that a uniform data collection device was used so that the large number of organizations involved would nonetheless collect standardized data.

The process to develop this form involved some interesting and innovative contributions from the member organizations. For example, the NGO Action on Disability and Development (ADD) recommended that specific questions about electoral rights of disabled voters be added to the observation form for use by all domestic election observers. These additional questions helped raise awareness of disadvantaged voters and promoted adherence to Bangladesh legal protections regarding these persons. Question 12 of the observer form asked if aged persons, pregnant women, or disabled individuals got preference in the voting line. Question 13 asked if blind or disabled persons were able to select their own assistants to help them vote.

There was also a question allowing observers to note the voting conditions for religious and ethnic minorities. This was added under Additional Questions (#26) on the form. There was considerable discussion by the EMWG about where to put this item, and even whether to include it or not. The compromise was to place the item at the bottom of the form under Additional Questions. Additionally, EMWG members ensured focus on the women voter turnout. Question 11 of the observer form asked observers to note if women were able to cast their vote without fear or pressure.

Recruiting Procedure: Observers were recruited to maximize inclusiveness while still ensuring some degree of accountability. They had to meet certain criteria in order to qualify:

- Must be representatives of an NGO or other officially registered organization.
- All organizations supported by TAF had to have been approved by the NGO Affairs Bureau to receive foreign funds in support of a precise number of observers.
- All organizations had to be issued accreditation cards for this precise number of observers.
- Organizations could only recruit individuals who fulfilled certain criteria required by Election Commission regulations, such as being 25 years or older, having no connections to any political party, and residing in an upazila different from the one in which they observed (see Accreditation section below).
- Must agree to Observer Code of Conduct and commit to using the standardized form for observation.

Typically, multiple observers, from EMWG members as well as other organizations, were placed in each polling station. Most observers were responsible for monitoring a specific polling center

throughout the day. They were termed “stationary observers.” A few organizations sponsored “mobile observers,” who moved from station to station.

Training: Each EMWG organization was provided funds to carry out training in standardized methodology, election procedures, observer codes of conduct, and procedures for observing and reporting on elections. There was a training of district and constituency coordinators in Dhaka and then these coordinators recruited and conducted training in the field. In general, at the national level, individual organizations shared resources and cross-trained their coordinators together.

Training at the district level, lasting from one to four days with sessions for as many as 80 observers, was generally conducted by individual organizations using EMWG guidelines and materials. Organizations had the option to add additional materials to the training program.

Deployment: The EMWG sought to coordinate the deployment of observers to achieve maximum coverage and to ensure three to five organizations were assigned to each constituency to act as a check on each other. In order to achieve these objectives, the EMWG members were given lists from the 1996 elections which included the divisions, names and numbers of constituencies, and the number of polling centers and booths. The member organizations used these lists as guidelines to make their deployment assignments, identifying specific individuals who lived in the geographic areas and were affiliated with their organizations.

These lists were shared among organizations, ensuring that at least three to five different EMWG organizations assigned individuals in each constituency. When necessary, organizations negotiated the deployment of their observers with other NGOs to prevent concentration of too many observers in one location at the expense of other places and to ensure diversity of representation at both station and constituency levels. Certain observers were designated as coordinators for each constituency, and his or her telephone and fax numbers were included. Below is a sample page from the polling center lists, with monitor assignments.

Media Coordination: The media subgroup of EMWG took up the task of producing and releasing its own press statements. The former activity required formalization of the coalition and agreement on specific information to be released. The original press conference announcing the formal inauguration of the EMWG was delayed from August 4 to August 13 as the EMWG members worked through these challenges of agreement and of confirming funding commitments from the donor community. As the election drew closer, the EMWG media sub-group learned to utilize the benefits of the press in presenting a united front as a coalition, in stressing its common goals and objectives, and in communicating important voter education messages to the public.

Advocacy: Prior to the election campaign period certain laws and practices in Bangladesh did not conform to international standards on election monitoring. The EMWG, with assistance from The Asia Foundation, advocated on behalf of the relevant changes and provided information to the international community to assist them in raising these issues, and the need for change, at the diplomatic level.

The EMWG and FEMA lobbied for significant changes in the “Guidelines for Election Observers for the 2001 Parliamentary Elections.” A seven-member delegation from EMWG met with the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government on August 8, 2001 to discuss several demands, including accreditation of observers by organization, full access to polling booths for observers, reconsideration of the regulation requiring observers to change upazilas, voting by postal ballot for observers, and recovery of illegal arms.

Specifically, the EMWG advocated to:

- Permit at least one observer per booth -- successfully implemented. There was one observer per booth for this election as opposed to one observer per station in 1996.
- Permit observers to observe the process from beginning to end, including the counting process -- successfully implemented. The 1996 guidelines did not permit observers to observe all day or observe the count.
- Permit disabled domestic observers to participate -- successfully implemented.
- Permit special needs voters to proceed to front of the queue (blind, disabled, elderly, and pregnant) -- successfully implemented.
- Permit observers to observe in their own communities to minimize cost of transport and increase ownership and quality of observation -- unsuccessful.
- Permit observers to vote by postal ballot if they could not observe in their own upazila -- unsuccessful.
- Lower minimum age for observers from 25 to 18 (voting age) -- unsuccessful.
- Facilitate early accreditation process -- unsuccessful.

Women continue to be woefully under-represented in Bangladesh’s government. To increase their representation, a coalition of women’s organizations recommended 64 seats be reserved for women-only super constituencies based on the district boundaries. (The constitutional provision for 30 reserved seats expired prior to the last election.) In addition, these groups recommended that parties nominate women candidates for at least one quarter of the constituencies. When Jimmy Carter visited in August 2001, both major parties agreed to support setting aside 64 seats for women in parliament. This measure was not fulfilled prior to the election, but is now expected to be considered by the new parliament. Furthermore, EMWG members advocated on behalf of greater commitment to representation by women.

