

**Advocating for inclusive electoral processes, for
minority rights and for rule of law in South Asia:**

Situation Report Bangladesh



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Electoral process of Bangladesh: How inclusive is it?

1.0 Introduction

Winston Churchill once said: “Many forms of Government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise. Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

Representative democracy, as is practiced today, is not the most ideal system because it has many ‘deficits’. Such deficits include, among others: lack of effective citizen participation, lack of transparency and accountability of elected representatives, and lack of inclusiveness of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. This report examines the electoral laws, processes and practices of Bangladesh to determine their inclusiveness character, or lack thereof, especially with regard to women, minorities and disadvantaged groups.

The report begins with the identification of the minorities and other disadvantaged groups. It then reviews the electoral laws, processes and practices to determine whether they actually uphold or trample the rights of such groups with respect to elections. It specifically examines *The Representation of People Order, 1972*, as amended in 2009, and the other relevant local government statutes to identify the provisions intended to include minorities and vulnerable groups. The report particularly focuses on the status of women, ethnic and religious minorities, and other marginalized groups, including nationals living abroad and physically disabled persons, in the electoral process and practices.

The report also lists the organizations and entities that raise their voices for and against the inclusion of minorities and vulnerable groups in the electoral process. It further identifies organizations that promote reforms to achieve inclusions of such groups and the successes, if any, achieved. In a nutshell, the report is intended to give a strong working knowledge of the status of women and minorities with respect to electoral processes and practices in Bangladesh in order to help design future interventions.

2.0 Minorities and Disadvantaged Groups

In Bangladesh, the census is held every 10 years, with the last one completed a few months ago. Hence the detailed information from the latest census is not yet available. However, data for the distribution of population for the year 2004 is available from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

According to the preliminary statistics available from the 2011 Population Census, Bangladesh currently has a population of over 142 million, of which 71.3 million are male and 71.1 million are female. Thus, women constitute roughly half of Bangladesh’s population.

Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country and the population data, updated by BSS for 2004, shows that 89.52 percent of the country’s population is Muslim, and the remaining 10.48 percent consist of religious and ethnic minorities. Of the minorities, the Hindus are the largest group with 9.58 percent of the population. The Buddhists are the third largest group with 0.46 percent, and the Christian the fourth largest group with only 0.26 percent of the

population. Nearly 600,000 Christians live in Bangladesh. However, the Muslims and the Hindus account for about 99 percent of Bangladesh's population.

There are also several small factions within the Muslim population – they are the Biharis, the Ahmadiyyas, Ismailis, Shias, Memons etc. The Ahmadiyyas are about 100,000 in number. The Bihari population, on the other hand, is about 800,000. Other factions are relatively small. It may be noted that Biharis mostly migrated from Bihar to Pakistan after partition, except those employed by the British, whereas the Ahmadiyyas are mostly local Bengalis.

Table 1
Distribution of Population of Bangladesh

Population	2004	2011 Census
Total	136.7 million	142.3 million
Bengalis	98%	NA
Adivashis, Biharis and others	02%	NA
Male	70.1 million	71.3 million
Female	66.6 million (sex ratio 100:105.2)	71.1 million (100.0:100.0)
Muslims	89.52%	
Hindus	9.58%	
Buddhist	0.46%	
Christian	0.26%	
Others	0.17%	

Source:

www.bbs.gov.bd/WebTestApplication/userfiles/Image/SubjectMatterDataIndex/datasheet.xls

Relative to the total population, Bangladesh has a fairly small Adivashi or indigenous population. By some estimates, more than 2 million Adivashis live in several districts of Bangladesh. However, about a third of them live in three districts – Khagrachori, Bandarban and Rangamati – of Chittagong Hill Tracts. Other districts with a concentration of Adivashi population are: Sylhet (19 percent), Rajshahi (11 percent), Dinajpur (6 percent), Mymensingh (6.8 percent). In addition, 10,000-50,000 Adivashis live in Rangpur, Bogra, Natore, Khulna, Tangail, Jamalpur, Sherpur, Netrokona, Sunamganj and Chittagong districts.¹

The Adivashis or small communities of Bangladesh belong to mainly three religions: Buddhists (43.7 percent), Hindus (24.1 percent) Christians (13.2 percent) and others 19 percent. According to Philip Gain, although government census estimates the number of ethnic communities in 1991 as only 27, the ethnic communities themselves estimate the number to be more than 45.² Mohammad Rafi, on the other hand, identified 73 small ethnic groups. However, Gain estimates the ethnic group number to be around 90, who live in both plain land and in hill areas.

