



Quarterly Report
BANGLADESH: Strengthening Cooperation Between Political Parties in Parliament
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I. SUMMARY

Following popular protests against the military government, Bangladeshis re-established democratic elections in their country in 1991. Since then, they have taken significant steps toward strengthening their country's governing institutions. Democratic advances have been impeded by a lack of institutional mechanisms that encourage citizen input in the legislative process, a low level of confidence in election processes, and frequent and problematic *hartals* (strikes) and incidents of street violence.

Since June 1999, NDI has worked with political parties and civic society organizations (CSOs) to increase citizen involvement in the legislative process and to increase cooperation between political parties. This quarter, NDI played an active role in addressing the objectives set out in this grant by: 1) taking steps to increase citizen involvement in the parliamentary process through the implementation of the *Study Circles* citizen forum program; 2) increasing the legitimacy of the electoral process through the planning of election and pre-election observation missions, the conducting of a political party pollwatching training of trainers program, and the creation of party pollwatchers' manuals; 3) strengthening parliament through ongoing engagement with party leadership and civil society regarding political party reform.

In upcoming months, NDI will continue to monitor the political environment and implement pre-election and election activities. This work will take place through continued coordination with the political parties, and local and international organizations working on election issues. NDI experts will continue to conduct a nation-wide training-of-trainers program for political party pollwatchers. The effort to continue fostering citizens' engagement with Parliament will be supported by the implementation of the *Study Circles* as a forum for discussion and development of advocacy strategies.

II. BACKGROUND

NDI's Past Work with Parliament and Elections

In 1991, Bangladesh held multiparty elections that were broadly accepted by all political parties. Since these elections, Bangladeshis have struggled to develop an effective and accountable independent legislature. Unfortunately, a legacy of mistrust between the major political parties continues to plague Bangladeshi politics. Rather than working within the

parliament to resolve differences, political parties have regularly boycotted parliamentary proceedings and have held street demonstrations that limit the effectiveness of the country's government. Recently, opposition parties have called for the government to resign immediately and to hold early elections.

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

Over the course of the past nine years, NDI has conducted a range of programs to assist and strengthen democratic institutions in Bangladesh. Previous NDI programs focused on strengthening the electoral process and increasing popular political participation. Starting in 1990, NDI has observed numerous polls and made recommendations about how to improve the electoral process. NDI also worked with civic leaders encouraging them to increase citizens' involvement in monitoring the electoral process. In support of such efforts, NDI helped create and train Bangladesh's first and largest citizens' election monitoring network, the Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA). During subsequent elections, FEMA mobilized hundreds of thousands of citizens to monitor the electoral process. The group continues to advocate for electoral reform and organizes workshops and seminars aimed at strengthening democracy in Bangladesh. NDI also organized a comprehensive international observer program for the June 1996 general elections to increase openness and trust in the electoral process.

In 1993, at the request of members of parliament, NDI held seminars and consultations with members of all of the parliamentary parties to discuss ways to strengthen the legislature and its committee structure. At the request of senior government officials and party representatives, NDI also organized a multiparty roundtable for parliamentary leaders in April 1997 to discuss the role, composition and powers of committees in the Bangladesh parliament. Following these initiatives, the government adopted several of the recommendations made by NDI, including a law forbidding ministers from chairing parliamentary committees.

During NDI's program, the Institute conducted activities designed to increase citizens' input in the legislative process. NDI held a forum for Bangladeshi civic leaders in September 1999 to discuss effective advocacy strategies. Following the workshop discussion, participants organized a group meeting on how they could bring an end to the current political deadlock between the parties. In addition, in November 1999, NDI held a seminar on the role civil society can play in the work of parliamentary committees. The workshop brought together committee chairmen and representatives from local CSOs to share ideas about how civil society could assist parliamentary committees with the construction of laws that better address the needs of Bangladeshi citizens. Already a few CSOs are beginning to work more closely with committee members. The development of new routines is a slow process and long-term help to CSOs and committee members is needed.

Also during NDI's program, the Institute conducted activities to increase cooperation between the political parties and improve parliamentary processes. NDI also suggested to the speaker of the parliament that he form a Citizens Relations Office to encourage Bangladeshis to

learn about their legislature and become more involved in the political process. The speaker and the parliamentary staff have taken initial steps to establish such an office.

The Institute organized four workshops on the functioning of the major parliamentary parties. During the forums, NDI representatives discussed with party members ways to improve parliamentary procedures. The Bangladeshi participants came up with a number of recommendations to improve parliamentary processes: promoting increased debate within party caucuses; strengthening the speaker's role in parliament; and increasing the opposition's role during plenary proceedings and the legislators' ability to act independently of their parties. While conducting the activities involved in NDI's current program, the Institute would build and expand upon these past efforts.