Odhikar’s Pre-Election Assessment

To provide an additional assessment of the election campaign period by a civil society organization, The Asia Foundation, with funding from USAID, supported Odhikar in efforts to closely monitor election procedures for 15 days prior to the parliamentary elections. Odhikar, one of the oldest human rights organizations in Bangladesh, has observed elections and documented election violations in the past. It was well-placed to conduct a pre-election assessment and document the last intense weeks of the election campaign utilizing its network of local human rights organizations.

Objectives

- To recruit, train, and deploy six groups of five observers in each of the six divisions to observe the pre-election environment for 15 days.
- To collect information on the pre-election environment using the observer teams and to include it in a pre-election assessment report.
- To inform civil society organizations, the media, the Election Commission, and other interested groups about the situation.

Activities

Recruitment and Deployment: Odhikar organized the pre-election observation through its network membership with a central coordinator, six divisional coordinators, and thirty divisional observers, five from each of the six electoral divisions. The divisional observers collected data on the pre-election situation from September 12 through September 26 and reported their findings to divisional coordinators. Information was then compiled by the central coordinator.

Training: Odhikar conducted training on election monitoring for these coordinators and observers September 8 and 9 at the BRAC Training and Resource Center in Dhaka. The training covered “Laws and Practices on Election and Election Monitoring,” “Election Monitoring: Strategies for Monitors,” and “Election Monitoring: Issues and Challenges of the 8th National Parliamentary Election.” Sessions also reviewed and demonstrated how to collect information and fill out the pre-election monitoring form and reports according to the EMWG guidelines.

Reporting: Odhikar targeted 28 constituencies, many with past histories of vote rigging and buying as well as incidences of violence and intimidation. Divisional observers reported to the central coordination office regularly from the field and reports were then released for publication in daily newspapers. Reports of election-related violence were collected as well as examples of violations of election codes of conduct, the use of illegal arms, and direct vote-buying. The pre-election assessment report covered threats against minority groups as well as the lack of government protection and its inability to uphold law and order.

Press Conferences: The Pre-Election Observation Report on the pre-election assessment was released at a press conference held jointly with ANFREL on September 26 at 3:00 PM at the National Press Club. The pre-election report was widely published in most of the daily newspapers on September 27. Ekushey Television covered the pre-election assessment as well.

Impact and Analysis

The pre-assessment reports provided thorough, detailed information on pre-electoral problems, and their publication was an incentive to avoid wrongdoing. By reporting on specific events and allegations in the press, observers were able to help advocate for greater transparency and to hold candidates and their parties accountable for acts of violence and intimidation. For example, in

Khulna-2 an Odhikar assessment reported the murder of a political party worker in great detail – giving his name, age, the name of the alleged perpetrators, and details of the motives for the murder, demonstrating that it was politically motivated.

Election violations included everything from graffiti, oversized posters, and colored paper violations, to handing out large scale bribes. For instance, one candidate gave out 5000 taka (US\$100), while another provided 10 bags of cement to individual mosques. Violence appeared in many forms from campaign workers carrying knives, axes, and pistols, to mobile armed gangs, to violent clashes at party offices and on the streets. From August 19 to September 26, 127 people were reported killed and 7,729 people injured in election related violence. These observations were widely published in most daily papers and in a special report on Ekushey Television. Odhikar members, with their human rights experience, could draw on experienced social activists, journalists, and lawyers to actively and accurately collect first-hand reports as well as other accounts and allegations in order to record the events and atmosphere of the pre-election period. Odhikar observers provided a valuable and insightful scrutiny of the pre-election environment.

ELECTION MONITORING ACTIVITIES

Domestic Monitoring

A total number of 148,377 observers were mobilized through the Elections Monitoring Working Group (EMWG). Furthermore, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA) mobilized an additional 49,377 for a grand total of 197,754 observers. With the support of funds from the United States Agency for International Development, 53,359 observers of this grand total were mobilized. For accounting purposes these observers were drawn from the following organizations:

BNPS	22,041
DEMOCRACY WATCH	4,861
KHAN FOUNDATION	5,056
BANCHTE SHEKHA	1,264
MMC	1,516
RDRS	1,011
BSEHR	834
BROTEE	8,588
FEMA/MSS	5,372
ACD	1,200
SCI	<u>1,616</u>
	53,359

Based on past experience in Bangladesh and other countries in Asia, The Asia Foundation identified domestic monitoring as one of the highest priority election-related activities. During the June 1996 election, The Asia Foundation had funded the deployment of 30,000 monitors, one

per polling station. Because each polling station contains an average of three to five polling booths (often in separate rooms), observers in the 1996 election found it difficult to observe the entire process in any one booth.

For the October 2001 election, there were an estimated 150,000 polling booths. In order to achieve 100% coverage of the polling booths, The Asia Foundation supported its partners in deploying 197,754 observers. This allowed 30% of polling booths in sensitive areas to be covered by two observers, usually from two different organizations, and allowed an observer to be present at all times throughout the voting day. By using a standardized observation form and a uniform data collection system, comprehensive coverage permitted monitoring organizations to accurately assess the outcome of the election in each constituency collectively. Furthermore, the deployment strategy was designed to ensure objective observation by posting individuals from at least two organizations at each station.

This dramatic increase in the number of observers was designed to increase the visibility of civil society monitoring and the diversity of organizations with a stake in ensuring a free and fair electoral process. The use of standardized training manuals and observation forms by observers from different organizations improved the reliability of monitoring data and significantly increased public confidence in the election process and the assessment by civil society. The presence of observers throughout the country also promoted greater participation by women voters by providing a safer environment in which to vote. In Bangladesh, religious edicts and dictates from male family members and community leaders often prevent women from voting. Yet when mobilized, as seen in the 1997 local government elections where women participated both as candidates and voters in large numbers, women's voters and their active participation can have a significant impact on the outcome of the election. Reports indicate that in all 300 constituencies, not only was there a high turnout among women voters but there were many women who voted for the first time in their lives.