Based on the research by Philip Gain, Adivashis living in Chittagong Hill Tracts include: 1. Bawm, 2. Chakma, 3. Marma, 4. Tripura, 5. Chak, 6. Khyang, 7. Lushai, 8. Pangkho/Panghu, 9. Tanchangya, 10. Mru, and 11. Khumi. Those living in Northwestern region include: 12.

¹ Bangladesh Asiatic Society, *Adivashi Jonogosthi*, Dhaka, 2007.

² Philip Gain (ed.), *Survival of the Fringe: Adivasis of Bangladesh* [Dhaka: Society for Environment and Human Development (SHED), 2011].

Paharia, 13. Bongshi/Rajbangshi, 14. Santal, 15. Oraon, 16. Mahato, 17. Buna, 18. and Munda. Those living in North-central region include: 19. Garo, 20. Koch, and 21. Hajong. Those living in Northeastern region include: 22. Khasi, and Monipuri. In Coastal region, 23. Rakhaines live.³

However, Bangladesh has historically refused to recognize the Adivashis. According to the Fifteenth Constitutional Amendment passed last June, “The People of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangalees as a nation and the citizens of Bangladesh shall be known as Bangladeshies” [Article 6(2)]. However, in Article 23A, the new Amendment states, “The State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities.”

There are also a significant number of physically disadvantaged groups. By some estimates, about 10 percent of Bangladesh’s population has some form of disability.

3.0 Electoral Laws, Processes and Practices

Neither the Bangladesh Constitution nor any other statute provides for reserved seats for religious minorities, ethnic groups or the physically handicapped in national or local elections. However, there has been a system of reservation for women both at national and local levels since independence.

3.1 Legal Provisions for Representation of Women

Both the Constitution and the Bangladesh legal code have provisions requiring reserved seats for women. Such requirements are applicable to both the Parliament and local bodies. Specific legal provisions for women’s reserve seats are presented in the Table below.

Table 2
Legal Provisions for Women in the Electoral Process

	Constitution	Statues	Others
Natio nal Electi ons	The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution increased the reserve seats for women in Bangladesh Parliament from 45 to 50. As in the past, these seats are to be filled through indirect	<i>The Representation of the People Order, 1971</i> , amended as of 2009, provides for registration of political parties under the Election Commission, subject to certain conditions. One of the conditions of the registration is that political parties, by 2020, must have 33% representation in all their committees, including the central committee.	The election manifesto of the ruling Awami League published before the Ninth Parliament

³ Gain also identified the following little-know small ethnic communities: 1. Asami, 2. Baday, 3. Bagdi, 4. Banai, 5. Bangli, 6. Barman, 7. Bauri, 8. Bedia, 9. Been, 10. Bhuimali, 11. Bhuiya, 12. Bhujpuri, 13. Bhumij, 14. Bindo-Mondol, 15. Bonaj-Chowhan, 16. Dalu, 17. Dhanwar, 18. Gando/Ganju, 19. Ghatual, 20. Gurkha, 21. Haram, 22. Hari, 23. Hari, 24. Harizon, 25. Hajra, 26. Hindi, 27. Ho, 28. Hodi, 29. Jangli, 30. Kadar, 31. Karmokar, 32. Kharia, 33. Koda, 34. Kol, 35. Kolkamar, 36. Konda, 37. Kora, 38. Kurmi, 39. Lakhrao, 40. Lohar/Lohara/Lohra/Lahra, 41. Madraji, 42. Malo, 43. Murari, 44. Muriyar, 45. Mushor, 46. Nayek, 47. Nagri, 48. Noonia, 49. Oria, 50. Pahan, 51. Palia, 52. Panikha, 53. Patra, 54. Rabidas, 55. Rai, 56. Rajwar/Rajuar, 57. Ramdas, 58. Rana/Karmakar, 59. Ranjoarh, 60. Rautia, 61. Saddri (PL), 62. Saddri (Tea garden), 63. Shabar, 64. Shing, 65. Tati/Tantubai, 66. Telegu (Tea garden), 67. Teli, and 68. Turi.