In addition, with funds from the Australian Agency for International Development, NDI led a delegation of parliamentary leaders from the major political parties and representatives of civil society to study the Australian parliamentary process. The trip provided participants with a unique opportunity to discuss, in a neutral setting, ways to improve cooperation between the political parties and strengthen the legislature.

Political Update

The Bangladeshi political landscape continues to be filled with strikes, inter-party disagreements and violence. In addition to the disturbances that have marred this reporting period, there has been a noticeable increase in the government's use of the Public Safety Act (PSA). Political activists have been continually arrested during political marches; opposition members have been complaining that the government's use of this act is excessive and politically motivated.

The opposition has also raised outcries at the recent announcement that the Prime Minister will stay in GanabHAVAN (the Prime Minister's Residence), and her younger sister will stay in another state owned house. PM Sheikh Hasina has petitioned to remain in this residence claiming she faces safety concerns during the pre-election period. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to resign and transfer power to a neutral caretaker government, headed by former Chief Justice Latifur Rahma, by July 15. After she steps down the country will be run by a Caretaker government headed by the most recently retired member of the supreme court.

Frequent hartals continue to shut down cities, sometimes for days at a time. Many have been injured or killed during these hartals. On June 18 a bomb exploded at an Awami League Party Office, killing 22 people and injuring over one hundred. The Election Commission, with the support of the new government, will make decisions regarding changes to the election laws.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

The overall goal of this program is to strengthen the parliament's role in the political process and increase the political effectiveness of civil society and its engagement in the legislative process. Although NDI has continued its work developing a study circle program to increase citizen participation in parliament and facilitate discussion on reform, a majority of the work conducted during this reporting period has been in preparation for parliamentary elections.

The Institute has focused attention on election preparations in order to meet the needs of the political climate, and address the pressing concerns of the citizenry and political parties. The objectives of this grant are as follows:

- Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process
- Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process
- Assisting Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures

Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process

NDI continues to develop its curriculum for study circles in order to firmly establish lines of communication and cooperation between civil society and Parliamentary committees. The Institute has prepared materials for these discussion sessions, and is awaiting the arrival of Bosse Bergnehr, a Swedish expert on the study circle method who will be assisting NDI in implementing this program. NDI will be working in coordination with local groups such as the Bangladeshi NGO Inner Force, the Center for Development of Communication (CDC) and Manabik Shahaya Sangstha (MSS). The Institute is dedicating energy to this effort during the pre-election period with the intent of using the study circle program to engage all of the major political parties in one forum and to give citizens an alternative to street demonstrations as a means of addressing substantive policy matters. The process of designing, funding, and implementing these forums will build the capacity of these local groups to organize similar programs in the future.

Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process

As the election draws nearer, the Institute has increased preparatory activities for the election. The Institute continues to hold meetings with the Election Commissioner and local election monitoring groups including FEMA, as well as with the United States Embassy, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), to discuss the planning of election monitoring efforts.

Party Agent Training for Party Pollwatchers

Canadian trainer Dominic Cardy and long-time NDI trainer Richard Klein arrived in Bangladesh in April to finalize and implement the training-of-trainers program for party pollwatchers. Both Cardy and Klein have conducted similar programs internationally. Klein and Cardy held summits with Awami League, Bangladesh National Party and Jamaat-e-Islami leadership and received positive feedback and from the political parties on the training program. NDI has worked to tailor the trainings to meet the needs of the various parties (see attached training zones, and political party polling agent training programme). The buy-in from the political party leadership is strong and has been reinforced by the parties' efforts to support these trainings—the Awami League offered to host (and fund) a two-day workshop where NDI trainers could conduct their workshops. Dominic Cardy has been traveling with four local staff to conduct trainings in Barisol, and Rajshahi. At the end of June, NDI hired and trained eight new NDI staff in Dhaka. These trainers will, in turn, train party members in Chittagong, Sylhet and a number of other

districts. In addition to trainings, they will also assist international delegations during the election period.

Monitoring Manuals for Political Party Polling Agents

NDI has submitted a proposal for additional funding to create, print, and distribute 700,000 copies of a manual, which focuses on how to monitor the election process, to polling agents from all political parties. The manual will be produced in collaboration with the Election Commission (EC) and the major political parties. The manual is designed as a resource for individuals monitoring on behalf of candidates and political parties, and will be distributed after the party pollwatch training sessions, in order to provide information on election procedures and the rights and responsibilities of party monitors.