Data Collection System: The EMWG established a system whereby each observer at a polling booth filled out two identical copies of the observation form. One copy was to be given to the EMWG representative at the polling station, and the other copy to their organization. The next step required each of the observers to compile their individual observations into one polling station report as an aggregated count of the individual observations for each of the 26 questions on the form. The EMWG-appointed representative at the polling station was to then deliver this form (and the supplementary individual forms) to the EMWG Union Focal Point (UFP), a committee made up of at least one representative from each organization that observed in that union.

The next step was to compile all the union data into an aggregate report, then hand deliver it to the Constituency Coordinating Committee (CCC). This committee was supposed to compile the union data into constituency reports. These 300 constituency reports were then meant to be faxed to the EMWG coordinating office in Dhaka within 24 hours of the election. The hard copies of this data form and all supplementary forms were to be sent by courier to the EMWG. In Dhaka

the aggregated constituency data would be entered into the computer by a separately contracted data management firm.

Although the planned system was not followed in many locations (see full description in Data Challenges below), creating delays in aggregation and reporting, data has ultimately been cleaned and compiled successfully. There is a copy of at least one observer form for every booth from at least two organizations for every polling station nationwide that have been submitted to The Asia Foundation consistent with the number of observers funded. The coverage went as planned, with organizations in the field coordinating to cover gaps and moving excess observers to stations where they were needed. When last minute changes were required the organizations reported changes by phone and fax. After the election TAF checked observer forms to verify the number and deployment of observers by organization. Organizations deployed observers with close to 100% coverage. In addition, it was possible to directly corroborate newspaper reports of violence and poll misconduct with observer reports from the field. Many incidents in the paper were confirmed by individual observer forms from that particular polling station.

TAF Role: The Asia Foundation provided technical assistance to these organizations to assist them in making the transition from limited coverage of polling stations to coverage of each polling booth. With comprehensive coverage, the organizations were able to collect data on the election day process throughout the country and generate data that would offer a fairly complete picture of the proceeding constituency by constituency throughout the country. Technical assistance from The Asia Foundation also included guidance on the development of standardized monitoring materials and an aggregation system for the collection of the election-day data and general program and financial management oversight. To ensure that the environment allowed such visible involvement by civil society, The Asia Foundation also assisted its partners in continuing efforts to advocate for more transparent procedures for monitors.

EMWG Leadership and Reporting: Although there were significant differences among coalition members, the EMWG committed itself to consensus-based decision making and a rotating leadership with support from both TAF and non-TAF members. Despite their diverse opinions and individual perspectives this group spoke with a unified voice. Their unity was effective when advocating for changes in the election guidelines and later when observers needed to be accredited for election day observation. It was critical to the democratic process in Bangladesh that a civil society monitoring coalition be able to declare unanimously and confidently, based on direct nationwide observation, that the elections were free and fair. In contrast to the expectations of widespread violence on election day, this was one of the most peaceful elections ever held in Bangladesh. The one new ingredient that helped to create a peaceful environment was the overwhelming number of domestic monitors.

This approach represented a dramatic shift for civil society organizations in the planning and implementation of election day monitoring. It required monitoring organizations to become more cost-effective on a per monitor basis while at the same time dramatically increasing the number of monitors. It was an opportunity for the monitoring organizations to respond to a changing democratic climate that requires greater civil society involvement in the electoral

process. This approach also represented a scaling up of activities for the participating organizations to achieve broader ownership and objectivity and thus greater public confidence in the monitoring process.

International Observation

To help promote a free and fair election process, the international community was asked by both the ruling party and the opposition to provide international monitors on election day. International election observers have become an essential element for assuring the credibility of election results in transitional democracies. While domestic monitors play a more important role over the long run, international observers can offer critical support to the consolidation of democracy at key stages. They can help discourage violations of the election process because international observers as opposed to domestic monitors are less subject to intimidation or coercion. Effective scrutiny by international observers can inhibit cheating and deter intimidation, and also provide confidence to voters that they can safely and secretly cast their ballot.

International observers offer a different type of visibility. Their presence is particularly important in transitional democracies because it offers regional and international endorsement and accountability of the democratic process in country. International observation can also provide endorsement of international standards of electoral process that might otherwise be ignored or rejected by local governments. In response to the request for international observers by the government and opposition, The Asia Foundation supported the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) observation mission with funding from USAID.

The Asia Foundation chose to support ANFREL election observers in order to add a needed Asian perspective to the international observation teams. The addition of a primarily Asian group of observers increased the substantive value of the international observation effort by offering a regional endorsement of the democratic process in Bangladesh. ANFREL has observed elections throughout South and South East Asia and its observers have a greater appreciation for the challenges and realities of organizing and running an election in this part of the world. These observers are also free from the donor-beneficiary relationship that exists when representatives from Western countries participate in election observation in developing countries. ANFREL's 22 observers were drawn from their network of journalists, human rights activists, and election experts from 12 countries.¹

ANFREL observation missions are conducted in cooperation with local partners in the country where an election is held. These partners provide transportation and logistical support, as well as staff who team up with the international observers on election day. In turn, ANFREL provides training and capacity building to its local partner in election observation. In Bangladesh, ANFREL's local partner is Odhikar, a network of organizations who support human rights. For

¹ These countries were Nepal, India, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Japan, Indonesia, Cambodia, South Korea, Sweden, USA and Malaysia.

this election period ANFREL provided technical assistance including training of Odhikar observers and assistance in project implementation. This was a very successful collaborative effort that enabled primarily Asian observers to monitor the election and that increased the overall capacity of Odhikar to observe and conduct election monitoring.

Objectives: The objectives of the international monitoring effort were:

- To help promote free and fair elections through the presence of international observers.
- To support the participation of Asian election observers to demonstrate Asia's endorsement of free and fair elections in Bangladesh.
- To strengthen the capacity of ANFREL's local partner, Odhikar, through the provision of technical assistance on election monitoring and reporting.
- To field a 25 member team of primarily Asian observers to monitor election-day activities in 28 constituencies of Bangladesh.
- To recruit, train, and deploy 280 mobile volunteers in 28 constituencies on election day in conjunction with the international observers.
- To issue a post-election statement and summary of election-day events at a press conference on October 2.
- To prepare a final report for distribution to the Election Commission, political parties, civil society, the media, the international community, and other stakeholders.