	<p>elections, with women having no constituencies of their own. Provisions are made for filling these five seats for the remainder of the life of the Ninth Parliament. The representation is divided among the parties on a proportional basis – proportion to each political party’s strength in Parliament. Provisions for reserve seats do not, however, preclude women from contesting in regular seats.</p>	<p>Elections of 50 reserved seats for Parliament are governed by <i>The Jatiyo Sangsad (Reserved Women Seats) Election Act, 2004</i>. [RvZxq msm` (msiw¶Z gwnjv Avmb) wbe©vPb AvBb, 2004]</p>	<p>elections committed to reserve 33% seats of the Parliament for women. Following the elections, the Party Secretary General promised to fill those seats through direct elections.</p>
Local Elections	<p>Article 9 of the Constitution states: “The State shall encourage local Government Institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to peasants, workers and women.”</p> <p>However, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution removed Article 9.</p>	<p>In 1997, the government instituted a system of reservation for women in local government bodies, namely the Union Parishad, Upazila Parishad, Zila Parishad, Paurashavas (small municipalities) and City Corporations. In Union Parishad, Paurashavas and City Corporations, provisions were made for women to be directly elected from reserved seats. Three general seats constitute a constituency for reserved seats for women – that is, women’s constituencies are roughly three times larger than the constituencies for regular seats. (No elections for Upazila and Zila Paishads were held and hence the reservation system meant nothing.)</p> <p>During the last Caretaker Government (2007-08), a Committee was set up to recommend reforms for strengthening and revitalizing local governance. The Committee recommended and drafted laws requiring 40% reservation for women on a rotational basis, which ensured direct elections for reserved seats and constituencies of similar sizes. However, that could not be implemented. Consequently, the same reservation system introduced in 1997 for Union Parishad, Paurashava and City Corporation continues. However, for Upazilas, a position for a woman Vice-Chairperson, along with a Vice-</p>	

		Chairperson for regular seats, was introduced. A third of the women elected from reserved seats from Union Parishads are also to become members of the Upazila Parishad.	
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3.2 Reserved Seats for Women in Parliament

Although the program started with only 15 reserved seats for women in 1993, it increased over time. When the elections to the 9th Parliament took place, we had 45 reserved seats for women. The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which was passed on June 30, 2011, increased the number of reserved seats to 50.

Although the number of reserved seats for women increased over the years, women elected from these seats are in essence kept out of the power loop. They are indirectly elected and the seats are distributed among the parties according to their strength in Parliament. They do not have constituencies of their own and do not enjoy the same power, authority and prestige as their male counterparts from the regular seats. Major political parties, despite their repeated commitments to increase the number of reserved seats to 100 and fill those seats with direct elections, never kept their words. As a result, the reserved seats have come to be viewed as ‘extra’ or ornamental. In fact, many years ago a popular Bangla magazine termed women elected from reserved seats as “sets of ornaments”. Thus, the prevailing system of reservation in Bangladesh does not truly serve the purpose of political empowerment of women.

Table 3
Women’s Representation in Parliament
(Number of Women Parliament Members in General (G) and Reserved (R) Seats)

Parliament	Reserved Seats (R)	Directly Elected (G)	Total Number of Women MPs	Total Representation in Parliament (%)
1 st (1973-75)	15	-	15	4.8
2 nd (1979-82)	30	2	32	9.7
3 rd (1986-87)	30	5	35	10.6
4 th (1988-90)	-	4	4	1.3
5 th (1991-95)	30	4	34	10.3
6 th (1996-96)	30	3	33	10.0
7 th (1996-01)	30	8	38	11.5
8 th (2001-06)	45	7	52	15.1
9 th (2009-)	45**	(19)18*	64(63)*	(18.6)18.3*

Source: P.K Pandey, “Representation without Participation,”... 1988

*Begum Momtaz Iqbal was elected from Sunamganj-4 constituency, but she died after the election. In the subsequent by-election, a man was elected as MP from that constituency.

**Increased the reserved seats to 50 through the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, enacted at the end of last June. It has not yet taken effect.

