



Bangladesh Election Commission

**Concept Paper:  
Meeting on Cooperation of Election Commissions  
in the South Asia Region**

**Introduction**

In the past, regional cooperation amongst election authorities has proved to be beneficial in parts of the world. Partnerships and regional forums have acted as valuable avenues for exchange of experiences and know-how. These have assisted in building closer ties between national institutions and their peers in neighbouring countries with largely positive results. The South Asian countries' experience of elections is varied: whilst in some countries organising public elections remains relatively novel (Afghanistan, Bhutan and the Maldives), in other countries in the region there is a long track record of organising credible elections.

Whilst there are differences in terms of capacity and experience in election commissions in these countries, there are also many common features in the sphere of elections that create opportunities as well as pose challenges to those institutions responsible for planning and organising public elections. An institutional framework for closer cooperation among the countries of South Asia in the field of election administration may offer a good opportunity on a permanent basis for debate on many unresolved issues, sharing of knowledge and a potential platform for common initiatives.

**Background**

Constitutions of South Asian countries have mandated periodic and competitive elections as a key pillar of their democracies. In all cases, parliamentary/presidential elections are organised by election commissions in these countries and within the next five years all of the countries in the region have planned elections for their parliaments and/or office of the President. Whilst recognising that each country has unique features of its electoral system, there is a high degree of common ground between many of them in the field of election administration. All countries in the region have signed the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and, therefore, recognise international standards for elections established in the ICCPR and the General Comments on Article 25 of the United Nations Human Rights Committee.

There are potentially great benefits in establishing a forum for exchange and peer-to-peer relationship building between the election commissions in the region in order for them to exchange experiences, look for solutions to common problems and knowledge transfer. There is also, if a more permanent forum could be established, a potential for network externalities that could raise issues such as common regional

standards for election administration being developed, closer cooperation between civil society organisations that work in this field as well as economies of scale in innovation trials such as electronic voting and voter registration processes.

Following the successful elections in Bangladesh at the end of 2008, the Bangladesh Election Commission received a number of high level delegations from election authorities in a number of countries to provide them insights into the voter registration process that was carried out in 2008. Building on these nascent peer based relationships, the Bangladesh Election Commission wishes to promote closer regional cooperation among election commissions as it may provide greater opportunities for all stakeholders involved to exchange views and share lessons learnt and experience gained in the region.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The meeting aims at achieving the following two objectives:

1. Provide a forum for the targeted election commissions to create an enabling environment towards building an institutional framework through personal contact and sharing of experiences of recent elections and innovations in the electoral field; and
2. Agreement on institutional framework for increased cooperation of election commissions in the SAARC region.

The aims of the meeting are to bring together key senior stakeholders heading election commissions in the region together as a catalyst for closer regional cooperation in the field of elections as a first step towards creating a permanent forum for future regional cooperation. The active participation of election commissions in a regional forum would act to assist in enhancing cooperation and information exchange in the region. Such a platform could act as a positive mechanism to build up key network relationships and contribute to discussion of common issues related to elections and possibly open up avenues for common solutions to problems.

The overall objective is to establish a regular and permanent forum of election commissions in the region. The meeting seeks to reach a consensus on a declaration and a timetable towards that end. Participants should be in a position to, in principle, acknowledge the possibilities of increased regional cooperation at management levels and be able to commit to look at initiatives that would work towards this goal.

### **Participation and Subject Themes for the Meeting**

High level delegations consisting of the Chief Election Commissioners and Secretaries to the Commissions of the respective Election Commissions of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka are expected to participate in the meeting. A total of 16 participants from the eight countries would constitute the core representing their respective Election Commissions. An inaugural session is envisaged to encourage a larger audience for the start of the meeting with a key note speaker invited. External speakers with key expertise and experience in the region will also be invited to present an overview of regional electoral system at the meeting. This will be followed by sessions on themes



reflecting on the recent experience of Election Commissions in the region. Contemporary issues high on the agendas of these countries include voter registration processes, political party and campaign funding, partnership development for election management, role of women in the election process, new technologies in election management and method of recruitment of election commissioners. Electronic voting has been high on the agenda in a number of these countries who either use electronic voting as an integral part of their system, or have experimented with or are planning to test it in the coming elections in their country.

### **Proposed Date and Site for Meeting**

The meeting will be held at Dhaka, Bangladesh during May 29-30 2010. Working language would be English and the meeting would take place over a two-day period.

### **Deliverables**

The Bangladesh Election Commission in cooperation with the UNDP office in Dhaka would take care of all planning and logistics needed to host the meeting. This would include organising flights, local transport and accommodation and conference facilities.

### **Role of UNDP**

UNDP country offices support the election process in a number of South Asian countries. As a leading partner in the field of technical assistance in the electoral field UNDP is well positioned in the region to support a conference/meeting of senior members of the electoral commissions of the region.

### **Logistics and Arrangements**

All election commissions in South Asia region are expected to attend the conference and recognise the benefits of the idea of greater regional cooperation. The UNDP Bangladesh office has anticipated funding a total of 16 participants. All costs relating to participation covering round-trip economy class airfare, accommodation, food and local transportation will be borne by the UNDP.