Training and Capacity Building: ANFREL conducted a three day election day monitoring and human rights observation training in Dhaka with 35 young lawyers and professionals who work with Odhikar. A second training was held for 210 university and graduate students who met the age requirement to introduce them to basic techniques of election observation. A third district-level training for 45 Odhikar election observers was also conducted. The training focussed on human rights and the election monitoring process using guidelines from the EMWG. By working as partners ANFREL offered Odhikar a regional perspective and the experience of several recent elections in South Asia. Odhikar acquired valuable election monitoring experience and expertise for the future as a result of their collaborative efforts with ANFREL.

Observation: In coordination with the United Nations Electoral Assistance Secretariat (UNEAS), ANFREL partnered with TAF and Odhikar to deploy 27 international observers from 17 countries to monitor the elections. From September 25 to October 3, ANFREL observation missions observed in 28 sensitive constituencies and approximately 250 polling centers throughout the country. Along with the 27 observers, on election day Odhikar deployed another 280 semi-mobile and stationary observers who worked with the international observers translating, observing, and monitoring the election process in these sensitive constituencies.

Post-Election Report: On both October 1 and 2, 2001, ANFREL and its partner Odhikar issued an election day assessment to the press. This statement declared that despite pre-election violence and a few voting irregularities and obstructions in some polling centers on election day, voters were free to cast their ballots for the candidates of their choice. At the press conference ANFREL mentioned several particular acts of violence including attempts to intimidate voters,

acts of ballot- and ballot box-snatching, as well as a few administrative irregularities with polling officers and party agents. Overall, however, ANFREL and Odhikar observers declared the elections free and fair.

The Odhikar report on election-related killings and injuries showed that the pre-election period was much more violent than the same period in 1996. In the last week before the election there were more than 2,000 reports of election-related killings and injuries. Clearly, there was a significant increase in the polarization of voters and a diminished tolerance for different political opinions. The response of the caretaker government to deploy the army to sensitive areas was effective and provided a measure of safety the week before the election and particularly gave greater security for voting on election day itself. The people of Bangladesh seemed determined to vote and turned out in huge numbers to choose their next parliamentary leaders. ANFREL's international observers were impressed by the remarkable enthusiasm of the voting public, particularly women, who waited in long lines to cast their vote.

ANFREL noted that there were some technical problems in the arrangement and the setting up of polling centers in terms of security, order, and voting secrecy; however, polling officers did their best to ensure these vital elements. The Awami League and BNP party agents outside most polling stations to assist voters in locating their assigned station and voter identification number, while set up at a legal distance, seemed to ANFREL observers to be overwhelming and occasionally threatened to undermine voter's freedom of choice.

On election day there were some minor lapses and technical inconsistencies over activities such as the application of indelible ink or the verification of a voter's identity but the integrity of the overall voting process was upheld. The international observers noted throughout that key procedures were actively and dutifully followed by most polling officers.

Impact and Analysis: According to ANFREL's report, observers and voters alike noted that the presence of foreign and domestic observers significantly strengthened voter's confidence in the integrity, transparency, and fairness of the polls. Despite heavy pre-election intimidation and violence, voters, both women and men, turned out in very large numbers to participate in the elections. Even with long lines and some irregularities people were able to cast their vote. For the most part representatives of civil society, particularly domestic observers and Bangladeshi journalists, were welcome and able to perform their duties independently and safely. The coordination and cooperation among international and domestic observers was particularly effective in strengthening voter's confidence in the integrity of the election process. The judicious presence of the army and the efforts of election civil servants to maintain law and order also contributed to the almost festive, and in general, peaceful atmosphere at most polling centers.

ANFREL, working in partnership with Odhikar, focussed on the vote count, tabulation, and addressing of serious complaints of fraud and irregularity, all of which were critical to voluntary and peaceful acceptance of election results. The international and domestic observers found that counting and tabulation were conducted properly with only minor lapses. *Like the domestic*

observers, ANFREL monitors observed that in almost all polling centers nationwide, a very small number experienced irregularities that affected the outcome. ANFREL reported satisfaction with the response of the Electoral Enquiry Committee, which investigated reports of the violence and irregularities that caused severe disruptions in 90 polling centers in 16 constituencies and subsequently ordered re-polling in these areas. ANFREL observers commented that because the elections were so widely and clearly declared to be free and fair by the Election Commission, the international community, and civil society, the opposition party was eventually forced to accept the results despite initial threats to call for strikes and agitation.

ANFREL observers noted a widespread sense of optimism that Bangladesh had reached a new level of political maturity. The October 1 elections were much more peaceful than expected. At the post election press conference on October 2, ANFREL declared that the elections were free and fair, endorsing the electoral process conducted by the caretaker government. In particular, ANFREL urged the international community to congratulate Bangladesh for holding peaceful elections that met international standards.

TAF supported International Observers who were deployed throughout the country alongside domestic monitors, providing a regional and international endorsement based on international election standards. The ANFREL team gave Bangladesh much-needed positive affirmation for its parliamentary elections as well as a strong endorsement for passing this critical step in the democratic process. The partnership of international and domestic observers was particularly effective in strengthening voter confidence in the integrity of the election process and contributed to high voter turnout.

OTHER COMPLEMENTARY ELECTION ACTIVITIES

In addition to the above USAID funded activities, other complementary election activities were supported by other donors in Bangladesh. Briefly, these included the following programs:

- Voter verification guides, leaflets, and posters
- Women parliamentary candidate training and advocacy program
- “Women and Elections 2001” TV program
- Candidate and garment worker dialogues
- Election reporting training for newspaper gatekeepers – e.g., owners, editors, and senior journalists
- Journalist election reporting training
- Long-term FEMA election monitoring
- Long-term journalist election monitoring
- Coordination with other election monitoring efforts
- Coordination and training of an additional 100,000 domestic monitors

ELECTION CHALLENGES

Advocacy Challenges

While the outcome of advocacy campaigns is less certain than that of other forms of civil society participation, they have the potential to produce large improvements in the electoral process with minimal resources. Although advocacy is relevant at any time, historically the ascension of a caretaker government has provided a window of opportunity for making significant changes in election policy. The EMWG and other civil society groups as well as representatives from the international community were prepared for and took advantage of this opportunity.

