



ANFREL statement on the termination of its mission in Bangladesh

Bangkok, Thailand
December 23, 2018

The Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) expresses dismay with the manner in which the Bangladesh authorities have handled the accreditation application process for domestic and international election observers in Bangladesh's 11th General Elections (*Jatiya Sangsad*) to occur on December 30, 2018. While the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) has taken initiatives to welcome intergovernmental organizations¹, non-governmental organizations such as the ANFREL and several domestic monitoring groups either faced significant delays in their accreditation or were barred altogether from monitoring the upcoming elections. Together with the BEC, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) also took part in the assessment of accreditation applications.

Due to significant delays in the accreditation approval by the BEC and visa approvals by the MoFA, ANFREL is forced to terminate its observation mission in Bangladesh on December 22. ANFREL formally requested accreditation for the elections as early as November 4, 2018 and submitted all necessary accreditation requirements to the BEC by November 26, 2018. As of December 21, 2018, a mere nine days before the elections, ANFREL was granted accreditation for only 13 of its observers out of the 32 applications it submitted. We regret that this situation hindered us from directly working with the Bangladesh election stakeholders, which ANFREL has been looking forward to.

ANFREL is among the endorsers of the Declaration of Principles and Code of Conduct for International Election Observers (DOP).² DOP endorsers are expected to uphold and advocate the principles of total impartiality, independence, and freedom of movement and full access to information, in all stages of the elections. The DOP also states that countries should issue an invitation or otherwise indicate their willingness to accept international election observation missions "in accordance with each organization's requirements sufficiently in advance of elections to allow analysis of all of the processes that are important to organizing genuine democratic elections." With ANFREL's withdrawal, no DOP-endorsing organizations will monitor the upcoming elections in Bangladesh.

ANFREL also is concerned with the high number of domestic election observers that have not received accreditation. It has been reported that there are only 34,838 observers who have expressed interest to participate as of December 19.³ A BEC official relayed that of this number, only around 26,000 observers will be granted accreditations.⁴ The 2018 elections marks the second lowest number of observers in two decades, just behind 2014 elections where

¹ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/11/26/ec-takes-initiative-to-include-foreign-observers>

² https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1923_declaration_102705_0.pdf

³ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/19/11th-general-election-fewer-observers-than-2008-polls>

⁴ <https://www.jagonews24.com/en/national/news/42949>

only 8,878 domestic observers and 4 foreign observers participated.⁵ In comparison, there were around 159,000 observers for the 2008 elections, and 218,000 in 2001⁶. All election stakeholders should therefore endeavor to encourage participation of observers in future elections.

Unfortunately, other member organizations of the Global Network of Domestic Election Monitors (GNDEM)⁷ also have been denied accreditation by the BEC due to allegations of partisanship or their association with human rights groups and independent election monitoring networks.⁸ The presence of election observers is a crucial indicator of the level of transparency and public confidence in the elections. Placing hurdles for observers to access information, restricting their movement, and hindering them from performing their mandate to promote democratic practices calls into question the sincerity of the Bangladesh authorities to hold transparent elections. We condemn all actions which impede the freedoms of civil society organizations.

With ANFREL's withdrawal, the organization registers its doubts regarding the integrity of the elections, especially with the reports on civil society restrictions⁹ and arrest of numerous opposition members¹⁰. With the absence of foreign monitoring organizations, the very important task of documenting and assessing the the conduct of elections falls solely on the shoulders of domestic organizations. These are organizations operating in an extremely repressive political environment that is not conducive to free civil society activities. ANFREL extends our solidarity with the Bangladeshi civil society actors as they bravely perform their duties, especially in this tense campaign. We express support in their advocacy to achieve truly participatory and inclusive political processes in Bangladesh.

Genuinely democratic electoral processes place a premium on human rights. ANFREL calls on all domestic stakeholders to collectively ensure secure and peaceful elections, using every opportunity to mitigate violence -- no matter the outcome of the election. We ask the Bangladesh Government and the BEC to enforce the rule of law impartially and to ensure the safety and security of all electoral stakeholders. Furthermore, ANFREL calls on the political parties to abide by a code of conduct which befit the dignity of future leaders.

Finally, ANFREL calls on the international community to monitor the welfare of election observers and civil society actors in Bangladesh. ANFREL hopes that Bangladesh electoral and civil society organizations will not be sidelined and that the restrictive environment in which they operate will be addressed and remedied.

For further information, please contact anfrel@anfrel.org.

⁵ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/19/11th-general-election-fewer-observers-than-2008-polls>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://gndem.org/>

⁸ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/election/2018/12/19/11th-general-election-fewer-observers-than-2008-polls>

⁹ <https://www.forum-asia.org/?p=27295>

¹⁰ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/12/13/bangladesh-crackdown-elections-loom>



This statement is endorsed by:

Asian Democracy Network (ADN)

Asian Human Rights Commission
(AHRC)

Perkumpulan untuk Pemilu dan
Demokrasi (Perludem), Indonesia

Free and Fair Elections Forum of
Afghanistan (FEFA), Afghanistan

Open Forum for Democracy
Foundation (PNET), Thailand

Center for Monitoring Election
Violence (CMEV), Sri Lanka

Komite Independen Pemantau
Pemilu (KIPP), Indonesia

Institute for Political and Electoral
Reforms (IPER), Philippines

Committee for Free and Fair
Elections in Cambodia (Comfrel),
Cambodia

Free and Fair Election Network
(FAFEN), Pakistan

People's Action for Free and Fair
Elections (PAFFREL), Sri Lanka

Taiwan Asian Network for Free
Elections (TANFREL), Taiwan

National Election Observation
Committee (NEOC), Nepal

Transparent Election Foundation of
Afghanistan (TEFA), Afghanistan

People's Alliance for Credible
Elections (PACE), Myanmar

Neutral and Impartial Committee for
Free and Fair Elections, Cambodia

Jaringan Pendidikan Pemilih untuk
Rakyat (JPPR), Indonesia

Transparency International -
Maldives (TI-M), Maldives