Although the number of women directly elected from regular seats did not change much over the years, it took a big leap during the last elections. A total of 19 women MPs in the current

Table 4
Women Elected from Regular and Reserved Seats

Regulars seats (2001)	Reserved seats (2001)	Regular seats (2008)	Reserved seats (2008)
Dr. Hamida Banu Shova (AL: Nilphamari-1)	Principal Nur Afroze Begum Zyoti	Mahabub Ara Gini (AL: Gaibandha-2)	Principal Khadija Khatun Shefali
Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP: Bogra-6)	Ms. Abeda Chowdhury	Begum Sultana Tarun (AL: Kushtia-4)	Apu Ukil
Mrs. Esrat Sultana Elen Bhutto (BNP: Jhalakhati-2)	Ms. Yasmin Ara Haque	Habibun Nahar (AL: Bagerhat-3)	Alhaj Momtaz Begum
Moshammat Khadiza Amin (BNP: Netrokona-3; by-elections)	Advocate Khaleda Panna	Begum Monnuzan Sufian (AL: Khulna-3)	Asma Zarin Jumu
Sheikh Hasina (AL: Gopalanj-3)	Advocate Ferdaus Akter Waheeda	Begum Motia Chowdhury (AL: Sherpur-2)	Ashrafun Nessa Mosharraf
	Advocate Bilkis Akhter Jahan Sheer	Rebeka Momin (AL: Netrokona-4)	Ahmed Naznin Sultana
	Advocate Rina Parvin	Sagufta Yasmin (AL: Munshiganj-2)	Aye Thein Rakhain
	Kazi Sahera Anwara Shammi Sheer	Begum Sanjida Khanam (AL: Dhaka-4)	Advocate Tarana Halim
	Khondaker Nurjahan Yesmin Bulbul	Advocate Sahara Khatun (AL: Dhaka-18)	Chemon Ara Begum
	Khaleda Rabbani	Mehere Afroz Chumki (AL: Gazipur-5)	Jahanara Begum
	Ms. Chamon Ara	Sara Begum Kabari (AL: Narayanganj-4)	Zinatun Nesa Talukder
	Jahan Panna	Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury (AL: Faridpur-4)	Jobeda Khaton
	Tasmin Rana	Sheikh Hasina (AL: Gopalganj-3)	Nazma Akhter
	Nuri Ara Safa	Begum Momtaz Iqbal (AL: Sunamganj-4)*	Noor Afroze Ali
	Bilkis Islam	Dr. Dipu Moni (AL: Chandpur-3)	Nurjahan Begum
	Begum Roji Kabir	Begum Rawshan Ershad (JP: Rangpur-3)	Parveen Talukder
	Begum Shamsun Nahar Khawja Ahsan Ullah	Begum Rumana Mahmud (BNP: Sirajganj-2)	Farida Rahman
	Rawshan Ara Farid	Begum Khaleda Zia (BNP: Feni-1)	Faridunnahar Laily

	Rabeya Chowdhury	Hasina Ahmed (BNP: Cox's Bazar-1)	Tahura Ali
	Raihan Akhter Banu		Saleha Mosharraf
	Rahana Akhter Ranu		Momtaz Begum
	Rokeya Ahmed Lucky		Mahfuza Mondal
	Shahira Akhter Hossain		Amina Ahmed
	Shahana Rahman (Rani)		Mosammat Shefali Montaj
	Sarwari Rahman		Mosammat Farida Akter
	Sultana Ahmed		Rowshan Jahan Shathi
	Selina Rahman		Ruby Rahman
	Syeda Nargis Ali		Shawkat Ara Begum
	Hasne Ara Gias (Daisy)		Shahida Tarekh Dipti
	Helen Jerin Khan		Shahin Monowara Haque
	Dr. Amena Begum		Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury
	Shanara Begum		Shadhana Halder
	Sultana Razia		Safia Khatun
	Merina Rahman		Sultana Bulbul
	Syeda Razia Faiz		Syeda Jebunnessa Haque
	Navila Chowdhury		Dr. Hamida Banu Shova
	Khodeza Imdad Lata		Nilufar Chowdhury Moni
	Newaz Halima Arali		Musammat Shammi Akhter
	Fahima Hossain Jubly		Rasheda Begum Hira
	Rasheda Begum Hira		Rahana Akter Ranu
	Razina Islam		Syeda Ashifa Ashrafi Papia
	Symun Begum		Nasrin Jahan Ratna
	Rokeya Begum		Noor-E-Hasna Lily Chowdhury
	Naima Sultana		Mahzabeen Murshed
	Begum Noor-E- Hasna Lili		Salma Islam

*Begum Momtaz Iqbal died after the Ninth Parliament elections and was replaced by a man in the subsequent by-election.

