Proceedings of the First-ever (Virtual) Interactive Session of the Forum of Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA)

(26th April, 2022)

Hosted by the Election Commission of Bhutan

Democracy House,

Kawajangsa: Thimphu

Bhutan

ECB/PPCD/17/2021-2022/ 6066   Date: 10th May 2022

Foreword

In compliance with the Thimphu Resolutions adopted by the FEMBoSA member countries during its 11th Meeting held on 11th August, 2021, the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) commits its utmost priority in realizing the points contained therein.

Accordingly, cognizant of point no. 13 of the Thimphu Resolution, the ECB as the host Election Management Body, had the pleasure of hosting the first-ever Interactive Session of FEMBoSA on 26th of April, 2022, virtually. We couldn't make it earlier due to the restrictions posed by COVID-19 pandemic and required to work from home (WFH).

We would like to sincerely thank the EMBs of Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka for your participation while we also regret that the EMBs of Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan could not participate.

Going forward, the esteemed representatives from the EMBs who took part in the interactive session may like to agree that sharing experiences among ourselves through interactive sessions must be strengthened.

Keeping the priority of disseminating resources amongst the EMBs of the FEMBoSA, the Country Paper, PowerPoint Presentation (PPT), and Proceedings of the Interactive Session as committed earlier is compiled for reference.

We hope this compilation of resources from the first Interactive Session will be found useful by all the members.

Looking forward to participation by all EMBs during the next interactive session.

(Ugyen Chewang)
Officiating Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan

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Introduction

The regional establishment for cooperation amongst the Election Management Bodies (EMB) of eight countries of South Asia created in the name of Forum for Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA) meets annually to discuss common issues, exchange innovative ideas and share experiences. The annual meeting of FEMBoSA is hosted by the Member EMBs on a rotational basis. The 11th Meeting of FEMBoSA was hosted by the Election Commission of Bhutan on August 11, 2021 virtually in view of the travel restrictions posed due to COVDI-19 Pandemic. During the said meeting the Thimphu Resolutions were unanimously adopted by all member countries, requiring the Election Commission of Bhutan, as the host Election Management Body and the serving Chair of FEMBoSA, and in pursuance with the Point No. 13 of the Thimphu Resolution to host the Interactive Sessions of FEMBoSA on a digital platform on a half-yearly-basis. Accordingly, the ECB has conveyed to all the Heads of EMBs of FEMBoSA Member Countries vide Official Memo on 8th of April, 2022, the proposal to host the First-ever Interactive Session on 26th April, 2022 from Democracy House, Thimphu, Bhutan. Cognizant of the immediate impact of social media on elections, particularly, during the COVID-19 pandemic situation, the thematic topic was kept as ***"Social Media in Elections in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic."***

The objectives of holding the interactive session were:

1. To strengthen cooperation and mutual relationship among the FEMBoSA member countries;
2. To use this common platform for sharing experience among the FEMBoSA members and exchange knowledge and skills related to new ideas and innovations in election management among the fellow EMBs.

Participants

The Interactive Session was attended by the representatives from the Election Management of Bodies of Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka and Bhutan. Among the delegates, one officer each was nominated by the respective Election Management Bodies to make presentation on the "Social Media in Elections in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic."

The Election Commission of Bangladesh

1) Mr. Forhad Admmed Khan, Joint Secretary (Election Management) - **Presenter**
2) Mr. Nurul Hasan Bhuiya, Sr. Assistant Secretary and the Focal Officer for FEMBoSA Interactive Session

Election Commission of India

1) Mr. Chandra Bhushan Kumar, Senior Deputy Election Commissioner
2) Ms. Sheyphali B. Sharan, Director General – **Presenter**
3) Mr. Pramod Kumar Sharma, Principal Secretary and the Focal Officer for FEMBoSA Interactive Session

Election Commission of Maldives

1) Dr. Mohaned Zahir, Commissioner Member
2) Mr. Hassan Zakariyya, Secretary General
3) Mr. Ibrahim Hafiz, Director
4) Mrs. Mariyam Shahiya, Assistant Director
5) Mr. Ahmed Muaz, Dy. Director, Registration Section – **Presenter**
6) Fathimath Shaba Bagir, Sr. Officer at Commissioner's Bureau and the Focal Officer for FEMBoSA Interactive Session

Election Commission of Sri Lanka

1) Mr. K. U. G. S. N. Kaluwewe, Additional Commissioner of Elections **– Presenter**
2) Mr. J. A. S. O. Jayasinghe, Dy. Commissioner of Elections

