

How important is the role of election observers?

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THE 1980s and 1990s will be remembered as remarkable decades of political change. Freedom and democracy today echoes across the globe. Eastern Europe has cast off the totalitarian governments, and the republics of former Soviet Union are struggling with a new democratic order. The promise of democracy has mobilized peoples throughout the world. Citizens in country after country have turned their backs on oppressive regimes and embraced more open governments; Africa is experiencing an unprecedented era of democratic reform; and new, dynamic democracies have taken root in Asia.

Like in other parts of the world in Asia also, hundreds of millions of citizens are participating in key part of democratic process selecting their governments through competitive elections. The power and promise of elections in Asia was most dramatically demonstrated by the 1986 presidential election in the Philippines; since then there have been equally important elections held in other countries in Asia. Many of these elections are relatively competitive and they are both a reflection and an important aspect of the ongoing democratization process. In some Asian countries, such as Japan, India, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, multiparty elections are a regular occurrence.

Although there are still many problems with elections in Asia such as including violence, fraud, vote-buying and government interference, but in a number of countries there have been significant reductions in corrupt and unfair electoral practices. The improvements in the quality of elections in Bangladesh, Philippines, Sri Lanka or Nepal and many other countries are attributable in large part to the growing independence and effectiveness of election authorities and the active participation of citizens' groups in election monitoring and voter education.

Developments in election monitoring

The last decade or so has seen at least two important developments in election monitoring. First, election observations have become far more sophisticated, and their scope has expanded to encompass a far wider array of activities than before. The role of the media, political parties,

and election commissions are coming under closer and more systematic scrutiny. Increasing attention is being paid to the accuracy of voter-registration lists, and audits of electoral registries have become the norm rather than the exception. Electoral laws as well as comparing rules are now evaluated in far greater detail than ever before.

The second important development has been the shift in the identity of the key agents who organize election-monitoring activities. Election observation was once almost the exclusive domain of international election observers from intergovernmental, regional or non-governmental organizations. In the last ten years, there has been a surge of interest among the domestic groups in mounting observation efforts in their own countries.

Domestic election observation

In recent years, growing numbers of nonpartisan civic organizations have mobilized citizens to monitor elections in a number of countries particularly in Asia. These organizations are contributing to more open, democratic political systems in two very different ways. First, they are helping to improve the quality and transparency of electoral process, which produces greater public confidence in elections and increases the chances that all sides will accept election results. Second, and perhaps more importantly, elections monitoring motivates citizen involvement in public affairs, which is helping to transform the way citizen view relationship to and participation in politics and governance.

The importance of election in democratic development has prompted citizens in many countries such as Bangladesh to play an increasingly active role in ensuring that elections are competitive and meaningful. To help make certain that elections are free and fair, they have either established new nonpartisan NGOs or expanded the mission of the existing NGOs to include election monitoring. The largest and the best known of these election monitoring organizations (EMOs) is the Philippines-based National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), which was formed in 1983. If one looks carefully during the last decade domestic EMOs surfaced in variety of different countries starting from Albania to Zambia (A-Z) and played

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very important roles.

This important recent development in international electoral trend in widespread acceptance of the contribution of domestic nonpartisan election monitors is helping ensuring free and fair elections. Election observers from nonpartisan civic organizations in most cases are more interested in the process than the outcome of an election. Consequently, if nonpartisan civic organization develop an effective monitoring apparatus, their evaluation of an election process will be considered more reliable than one offered by government dominated election commission or by a party contesting the election. Moreover, domestic monitoring groups provide a neutral vehicle for organizing and engaging sectors of society that are otherwise unwilling or afraid to assume a partisan role in an election process.

International versus domestic observation

International election observers whether intergovernmental, government or non-governmental do play constructive role in holding of a free and fair election. But according to current experience they are more effective when there is a well-established network of domestic monitors.

Although international election observers when present in a country also act as poll watchers, they typically do not remain at a given polling station throughout the election day. Moreover, unlike the international observers, domestic groups are intimately familiar with the language, culture and political situation and can mobilize enough people to monitor a large and meaningful number of polling stations.

Election monitoring: A case study of Bangladesh

Electoral history of Bangladesh is not a happy one. Past elections were sometimes blatantly rigged and marked by booth capturing, ballot stuffing, political interference, violence, intimidation and even manipulation of results. The mis-

trust and suspicion among the political players were so deep that it became necessary to install a non-stakeholder caretaker government to ensure holding of free and fair elections. The 1991 and June 1996 elections held under a non-partisan interim or caretaker government have been generally considered to be free and fair.

