



**CEPPS/NDI Semi-Annual Report: October 1, 2004 to March 31, 2005**

**BANGLADESH: STRENGTHENING THE ROLES OF  
POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARLIAMENT**  
**USAID Associate Cooperative Agreement No. 388-A-00-03-00095-00 under  
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**I. SUMMARY**

When a parliamentary system was restored after the 1991 elections, Bangladeshis hoped that an era of democracy and good will would ensue. Successive election cycles since that time have resulted in the peaceful transfer of power between governments, and a vibrant and active civil society has emerged with a growing capacity to monitor and affect the political environment. However, hostility among the political parties – particularly the Awami League (AL) and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) – combined with the legacy of 20 years of often violent and undemocratic government, has threatened many of these gains. In the three and a half years since the 2001 elections, the animosity between the AL and the BNP has continued, holding the democratic process hostage. Unresolved murders of high profile AL members have exacerbated the situation with both parties blaming each other for the attacks.

In this context, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) received funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in October 2003 to extend and further its work with political parties, parliament and civil society. This three-and-a-half-year program seeks to: 1) further the democratic reform process in the four major political parties in Bangladesh; 2) increase dialogue within and among the four major parties; 3) strengthen the role of parliament in the nation's affairs by increasing the capacity of the parliament to perform legislative, representative and oversight functions; 4) increase citizens' access to government and awareness of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society; and 5) increase the legitimacy of the electoral process.

During this reporting period, NDI held three sessions of its Political Leadership Development Course (PLDC) for mid-level political party leaders in Dhaka, Bogra and Khulna. NDI is also working with interns from the four major parties to compile a database of mid-level party leaders, and is continuing to develop digital maps of past electoral data from selected constituencies. In addition, the Institute conducted a study tour for representatives from the BNP and the AL to travel to Morocco to examine local NDI-organized focus group centers. The Institute also sponsored a video conference for Members of Parliament (MPs) and journalists on the relationship between politicians and the media in Bangladesh.

## II. BACKGROUND

In 1991, following popular pressure against the military government, democratic elections were held in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has since held four elections, three of which were deemed credible and representative by the international community. However, democratic advances have been impeded by a number of issues. Hierarchical political parties, an inability of parliament to effectively represent the interests of its constituents, and a lack of intuitional mechanisms to encourage citizen input in the legislative process have all seriously impeded democratic governance. In recent years, the parliament has not effectively dealt with the problems facing the nation and remains intensely divided over even the smallest procedural matters.

A history of animosity and mistrust between the AL and the BNP has prevented parliament from performing even its basic functions such as forming committees, holding debate and reaching out to the public. Bangladesh's parties tend to be hierarchical, internally undemocratic and personality based, creating minimal opportunity for party members and members of parliament (MPs) to engage the party on critical issues, including reform. In addition, many political parties lack the necessary skills to properly represent their constituents. These characteristics have created a fractured and excessively partisan political landscape over the past 13 years, evidenced by a lack of constructive participation by the opposition, unilateral decisions by the ruling party and a disconnect between the national parties and their divisional branches.

Furthermore, public input into the decision-making process in Bangladesh is neither expected nor encouraged. Access to government is limited and citizens rarely get reliable information from government agencies. NGOs and community service organizations (CSOs) that represent citizens are also finding it difficult to participate in Bangladesh's democracy. While their activities are focused on monitoring the political situation, NGOs like political parties, often have a strong leader that controls the organizations activities. Despite this, civil society advocates can rely on the fact that the civil society community remains one of the most vibrant and active in South Asia. The Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), for example, has been especially effective both in monitoring the elections and recommending changes to the election laws.

The current political situation in Bangladesh remains tense with both the main parties blaming each other for the political unrest in the country. The assassination of Shah ASM Kibria at an AL rally at the end of January has further polarized the parties with both the BNP and the Awami League blaming each other for the attacks. His assassination resulted in further *hartals* with the possibility of the AL increasing its campaign of agitation against the government in April 2005. However, the AL has remained in Parliament and is contesting the forthcoming by-election caused by the death of Mr. Kibria as well as the mayoral elections in Chittagong. The AL has also joined the Parliamentary Standing Committees and is taking an active role in the workings of the committees.

As expected, the provision of 45 reserved seats for women has been a contentious issue with a number of Women's Organizations challenging the constitutionality of the act in the courts. The Government has come under pressure from the international community to improve the law and order and governance situation but has retaliated by accusing the donor community of interfering in the internal affairs of the country. This trend continued in March 2005 when the government requested that two European Union (EU) countries to recall their ambassadors. The Annual Bangladesh Donors Forum has been cancelled this year and subsequent donor events will be chaired by the Finance Minister as opposed to World Bank officials as in previous occasions.

