

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM VOTER SURVEY

FORECASTING ATTITUDES IN BANGLADESH

by Mary Lou Schramm

Within the past 30 years as an independent state, Bangladesh has experienced assassinations, imposition of martial law, crippling protests, and political stalemate between ruling and opposition parties. The current political arena is dominated by on-going conflict between the government, headed by the Awami League, and the Opposition Alliance, a coalition led by the largest opposition party, the Bangladesh National Party. One consequence is that the Jatiya Sangsad (National Parliament), is boycotted by the opposition and unable to function effectively. Hartals, or national strikes, are an often-used political maneuver. These stop nearly all movement in the country. In the midst of political battles, many believe that vital issues now facing Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest and most densely populated countries, may be left unresolved, and the development of the country may be a casualty of the fight.



In order to better ascertain popular attitudes toward the political and economic system in Bangladesh and to disseminate this information widely, IFES conducted a national survey of the Bangladeshi voting population. The survey sampled the rural and urban voting age population in November and December 2000. The rationale: scientifically reliable survey findings highlight the needs and opinions of Bangladeshi voters and identifies the basis from which they will choose a candidate in the elections scheduled for late 2001. Because pre-testing showed that many rural voters were generally unaware of the function of Parliament, the survey questionnaire was modified slightly in rural areas to focus on local issues. The survey shows that most Bangladeshis:

- *Think that development should be the foremost concern for leaders.* Most respondents feel that improving roads and communications, increasing literacy and educational opportunities, and establishing industries and employment opportunities, irrigation, and access to electricity should be national priorities for their leaders.
- *State that politicians do not spend enough time on contemporary problems.* Seventy-one percent of rural and urban respondents agree with the statement that, "Politicians spend too much time on past events...and not enough time on the problems of the present."
- *Support elections for officials at all levels of government.* Both rural and urban Bangladeshis overwhelmingly support electing officials at all levels of government: village level (96% rural, 94% urban), union parishad level (98% rural, 96% urban), upazilla/thana parishad (93% rural, 92% urban), and district parishad (90% rural and urban).
- *Feel that women should be elected-not appointed-to seats reserved for women in Parliament.* Seventy-six percent of urban respondents support reserved seats in Parliament for women. Most of these respondents (88%) think women should be elected, not appointed to these seats. Rural respondents on the survey were not asked this question.
- *Feel Parliament should make these issues top priority:* economic development, law and order, unemployment, education, and economic stability.
- *Oppose hartals (strikes) and boycotts.* A majority of rural and urban respondents is against the use of strikes and work stoppages. A larger majority is against the boycott of Parliament by political parties. A plurality of respondents is against both these actions.
- *Believe that corruption is a problem.* Both rural and urban respondents state that official corruption is a common problem in Bangladesh, particularly among the police, where the majority of respondents indicate corruption is a serious problem.
- *Strongly support human and civil rights.* Strong majorities of both urban and rural respondents support the protection of human and civil rights, including the right to honest elections held regularly, equal treatment of women by law, freedom of religion, the right to criticize the government publicly, and the right to choose from several candidates when voting.

IFES will present the survey findings at briefings in Bangladesh in November. IFES will also conduct workshops to orient research groups to work with the data. This will contribute to the goal of the survey to increase the recognition and future use of such data in the social and political work underway in Bangladesh.

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