The concept of independent poll monitoring is not new in Bangladesh and is being promoted since 1990. For all the attendant benefits of election monitoring, the Election Commission recognized the need for election monitoring and invited international observers during the 1991 general elections. Although credentials were issued to international observers only during the 1991 general elections, the domestic observers which reached a high water mark during the 1996 June general elections when large number of election observers, both domestic and international were accredited.

FEMA, which undertook a comprehensive election-monitoring programme, fielded over 30,000 election observers on the election day. Election monitoring by FEMA served a variety of functions in promoting free and fair elections. The presence of election observers at the polling centers not only discouraged frauds, but also inspired confidence in the citizens who might otherwise have been hesitant to vote of fear for personal safety. The unprecedented high voter turnout in 1996 election (more than 74%) is a reflection of the confidence in the electoral process and it was largely due to the work by the civic organizations like FEMA.

The election monitoring groups admittedly played an important role in the acceptance of the outcome of the elections by the contesting parties both during the 1991 and June 1996 elections.

Challenges for EMOs

There are several issues and concerns that EMOs have to address to be able to successfully undertake election monitoring. Starting from

key organizational issues such as creating an appropriate organizational structure, establishing realistic goals, and mobilizing human, financial and other resources to getting accreditation from the authorities. While these are very important issues, the following are the most critical ones:

Developing and maintaining nonpartisanship

Establishing and maintaining a reputation for nonpartisanship is essential to the success of an EMO's election monitoring effort. Like all EMOs, FEMA had to face the challenge of demonstrating nonpartisanship to the government, political parties and the public. Attaining this neutral status involved maintaining both the reality and the perception of nonpartisanship. To achieve it, FEMA exercised utmost care in selecting their volunteers and made it compulsory to undergo intensive training including signing an oath of nonpartisanship and binding all FEMA volunteers to a code of conduct. Further, should the parties or candidates raise valid objections about nonpartisanship of any volunteers, s/he was removed by FEMA.

Building credibility

The critics of election monitoring often accuse EMOs of bias and incompetence. Therefore, in addition to demonstrating nonpartisanship, EMOs face the challenge to establish and maintain their credibility. The EMO must demonstrate that it has the depth of understanding of the intricate issues involved in election process. Secondly, the EMO should involve credible organizations and individuals representing the various segments of the civil society. Thirdly, the EMO must be transparent, objective and free from bias so that in public esteem it is deemed to be a credible organization. The involvement of respected citizens in FEMA helped establish credibility. It made all its decision open for scrutiny by government, political parties, the media and the public. These and other elements can be proactively focused through the media to establish and enhance the credibility of the EMO.

democratic development that both, by their activities, should earn credibility and build a relationship of mutual trust and respect." The chances of relatively more collaborative relationship increase as both organizations grow more credible and sophisticated.

Election Commissions can benefit as they can use the advocacy role of EMOs for electoral reform to secure more independence and authority from the government. Election Commissions may turn of EMOs to train election officials, polling agents and to assist with the government sponsored voter education campaigns. Through this process Election Commissions often become allies

with EMOs.

Ultimately the credibility of an election monitoring organisation (EMO) is measured by the degree of confidence that the government, the contestants and the public have in the integrity of the election monitoring effort and the accuracy of the EMO's findings. Establishing trust and mutual respect among the key actors is not only desirable but an important element for holding of genuine democratic elections.

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Excerpts from HRC Report and cartoon strips are held over for tomorrow



All health information to keep you up to date

Aged first

The fear of falling

Falling or the fear of falling, is one of the most common problems that plagues people as they age. While growing older has its benefits, better balance is not one of them. If you often find yourself struggling to stay upright, check the following Do's and Don'ts:

First, see your doctor to make sure you don't have underlying medical conditions, such as heart or eye problems, which could be contributing to your wobbly woes. Proper treatment may solve your balance problems. Be sure to ask your doctor if any medicines you're taking could cause dizziness or otherwise raise your risk of falls. A regular exercise programme will build and maintain your strength and flexibility so you can keep your balance better.

Small act, big fact

Human milk is a clean source of water in early infancy. It protection is highest in the new born via colostrum. Human milk actively provides protection against infectious diarrhoea in early infancy.

Human milk kills parasitic intestinal protozoa. Experiments have shown that parasites like Giardia lamblia and Entamoeba histolytica are rapidly killed by human milk. Hence:

- = Breast feed from birth to ensure intake of colostrum.
- = Breast feed alone in early infancy.
- = Introduce other foods only when benefits outweigh risks.
- = Positively avoid bottle feeding as a hospital policy.
- = Support breast feeding and minimize bottle feeding as a part of national nutrition, health and development policies.
- = Introduction of foods other than human milk should be avoided until really indicated.

Next: Around the world.