

**Elections 2001
Quarterly Report
June 28 - September 30, 2000**

Summary

The cooperative agreement on Elections 2001 was signed on June 28, 2000. The Asia Foundation began the development of its strategic framework with a series of information sharing meetings for civil society organizations on voter education and women's political participation. One meeting on each issue was convened in this quarter and participating organizations analyzed needs for the upcoming election in these two areas. The Asia Foundation also facilitated the exchange of information among donors at a meeting on August 29 at the Swedish Embassy. Tim Meisburger, The Asia Foundation's Cambodia-based Election Advisor, visited Bangladesh and held a series of bilateral meetings with civil society organizations to discuss plans for the upcoming election.

The strategic framework includes three complementary sets of activities focused on poll monitoring and observation during the period leading up to and including election day. Specifically, USAID funds will provide initial support to an expanded monitoring network that will coordinate monitoring activities and ensure broad national coverage using standardized monitoring techniques. 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. Third, the current grant includes modest funds for voter education to build the public's commitment to the election process by developing a limited number of specific messages to be adopted by various organizations and broadcast over various media outlets for blanket coverage. Within the voter education activity, the Foundation will conduct a workshop with radio, television and print journalists designed to improve election coverage.

Project Activity: June 28 - September 30, 2000

1. Election-Day Monitoring

The Asia Foundation held bilateral meetings with FEMA, Proshika, ADAB, Asa, BRAC, Lions Club, Rotary Club, and Prip Trust to discuss election-day monitoring. The overwhelming majority of the organizations indicated the need for a new monitoring structure that would a diverse, broad-based coalition of organizations and greater coverage. Drawing on the

Foundation's experience in Indonesia and Cambodia, The Asia Foundation provided the organizations with an overview of the models used in those countries and discussed ways that the model could be adapted to the Bangladeshi context. The organizations agreed to meet as a group to discuss the issue further.

2. Long-term International Monitors

No activities this quarter

3. Voter Education Clearinghouse

The Asia Foundation facilitated a brainstorming meeting with voter education organizations on August 22, 2000. The meeting was attended by representatives of FEMA, CDS, BCCP, Banchte Shekha, Rupantar, Democracy Watch, BRAC, ADAB, and CCHRB. The Asia Foundation outlined its priorities for the upcoming election in an effort to increase the impact of voter education programming given limited funding. The Asia Foundation's priorities include facilitating information sharing and coordination among NGOs involved in voter education, providing technical assistance on voter messages, and supporting programs that reach the largest number of voters possible.

At the meeting, Participants agreed that most voters understand the basic mechanics of voting and identified the following issues as particularly relevant in this election cycle:

1. Information on breaking the cycle of intimidation and violence;
2. Information how to choose candidates and how to hold candidates accountable to their platforms;
3. Information on the right to choose candidates freely and on the importance of each individual's vote; and
4. Encouragement for women to fully participate.

Some of the organizations present at the meeting have begun planning voter education and other activities for the upcoming elections, while others are still in the pre-planning stage. The Asia Foundation encouraged the organizations present to coordinate on messages and distribution, utilizing the networks of the various organizations throughout Bangladesh's districts and thanas.

In September, The Foundation hosted a followup brainstorming session on voter education. The September 25th meeting on voter education was attended by representatives of ADAB, Ananya Shamaj Kallyan Sangostha (ASKS), Banchte Shekha, Bangladesh Center for Communication Programs (BCCP), BRAC, Centre for Development Services (CDS), Ekushey Television, Rupantar, and Samata. Participants built on many of the issues identified in the August 22 meeting and discussed the success of slogans used in prior awareness-building campaigns including elections and oral rehydration.

Representatives from Ekushey TV who participated in the meeting indicated that they are interested in collaborating with NGOs to disseminate voter education through short spots and longer programs and will be reserving air time for election-related programs such as regional reports, interviews with candidates, information on current Members of Parliament and live coverage of the election results on election day.

4. Training for Journalists

No activities this quarter.

5. Coordination

Hosted by the Embassy of Sweden/SIDA, a meeting on domestic monitoring for Bangladesh's upcoming national election was held on August 29, 2000 and was attended by representatives from the Embassy of Sweden/SIDA, SDC, the Japanese Embassy, the Dutch Embassy, USAID, the US Embassy, CIDA, the European Commission, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), and The Asia Foundation.

Tim Meisburger, Election Advisor for The Asia Foundation (TAF), presented the results of a series of meetings held with NGOs in recent weeks to discuss domestic monitoring for the upcoming election. NGOs agreed that more comprehensive monitoring will help to ensure a fair democratic process and expressed support for working together in a coordinated capacity to develop a standard methodology for training and data collection. A network of full coverage (ie at least one monitor for polling booth) and standard forms for data collection will allow the monitors to confirm election results for constituencies in which the election is free and fair and identify those constituencies and specific polling stations in which problems of fraud, intimidation, and other impediments left the election results open to question.

The Asia Foundation pointed out that several internationally accepted standards in terms of election observation are currently not being followed in Bangladesh and provided an information sheet outlining these standards. For example, only one observer is permitted per polling station rather than each polling booth and if a new observer arrives, the first observer must leave. In addition, observers are currently not permitted to monitor the polling station where they are registered, which prevents the observers from being able to cast their vote and needlessly increases the cost of observation, and do not have the right to view and record the results of the counting process. The Election Commission has the authority to change these regulations to comply with international standards. The Asia Foundation urged the donors present to advocate for these changes and offered to provide talking points for Ambassadors. The Foundation has confirmed that Bangladesh has endorsed the "Inter-Parliamentary Union's Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections" and therefore should be held accountable to these criteria.

In addition to these issues, participants also discussed long-term domestic monitoring and international monitoring. USAID and the US Embassy also presented their non-Asia Foundation activities, including support to NDI for political party poll watcher training and international observation and a pre-election assessment by IFES.