



Quarterly Report
BANGLADESH: Strengthening Cooperation Between Political Parties in Parliament
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October 1 to December 31, 2000

I. SUMMARY

Following popular protests against the military government, Bangladeshis re-established democratic elections in their country in 1991. Since then, they have taken significant steps toward strengthening their country's governing institutions. Unfortunately, as in many other democracies in transition, Bangladeshis continue to struggle to improve the quality of governance. A lack of institutional mechanisms that encourage citizen input in the legislative process, encourage confidence in election processes and promote cooperation among the political parties in parliament impedes democratic advances.

This quarter NDI played an active role in addressing the objectives set out by this grant through the following work: 1) NDI assisted local civil society organizations in increasing their capacity to make their needs heard in parliament; 2) NDI fostered the support of many parties for the upcoming training of trainers for parliamentary poll watching by holding "summits" with party leaders; and 3) NDI continued to coordinate activities in preparation for the upcoming elections by working with FEMA, the Election Commission and the European Union.

II. BACKGROUND

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

Regular impasses between the parties together with a weak parliament threaten Bangladesh's future democratic development, which depends on an increase in the role parliament plays in resolving disagreements among the political parties. 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.

A. Civil Society Organizations' Role in the Political Process

Civil society organizations (CSOs), including nongovernmental, media and professional organizations, in Bangladesh are often better organized and operated than similar types of organizations around the world. Media groups, for instance, successfully prompted the government to revise its land distribution policies by printing a number of articles accusing the government of corruption. In addition, CSO members have conducted studies that identify social problems in the country and make recommendations on how the government could address these issues. Unfortunately, CSOs rarely cooperate with one another to pressure the government to address citizens' needs or consider their research findings while drafting legislation. When these civil society groups do attempt to advocate citizens' issues within the parliament, their efforts are mostly misdirected due to the representatives' unfamiliarity with open and inclusive parliamentary procedures, such as committee hearings and testimonies.

Bangladeshi CSOs are often well-staffed and experienced in conducting research on public policy issues relevant to parliamentary committee members. Conversely, parliamentary committees are short-staffed, with members lacking many of the skills essential to proposing new laws and commenting on pending legislation. As the legislative process is still quasi-closed, members of parliament are underutilizing the wealth of free resources available to them from civil society. Parliamentarians to supply the committees with information during the law drafting process could call upon CSOs for assistance. By increasing coordination between civil society groups and committees, members will gain the resources and essential knowledge needed to act as legislators, and Bangladeshi citizens will be able to provide input into the law drafting process.

B. The Electoral Process

Despite some complaints, Bangladesh's 1991 parliamentary elections were perceived to be fair, with the political parties accepting the poll results. The second of the two 1996 elections were seen by international election observers and a local monitoring group, the Free and Fair Elections Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), as the "cleanest" and most trouble free in Bangladesh's political history. NDI found, during its election observation mission in 1996, that less than 1 percent of the polling stations suffered serious disturbances that required re-polling. Despite the findings from international observers, the Bangladeshi political parties alleged intimidation, ballot stuffing and government rigging, thereby tainting the 1996 election results. Following the election, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party demanded re-polling in 111 out of the 300 constituencies. Furthermore, Bangladeshi political leaders and CSO activists have pointed out problems in the electoral laws that they claim deter a smooth election process.

The next parliamentary elections in Bangladesh will be held by mid-October 2001. However, presently there is a great deal of speculation that early elections may be called in June. Continued international involvement in Bangladesh's elections would demonstrate international

support for and commitment to a transparent and fair electoral process. International assistance would also ensure that the election is conducted in a free and fair manner, adding legitimacy to the election outcome and to the next legislature.

C. Political Parties and the Parliamentary Process

The lack of cooperation among the political parties has often been cited as the chief impediment to the functioning of the legislature in Bangladesh. Rather than using the parliamentary process to resolve party differences, political party members tend to use street agitation and the threat of violence to advance their political agendas. Within the parliament, the parties generally do not consult on important policy decisions, and significant bills have been adopted while the opposition was not participating in parliament. While in session, some members of parliament have used abusive language to make personal attacks against members of opposing parties, thereby limiting the productive discourse needed for policymaking. In addition, members of opposition parties have complained that the speaker does not give the opposition enough time in parliament to present issues of concern to their parties. If the parliament continues to fail to address social and economic problems and to govern effectively, the Bangladeshi citizenry may lose confidence in the country's political process.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

October 2000

During October, NDI continued the work of establishing an office while initiating efforts to prepare for the upcoming national elections.

- NDI created job descriptions and began searching for and interviewing local staff.
- Two NDI staff members observed the runoff election in Comilla on October 23. This provided an opportunity to hold discussions with local election officials, voters, candidates, and citizens about the election process. The outcomes of this observation were shared with the Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. Syed.
- NDI met and reported the findings of the Comilla election to a meeting of donors called by the Asia Foundation.
- NDI met with Member of Parliament (MP), Rabeya Bhuiya, to discuss a range of issues including the election and the 30 designated seats for women in Parliament.
- NDI continued meeting with USAID to discuss the implementation of the work plan.
- NDI staff met with embassy and USAID Personnel Directors to discuss local labor laws and the hiring process in Bangladesh.
- NDI participated in a two-day seminar at the university of Dhaka as a panelist on the subject of "Accountability in Government in a Democracy."
- NDI's Resident Representative facilitated a workshop on advocacy techniques co-sponsored by FEMA and NDI. The main goal of the workshop was to help form an action strategy for women NGOs on the issue of the 30 designated seats.