Election Commission of Bhutan

a) H.E. Ugyen Chewang, Officiating Chief Election Commissioner
b) H.E. Dawa Tenzin, Election Commissioner
c) Mr. Phub Dorji, Secretary, Secretariat of Election Commission of Bhutan - **Presenter**
d) Mr. Mani Kumar Ghalay, Head, Policy and Planning Coordination Division
e) Mr. Thinley Lhendup, Head of ICT Division

f) Tshewang Lhendup, ICT Officer, ICT Division

g) Mr. Jigme Kinley, ICT Associate, ICT Division.

h) Kezang Wangdi, Planning Officer, Policy and Planning Coordination Division

i) Mr. Pema Chedup, Assistant Planning Officer, Policy and Planning Coordination Division

j) Ms. Norbu Zangmo, Personal Secretary to Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan

k) Ms. Sonam Zangmo, Personal Assistant to Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan

Unfortunately, neither the Election Management Bodies of Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan did not nominate their representatives to attend the same, nor did they share their papers.

Welcome Address by Hon'ble Election Commissioner of Bhutan Dasho Dawa Tenzin

I feel greatly honoured to welcome the distinguished delegates/participants including the Members and senior officers and representatives of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia to the first ever interactive session of the FEMBoSA, hosted by the Election Commission of Bhutan, Thimphu, Bhutan.

Respected delegates/participants, ladies and gentlemen!

In this very good morning, with my warm wishes, I would like to extend my warm welcome to all of you to this first ever virtual interactive session of the Forum of Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA).

On behalf of the Election Commission of Bhutan, I offer and express my sincere appreciation for having provided this opportunity to the Election Commission of Bhutan to host this first ever interactive session of the Forum of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA) here in Bhutan.

With the emerging COVID-19 pandemic over the last two years taking all of us through the challenging situations both in terms of people's health and negative socio-economic impacts, we all have come to a stage where we are returning to normal.

Yet, we are not completely out of the dreadful virus, and keeping the health of our families and keeping ourselves out of the further impact of the pandemic, through various measures, is still our priority and responsibility.

It gives us immense pleasure to host this virtual interactive session for the first time in the history of the FEMBoSA. It would not have been possible without the kind support and cooperation received from each member EMB. In this regard, I would like to thank all the members for their kind and unwavering support in hosting this first ever interactive session.

The idea of this interactive session seeks to strengthen the institution of democracy and good governance in our region through the close contact among the EMBs of the SAARC countries and through sharing of experiences and learning from each other in managing elections both during normal and trying times such as amid the COVID-19 pandemic. As the FEMBoSA completes its 11 years, the noble idea of interactive session of this kind is sure to bring us together as one family with even stronger bond and friendship in the field of electoral practices and electoral management. I am confident that such noble initiative would provide us good learning and sharing experiences in the field of managing elections. We are as much excited to host this meeting virtually as we were eager to hold in a physical setting. However, we are not yet far from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that really allows us to meet in a physical setting. Although I share the incompleteness of not having the Election Commission of Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan in this session, I share our happiness of having the participation of dignitaries of the rest of the member EMBs.

Dear participants, ladies and gentlemen,

We welcome you to Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan and hope that this first ever virtual interactive session of the FEMBoSA will provoke meaningful discussions through lot of interactions among the participants of the EMBs of different South Asia countries. We also hope that this meeting would be a memorable one as we are not only meeting amidst the pandemic but is also the first of its kind in the history of the FEMBoSA.

I thank you all for your positive support and cooperation which helped us in bringing the event to this day, albeit in a virtual setting. I, on behalf of Election Commission of Bhutan, welcome with zeal and enthusiasm the distinguished participants/delegates to the First Interactive Session of the FEMBoSA once again. I wish you to have fruitful discussion during the session.

Have a good day!

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Tashi Delek!

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Kuzuzangpo and warm greetings from the Election Commission of Bhutan, Thimphu.

Distinguished Delegates & Esteemed FEMBoSA representatives,
Ladies and gentlemen!

It has been almost more than 258 days ago that the members of the EMBs of South Asia met virtually on the 11th of August 2021 during the historic 11th FEMBoSA Meeting hosted by the Election Commission of Bhutan.

Since the 11th meeting of the FEMBoSA, we have not been able to formally come together and share experiences among ourselves as each one of us have been fully kept busy pursuing to fulfill our mandates. The noble objectives of the FEMBoSA to promote contact among the EMBs of the SAARC countries; share experiences and learn from each other and cooperate with one another in enhancing the capabilities of the EMBs towards conducting free and fair elections has brought us together yet one more time today. This it is the core value that the important Forum holds in keeping the EMBs of the South Asia closer to each other. I wish this spirit be continued in the future at all times.

Let me take you to the point no. 13 of the Thimphu Resolution of the 11th FEMBoSA unanimously adopted by all the member EMBs for implementation which required us, under the current chairmanship, to host an interactive sessions on a half-yearly basis so that the Forum is able to live up to its commitments in upholding the principles of promoting free and fair elections with strong democratic values in the region.