Parliament were directly elected, although the number subsequently declined to 18 due to the death of one directly elected woman MP who was replaced by a man in the subsequent by-election. A record number of 60 women contested from 65 seats, with Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia each contesting from three seats and Begum Rawshan Ershad from two seats.

Table 4 lists the women who won from regular seats in the last two elections and also the women indirectly elected from reserved seats. It is strikingly clear that most of the women who won from regular seats in the last elections are new. There are only a few repeat performers: very few women from regular seats could get re-elected in the subsequent elections, the exceptions being Sheikh Hasina and Begum Khaleda Zia. In other words, even women elected from direct seats are unable to develop their constituencies and subsequently get re-elected. Thus, the sustainability of women's inclusion in the electoral process is clearly at risk.

As mentioned before, women from reserved seats do not have constituencies of their own and the question of their constituency development and re-election does not even arise. In fact, their nominations represent patronage bestowed upon them by party higher-ups. Thus, in Bangladesh's system of reserved seats for women, women's leadership is not truly empowered, and talented and dedicated women have little chance to demonstrate their qualities as politicians. In fact, the inclusion of women in the electoral process is not generally viewed as a right of women, rather a privilege to be given to them out of kindness of all powerful leaders or at best mere tokenism.

3.3 Reserved Seats for Women in Local Bodies

As stated earlier, reserved seats for women were introduced with much fanfare in 1997. Women from reserved seats in local bodies are directly elected from larger constituencies with three regular seats constituting one reserved seat for a woman. This system is discriminatory as it requires women to get elected from larger constituencies and yet not granted the same power and authority enjoyed by their male counterparts elected from regular seats. They are not even allowed to give citizenship certificates to their constituents. In essence, the system has kept them out of the regular power structure.

After the reservation system for women was introduced in 1997, a great deal of enthusiasm was created and women in large numbers contested those reserve seats at all levels, including the Union Parishad. However, after experiencing discrimination – women were given some 'ceremonial' roles, such as chairs of various Committees and minor allocations of development projects and social safety-net allocations – the enthusiasm for reserved seats on the part of women gradually waned. For example, at the Union level, the number of women contesting the reserved seats declined from 43,969 in 1997 to 43,764 in 2003 elections. Although this is a marginal decline, the number should have significantly increased with time and increased population.

In this context, our situation may be contrasted with that of neighboring India, where a "rotational system" with direct election is in place at the Panchayat level. Although one-third of the seats are reserved for women in all three tiers – Gram Panchayat, Panchayat Samity (mid-level) and Zila Panchayat (district-level) – the actual number of women representatives significantly exceed the quota and such representation has been increasing over time. For example, the number of women representatives in all tiers combined increased from 586,000

in 2002 to 1,040,000 in 2008. During the same period, the total women Panchayat members increased from 13,300 to 21,351. Thus, it is clear that the rotational system is far superior to the system we have in Bangladesh for political empowerment of women.

The marginalization of women in local bodies led to several women Commissioners from Khulna City Corporation in 2003 to file a writ before a bench of the High Court challenging a government circular which was discriminatory to women representatives (*Shamima Sultana and others vs. Bangladesh and others*, Writ petition 3304 of 2003.). The Honorable Court, in its judgment, observed clearly that our Constitution recognizes the equality of women and men and allow affirmative action to redress discrimination. The court found for the petitioners, stating that – whether elected from the general or reserved seats – they must have the same rights, authority and responsibility as their male counterparts, and declared the relevant circular illegal.

As stated before, the reservation system for women was changed for Upazila Parishad, the election for which was held in 2009 after nearly 18 years. The Upazila Parishad is now constituted of a directly elected Chairperson, a Vice-Chairperson from a regular seat and another Vice-Chairperson from a seat reserved for women. Unfortunately, the government, in its wisdom, or lack thereof, decided to keep the whole Upazila system dysfunctional. The women Vice-Chairpersons have also not been given any meaningful responsibilities. Thus, at the UP and Upazila levels, women leaders though directly elected from reserved seats have failed to be empowered.

