

Elections 2001
Cooperative Agreement 388-A-00-00-00056-00
Quarterly Report
July 1 - September 30, 2001

Summary

During this period the Election Monitoring Working Group (EMWG) made significant progress toward paving the way for complete and comprehensive election day monitoring in Bangladesh, including advocating for new Election Commission (EC) guidelines that would facilitate the deployment and increase the number of observers and provide for their timely accreditation.

A sub-group of the larger EMWG finalized the observation form and manual to be used by participating organizations, incorporating two additional questions regarding the participation of women and disabled voters. The EMWG formed a media sub-group to raise awareness regarding the EMWG's activities and to maintain a dialogue with the press regarding the conditions needed for free and fair elections. A second sub-group was established to advocate with the Election Commission for adequate and timely accreditation of observers, for their access to all aspects of polling, including the counting process, and for provision to allow domestic observers to cast their votes on election day. One of the major achievements of this sub group is the recent approval by the Election Commission of 150,000 election observers to be deployed by 29 organizations under EMWG.

Changes in observer guidelines successfully brokered by the EMWG during this period include provisions:

- to allow one observer per booth (although, in some instances, for only 15 minutes at a time);
- to submit observers' names at the district level for approval and accreditation;
- to have the EC accredit a specified number of observers for select organizations registered, screened, and approved by the EC;
- to have approved organizations at the national level distribute official accreditation cards to their specified number of observers;;
- and to allow observers to watch the vote count.

The Asia Foundation has signed letters of agreement with Banchte Shekha, Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha (BNPS), Bangladesh Society for Enforcement of Human Right (BSEHR),

Brotee, Democracy Watch, FEMA, Khan Foundation, Mass Line Media Centre (MMC), Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Services (RDRS), Service Civil International (SCI) and Association for Community Development (ACD) to support election day observations and related activities. The Asia Foundation was also able to leverage USAID funds to secure commitments from the German, Dutch, and Norwegian Embassies and USIS to support election day monitoring and for the Swiss Embassy and DFID/SDC to support other election-related activities.

A total of 16 meetings of the EMWG and its sub-groups, two press conferences, two workshops, one brainstorming session, and one meeting between EMWG and CEC were held within the reporting period.

Project Activity: July1 – September 30, 2001

1. Election Day Monitoring

1.a: EMWG workshop with the Election Advisor, Tim Meisburger:

The EMWG had a brainstorming meeting with the Asia Foundation election advisor, Tim Meisburger, on July 12, 2001. Participants included representatives from 26 organizations which constitute members of the EMWG core group and their partners. The issues addressed in this workshop were the accreditation process, network development, development and printing of the manual, and the role of observers. During the session a structure for the EMWG network was established. To ensure maximum and effective mobilization of domestic observers, the structure was decentralized, keeping the EMWG secretariat in Dhaka and establishing two focal points, called Constituency Coordination Committees (CCC), and four coordination committees, called Union Focal Point (UFP), with 12 polling centers under the UFPs. Specific responsibilities for coordination and reporting at the various levels were then assigned. These are broadly;

National Election Monitoring Working Group (EMWG)

- Develop an observation strategy
- Provide guidelines for network levels and observers
- Identify constituency representatives for each organization active in constituency
- Facilitate coordination between member organizations, donors, and international observers
- Prepare and release reports

District Coordination Group (DCG)

- Coordinate at the district level
- Distribute materials

Constituency Coordination Committee (CCC)

- Coordinate deployment
- Identify Union focal points or committees
- Distribute materials to Union
- Aggregate polling and monitoring results and send to CCC

Polling Centre (PC)

- Observer polling and counting
- Aggregate polling and monitoring results and send to UCC

1.b: EMWG Meetings Update:

A total of 16 EMWG meetings and sub-group meetings were held during the reporting period. The main issues/priorities discussed were:

- clarification of the regulations for accreditation.
- recommendations for the EC to approve accreditation at the organizational level and to allow organizations to print their own cards or to distribute group approved cards for a specified number for each organization.
- Network Development: clearly map out how instructions and materials are to be passed down from the EMWG and how observation reports will be passed up to the national level, keeping the structure of the network as simple as possible. It was suggested that forms be sent directly from the constituency level to the national HQ. One of the participants stressed that, to ensure quality, results should come directly from the constituency level.
- Advocate for a process for submitting names of and information about local observers to the Election Commission and issuing accreditation cards to observers at least 20 days before the election.
- Advocate with the CEC to arrange for observers, to be able to cast their own votes through postal ballots like election polling officials.
- Submit regular press briefings describing the objectives of EMWG and the number of organizations involved. Respond to and correct misinformation in the press regarding election monitoring.

1.c: Establishment of BRAC Centre:

To provide a neutral location for the EMWG's weekly coordination meetings, sub-group meetings, and press briefings, The Asia Foundation supported the rental of a coordination office at the BRAC Center. The office was made available daily from August 20 to October 15. A full-time administrative officer was hired by The Asia Foundation to support the EMWG. The officer was present whenever the EMWG office was open. Two additional people seconded from EMWG member organizations worked on media issues and logistics/deployment. The Asia Foundation contracted with the BRAC Center for 24-hour security coverage of the office space (three eight-hour shifts). The security officer was posted just outside the office and requires all visitors, including EMWG members, to sign a logbook.

The office has been equipped with two computers, two UPS, one printer, three fax machines, and one photocopy machine. The Asia Foundation purchased necessary office supplies (copy paper, toner, ink cartridges, pens, stapler, scotch tape, scissors, etc). The Foundation also purchased tea-making facilities (water boiler, thermos, tea, coffee, sugar, etc) as it was less expensive to have in-house tea making facilities rather than to purchase tea from the BRAC Center Inn.