Pre-Election and Election Mission Preparations - Dhaka

NDI has begun planning for a pre-election mission, and an international election monitoring delegation of at least 20 delegates. In Dhaka, the Institute has begun logistical preparations—arranging for accommodations and transportation for the delegation. Additional groundwork has been laid through regular meetings with political parties, local election groups, and members of the NGO community. NDI has also been in consultation with other organizations—including discussions with Don Collier, the leader of the UNDP election coordination effort—planning for international election observation delegations. The Institute critiqued the UNDP’s proposal for election coordination and has provided feedback based on its experiences monitoring past elections in Bangladesh. NDI continues to meet with the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh and U.S. Embassy representatives to discuss security and planning for various aspects of the international election monitoring delegation.

Pre-election and Election Mission Preparations – D.C.

In Washington, preparations for both the pre-election and election day delegations include the drafting of briefing materials, delegate lists, agendas and timelines for election-related activities.

Assisting Members of Parliament in Reviewing and Strengthening Parliamentary Procedures

NDI continues to meet with political party leadership, members of Parliament and Committee chairs in order to discuss elections and parliamentary reforms. These meetings, as well as workshops, public hearings, and general consultation with government officials, remain important to NDI’s ongoing work with parliament.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Increasing Citizen Involvement in the Parliamentary Process

- The initial efforts of NDI and partner CSOs, in the promotion of a study circle program to formalize dialogue between the public and the legislature, have

already increased the contact and level of engagement between CSO leaders and MPs through the process of trying to establish this program.

- NDI's partner CSOs are gaining skills—in soliciting funds, proposal writing, program design and coordination—as a result of their work with NDI on the development of the study circles.

Increasing the Legitimacy of the Electoral Process

- NDI's regular discussion of electoral reform with all of the major political parties has increased the level of dialogue on Bangladeshi electoral processes.
- Logistical groundwork has been laid for international pre-election and election observation missions, including the selection and soliciting of prominent political figures and elections experts who will provide stability during the election period.
- Party pollwatcher trainers have been prepared for the job of training many party pollwatchers for the election.
- Through NDI's party pollwatch manual, party pollwatchers have access to thorough and comprehensible information about their role and responsibility, through NDI's party pollwatch manual.
- As a result of NDI's efforts, activists from different political parties have all agreed to support the training of party pollwatchers and provide party pollwatchers at polling stations.

V. EVALUATION

This quarter, NDI has met the program objectives in the following ways:

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

By engaging citizens and CSO leaders in the process of developing the study circle program, NDI has increased the capacity of citizens to translate their interests in working with parliament into program design by creating forums that allow citizens to address parliamentary issues. Also this quarter, NDI has assisted civil society groups in developing a coalition of groups working to address parliamentary issues and citizen participation in politics.

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

NDI has demonstrated international interest in free and fair elections by laying the groundwork for both pre-election and election delegations to travel to Bangladesh. NDI took advantage of its history and reputation in Bangladesh and elsewhere to encourage all major parties to support the party poll agent training. NDI's Country Director has

demonstrated his support for the electoral process by engaging in consultations with the Elections Commissioner.

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

NDI has demonstrated its interest in helping to strengthen Parliamentary procedures by holding ongoing meetings with government officials. With the dedication of much energy going towards the elections coordination (gathering support of all of the political parties to participate in the party poll watch training of trainers), NDI found one point of consensus between all of the parties. NDI's constant engagement with the main political parties supports the Institute's work to foster communication between party leadership by sending the message to the political parties that there are common interests between them.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Looking ahead to the next quarter, NDI will help work toward transparent, peaceful, and accepted elections; increased communication between civil society and Parliamentary committees; and strengthening of Parliamentary procedures; through the following activities:

- Using the Study Circles method, NDI will continue to facilitate the development of a series of citizens' forum to establish lines of communication and cooperation between civil society and Parliamentary committees with the help of a volunteer Swedish expert trainer;
- NDI will continue to meet with party leadership, MPs, and Committee Chairs, to discuss elections, parliamentary reforms, and NDI program efforts;
- NDI will complete the design, publication, and distribution of a party poll agent manual;
- NDI will complete the current party polling agent training of trainers throughout the country;
- NDI will continue meeting with organizations such as the UNDP, USAID, and the EU to help in coordinating activities around the election;
- NDI will finish planning and carry out a pre-election mission with an eminent political figure from the United States;
- NDI will organize an election observation missions with a delegation of 20 to 40 people.