3.4 Zila Parishad for Hill Tracts

Although Bangladesh does not provide constitutional recognition of Adivashis, it recognizes the uniqueness of the people of the Hill districts, namely Rangamati, Khagrachori, and Bandarban. As part of this recognition, *The Parbatya Zila Sthanio Sarkar Parishad Ain, 1989*, which was renamed as *Parbatya Zila Parishad*, under *The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord of 1997*, provides for three District Councils.

The Parbatya Zila Parishads are to be headed by a chairman of ministerial rank. Each Parishad is consisted of 30 members, with ethnic Bengali participation limited to one third. Unfortunately, the elections of those Parishads have not been held, and they are now being run by unelected individuals.

4.0 Electoral Practices

Although Bangladeshi laws do not require a reservation of seats for religious minorities or other disadvantaged groups, there is a long established practice of nominating certain number of individuals from ethnic and religious minorities to run from regular seats. As mentioned earlier, in most cases these nominations have been symbolic.

Table 5 below shows the number of religious minorities who were elected to Parliament since the return of democracy in 1991. Although the highest number of MPs belonging to religious minorities were elected in the current Parliament, their number is not very significant – only 14. They account for less than 5 percent of the total number of MPs elected from regular seats, which is far below their share (10 percent) of the total population. However, there are a few MPs from religious minorities who were elected from reserved seats.

Table 5

Number of Religious Minorities and Ethnic Groups

5 th Parliament (1991-96)	6 th Parliament (1996-96)**	7 th Parliament (1996-01)	8 th Parliament (2001-06)	9 th Parliament (2009-)
Satish Chandra Roy (AL: Dinajpur-2)	Profullah Kumar Mandal (BNP: Khulna-1)	Ramesh Chardra Sen (AL: Thakurgaon-1; by-elections)	Monoranjan Shil (AL: Dinajpur-1; by-election)	Ramesh Chandra Sen (AL: Thakurgaon-1)
Paritosh Chakravorty (JP: Rangpur-2; by-election)	Gonesh Chandra Halder (BNP: Madaripur-3)	Satish Chandra Roy (AL: Dinajpur-2)	Dhirendra Nath Saha (AL: Narail-1; by-election)	Monoranjan Shil (AL: Dinajpur-1)
Shankar Govinda Chowdhury (AL: Natore-2)	*Parijat Kushum Chakma (BNP: Rangamati)	Biren Sikder (AL: Magura-2)	Pachanan Biswas (AL: Khulna-1)	Sadhan Chandra Mazumdaer (AL: Naogan-1)
Dhirendra Nath Saha (AL: Narail-1)	*Sating Pru (BNP: Bandarban)	Dhirendra Nath Saha (AL: Naarail-1)	Gautam Chakravorty (BNP: Tangail-6)	Ranjit Kumar Roy (AL: Jessore-4)
Dhirendra Devnath Shomvu (AL: Borguna-1)		Pachanan Biswas (AL: Khulna-1; by-election)	Pramod Mankin (AL: Mymensingh-1)	Sree Biren Shikdar (AL: Magura-2)
Shudangshu Shekar Halder (AL: Projpur-1)		Narayan Chandra (AL: Khulna-5; by-election)	Suranjit Segupta (AL: Sunamganj-2)	Nani Gopal Mandal (AL: Khulna-1)
*Promod Mankin (AL: Mymensingh-1)		Dhirendra Devnath Shamvu (Borguna-1)	*Moni Swapan Dewan (BNP: Rangamati)	Narayan Chandra Chanda (AL: Khulna-5)
Suranjit Sengupta (GP: Sunamganj-2)		Gautam Chakravorty (BNP: Tangail-6)	*Bir Bahadur (AL: Bandarban)	Dhirendra Chandra Debnath (AL: Barguna-1)
*Kalpa Ranjan Chakma (AL: Khagrachori)		Suranjit Segupta (AL: Habiganj-2; by-election)		Promod Mankin (AL: Mymensingh-1)
*Dipakar Talukder (AL: Rangamati)		*Kalpa Ranjan Chakma (AL: Khagrachori)		Sukumar Ranjan Gosh (AL: Munshiganj-1)
*Bir Bahadur (AL: Bandarban)		*Dipakar Talukder (AL: Rangamati)		Suranjit Sengupta (AL: Shunamganj-2)
		*Bir Bahadur (AL: Bandarban)		Bir Bahadur (AL: Bandarban)
				Dipankar Talukder (AL:)

				Ranjamati)
				Jantindra Lal Tripura (AL: Khagrachori)

**BNP held the 6th Parliament elections which Awami League and other parties boycotted. The election failed to gain acceptability and the Parliament was dissolved in less than two months of being elected.