Prior to the election campaign period certain laws and practices in Bangladesh did not conform to international standards on election monitoring. The Asia Foundation assisted the EMWG and its partners to advocate for the relevant changes as well as provided information to the international community to assist them in raising these issues, and the need for change, at the diplomatic level.

Working together, diverse segments of civil society and the international community played important roles as advocates. On the domestic side, the EMWG and FEMA lobbied for significant changes in the "Guidelines for Election Observers for the 2001 Parliamentary Elections." The international pressure for fair elections came from human rights and democracy groups as well as on a more formal level. Ambassadors and other representatives of the international community in Bangladesh met regularly to develop a common voice on election issues and a cooperative relationship on joint efforts to ensure consolidation in promoting free and fair elections. Former President Carter's visit in August helped facilitate broad support, especially government support, for 100% nationwide coverage by domestic observers.

Civil society groups through the EMWG with support from TAF advocated to:

- Permit at least one observer per booth -- successfully implemented. There was one observer per booth for this election as opposed to one observer per station in 1996.
- Permit observers to observe the process from beginning to end, including the counting process -- successfully implemented. The 1996 guidelines did not permit observers to observe all day or observe the count.
- Permit disabled persons to participate as domestic observers -- successfully implemented.
- Permit disabled or special needs voters to proceed to front of the queue (blind, physically disabled, elderly, and pregnant) -- successfully implemented.

- Permit observers to observe in their own communities to *minimize cost of transport and increase ownership and quality of observation* -- unsuccessful.
- Permit observers to vote by postal ballot if they could not observe in their own thana -- unsuccessful.
- Lower minimum age for observers from 25 to 18 (voting age) -- unsuccessful.
- Facilitate early accreditation process -- unsuccessful.

In support of disabled domestic observers, TAF funded Action on Disability and Development (ADD) to become a member of the EMWG as a full and equal participant in the meetings. ADD served on two key subcommittees of the *monitoring group*; the subgroup that drafted the observation manual and forms to be used by all members of the alliance and the subgroup that dealt with outreach to the media.

As a member of the material subgroup developing the observation manual and form, ADD *recommended that specific questions be added to the observation form for use by all domestic election observers.* These additional questions helped raise awareness of disadvantaged voters. Question 12 of the observer form asked if aged persons, pregnant women, or disabled individuals got preference in the voting line. Question 13 asked if blind or disabled persons were able to select their own assistants to help them vote.

There was also a question allowing observers to note the voting conditions for religious and ethnic minorities. This was added under Additional Questions (#26) on the form. There was considerable discussion by the EMWG about where to put this item, and even whether to include it or not. The compromise was to place the item at the bottom of the form under Additional Questions.

Women continue to be woefully under-represented in Bangladesh's government. To increase their representation, a coalition of women's organizations recommended 64 seats be reserved for women-only super constituencies based on the district boundaries. (The constitutional provision for 30 reserved seats expired prior to the last election.) In addition, these groups recommended that parties nominate women candidates for at least one quarter of the constituencies. When Jimmy Carter visited in August 2001, both major parties agreed to support setting aside 64 seats for women in parliament. This measure was not fulfilled prior to the election, but is now expected to be considered by the new parliament. Additionally, EMWG members ensured focus on the women voter turnout. Question 11 of the observer form asked observers to note if women were able to cast their vote without fear or pressure.

During the pre-election campaign period, various voter education programs and other election related activities such as the slogan contest, posters, women candidate training, and the garment workers project, emphasized the message that it is appropriate and beneficial to have women in

government. These messages focused on how women can be effective leaders, that the participation of women in government is essential for good governance, and that women should participate in the elections by voting and by running for office.

Contextual Challenges

Certain challenges exist in the voting environment in many areas throughout Bangladesh. Some of these include:

- Risk of increased violence and intimidation
- Possibility of decreased women's participation due to pre-election violence
- Regulatory constraints including public transport and cell phone use

The EMWG Observation Report of September 26 stated that through September 18 the pre-election period had been more violent than the same period of the 1996 election. The increase in violence was attributed to greater polarization of the electorate and a sharply diminished tolerance for differing political opinion. The ready availability of illegal arms also heavily contributed to the unprecedented level of violence in the pre-election period. The increased level of violence was clearly seen in the greater number of injured and killed throughout the country. Through the last day of September, the final day before the election, there were 408 political acts of violence including strikes, clashes, hijackings, abductions, and bomb blasts. There were 5,413 people reported injured and 97 dead as a result of the political violence. The violence was clearly much worse in some districts than in others, though the overall number of killings was spread fairly evenly between major parties.

Regulatory constraints on civil society activities included the banning of public transportation on election day. Only a few private cars and other vehicles clearly marked as election observers were allowed on the road. This was ordered to prevent the movement of thugs who would attempt to threaten potential voters, but it also made voting virtually impossible for anyone who did not live within walking distance of his or her designated polling center. Because observers were required to monitor outside their own upazilas, this ban on transportation created difficulties for them, especially for women, who ordinarily find travel over long distances in Bangladesh more troublesome than do their male counterparts anyway. One way to address this problem was to mobilize observers a day or two prior to election day, but this solution required the payment of lodging costs and per diem, which was prohibitive in most cases. Furthermore, the ban on public transportation in combination with the requirement that observers monitor outside their own upazilas meant that observers were not able to vote themselves in many cases.

