

List of Suggestions

During the course of our observations a number of practical points occurred to us, which the Election Commission may wish to consider. These are listed below.

We are hopeful that the Election Commission will co-ordinate a post-election appraisal exercise and use the period before the next general election to enhance the impressive system created during this election. In that context, we offer the following points for possible consideration in that process:

- The Code of Conduct has proved to be highly effective in regulating the conduct of political parties and candidates, and its success could be built on for the future. In particular, consideration might be given to:
 - strengthening the system of Electoral Enquiry Committees;
 - providing further measures to remove all forms of party influence from the polling centre (posters, party booths, party agents speaking to voters, crowds of party supporters, etc).
- Consideration might be given to increasing penalties for breaches of election laws and the Code of Conduct by providing for summary and expeditious action against offenders (possibly including disqualification of persistently offending candidates).
- A review might be conducted of the system whereby a candidate may stand for election in more than one parliamentary constituency.
- The Election Commission could consider issuing identification cards to all voters, including the homeless, in order to extend the franchise to all eligible citizens and to prevent abuse of the electoral system.
- The Election Commission might consider putting in place a continuing programme of voter education, for the general public and in schools.
- Steps might be taken to clearly identify polling officials and party agents as such.
- In making decisions regarding facilities that would be used as polling centres consideration should be given to improving access to the premises and the need to put in place appropriate physical arrangements for the conduct of voting.
- A more secure method for the sealing of ballot boxes could be devised, including the use of numbered seals.
- The arrangements for tendered ballots might be improved to ensure that all who are entitled have the opportunity to vote.
- Domestic observers played an important role in the elections: consideration could therefore be given to further procedures to facilitate their participation in election preparations.
- To ensure a secure environment at polling centres further training might be given to the security forces in crowd control.

Summary of Conclusions

The main conclusions emerging from the body of this Report are as follows:

- The conditions existed for a free expression of will by the voters and the results reflected the wishes of the people of Bangladesh. Overall this was a credible election.
- There was no evidence of abuse of the electoral process on a scale or of a nature as to affect the integrity of the process and, although there were shortcomings, the validity of the outcome was not affected.
- The secrecy of the ballot was assured, the election procedures were generally well understood and properly followed and the vast majority of voters were able to exercise their franchise freely.
- The voters should be congratulated for their patience and for their high turnout, which confirmed their strong support for the election and the democratic process. In particular we welcome the extensive participation of women.
- The Caretaker Government should be commended for its success in providing conditions in which a credible election could be held.
- The remarkable performance of the Election Commission and its officials should be acknowledged. It was a considerable achievement to organise an election on this scale in two months.
- In general, security arrangements for both the poll and the count were appropriate and the security forces played an effective and positive role.
- The political parties were given access to the broadcast media, whose coverage was generally balanced, and the Press permitted the expression of a wide range of political views.
- The Code of Conduct helped to ensure that the political parties and candidates for the most part conducted themselves responsibly.
- We were impressed by the domestic election observers, who we believe played an important part in the election process.

Acknowledgements

Our thanks go first to the people of Bangladesh for all their assistance to our Group, without which our mission could not have been accomplished. We also wish to acknowledge the many personal kindnesses extended to us. We were deeply touched by the warm reception we received in every region of the country.

We are grateful to the Government of Bangladesh and the Election Commission for their assistance, and in particular to President Abdur Rahman Biswas, Chief Adviser Justice (Retd) Habibur Rahman and Chief Election Commissioner Mr Mohammad Abu Hena for finding time to welcome us personally. We received valuable co-operation from Mr Ashfaqur Rahman and his team at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Divisional Commissioners, Deputy Commissioners, election officials, senior officers of the security forces and representatives of the political parties.

We wish to express our appreciation to members of the diplomatic corps, non-governmental organisations, representatives of the media and other international observer groups for their assistance. We also wish to thank the domestic observers of both FEMA and CCHRB for their support. Special thanks must go to our interpreters and drivers who worked especially long hours.

We would also like to pay tribute to the members of the Commonwealth Secretariat support staff for their unfailing energy, resourcefulness and patience and for working day and night to ensure the success of the mission.

Finally, we wish to place on record our thanks to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, for his guidance and for giving us this opportunity to serve the people of Bangladesh, the cause of democracy and the Commonwealth.