Elections in Bangladesh
Supporting Civil Society to Strengthen Democratic Processes

A leader in innovative election programming in Bangladesh for nearly 25 years, The Asia Foundation supports civil society efforts in domestic election observation, electoral advocacy, and the use of technology to promote openness and accessibility of electoral information and data.

Bangladesh’s electoral processes have seen significant changes and variation in quality since it became independent in 1971. For much of that time, power has shifted between two main political parties, and increasing polarization has led to an often-volatile pre-election environment. The 2008 parliamentary elections, following two years with a caretaker government, are widely considered the most professional and legitimate elections in the country’s history. The most recent parliamentary elections, held on January 5, 2014, did not meet the same standards; 18 parties boycotted, voting occurred in fewer than 50 percent of constituencies, and final vote counts have yet to be released. High levels of fraud and, in some cases, violence characterized subsequent upazila (sub-district) and city corporation elections. These recent experiences have led to a degradation in the integrity and legitimacy of electoral processes, highlighting the need for strong civil society voices in observing and monitoring the electoral process.

SUPPORTING CIVIL SOCIETY OBSERVATION AND PARTICIPATION IN ELECTIONS

Working with the Election Working Group (EWG), Bangladesh’s largest domestic electoral network, The Asia Foundation provides technical support and training on international best practices for electoral observation. The Foundation has supported EWG to implement scientific sampling techniques in the deployment of observers and, for the first time in Bangladesh, the use of real-time data collection and analysis through SMS technology and online databases. With the Foundation’s assistance, all 28 EWG member organizations have also signed up to the Declaration of Global Principles for Non-Partisan Election Observation & Monitoring by Citizen Organizations.

Such advancements have positioned EWG as the strongest civil society voice on elections in Bangladesh, providing accurate, objective, and timely reporting. EWG successfully deployed 180 Long-
Term Observers six months prior to and for three months following the January 2014 parliamentary elections. These observers provided accurate and timely information, which allowed EWG to publish monthly “Eye on Election” reports, covering the progress of electoral preparations, the post-election environment, and election-related violence. These reports received widespread media coverage, ensuring that an independent voice was heard throughout the contentious pre-election period and in the midst of post-Election Day scrutiny.

EWG also deployed over 16,000 Short-Term Observers in 2014, covering 47 percent of constituencies in the parliamentary election and 46 percent of upazilas in the upazila elections. These observers provided critical election day reports based on objective data, which were an important resource alongside anecdotal reporting from the media and official statements by the election commission, to effectively analyze the credibility of the electoral process.

Voter education initiatives are also vital, ensuring an informed citizenry can take part in the electoral process. Recognizing the importance of working collaboratively, EWG partnered with the election commission in distributing voter education materials – some developed by the commission and some by EWG – for the 2014 voter list update process.

For the 2015 Municipal Elections, in an attempt to better understand what affects voter turnout in Bangladesh, the Foundation supported EWG to carry out a Randomised Controlled Trial using SMS and robo-calls to eligible voters. Treatment groups received a combination of simple reminder messages, messages that appealed to civic duty, and messages delivered by a celebrity encouraging them to vote. The findings provided important insights into maximizing the effectiveness of voter turnout efforts by domestic civil society groups.

STRENGTHENING CITIZEN VOICES ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Citizens’ ability to contribute to and shape a country’s electoral system is critical to ensuring the system’s legitimacy. The Asia Foundation plays an ongoing role in strengthening EWG’s capacity in citizen-led advocacy through training and mentoring. Through its observation activities, workshops, and research projects, EWG identifies and prioritizes key areas of the electoral process in need of reform, and develops effective advocacy activities to seek change. These include identifying groups underrepresented in the voter list, challenges that marginalized groups such as women, persons with disabilities, and ethnic and religious minorities face in participating in the electoral process, and electoral rules and regulations that fail to meet international standards. EWG is able to effectively draw attention to these important issues and plays a critical role in calling for a more inclusive and representative electoral system.
Approximately 2,000 schools and other public institutions are used as polling stations in Dhaka City during elections, however it can be difficult for voters to identify or find the station where they are registered to vote. To address this issue, The Asia Foundation partnered with the local Open Street Map community to collect the geo-locations of the polling stations. Using a mobile data collection application on their phones, 40 young volunteers traversed all of Dhaka in a single day collecting the geo-data along with photos of the locations. The collected data was then visualised onto interactive online maps allowing voters to easily identify their polling station. The data was also made available via an open source application programming interface (API), giving online and mobile developers the opportunity to use the datasets for other purposes. An example of this was the Election Working Group, which used the data to visualize incidents, such as fraud and violence, that occurred on election day.

**HARNESSING TECHNOLOGY FOR THE PROMOTION OF OPEN AND ACCESSIBLE ELECTIONS**

Critical to an inclusive and transparent electoral process is the provision of open and accessible information for all stakeholders. The Asia Foundation has been at the forefront of finding innovative ways of harnessing technology for the promotion of electoral information for voters in Bangladesh. In April 2015, the Foundation hosted the country’s first hackathon for elections. The event brought together more than 90 young programmers who competed for 36 hours to develop mobile and online applications for voters for the 2015 Dhaka and Chittagong City Corporation elections. The applications provided innovative ways for voters to access information, including candidate information, the location of polling stations, and how to vote. The Foundation also supports EWG to harness technology for their work, including the development of standalone websites for the 2015 City Corporation and Municipal elections, as well as for the “Women Count” campaign (all of which are now housed at www.BangladeshElections.org). The Foundation has also made significant investments in developing electoral databases and online mapping visualization tools to support advocacy and research initiatives.
**WOMEN COUNT CAMPAIGN**

In February 2014, the Election Commission of Bangladesh (ECB) released details of the updated voter list, which indicated a significant gender imbalance in newly added voters. Though the 2011 census found gender parity within the population, only 44 percent of newly added voters were women. To understand better, The Asia Foundation downloaded more than 225,000 pdf files detailing the newly added voters from the ECB website, created a dataset to analyze the nature of the gender imbalance, and visualized the data using interactive online maps. In some districts, the gender imbalance was significantly higher than the national figure, with women representing as few as 33 percent of newly added voters in some cases. Using this data and the powerful communication tool that the mapping visualizations provided, the Foundation facilitated the formation of a coalition of more than 35 civil society organizations united around the “Women Count” campaign to increase the number of women included in the next voter list update. The initiative, launched in July 2015, combined a national-level media campaign based around the www.womencountbd.org website with localized voter education campaigns targeted at women in districts with the greatest gender imbalance. By October 2015, the ECB reported that 48 percent of new voters added in the first phase of the 2015 update were women, a significant improvement over the 2014 update.