A second regulatory constraint was the shutting off of all cell phones on election day. This was an attempt to keep political thugs from exchanging information and planning violent acts, but it also prevented observers, reporters, and others from communicating effectively. Although deterring violence was of course a legitimate concern, this order represented a non-democratic, authoritarian solution which served to hinder more democratic means to address the causes of violence and perhaps even disguise the real causes themselves. As a result, it is impossible to

know if the presence of large numbers of observers in a truly open environment would have had the same or even greater effect in deterring violence on election day. It can be said, however, that such coverage by domestic observers was a new element on the least violent election day that the country has ever experienced.

Media Challenges

It is often difficult to get objective, unbiased, well-informed political reporting in Bangladeshi newspapers or on TV, especially during an election period. The political connections of media owners often result in less than fair and balanced election reporting. Historically, election coverage in Bangladesh has concentrated on one-sided statements, opinions, views, and the actions of political parties and only sometimes on political violence. Well-balanced, carefully researched election reporting for all candidates and parties is not yet a reality. Providing information to the media and getting meaningful messages out remain a challenge.

The media subgroup of EMWG took a long time to begin producing and releasing its own press statements. The original press conference, announcing the formal inauguration of the EMWG and set for August 4, was delayed and then finally held August 13. Part of the problem was the process of understanding and formalizing their role as a coalition as well as overcoming constraints such as reaching agreement on specific information to be released by all 29 organizations. The final challenge was getting confirmation of their funding commitments from the donor community. Earlier funding commitments would have allowed time to work through many of these challenges. Eventually the EMWG learned to take advantage of the press, to stress common goals and objectives, and to send important voter education messages through this media. EMWG could have used the press earlier but it finally learned important lessons for cooperating and presenting a united front as a newly organized coalition.

Accreditation Challenges

All of the members of the EMWG, FEMA, and other election observation organizations experienced problems ensuring that their observers were officially accredited by the Election Commission. Even though the leaders of the political parties publicly stated their support for non-partisan observation, and the election laws were specifically amended to allow the presence of observers during both the polling and the counting processes, an effective or consistent accreditation process was never developed.

In early August TAF suggested to the EC that they accredit organizations, and then allow those organizations to provide a specified number of accreditation cards directly to their observers. Another suggestion was for each organization to print and fill in the cards, and then send them to the Election Commission (at the district or constituency level) for a validation stamp.

Accreditation issues were difficult to handle and there was a great deal of pressure on the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) to meet this challenge. Initially both the BNP and AL objected to domestic observers inside polling centers and later objected to accrediting particular observer

groups within the EMWG. The EC also continued to get requests to observe from groups outside the EMWG. Just a few weeks before the election most deputy commissioners (DCs) insisted on additional identification information in order to deny accreditation to political rivals. The size of ID photo, for example, was used as an excuse to deny ID cards to observer groups. In many districts, accreditation reviews were left to the last minute to avoid issuing ID cards.

The original requirements imposed on election observation organizations by the Election Commission (i.e., organization's registration information, income source, governing body/executive/board of directors and name, address, date of birth, father's/husband's name, two stamp-sized photos and prior election observation experience, if any) were all met by the EMWG's members. Unfortunately, many DCs decided the official rules were not restrictive enough, and imposed their own independent standards for accreditation. Some examples of these ad hoc standards include:

- On September 22, a DC asked observers to submit a bank statement before they could receive accreditation. When that was submitted it was refused, and he instead asked for a letter of financial support from the funding organization. When questioned, he would not reveal the reason for his refusal to grant any accreditation cards.
- In one district the DC refused to accredit any observers because he said the area was sensitive or vulnerable, precisely the sort of area most in need of observers.
- In one area the DC said he would not accredit any mobile observers, only stationary observers could be accredited. This is noteworthy because the particular organization of the EMWG reporting this was only providing mobile observers.
- The DC in one area agreed to accredit only 10% of the observers who applied from one organization.
- The DC in another area refused all of the applications from one organization, while he required another's observers to get clearance from the Special Branch of police.
- The DC in one district required all observers to have police verification, and the officials concerned were expecting bribes to issue clearance certificates.
- An Assistant DC agreed to accredit only seven of the 211 observers (3.3%) submitted by one organization. No reason for the denial of others was given.
- In a violent district 80 observers from one organization applied for accreditation, but none were approved. No reason for the denial was given.
- One DC required all observers to go to his office for an interview on September 24 at 10:00 AM. The observers were asked to bring Secondary School certificates, and other documents proving citizenship, age, and education.
- In three other districts the DC said all observers must come for an interview at the DC office.
- In one place the Magistrate decided to allow a maximum of three observers per polling center. When questioned he denied ever receiving any written directives from the EC on accreditation of observers. He claimed the selection criteria of observers were completely at the discretion of the DC and Returning Officer.

The additional information required by some DCs was superfluous, costly, and time-consuming to obtain, and far exceeded documentation requirements for international observers. A

delegation from The Asia Foundation met with the Chief Election Commissioner on several occasions throughout the pre-election period to discuss the problems associated with accreditation at the district level. At one particular meeting on September 24, 2001, the delegation learned that although 250,000 accreditation cards had been printed, only 100,000 had actually been distributed to the districts, so even if the DCs had wanted to accredit all observers, they would not have had sufficient cards to do so. At that time, TAF and the EMWG urged the Chief Election Commissioner to issue a formal statement to all DCs and other officials clearly stating that all EMWG organizations have met the original requirement and should have all of their observers approved without delay.

To help solve this serious problem TAF suggested to the Chief Election Commissioner that the remaining cards be delivered directly from the Election Commission in Dhaka to the EMWG members for distribution through their own networks. Finally, the CEC agreed to this proposal. For the next week TAF and EMWG volunteers went daily to the Election Commission to assist in applying the official validation stamp to each of the 150,000 cards for distribution before the election. Furthermore, the EC ordered the printing of additional cards to ensure the provision of the total number of approximately 200,000 required.

This approach of distributing a select number of accreditation cards to government-approved organizations for distribution to their staff and local representatives is not uncommon. In the end the Chief Election Commissioner's willingness to issue the ID cards in spite of all the delays and attempts in the field to sabotage the effort, allowed all 29 organizations to receive ID cards for their observers. This decision was taken just a week before the election, making it difficult to distribute the cards on a timely basis. However, all organizations received their designated cards and worked hard to get their allocated number to each individual observer throughout the country.