In view of this, the ECB takes yet another privilege to host this first-ever interactive session, today on 26th of April, 2022, on the theme **"Social Media in Elections in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic."**

In holding this interactive session, it is my personal joy to heartily extend our warmest welcome to each one of you to the session that is being hosted by the Election Commission of Bhutan, here in Thimphu, Bhutan. I wish this kind of interactive session would take us through a journey to achieve our common goals and objectives.

We are indeed very pleased by the strong support and cooperation rendered by each FEMBoSA Member countries in making this interactive session a reality despite it being notified within a short period of time. Please bear with us for communicating about the event in a very short time as we had been truly preoccupied with the Local Government Elections in the country.

Nonetheless, it is our firm belief that this interactive session stands timely. With enormous experience of all the member countries in conducting elections, we have much to share with and learn from each other through the experiences that we have in the context of our own countries. I very much believe that this session provides the right platform to do so. Therefore, I am confident that at the end of this virtual meeting each of us would have a lot many ideas and experiences to take away from the participants of this meeting.

Needless to say that the presenters identified and nominated by the respective EMBs today are highly qualified officials who possess huge technical expertise and professional experiences. The sharing of experiences through the presentations that the participants are going to make in due course of time and the discussions that would follow each presentation will beyond doubt be highly beneficial to all of us. The exchange of ideas and innovations that would take place among the participants during the session will definitely help each one of us learn from each other and provoke our thoughts in developing better ideas and new innovations in the field of electioneering in the face of emerging difficulties due to COVID-19. I wish you all good luck.

Similarly, this interactive session of FEMBoSA must always exhibit dignity and professionalism in all its appearance and outlook. Discussion among the members must be respectable. I humbly request the participants to religiously abide by the time being allotted for different phases of the session. Each presentation will be followed by 15-minute for discussion during which any one can throw relevant question to prompt discussion.

Finally, as the serving Chair of the Forum, I would like to report that the EMBs of Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan have not been able to be part of today's interactive session which I assume could be due to pressing issues at home. We will definitely miss their absence today and look forward to their active participation in the future sessions.

It is my wish that all the participants would take active participation in the meeting/discussion /deliberations and contribute towards achieving our objectives of the session.

I wish all the esteemed delegates/participants a fruitful session today. With all my aspirational prayers, **I hereby declare the first-ever Interactive Session of FEMBoSA, Open**.

Thank you one and all!

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Mr. Mani Kumar Ghalay, Head of the Policy and Planning Coordination Division (PPCD), Election Commission of Bhutan in his capacity as the Moderator for the Technical Session of FEMBoSA Interactive Session, briefed on the Rules of Procedures (RoP)[1] to the participants, before commencement of the session.

Country Paper Presentation by Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC)

Mr. Forhad Ahmed Khan[2], Joint Secretary of the Bangladesh Election Commission was the Presenter on "Election during COVID-19: Challenges and Measures for addressing them with Special Reference to Social Media[3].

Presentation Synopsis

Mr. Khan informed the participants that the Bangladesh Election Commission has the legal obligation to conduct parliamentary elections within specified timeframe. Also, it was shared that the Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh, however, enjoys some limited power to defer the elections to parliament, i.e. up to 90 days in each constituencies should there be compelling reasons. Hence, during the initial days of COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, the BEC had exercised this legal apparatus to defer elections. Ever since the COVID - 19 outbreak in March 2020, it was reported that the BEC has conducted elections of approximately 400 national and local bodies including 17 constituencies of national parliament.

Presenting on the Use of Social Media in Elections, he said, social media is still a prominent platform for anti-establishment stakeholders in Bangladesh. In addition, he said that the social media is used widely by the candidates and political parties to do the election campaigns and to disseminate the information regarding their candidature. Besides, he also briefly explained the challenges as well as remedies, meaning the way forward.

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[1] Rules of Procedure developed for Interactive Session by the Election Commission of Bhutan is attached as Annexure 1.
[2] Curriculum Vitae [CV] of all Presenters attached in Annexure 2.
[3] Country Paper and Power Point Presentation [PPT] attached in Annexure 3 and 4 respectively.

Discussion Session

Following the conclusion of 10 minutes presentation by Mr. Khan from the Bangladesh Election Commission, the Session Chair Mr. Phub Dorji, Secretary of the Election Commission of Bhutan, opened the floor and invited the participants to the discussion session. He urged all the participants to seize the question-answer session to clarify their doubts if any. Since there was no one coming forward to ask questions, Mr. Mani Kr. Ghaley, the Moderator for Interactive Session, enquired the presenter on how effectively does the legal provisions on use of social media help to control the negative campaign in Bangladesh?