One positive observation regarding minority representation is that, in almost every Parliament since 1991, 3 to 4 MPs were elected from the Adivashi and other ethnic groups, even though they account for only a small proportion of the total population. Major parties normally tried to nominate Adivashis especially for the three Hill district constituencies where they are the majority. Occasionally, some Adivashi women have also been elected from reserved seats held for women.

One negative observation regarding minority representation, however, is that very few of these MPs, outside the Hill districts, appear to have been able to develop their own constituencies. The exceptions are Mr. Suranjit Sengupta, Monoranjan Shil and Promod Mankin, who himself is an Adivashi.

4.0 Inclusion of Special Groups

4.1 Citizens Living Abroad: Eligibility for Office

The election manifesto of Bangladesh Awami League committed to the inclusion of Bangladeshi citizens living abroad in the electorate. Accordingly, section 8 of *The Electoral Roll Act, 2009* was amended in December 2010 to add a new sub-section in order to allow such individuals to become voters. The sub-section states that a Bangladeshi citizen living in another country would be considered a resident of that area, or the voter area where she/he lived before, or the area where her/his paternal home was or is located. Such residency would allow expatriates or migrant workers to be enrolled in the electoral roll.

Although the law now allows the citizens living abroad to become voters in Bangladesh, there has not been any special drive to enroll them. No special arrangements have been made to enlist them in the countries where they currently live or work. At this time, such residents must come to the Election Commission office in the locality where they are residents, as per law, and get their names included in the electoral roll.

In the past, the Constitution of Bangladesh did not allow Bangladeshies who took the citizenship of other countries to run for Parliament. However, the recently enacted Fifteenth Amendment appears to have changed this. The newly amended Article 66 of the Constitution states: “(2A) Notwithstanding anything contained in sub-clause (c) of clause (2) of this article, if any person being a citizen of Bangladesh by birth acquires the citizenship of a foreign State and thereafter such person— (i) in the case of dual citizenship, gives up the foreign citizenship; or (ii) in other cases, again accepts the citizenship of Bangladesh— for the purposes of this article, he shall not be deemed to acquire the citizenship of a foreign State.” It may be noted that the sub-clause (c) of (2A) debars those who acquire the citizenship of, or affirm and acknowledge allegiance to, a foreign State.

4.2 Inclusion of Disabled

It is claimed that at least 10 percent of Bangladesh's population are disabled and there is no barrier against physically disabled adults becoming voters. At present the number of disabled voters in Bangladesh is estimated at about 7.5 million. Although they face no difficulty in becoming voters, they face formidable challenges in casting their votes.

There are two organizations in Bangladesh to promote the interests of disabled voters: National Disabled Women's Parishad and National Grassroots Disabled Federation. In order to facilitate voting by disabled persons, they voiced the following demands prior to the Ninth Parliament elections:

- Arrange separate queues for disabled voters and voting must take place in the ground floor.
- Provide ramps, either permanent or temporary, for disabled voters.
- Allow companions in the polling booths for disabled voters with sight impairment and introduce "techtile ballot" for them.
- Political parties must have clear commitment and sense of direction for implementation for education, health and employment for disabled persons included in their election manifestos.
- Public media must create public awareness for creating voter-friendly atmosphere for disabled voters.
- Every political party must nominate 12 disabled candidates, two from each Division, in the next Parliament elections.

Most, if not all, of these demands are reasonable. The Election Commission tried to improve the facilities for disabled voters. However, our political parties did not pay much attention to their demands to nominate people of disability.