Organizational Challenges

Most of the election monitoring organizations in Bangladesh were formed as coalitions of NGOs. In the past these coalitions have usually acted as separate organizations, independently building capacity to recruit, train, and deploy election observers. Rather than build new capacity specifically for elections, the Foundation actively encouraged these NGOs and coalitions to cooperate in order to effectively utilize their existing capacity, lower the overall cost of election monitoring, and increase the number of observers deployed. Specifically TAF worked with the EMWG to:

- Increase coordination and cooperation for greater coverage, minimal duplication and maximum public confidence.
- Insist on direct involvement of member organizations in monitoring to increase ownership and accountability of the civil society effort
- Balance the concern of objectivity of individual monitoring organizations.
- Demonstrate a new model which increases the capacity of organizations to scale-up programming and budgeting for maximum efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability.

- Break down the resistance to change and the preference to conduct “business as usual.”

In a transitional democracy like Bangladesh, one critical concern regards the “neutrality,” or more accurately, the political bias, of domestic observers. For some, the underlying assumption is that individuals must be neutral – or “apolitical.” During the 2001 elections, the Foundation assumed instead that while it would not be possible to find observers who were truly unbiased, it would be possible to obtain monitors who represented the entire range of *political opinion and/or* agreed to act in non-partisan cooperation, and thus achieve balance and fairness. Therefore, TAF sought to open the observation process to be as inclusive of the complete variety of *political opinions as possible*.

Where the Election Commission and regulations in Bangladesh sought to limit observation -- because of worries about interference or bias -- the EMWG strove to open the process, believing that limiting the representation of interests through domestic monitors would ironically increase the potential for bias. As a result, the EMWG deliberately drew election day observers from a wide spectrum of organizations and coalitions, thereby demonstrating real inclusiveness. The EMWG directly met the organizational challenge to provide diversity and balance in election day monitoring. Furthermore, the deployment strategy was designed to ensure the presence of a minimum of two different organizations at each polling station.

The objectives of the Foundation’s program as well as the EMWG was to maximize inclusiveness, while still ensuring some degree of accountability. First, all observers had to be representatives of an NGO or other officially registered organization. Second, all organizations supported by TAF had to have been approved by the NGO Affairs Bureau to receive foreign funds in support of a precise number of observers. Third, all organizations had to be issued accreditation cards for this precise number of observers. Fourth, organizations could only recruit individuals who fulfilled certain criteria, such as being 25 years or older, having completed a secondary school certificate, agreeing to a code of conduct, and observing in an adjacent upazila, as specified by the Election Commission.

Data Challenges

The actual reporting process was different from the planned model in approximately two-thirds of the constituencies. The structural network was not followed so that data could be aggregated at each stage, sending a collated summary at the final level to the central EMWG office. The reasons for this discrepancy from the planned procedure were primarily a tendency by participating organizations to prioritize individual organization reporting over aggregated reporting, and the decision by the EMWG to eliminate the involvement of the constituency coordinating committees from direct involvement in the aggregation process. Other issues included the increased number of polling stations at each center; the difficulty observers had in identifying each other because of problems with accreditation cards, masses of people, being stationed in unfamiliar areas, and not knowing where to meet afterward; the varying challenges observers faced at polling centers, such as time limits within booths, denial of access to certain

places, and rotation from booth to booth; and the limits placed on transport to allow for transferring of data to the next higher meeting site, among others.

As a result, literally thousands of individual observer forms were faxed to the central office, bypassing lower levels of reporting. By the end of election day, the EMWG office was inundated with faxes of individual observer forms. While efforts were made to get participating organizations to go back to the originally conceived system and work together to prepare aggregated data for each level, this proved nearly impossible at that point. As a compromise, each organization worked to prepare aggregated data for their organization for each of these levels.

The Asia Foundation together with the data management firm worked to clean, check, and aggregate this data. Ultimately TAF successfully collected all observer forms from EMWG member organizations within a short period. Foundation staff checked the forms, made necessary corrections, completed the data entry, and compiled the final data. It was a very difficult, time-consuming job that demanded a detailed and rigorous checking procedure. Having realized through this experience why joint, coordinated aggregation was so important, EMWG organizations focused their attention after the election to preparing their aggregated data so that results could be tabulated, analyzed, and reported. This process to aggregate the data was performed with the technical assistance of The Asia Foundation. In order to clearly document the model, TAF disaggregated the data into the various levels from constituency down to union level so that a template for data collection and aggregation will exist for future elections.

It should be noted, however, that on election day, 20 out of the 64 districts nationwide (almost one third) followed the original implementation system as outlined by the EMWG and submitted the observer forms through the coordinating committees as well as their individual organizations. In eight of these 20 districts, Foundation staff, while making site visits, met with representatives from all participating observer groups at the district level to reiterate the reporting system. These particular districts, along with others, followed the original implementation system. Because organizations saw both kinds of reporting and aggregation in the field and the results, there is an incentive for the future to use the coordinating committees so that observer results can be reported quickly on election day.

Election Results

Comprehensive election day monitoring was an enormous and complex undertaking. It was an important achievement that, for the first time ever, such a diverse group of civil society organizations came together as the EMWG to meet this election day challenge. That this coalition successfully deployed 197,754 observers (104,977 directly funded by TAF; with 53,359 funded by USAID) in an extremely short period of time is remarkable.

Out of the 104,977 observers directly funded by The Asia Foundation, 96,344 were stationary observers. From these 96,344 stationary observers, 80,948 observation forms were received. In some locations, organizations deployed observer pairs for each center and submitted only one

form per pair. These observers reported in 3,974 of the 4,484 unions, i.e., 89% of all the unions. In addition to the EMWG observers, 49,377 additional stationary observers were deployed for a total of 145,721 stationary observers, aiming for not only 100% national coverage, but at least overlapping coverage in 30% of polling centers in sensitive areas. An additional 52,033 volunteers were mobilized on election day, and included additional stationary observers who monitored in pairs, mobile monitors, district coordinators, constituency coordinators, union coordinators, and backup observers.