November 2000

During November, NDI Bangladesh hired and trained three local staff members. Holding “summits” with political party leadership, NDI Resident Representative Jim Oliver met with a series of leaders to discuss the follow issues: 1) training of trainers workshop for party pollwatchers; 2) participation in NDI sponsored workshops by party MPs; 3) the issue of women’s seats in Parliament; 4) the use of musclemen by both parties; 5) the need for dialogue among opposing political parties around issues of national importance; and 6) the boycott of Parliament and how the opposition can play some meaningful role in governance. Meeting with members of the political parties, NDI discussed party poll watching and solicited positive responses from the Jatiya Party, Awami League, and Jamat Islami Party. In an effort to mobilize the CSO community, NDI has continued coordination with the Election Commission, FEMA and the European Union. Working with these groups NDI continued to lay the basis for potential election monitoring structures:

- NDI hired and trained a secretary, program assistant, and logistics assistant.
- NDI co-sponsored the second advocacy workshop “Women in Parliament” for women NGOs. Participants reached an agreement and decided to move forward with an action agenda.
- NDI participated in a donor coordination meeting called by the Asia Foundation.
- NDI’s Resident Representative met with Mr. Suranjit Sengupta, one of the leaders of the Awami League, and Senior Advocate to the Supreme Court. He also met with a leader of the Jamat Islami Party, Matiur Rahman. Both parties expressed interest in NDI’s training of party pollwatcher trainers.
- An additional meeting was held between Resident Representative and Ambassador Abul Ahsam, the Acting Chair of the FEMA to discuss FEMA’s concerns regarding the upcoming elections.
- Continuing to engage party leaders, NDI met with Member of Parliament G.M. Quader of the Jatiya Party and discussed the upcoming elections and the level of corruption in Bangladesh. Quader said his party will commit to participating in the training of trainers for party poll watchers.
- NDI continued to provide technical support to FEMA in planning workshops addressing the issue of designated seats for women in parliament.

December 2000

NDI increased its engagement in activities preparing for the upcoming election. There have been increasing rumors that elections will be called in June, sooner than had been expected. Increased violence and political fighting in Bangladesh have accompanied these rumors. Subsequently, NDI has taken action to intensify its preparation for elections, and activities with parties and parliament.

- NDI’s Resident Representative met with the Mahfuz Anam, Editor of the *Daily Star*, a newspaper on the forefront of criticizing politically motivated violence. During this meeting Anam spoke of his interest in doing a major civic education project on the election in his paper.

- NDI's meeting with party members continued with a session involving eight Awami League leaders. The Awami party leaders expressed interest in participating in the party pollwatching training of trainers.
- Further meetings continued between NDI and the Jatiya Party. Jim Oliver met with the Minister for Communication, Mr. Anwar Hosain.
- Three NDI Bangladesh staff traveled to Khulna to observe a bi-election for a parliamentary seat. This observation trip served as an in-service training program on election observation for new staff.
- NDI Bangladesh met with the European Union to coordinate ongoing efforts to prepare for elections.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

As a result of NDI's efforts:

- The Chief Election Commissioner has been informed of problem areas that arose in the municipal elections observed by NDI staff. In the bi-elections following the municipal elections, the Election Commissioner made changes based on NDI's recommendations. For example, during these bi-elections identification tags for polling agents were utilized for the first time as a result of the recommendations by NDI.
- FEMA members and staff are more knowledgeable about advocacy techniques and proposal development. They have utilized these new skills obtained from NDI advocacy skills trainings, in recent proposal development projects.
- NDI local staff received election observer training and experience, and have learned logistical skills.
- Positive communication has been established between NDI and the party leadership, and discussions were held on the democracy issues that Bangladesh presently faces.
- The communication between women's organizations working to address the allocation of 30 parliamentary seats for women and the political parties has increased as a product of NDI advocacy training.
- All of the political parties have committed to participate in the training of trainers workshop to be sponsored by NDI.
- Following NDI outreach efforts, various media organizations have expressed their interest in doing public education on the election.

V. EVALUATION

This quarter, NDI has assisted civil society representatives in developing effective advocacy strategies while holding forums to facilitate discussion among representatives of the parliament secretariat, pro-democracy groups and academics, on ways to increase dialogue between the civil society organizations and parliament, as well as to improve dialogue between the parties. The Institute has leveraged its position to hold frank discussions with political leaders concerning parliamentary boycotts, potential election campaign violence and fraud, the need for dialogue between government and opposition parties on issues of national concern, and the role civic society can play in supporting Parliament. This quarter, NDI has made substantial

gains in engaging party leadership in preparation for NDI's upcoming training of trainers for party poll watchers. These gains include commitments from all of the major parties leadership to engage in the NDI training of trainers for party poll watchers.

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

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

- NDI, along with FEMA, will continue to hold round-table discussions that focus on advocacy and accountability in parliament and the role of civil society. Based on the encouraging level of participation resulting from the last discussion, both groups are planning a follow-up workshop on the same agenda;
- NDI will hire an expert to conduct the training of trainers for party pollwatchers;
- NDI will initiate the training of trainers for party pollwatchers;
- NDI will continue to engage civil society leaders, and local NGOs in the discussion of and preparation for the upcoming elections by coordinating with local and international observer delegations;
- NDI will hold meetings with the Election Commission on electoral reforms and election areas of concern;
- NDI will continue participation in the donors meetings called by the Asia Foundation to help in coordinating activities around the election;
- NDI will facilitate the development of a citizen's forum to establish lines of communication and cooperation between civil society and Parliamentary Committees;
- NDI will meet with party leadership, important MPs, and Committee Chairs, to discuss elections, parliamentary reforms, and NDI program efforts;
- NDI will visit Parliament to observe plenary sessions and hold discussions with MPs; and,
- NDI electoral law assessment team will arrive and begin interviews, resulting in a report to be shared with civil society organizations and political party leadership;