

USAID / BANGLADESH: ELECTIONS SUMMARY

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Ten years after emerging from military rule, Bangladesh is in a period of transition in which its many formal structures of democracy, including political parties, regular elections, and a parliamentary form of government, function in an undemocratic manner, with limited transparency, accountability, and openness to public input. While citizens can expect elections to be relatively regular, they are not necessarily fair, and elected representatives do not always govern in the interests of the people who elect them.



Domestic observers monitoring an election.

National and local elections in Bangladesh have been marred by politically motivated violence and intimidation prior to, during, and following the polls. With increasing acrimony of the public political dialogue, there is increasing civil society concern about the danger of more violent clashes between and among political parties in the coming parliamentary elections, which must be held by mid-October 2001, than in recent relatively fair general elections. A series of politically motivated murders this year reinforces this concern. The two main parties have shown no willingness to compromise on important national issues, and

refusal by the losing party to accept election results has the potential to seriously destabilize the country.

PROGRAM RATIONALE

The next elections are critically important for the institutionalization of democracy in Bangladesh; generating public support for the next government will depend on whether or not the elections are credible, irrespective of which party wins the majority of parliamentary seats. Supporting an open and transparent election process in which results are considered fair and acceptable to both winners and losers is an important U.S. foreign policy objective in Bangladesh. It is a high priority for the USAID Democracy and Governance Team and the U.S. Embassy in Bangladesh between now and the next parliamentary election.

PROGRAM STRATEGY

To help ensure the credibility of the next parliamentary elections, USAID is focusing its support on monitoring of the election process from the voter registration period through the consolidation of election day results and the sitting of the next Parliament. In addition, some resources have been devoted to an election assessment, voter education, and public opinion polling.

USAID support for free and fair parliamentary elections in 2001 specifically includes:

1) domestic election monitoring and voter education coordination

USAID is supporting the Asia Foundation for organizational and grant support to Bangladeshi civil society organizations for domestic elections monitoring and voter education. First, an expanded monitoring network will coordinate monitoring activities and ensure broad national coverage using standardized monitoring techniques, and a single reporting framework will aggregate the reports of election monitors throughout the election season. Second, locally recruited international observers will support and reinforce the efforts of local monitors and provide independent assessments of conditions in all six divisions of Bangladesh during the weeks leading up to election day, when the risk of voter intimidation is greatest. Third, this program includes modest funds for voter education to build the public's commitment to the election process by providing blanket coverage of a limited number of specific messages broadcast over various media outlets. To this end, the Voter Education Clearinghouse will bring together the country's leading voter education organizations and encourage them to maximize the benefits of voter information activities by identifying a limited number of strategic voter messages throughout the pre-election period.

2) political party poll-watchers and international election observers

USAID election support also goes to the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to identify challenges to a transparent and fair electoral process, and recommend ways to enhance the process; conduct pre-election, election day, and post-election international observation missions; and train domestic party pollwatchers. NDI will work closely with local civil society organizations encouraging them to design and implement advocacy strategies to improve the electoral process.

3) election readiness assessment

USAID has supported the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) to assess preparations for parliamentary elections in cooperation with the Election Commission. The assessment, currently in final draft form, will advise donors, particularly the U.S. Embassy and USAID, about appropriate election-related strategies that donors could implement to best ensure that the next general elections are free and credible and perceived as such by both winners and losers. It will also provide a basis for understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the electoral system in Bangladesh and recommend reform measures which could increase the transparency of the electoral process. Finally, it will advise international donors, the Election Commission, political parties, domestic NGOs, media groups, and independent researchers on elements of the electoral process which are most susceptible to fraud and which should therefore be closely monitored.

4) public opinion survey of voter attitudes

USAID also has extended support to IFES for its pre-election program of public-opinion polling on issues of importance to voters. The scientific random sample survey will measure public opinion on major political and social issues that could be a part of the political dialogue leading up to the parliamentary elections in 2001, thus providing a base of information which would allow political parties to respond to issues important to the people during and after the election cycle. The survey will identify priorities of the general public for government action, probe public attitudes toward key government/political institutions and political processes, and examine public attitudes toward major policy reforms frequently discussed in the press (e.g., local government reform). The survey may measure some very sensitive issues, such as attitudes toward the political impasse at the national level, political party responsiveness, the military, changes in tenure of government, hartals as a means of political expression, women as elected members of government/decision-makers, etc. In addition, the survey will measure the

credibility of various elements of the governmental and non-government structure (i.e. parliament, civil service, local government, electoral system, police, judges, civil society, etc.) and confidence in the police and justice system in protecting human rights.

ASSESSMENT

Although the challenges involved with supporting an open and transparent election process in a politically charged and acrimonious environment are great, the US Mission is committed to playing a positive role in the institutionalization or further consolidation of democracy in Bangladesh.

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