Out of the 80,948 observations deployed by EMWG, there were only 719 reports that assessed the overall election as having irregularities sufficient to alter the election results. These “failed reports” were scattered over 132 constituencies and 262 unions. Of these 262 unions, the irregularities were only sufficient to produce a failed score at the union level in 32 unions, taking into account the observations of any one monitoring organization. Out of these 32 “troubled unions” only seven received an overall failed score by all monitoring organizations observing together in that union. 25 of these 32 unions had re-polling carried out by the government. Out of the 300 constituencies, all achieved a passing score. In other words, no seat in Parliament was perceived to be threatened by the relatively small number of irregularities that were observed nationwide (no matter how serious), and therefore these irregularities would not have been sufficient to alter the results in any constituency.

The 29-member working group developed a structure for national and local election operations, a methodology for recruitment, training, observation, and data aggregation and collection, and a successful deployment strategy. Although there were significant differences among coalition members, the EMWG committed itself to consensus-based decision making and a rotating leadership with support from both TAF and non-TAF members. Despite their diverse opinions and individual perspectives this group spoke with a unified voice. Their unity was effective when advocating for changes in the election guidelines and later when observers needed to be accredited for election day observation. It was critical to the democratic process in Bangladesh that a civil society monitoring coalition be able to declare unanimously and confidently, based on direct nationwide observation, that the elections were free and fair. In contrast to the expectations of widespread violence on election day, this was one of the most peaceful elections ever held in Bangladesh. The one new ingredient that helped to create a peaceful environment was the overwhelming number of domestic monitors.

POST-ELECTION ACTIVITIES

Re-Polling, By-Elections, and Polling in Postponed Constituencies

Re-polling was held on October 8, 2001 in 90 polling centers of 16 constituencies. Because of excessive violence, terrorism, and vote rigging, voting in these constituencies was postponed one week. The following TAF grantee organizations observed the re-polling: Brotee, Service Civil International (SCI), Bangladesh Nari Progoti Shangha (BNPS), Democracywatch, Khan Foundation, Bangladesh Human Rights Commission (BHRC), National Election Observation Council (NEOC) and Mass-line Media Center (MMC). In addition to observers, the government

took special security measures that also helped to make the elections in these 16 constituencies peaceful and successful.

By-elections were held in two constituencies, Moulvibazar and Manikgonj, on November 12, 2001. The organizations who observed these bi-elections were SCI, NEOC, BHRC, and Brotee. These elections were held peacefully as well.

Because one of the leading political party (BNP) candidates died just before the election in Cox's Bazaar, the election there was postponed until November 1, 2001. Organizations who observed this election were Brotee, NEOC, and BHRC. Foundation staff also observed the Cox's Bazaar election, which went very well.

Election Follow-Up Meeting for all TAF Partners

Organized by The Asia Foundation, an election follow-up meeting was held on October 23rd, 2001 for all TAF partners to discuss post election activities, report submission, observer form delivery, election experiences, and the next plan of action for grantee organizations.

Publications

The final report, along with extensive tables of data, of the 29-member Election Monitoring Working Group has been published professionally. This publication, *Election Day 2001: Nationwide Observation*, will serve as a useful tool in analyzing the environment on election day and the results of the process. Furthermore, a second publication, called *A Guide to Organizing Election Observation in Bangladesh*, has been published. This document presents recommendations and suggestions for organizing a Working Group for future elections and is based on lessons learned and conclusions drawn from the 2001 EMWG experiences. In addition, the TAF Final Report, *Towards a Stronger Democracy: A Comprehensive 2001 Elections Program*, summarizing the achievements of all election 2001 activities, together with photographs and artwork, has been published professionally to serve as a record of the extensive variety of projects which helped to make Bangladesh's 8th National Parliamentary Elections a success.

CONCLUSION

The Asia Foundation and its partners made a significant and positive impact on the 2001 parliamentary elections. TAF-supported NGO activities helped deter violence, increase public confidence in the overall election process, and encourage large numbers of voters to directly take responsibility for ensuring free and fair elections. The Foundation's election program nurtured and emphasized nine democratic principles of an election as its NGO partners developed and carried out their activities:

- A strong democracy must have citizens who are fully aware of their rights as well as their responsibilities as voters.

- Targeted communication campaigns can rally citizens to take action and make changes that strengthen the democratic process.
- Women's political participation as voters and as candidates is critical to the growth and expansion of democracy.
- Parties and candidates need to conduct issue-based campaigning which invites performance-based assessments of public service.
- The media as well as political candidates need to focus on problems and solutions using in-depth analysis and reporting rather than relying on politically based information gathering, reporting, and decision making.
- Environmental monitoring and civil society groups can and should act as watchdogs for the broader society.
- The overall democratic electoral process in Bangladesh as well as its underlying commitment to democracy needs to be affirmed and encouraged by the international community.
- Bangladesh needs to ensure broad and inclusive citizen ownership of the elections in which voters themselves preserve and protect Bangladesh's right to hold free and fair elections.
- The Election Commission must be completely independent to serve people's constitutionally guaranteed right to free and fair elections.

The TAF 2001 elections program offered a comprehensive, diverse, and innovative approach to help Bangladesh successfully meet the challenge of open, transparent, and peaceful elections. Through the recent election process TAF's partner organizations have learned valuable lessons about the effectiveness of projects like the mass communication campaigns, the empowerment which comes with direct candidate-constituent dialogues, and the vital contribution that domestic monitors can make. These achievements demonstrate new progress toward strengthening Bangladesh's young democracy, which go beyond previous elections that focussed on voter education and mechanisms of voting. The 2001 initiatives represent a shift to greater ownership by diverse civil society organizations, greater citizen-candidate interactions, more issue-based campaigning, and higher standards of accountability for candidates and political parties.