

## Reckoning with the People

# IFES to Undertake Survey in Bangladesh

by Thomas Carson, Ph.D.

The current political arena in Bangladesh is as heated as its greenhouse climate. Ongoing conflict between the current government, headed by the Awami League, and the Opposition Alliance, a coalition led by the Bangladesh National Party (the country's largest opposition party), dominates the political scene. One consequence is that the National Parliament (*Jatiya Sangha*) is boycotted by the opposition and unable to function effectively. National strikes (*Hartals*) are another often-used political maneuver. These close down traffic and bring nearly all movement to a standstill.

To be fair, the current government, when it was in opposition, and the Opposition Alliance both used parliamentary boycotts and national strikes as strategy. Yet, in the midst of the political battle, many believe that vital issues now facing Bangladesh, one of the world's poorest and most densely populated countries, may be left unresolved. Further, the development of the country may be a causal-ity of the fight.

Decades ago, George Gallup, a name synonymous with the development of opinion research, argued that surveys of the public's opinion broaden democracy by enabling citizen's voices to be "reckoned with" in political decisionmaking. This holds true in Bangladesh as well. Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) active in the country have stressed this point, stating that no methodologically sound and generally accepted body of data exists from which politicians and activists can determine public preferences for policy and governance. In the absence of countervailing data, political parties appear to have a free hand to set the scope and course of political discourse.

As Bangladesh heads to its next general elections, set to occur in 2001, symbolic issues and historical events dominate politics, according to many analysts. Debate is framed in the context of who and where one was during the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan, the 1971 emergence of the independent state of Bangladesh, and the 1975 assassination of Bangladesh's founder, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. What is missing, many argue, is a focus on the issues of the present. The 2000 IFES National Survey of Bangladesh is designed to meet this need.

The main task of this scientifically valid survey is to provide results that can be taken to political party leaders; to document policy preferences; and issue stands held by the public. The questionnaire uses a standard social-political module already fielded by IFES in many developing and transitional countries across the world. This module allows comparisons across systems. Alongside this, IFES is working intently with donors and NGOs in Bangladesh to point the survey toward the country's specific needs.

Selected topics include:

- Development activities: needs assessments at both rural and national levels; problems facing development; relative role of institutions involved in development; performance of local and national governments in activities to develop Bangladesh.
- Assessment of politics: description of the political situation; perception of differences between parties; evaluation of the reason for and effect of interparty conflict; support for strategies used in political conflict.
- Issue preferences: the issues Parliament should address in session; most important national and regional problems and issues; evaluations of progress made in programs over a time spanning the last two governments.
- Electoral behavior: what issues candidates should address; reasons for voting/not voting; decisions in choosing candidates or parties.

The survey faces unique challenges as well. Between 70 and 80 percent of the country's population live in rural settings. Functional literacy, beyond recognition of signs and the ability to sign one's name, is estimated at 25 percent. To counter this, two nearly parallel national surveys are developed. The rural ver-

sion (N=1000) is oriented toward events and developments in the districts in which the rural respondents live. This questionnaire tests understanding of matters relating to national institutions. One question, for example, might involve whether or not the respondent is aware that a particular minister represents them in parliament. The urban version (N=1000) focuses on the national issues. Although these versions are essentially parallel, the frame of reference is altered somewhat for the purpose of orienting the rural or urban respondents toward matters both immediately recognizable and of greatest concern to them.

An additional goal of this project is to increase the recognition and future use of such data in the social and political work under way in Bangladesh. Regional workshops are being planned to discuss and distribute results. These will be available in an accessible format, and training will enable groups to work with them. Combined with the efforts of civil society organizations and political parties, this information will enable the people of Bangladesh to have a concerted voice in political decision-making. □

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*Thomas Carson has worked on projects including the 1999 IFES Belarus National Survey and the 1998 and 2000 IFES studies in Armenia. In 1997, he designed and implemented the OSCE's Media Monitoring Program in Bosnia & Herzegovina, and he was a coordinator/methodologist of regional research in East Europe for the Gallup Organization from 1996-97.*