### III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

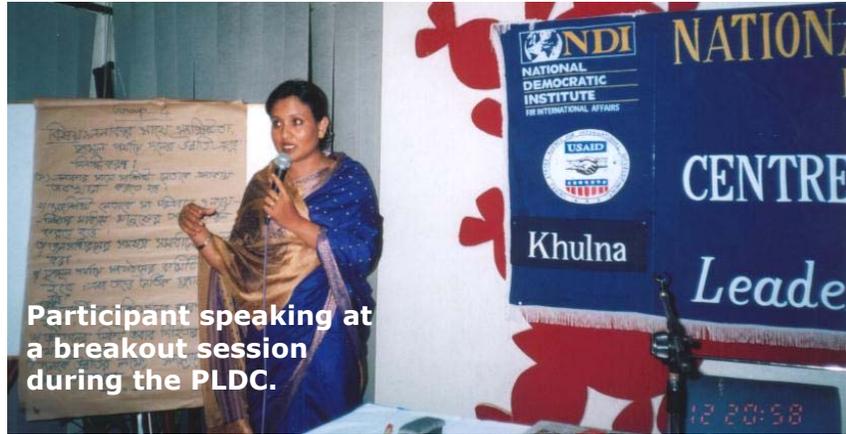
NDI continues to hold regular meetings with the main political parties on the current political situation and to keep them informed of relevant NDI activities. Meetings also took place with partner NGOs to coordinate election observation missions. Consultations with IRI and the Democracy, Governance and Education (DG-ED) Office of USAID/Bangladesh take place on a regular basis to co-ordinate program activities. While the original CEPPS Agreement divided activities of NDI and IRI into the Northern and Southern halves of Bangladesh respectively, both organizations felt this arrangement was too restrictive and, in consultation with IRI and with the agreement of the DG-ED Office of USAID/Bangladesh, it was decided that the two organizations would work in all six administrative divisions of Bangladesh.

#### *Political Leadership Development Course (PLDC)*

The PLDC continued to be the backbone of NDI activities this reporting period. Three more sessions were held for mid-level party leaders in the administrative divisions of Dhaka (October), Bogra (January) and Khulna (March). As with previous courses, participants were required to hold a minimum high school education, be between 25 and 50 years of age and hold a mid-level position within their respective political party. NDI continued its excellent working relationship with the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) at Dhaka University under the Chairmanship of Professor M. Ataur Rahman, President of the Bangladesh Political Science Association. The chart below gives a breakdown of participants at each course, disaggregated by gender:

COURSE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS FROM EACH PARTY								TOTAL
	AL		BNP		Jatiya		Jamaat-i-Islami		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	
<b>Dhaka</b>	8	2	10	2	6	2	8	2	<b>40</b>
<b>Bogra</b>	14	1	25	0	6	4	6	4	<b>60</b>
<b>Khulna</b>	13	2	16	1	10	1	12	0	<b>55</b>

As with previous workshops, the courses were divided into a series of modules over the two days, covering topics such as political leadership, poll analysis, the role of political parties in Bangladesh today, how to attract potential voters and supporters, candidate selection, campaigning, managing modern political



**Participant speaking at a breakout session during the PLDC.**

parties, and youth and leadership. Participants also broke into small multiparty groups during the course in order to present approaches to issues such as candidate selection, ethical standards, evaluation and discipline within the parties, financial management and fundraising, constituency outreach, grassroots party development, party registration and identification and analysis of local issues.

In addition to NDI Country Director Owen Lippert and NDI Senior Political Party Program Manager Deborah Healy, facilitators for Dhaka included Dr. Ataur Rahman of CGS, NDI consultant Lincoln Mitchell, and Hamish Marshall, a poll analyst who is the leader of the opposition's office in Canada. For the Bogra and Khulna PLDCs, Country Director Owen Lippert and Professor Rahman were joined by Iftekher Alam, a consultant with NDI Bangladesh who specializes in leadership training with young people and is a former consultant with the Kent Borough Council in the United Kingdom. Question and answer sessions followed all presentations, generating a lively discussion and participant interaction at each of the courses. Participants in the courses, especially those at the Dhaka training, expressed their gratitude to NDI in providing them with the opportunity to have these discussions with their counterparts from other political parties. No such forum exists in Bangladesh, and while the conversations were spirited, they gave the participants a chance to exchange views in a non-confrontational environment.

Senior representatives from the four major parties attended the certificate award ceremony in Dhaka, Bogra, and Khulna. MPs from each district and senior local party figures also attended the ceremonies.