5.0 Groups Promoting the Status of Women and Disadvantaged Groups

1. Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (SHUJAN)
2. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB)
3. Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)
4. BROTEE
5. Society for Environment and Human Development (SHED)
6. Nari Uddog Kendra
7. Democracy Watch
8. Action Aid
9. Nijara Kori
10. Ain O Salish Kendra
11. Mahila Parishad
12. Women for Women
13. Steps Towards
14. Nari Progoti Shanga
15. South Asian Partnership
15. USC Canada-Bangladesh
16. Manusher Jonno Foundation
17. Bangladesh Legal Aid Trust (BLAST)
18. Nagorik Uddog

19. National Disabled Women Parishad
20. National Grassroots Disabled Federation

The organizations listed above in general promote and protect the rights and interests of women and disadvantaged groups and some of them have specific reform proposals, although not all of them are involved in promoting their electoral rights. The left political parties, although not a significant force in Bangladesh, are for greater and more meaningful representation of women and minorities. The major political parties also generally give lip service to the issue of inclusiveness of women and vulnerable groups. Only fringe rightwing groups are opposed to political empowerment of women.

6.0 Positive and Negative Incidents

One positive development discernible from the information presented above is that a record number of women and religious minorities were elected from regular seats in the Ninth Parliament elections. This was partly due to the sweeping victory of the Awami League (which is considered to be relatively more progressive) led Grand Alliance in the elections. The challenge will be to keep the momentum and consolidate the gains made.

Another positive trend is the increase in the number of reserved seats for women in Parliament over the years. Nevertheless, the reserved seats still account for only 14.3 percent – 50 out of 350 – of the total strength of the Parliament. More seriously, the present system of reservation does not truly lead to political empowerment of women.

A recent negative development is that Adivashis have not been constitutionally recognized in Bangladesh, despite the widespread demand by the Adivashis themselves and the progressive citizen groups to do so. At a recent United Nations meeting, Bangladeshi representatives even denied that the country has an Adivashi population.

Another seriously negative development is that a recent Constitutional Amendment reaffirmed Islam as the state religion despite strong opposition from secular forces. Zealots always use religion as a weapon against women and minorities. This development will have far-reaching implications for the inclusion of women and minorities in the electoral process in the future.

The most negative incident with respect to religious minorities was the violence unleashed against them following the Eight Parliament elections held in October 2001. The supporters of the Four Party Alliance, which won the elections with a huge majority, attacked the Hindus because the Hindus are considered to be the vote bank of the Awami League which lost the election. Those attacks occurred in many districts, but the newly elected government denied that any systematic violence had occurred and thus failed to take effective measures against such violence. The present government instituted an inquiry and a report was submitted to the Home Minister last April documenting widespread violence against Hindus. It is hoped that the true culprits will be brought to justice and that the present government will not try to extract political mileage from the incident.

7.0 Best Practices

One of the most important practices we can identify as the best practice is the preparation of electoral rolls with photographs. Usually minorities and women, particularly poor women, are excluded from the voter roll; even if they are enrolled, by means of false voting, their votes are often cast by others. An electoral roll with photographs can prevent such mischief. Furthermore, using such a system, Bangladesh could enroll almost every eligible voter.

Annexure:

List of Organizations Involved in Election Monitoring and related Activities

1. Bangladesh Centre for Development, Journalism and Communication (BCDJC)
2. Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sammonny Parishad (BMSP)
3. COAST TRUST
4. DEMOCRACY WATCH
5. DAK DIYE JAI
6. Jatiya Nirbachon Parjobekkhon Parishad (JANIPOP)
7. Gono Kalayan Sangstha (GKS)
8. Gono Unnayan Kendra (GUK)
9. Institute for Environment and Development (IED)
10. KHAN FOUNDATION
11. LIGHT HOUSE
12. Mass-Line Media Centre (MMC)
13. Manabik Shahajya Sangstha (MSS)
14. Palishipara Samaj Kallayan Samity (PSKS)
15. NABOLOK
16. National Development Program (NDP)
17. Noakhali Rural Development Society (NRDS)
18. ODHIKAR
19. Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service (RDRS)
20. RIGHTS JESSORE
21. SRIZONY Bangladesh
22. RUPANTAR
23. Shariatpur Development Society (SDS)
24. SOLIDARITY
25. UTTARAN
26. WAVE FOUNDATION (SC)
27. JAGORONI CHAKRA FOUNDATION
28. BROTEE
29. Fair Elections Monitoring Alliance (FEMA)