1.d: Observer Guidelines:

A comprehensive election observation manual was developed by the EMWG, spelling out a code of conduct and dos and don'ts to be followed by observers during election day monitoring. The manual included information regarding the Bangladesh election law and proper polling procedures, common irregularities that observers needed to be watching for, and steps to take in the event of violence or other security concerns. The manual included copies of the Polling Booth Observation Form and the Vote Counting Form. It was printed in both English and Bangla.

1.e: EMWG meeting with Chief Advisor:

A seven-member delegation from EMWG met with the Chief Advisor of the caretaker government on August 8, 2001 to discuss several demands, including accreditation of observers by organization, full access to polling booths for observers, reconsideration of the regulation requiring observers to change thanas, a postal system for observers, and recovery of illegal arms.

1.f: TAF Delegation meets the Chief Election Commissioner:

The TAF Representative, Regional Elections Advisor and Program Advisor met twice with the Chief Election Advisor during this quarter to discuss various problems faced by the EMWG member organizations and the process of accreditation. As a result of these meetings, the Chief Election Advisor agreed that the Election Commission would forward all accreditation cards directly to The Asia Foundation for distribution to the EMWG member organizations.

1.g: Challenges:

The EMWG and its network faced a number of challenges, first and foremost the directives of the Election Commission, issued to the District Commissioners (DC) and Returning Officers at the district level, requiring them to scrutinize all observers' applications. In response to these directives, DC and the Returning Officers demanded additional, cumbersome, and non-standard information from applicants, including Secondary School Certificates proving the applicant's age, a certificate from the union or ward chairman establishing character and residency, and two stamp-sized pictures. All organizations (both EMWG and non-EMWG) seeking permission to observe the election face tremendous difficulties fulfilling the last minute requirements set by the DC and/or district Returning Officers. The last minute clearance by the NGO Affairs Bureau also caused civic organizations not yet registered enormous difficulty in deploying observers because grant payments could not be made until approval was received, causing delays in transport, per diem and other program payments.

The most unexpected challenge faced by the EMWG, however, was finding itself bogged down with external issues (politicization, bad press, membership issues) rather than focusing on implementing the monitoring effort.

2. ANFREL

The Asia Foundation re-programmed funds originally designated to support locally recruited Long Term International Observers. Instead, it signed a Letter of Agreement with the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) to support the participation of Asian election observers to promote free and fair elections and strengthen the capacity of ANFREL's local partner, Odhikar, through the provision of technical assistance on election monitoring and reporting. The Asia Foundation believes that both activities will contribute positively to the overall observation effort in Bangladesh. However, due to limited funds, The Asia Foundation is confident that of the two programs, the ANFREL mission will have a greater impact by increasing the number of observers on election-day and providing an Asian perspective that is currently missing from the international observation teams. ANFREL observers are also free from the donor-beneficiary relationship that exists when representatives from Western countries participate in election observation in developing countries, allowing them to more candidly report on observations.

The ANFREL network is composed of member organizations from South and Southeast Asia and has conducted election observation missions in Cambodia, East Timor and Thailand with support from The Asia Foundation and USAID. ANFREL's observers have been drawn from their network of journalists, human rights activists, and election experts. The ANFREL observation mission includes a 25-person election-day monitoring team and technical assistance to Odhikar, ANFREL's local partner. Technical assistance to Odhikar includes training of Odhikar observers and assistance in project implementation.

The Foundation has also signed a letter of agreement with Odhikar for pre-election assessment and mobile monitoring on Election Day. With technical inputs from ANFREL, Odhikar conducted a pre-election assessment of the environment during the caretaker government period by deploying 6 groups of observers for pre-election assessment and distributing pre-election assessment reports to civil society organizations, the media, the Election Commission and other interested groups. It also created a network of election-day monitoring volunteers. They focused on election-day activities in 20 districts and coordinated with the UNDP Secretariat to feed into their deployment strategy to ensure adequate coverage of the country by international observation missions. 280 Odhikar semi-mobile and stationary observers in the same districts in 28 constituencies supplemented the ANFREL election-day mission. To train the observers Odhikar used EMWG's standard training manual.

3. Voter Education

The Foundation has signed a contract with Democracy Watch (DW) for a poster for the award winning slogan against violence "Deshe Ekhon Proyojon, Santrash Mukto Nirbachon" (The country needs a violence free election). The renowned artist Shishir, who works for the national daily Prothom Alo and is a professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, Dhaka, has been commissioned for the design. Democracy Watch is also developing posters for the two other winning slogans and will distribute all three throughout the country using the election-monitoring network. According to Democracy Watch, one poster per 100 voters is required to adequately saturate the countryside and effectively reach voters. This will require 750,000 copies of each poster.

4. Training for Journalists

No activities this quarter. Reprogrammed to election day monitoring.

5. Coordination

The Asia Foundation has continued to keep the donor community informed on developments regarding election-related activities. Minutes from all sixteen EMWG meetings have been shared with donors and monthly update letters were sent in September.

The Asia Foundation has made its facilities available to the Bi-weekly meeting of the Election Monitoring Working Group and prepared and distributed the minutes from those meetings until the BRAC Center was rented in August. After that date, TAF staff provided administrative support to the EMWG. Minutes of their meetings were also distributed by TAF.

Valeria Scott Laitinen, TAF Election Consultant, made a presentation to the LCG/Governance meeting on August 02, 2001 and to the LCG/NGO meeting on September 06, 2001

6. Activities Next Quarter

The Asia Foundation will hire and guide a data manager in compiling data and preparing a consolidated report on Election Day Monitoring from all grantee organizations that participate in the domestic observation team country wide during the 8th National Parliamentary Election.