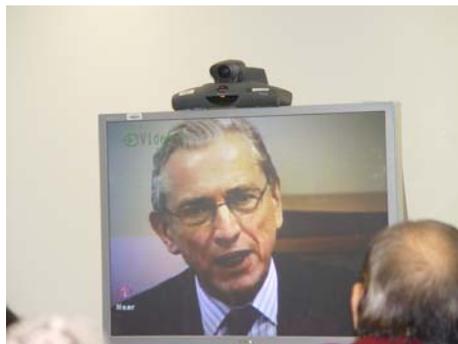


**District Head of the AL at the PLDC Certificate Award Ceremony.**

### *Poll Level Electoral Map/GIS Map*

To assist political parties, election observers and government officials to identify potential ‘trouble spots’ in Bangladesh elections, NDI undertook a project to create digital maps of constituencies based on polling station election data. In addition to the digital maps created in the last reporting period, three Geographic Information System (GIS) Maps have now been completed for the Khulna-1, Khulna-2 and Barisal-2 Constituencies. NDI provided soft copies of the maps to political parties and many agencies, including the Chief Election Commissioners office, USAID, the Australian High Commission and the EU Delegation in Bangladesh.

### *Video Conference*



With the assistance of the World Bank Institute and the Commonwealth Parliamentarians Association, NDI hosted an international video conference that brought together parliamentarians and experts from five countries to discuss “Parliament and the Media.” The countries involved were Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka the United Kingdom and the United States. The aim of the conference was to promote discussion among the political parties, to re-engage MPs in the business of parliament, and to help bridge the current antagonistic relationship between parliamentarians and the media. Representatives from the four major political parties in Bangladesh participated with the Minister for Law and Parliamentary Affairs, Barrister Moudud Ahmed MP, attending as chief guest. From the London, attendees included Rt. Hon. Lord Fowler, a Conservative Party Member of the House of Lords and former Cabinet Minister, Ms. Oona King MP, a Labour Party Member of Parliament since 1997 and Mr. Mar Stephens of the law firm Finers, Stephens & Innocent. The representatives from Indonesia and Sri Lanka included Members of Parliament and representatives of the media.

### *Focus Group Training*

In response to a request from the Bangladesh Awami League, NDI Bangladesh organized a visit to Morocco for a representative from the AL and the BNP to study focus groups organized by NDI/Morocco. The delegation from Bangladesh consisted of Mr. Abul Maal Abdul Muhith a former government official representing the AL, and Mr. Sk. Azizul Barea (Helal), President of

the Jatiyatabadi Chattra Dal (JCD), the Student Wing of the BNP. They were accompanied to Morocco by NDI Senior Program Manager Deborah Healy.

While in Morocco, the delegation observed focus groups being conducted in Oujda, a town in northeastern Morocco which is close to the border with Algeria. The Bangladesh delegation met with NDI's focus group Program Manager Abla El Khattabi, on the afternoon of Monday, February 21, to discuss the process of recruiting participants, as well as the amount of time needed to prepare for the focus groups. After the NDI/Morocco team made a presentation on the findings from the focus group, the representatives from the political parties in Bangladesh were asked to speak on the political system and politics in Bangladesh. This arose out of a request from the politicians in Morocco when they learned of the study tour in Oudja. Both Mr. Baree and Mr. Muhith spoke about the birth of Bangladesh from the War of Liberation in 1971 to the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991. After making their presentations they took questions from the assembled guests.

Mr. Baree and Deborah Healy also visited the NDI office in Rabat its accompanying focus group centre. NDI/Morocco shared a number of reports on focus groups that have taken place in the centre. Some of these reports will be shared with the political parties here in Bangladesh to assist them in developing focus group training activities.

#### *Mid Level Political Leadership Database*

The Mid-level Political Leadership Database (MPLD) is a project designed to collect and computerize background data on mid-level political leadership in Bangladesh. The collection of this information is a critical step to NDI's efforts to keep an updated contact list of key political leaders as well as reach out to the political parties. NDI has enlisted the support of four interns from the major parties to assist in this work. The main objective of the project is to collect contact information for all mid level political leaders in the 64 districts and 464 Upazillas throughout the country. A database has been designed to store this information, which will eventually be released to each of the parties to ensure that it is used effectively and kept updated.

#### *Survey on Integrity of Voter Registration*

To develop an empirical method for determining the extent to which Bangladesh's voters' lists include ineligible and sometimes fictitious entries during voter registration, NDI is conducting a survey on the integrity of voters' lists. The survey also intends to estimate the number of eligible persons missed while the procedure for registering voters was carried out. To carry out this survey, NDI has hired a local firm, Survey and Research Systems, to obtain and verify a sample of the voter lists from selected urban and rural polling centers. This survey will scrutinize the quality of the voter registration process and review the validity of age, gender and legal residence of individuals included in the voter lists. Once completed, the survey will provide an analysis of overall error in the voter list as well as components of error nationwide in rural and urban constituencies. The survey thus envisages tracing the irregularities that undermine the integrity of voter registration and measure their extent by type.

#### IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

*Objective 1: To further democratic reform processes in political parties*

- The PLDC continues to attract widespread support and enthusiasm not only from the top leadership in the political parties but, more importantly, from the participants. This course allows them to interact in a neutral environment and decide for themselves best practices that can be adopted by their parties.
- Senior representatives from the four major parties attended the Certificate Award Ceremony for the PLDC in Dhaka; their presence at this event underscores the importance the parties place on the course. In Bogra and Khulna, Members of Parliament from the areas and senior local party figures also attended this ceremony. Furthermore, the PLDC courses have provided a forum for party leaders from all major parties to convene in support of a common cause, providing an important opportunity for parties to interact in a neutral environment.



- The eagerness of the two major parties to send representatives to the focus group centre in Morocco shows their commitment to furthering democratic reforms within their respective parties.
- The President of the Jatiya Party, H.M. Ershad, has requested that NDI send him information on how ordinary party members can have a greater say in the decision making process and more specifically on candidate selection, an indication that party leadership is recognizing the importance of internal democracy and receptivity to input from party members.

*Objective 2: To increase dialogue within the four major parties*

- The PLDC shows party activists how parties should operate in a democratic society and as a result are becoming more vocal within their parties. This was manifested in reports

by BNP activists calling for the party leadership to give them a greater say on who their candidates should be at election time.

*Objective 3: To strengthening the role of Parliament in the nations affairs by increasing the capacity of the Parliament in performing legislative, representative and oversight functions*

- The International Video Conference on Parliament and the Media promoted discussion among the main political parties; the Law and Parliamentary Affairs Ministers joked with Sri Suranjit Sengupta MP of the Awami League that this was the most discussion they had since the last parliamentary elections. The conference also re-engaged the MPs in the business of parliament, which has been inactive for months.

*Objective 4: To increase citizens' awareness of their rights and responsibilities in a democratic society and how to access their government officials*

- Through the USAID America Week initiative, which took place in Khulna this year, NDI distributed copies of the Parliamentary Guide, providing citizens with the complete contact information for all parliamentarians in Bangladesh. As the most comprehensive guide of its kind in Bangladesh, this publication has been recognized by political parties, parliamentarians and others as a valuable mechanism to bring political parties and politicians closer to the people.

*Objective 5: To increase the legitimacy of the electoral process.*

- The completion of the three GIS maps for the Khulna-one, Khulna-two, and Barisal-one constituencies has generated increased interest in the digital maps. For example, Zahir Uddin Swapon, an MP from the Barisal-one constituency, has expressed his eagerness to have his constituency organization receive training on how best to use the map for constituency outreach and electoral analysis.

## **V. EVALUATION**

NDI's program hinges on building strong, trusting relationships with political actors, civic groups, and international organizations. Despite the ongoing violence and tense political environment, NDI continues to have excellent relationships with the four major parties. At both formal and informal meetings, representatives of the parties have praised NDI for their role in strengthening democracy in the country. This dedication and commitment has also been acknowledged by the U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, who has singled out NDI for praise on a number of occasions.

Activities have gone ahead as scheduled, with the PLDC remaining the backbone of NDI's current activities. The difficulties that NDI experienced in the past for being perceived as pro-Awami League have now been overcome and an excellent working relationship with the BNP now exists. As testament to this, Tareque Rahman, senior Secretary General of the BNP, invited Country Director Owen Lippert to attend one of the regional organizing sessions he has initiated throughout the country. Similarly, the Chief Advisor to the Leader of the Opposition

and the Chairman of the Jatiya Party have also requested that the NDI Country Director attend their regional organizing sessions. Press coverage for the Institute continues to be positive with all NDI activities covered favorably in the media.

## **VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES**

The next six-month period will be a busy time for the program. Building on the highly successful International Video Conference on ‘Parliament and the Media’, NDI will hold a second videoconference in April on the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). A further video conference will take place in June.

The PLDC will continue with further courses due to take place in Chittagong, Comilla, and Cox’s Bazaar. A final course will take place in Dhaka in October. During 2005, NDI will seek to form a women’s caucus consisting of both newly appointed female MP and political activists from the four major parties. In addition to strengthening the leadership skills of the female MPs and other political activists, NDI will also conduct activities to improve the registration and turnout of female voters.

A political party handbook is being developed based on the mid-level leader training materials. The English version is near completion and will be sent for translation in due course. NDI is currently conducting a survey on the integrity current voter lists, which it expects to complete in April. The survey will involve a sample of approximately 5000 registered voters in rural and urban areas. After the release of the voter list survey, NDI plans to convene a small private conference with senior representatives from the four major parties in order to determine if a consensus can be formed on small, feasible electoral reforms to be implemented over the next 18 months.