

# Bangladesh



The Asia Foundation's programs promote fair elections, effectiveness and transparency of the parliament, give policy voice to rural micro enterprise, assist the disadvantaged in accessing justice, build trust between police and communities, engage religious and secular leaders to advance national development efforts, and promote pragmatic dialogue on Bangladesh-India relations. Since 1971, the Foundation donated over 2 million books and journals across the country through its Books for Asia program.



In Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation works with local partners in government, civil society, and the private sector to advance good governance, economic growth, women's rights, public security, and regional dialogue.

## PROMOTING FREE, FAIR, AND SAFE ELECTIONS

Elections are a cornerstone of good governance in Bangladesh, and for most voters, the principal mode of engagement in political affairs. Despite a past record of free and fair elections, further challenges remain to strengthen and safeguard the culture of democracy and ensure the integrity of future elections. With technical assistance from The Asia Foundation, the 32-member Election Working Group (EWG) coalition implements a comprehensive national program for parliamentary and local government elections. EWG program activities facilitate dialogue among the Bangladesh Election Commission, law enforcement agencies, political parties, the media, and civil society to ensure a level playing field, reduce the risk of election violence, promote more substantive election campaigning, and encourage popular demand for enhanced democratic representation and accountability between elections. The EWG also conducts studies on public perception of the present environment and facilitates stakeholder inputs in shaping the electoral and broader governance reform agenda. For the December 2008 parliamentary and following *upazila* (subdistricts) and 2011 Union Parishad

elections, the EWG conducted stationary and mobile monitoring, voter education, and advocacy activities.

## ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS AND TRANSPARENCY OF PARLIAMENT

In the three decades since independence, Bangladesh has made tremendous progress in extending basic infrastructure, social services, and economic opportunities to a population of more than 145 million people. While the economy has grown at a consistent pace for the last decade, the benefits of economic growth have been slow to extend to the population at large. Weak governance has stood as the greatest obstacle to broad-based national development and poverty reduction through a combination of factors that include partisan political tensions and lack of public participation in decision-making. The Asia Foundation is implementing a five-year program on Promoting Democratic Institutions and Practices (PRODIP) in partnership with the State University of New York Center for International Development (SUNY-CID) with support from USAID. PRODIP is designed to improve the effectiveness and transparency of the parliament, while also increasing the constructive participa-



### BANGLADESH

The Asia Foundation has been programming in Bangladesh since 1954.

In 2010-11, the Foundation donated 113,000 books and journals through the Books for Asia program.

Through the LOI program, over 20,000 leaders participated in interfaith dialogues to strengthen traditions of tolerance, diversity, and social harmony.

PRODIP is a five-year, \$23.2 million program launched in 2011 engaging with the policymakers through the Parliament.

tion of civil society in the public policymaking and legislative process. Working closely with the Honorable Speaker of the Parliament, Members of the Parliament, and other international donors, PRODIP will assist Bangladesh's national parliament, the Jatiyo Shangshad (JS), to become more effective, transparent, and participatory by building institutional capacity in the areas of policy development, legislation, oversight, and representation, while focusing activities on Millennium Development Goals (MDG)-related issues. To improve law-making, the project will facilitate colloquia, forums and public hearings; sponsor workshops on policy development and bill drafting; and develop in-house, as well as outside capacity for expert legislative research and policy support.

### **PROMOTING ENHANCED LOCAL ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE**

The Bangladesh private sector has an important role to play in generating income and employment opportunities for the poor. Small and micro enterprises, which represent the largest proportion of private enterprise, face special challenges. Baseline research by The Asia Foundation found that many of the obstacles to the growth potential of rural and small town micro entrepreneurs reflect an unresponsive public sector. National and local government officials' capacity to deliver necessary market reforms is low, and small business owners and the informal associations, or *samities*, that represent them have only limited ability to demand and influence reform initiatives. Foundation programs strengthen the advocacy capacity of business samities to articulate and to demand reforms to the business environment, and assist local government officials to better manage their resources to successfully implement reforms. Additional Foundation programs complement this work by building linkages between national-level economic development institutions and the subnational business community.

### **IMPROVING PUBLIC SECURITY THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED POLICING**

Public security in Bangladesh has deteriorated in recent years, with increases in robbery, extortion, assault and intimidation, violence against women, political conflict, and extremist violence. At the community level, a widening gap in mutual understanding, trust, and communication between police and citizens has further undermined public security. The Asia Foundation has been collaborating with police and citizens since

2004 on this effort at the community level in the Bogra district in the northwest, and Jessore and Madaripur in the south. Building on past experiences, in January 2011, the Foundation launched a new three-year Community-Based Policing (CBP) program with the generous support of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

The goal of this initiative is to continue to work with police and citizens, as well as in collaboration with other international donors, to improve public security through increased citizen-police cooperation. As part of this effort, particular emphasis is being placed on Community Policing Forums (CPFs) in 518 villages and municipalities evenly distributed across all 124 subdistricts in the northwestern Rajshahi and Rangpur Divisions.

### **ENHANCING THE ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Community and civil society leaders can be instrumental in realizing national development goals at the grassroots level. Trusted locally, their knowledge and experience of public affairs in their communities can also serve the critical function of communicating local development needs to government and development practitioners. With funding from USAID, The Asia Foundation began reaching out to influential community leaders in 2004, starting with more than 5,000 Muslim religious leaders. The four-year Leaders of Influence (LOI) program, launched in 2007, grew to include more than 21,000 diverse participants, including Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian leaders as well as imams, local elected officials, community service club members, women and youth leaders, and professionals such as lawyers, doctors, educators, business-people, and journalists. A network of local NGO partners worked to engage these varied groups, and helped to mount a series of orientations and workshops designed to familiarize them with USAID-funded development projects and practices in their communities in areas such as health, education, religious harmony, environmental conservation, and women's empowerment.

In Bangladesh, The Asia Foundation's programs are also conducted with the support of several bilateral and multilateral agencies and diplomatic missions, including the Asian Development Bank, the Australian High Commission, the Canadian International Development Agency, the Royal Danish Embassy, the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the United Kingdom Department for International Development, and the United States Agency for International Development.

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