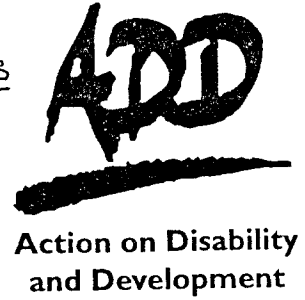


Working with disabled people for positive change

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The Press Conference Statement by ADD on The Election Observation 2001 by the People with Disability

Venue: Pan Pacific Hotel Sonargaon, Date: 11 October 2001, 3:00 p.m.

Dear Reporters, Respected Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, on behalf of Action on Disability and Development (ADD), I have the privilege of welcoming you to the Press Conference on the Election Observation - 2001 by the people with disability.

ADD, a UK based development agency operating in 13 countries of Asia and Africa, is committed to safeguard, promote the interests of the disabled people and to empower them to participate in the political and democratic processes. In Bangladesh ADD is working in 5 districts with disabled people and their organizations. ADD-Bangladesh assists people with disabilities to organize themselves to take control of their lives and to contribute positively to the societies they live in.

We are proud to declare that this is for the first time in Bangladesh and second in the world history that disabled people have observed National Parliamentary Elections. ADD is one of the members of Election Monitoring Working Group (EMWG), a 29-member organization.

ADD has deployed 360 disabled people to observe the elections in 18 constituencies under Kushtia, Natore, Dhaka, Bogra and Magura districts. ADD has recruited representatives of a cross-section of local and national level organizations of disabled people and NGOs in the respective areas.

The observing constituencies are: Kushtia -1, 2, 3, & 4, Bogra -2, 4, & 6, Magura -1, 2, Natore -1, 2, 3, 4 and Dhaka - 5, 6, 9, 10, 11. We are confident that with the ADD 's initiatives in election observation, disabled people had played a significant role in helping to foster democracy at a sensitive and delicate juncture.

Given the significance of the election for the democratic future of Bangladesh, it is interesting that the election has attracted overwhelming national and international attention. Among the large number of domestic observers, existence of observers with disabilities have been welcomed by Election Commission, the Care Taker Government as well as major political parties and civil society organizations.

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The main purpose of the observation is to watch and ensure that the election is held in a free, fair and peaceful manner. Our role is to prepare a report on election observation and disseminate the findings to the Election Commission and all concerned authorities. Besides, making sure that disabled people have indeed exercised their franchise in the 8th Parliament Election.

The overall election situation, according to the observers with disabilities in 5 districts, is free, fair and neutral. The election environment was peaceful except some sporadic incidents of mismanagement, voter intimidation and fake votes.

Participation of both male and female voters was unprecedented and spontaneous. Although the participation of women voters was very high, they faced hardship to cast the vote for the poor arrangement of the polling centers, as they had to wait for hours in the long queues.

It is imperative to mention that the deployment of the armed forces, recovery of the illegal arms and seizure of licensed arms before the election was an effective initiative of the Care Taker Government for holding the election peacefully. These measures reduced the possibilities of violence that was widely speculated before the Election Day.

The Presiding Officers welcomed the disabled observers to observe the voting process but in the counting process, many of them were not allowed to be present. We believe that the presence of the observers in the counting process could increase the transparency of the election results.

Along with the observation of free and fair election, the disabled observers also checked for the barriers faced by the disabled people to exercise their voting rights. The findings by ADD observers can be summed up as follows:

Disabled voters were given priorities in the voting queue. The visually or hearing impaired people were allowed to exercise their right to franchise with the help of their chosen assistants. The Election Commission was obviously most considerate to the special need of disabled people and ensured their participation in relative ease.

Large number of male and female disabled voters turned out at various polling centers. The participation of disabled voters in this election increased than the past elections because of the public awareness programme on disabled peoples voting rights undertaken by ADD and Ministry of Social Welfare and Election Commission. The media deserve the pride of such a commendable work.

Polling centers in the rural areas were mostly on the ground floor. Unfortunately, some polling centers in the urban areas were quite inaccessible. Eighty per cent of the polling booths in urban areas were on the first and second floor of public schools and colleges. This created barriers for disabled voters to give their vote.

However, cooperation of the Presiding Officers was remarkable. They were generally orientated on the disability issues and vote giving procedure by the visually impaired people, though some Polling Officers did not appear to be much clear about the rights of disabled voters. One Polling Officer in Udayan School, Dhaka wanted to give vote for visually impaired person that obviously mean the violation of the election rule.

Even though it is a common phenomenon that people with disability are teased by the people of the society about their disabilities, the disabled observers reported that this attitude did not prevail at the polling centers. At least 82% observers felt welcome and appreciated by officers on duties and other voters and encouraged by their families and communities.

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Although no political parties included disability issues in their manifesto and there were no disabled candidate stands for the election, domestic and international observers included disability issue in their observations. Overall participation of the disabled people as observers itself brought the focus on the disability issue in the 8th Parliament Election.

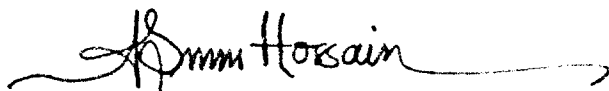
Disabled People's involvement with the election exercise in direct and positive manner has been most rewarding in more than one sense. This afforded the disabled people a sense of self-confidence and a valuable experience in a mainstream national activity.

This, we firmly believe, will set an exemplary trend for the disabled people in Bangladesh as well as in other countries where ADD is operating, to strive for greater achievements and to seek to realize their common and cherished objectives.

We at ADD and disabled observers in Bangladesh would like to give the Election Commission a vote of thanks for organizing and ensuring a peaceful, well arranged National Election all over the country. The citizen of Bangladesh will ever be benefited from the free exercise of their rights to choose their representatives.

Distinguished Journalists, you will be remembered for your meaningful contribution in implementing election observation and promoting electoral participation of citizens with disabilities in Bangladesh.

Thanking you,



A.S.M. Mosharraf Hossain
Program Manager
Action on Disability and Development (ADD)