Responding to the query, Mr. Khan informed that in the first place, the country has put Digital Security Act in place. He also said that BEC has initiated dialogue with the stakeholders and political parties to reduce the incidents of negative campaign. Furthermore, it was informed that the social media act is due to be amended soon to accommodate the provisions to cater to such issues.

Ms. Sheyphali B. Sharan, Director General of the Election Commission of India also asked the presenter whether the use of social media in Bangladesh, in any ways, contributed to the overall voter turnout. The presenter responded by saying that the BEC has observed a voter turnout of 65 percent during the elections conducted amidst COVID-19 pandemic. He said that the 65% voter turnout is less compared to the past elections.

Country Paper Presentation by the Election Commission of India (ECI)

Presentation Synopsis

Ms. Sheyphali B. Sharan, the Director General, Election Commission of India presenting on the Use of Social Media in Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic, has stated that the virtual interactions during the COVID-19 situations have enhanced the use of social media. She highlighted the initiatives and milestones in relation to the Social Media Managements by Election Commission of India (ECI) as the following:

1. First set of instructions on the use of social and digital media for election campaigning.
2. Instruction on application of pre-certification on political advertisements on social media from Media Certification and Monitoring Committee.
3. Engagement and consultation of stakeholders in the electoral process by inducting the use of social media.
4. Instructed Chief Electoral Officers in the States/UTs to create awareness and information dissemination.
5. Reconstituted "Voluntary Code of ethics" for social media which was further extended to all future General Elections and Legislative Assembly Elections.
6. Appointment of three Nodal Officers to monitor political advertisements in social media and to expedite actions.

The presentation further highlighted that the fake news, hate speech, recirculation of old clips and monitoring of the vast social media landscape are the various challenges posed by using social media in the election process.

On the plan ahead, the presenter recommended the EMBs to do the following:

1. To modify old/existing rules to deal with current dynamic times.
2. Tackling fake news/ misinformation by strengthening monitoring mechanisms
3. Training and capacity building of election personnel and
4. Sensitization of political parties with the rules and regulations timely.

Mr. Mani Kr. Ghaley from the Election Commission of Bhutan pointed out that India is the largest democracy in the world and it is always fascinating to observe that electoral activities are being coordinated by the ECI in a seamless manner. As to the question, he asked Ms. Sharan about how the ECI deals with the paid advertisements in the Social Media especially the hate and divisive speeches by the candidates and political parties. In addition, he also enquired as to how the ECI deals or tackle with the social media giants such as Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp among others, especially when the anonymous users share or upload hate speeches and propagandas. To this, the presenter clarified that though managing elections in India is the biggest management exercise and logistics, Media Monitor Committee down in the district levels and the Voluntary Code of ethics are vigilant enough to monitor and take actions as and when required. Similarly, appointment of Nodal Officers system for reporting posts/ political advertisements in Social media in light of violation of Model Code of Conduct or any provisions of electoral laws help. Moreover, she added that the respective political parties and Media Houses are aware of the provisions put in place under section 126 of the R.P. Act, 1951.

In Continuation, a representative from Bangladesh put forth the request to share the differences in use of Social Media during COVID situations and the normal times. In response, the presenter stated that use of Social Media in elections during COVID-19 times had a good influence in achieving ECI's motto of "Keeping the Voters safe". The ECI utilized social media platforms to message the general public and Political Parties published their campaigning in virtual mode which favored in avoiding the physical rallies and contacts.

Dr. Chandra Bhushan Kumar, Sr. Deputy Election Commissioner of India supplemented the presenter by stating that the use of social Media platforms had extensive benefits. According to him, Social Media enabled the political parties to reach out to the voter as the ECI had banned all election rallies during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also informed that the session that they have further promoted and enhanced the expenditure on digital campaigning. As a result, he said that close to 19 million voters have come forward to vote in Uttar Pradesh the State with the largest electorate size. He justified that this was possible because of the extensive use of social media in elections.

Presentation Synopsis

Mr. Ahmed Muaz, Deputy Director from the Election Commission of Maldives presented on the importance of increasing the Usage of Technology in the Electoral Process during Pandemic. In doing so, Mr. Muaz shared that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new level of thinking which has enabled the Election Commission of Maldives (ECM) to accelerate the use of technology in the electoral process crucial for making them accessible to the public through digital means.

In specific, he said that technology is being used by the ECM for the purpose of electoral training, awareness programmes and for voter registration. The presenter also gave the brief accounts of pros and cons of using technology in elections during the pandemic.

Discussion Session

Ms. Sheyphali Sharan from the Election Commission of India enquired on whether the ECM has been able to penetrate to the electorates during the peak of COVID-19 using the technology and if there was any comparative analysis done on this aspect? Mr. Khan from the Bangladesh Election Commission also requested the Presenter to share the experience on whether there was any weakness in using the technology during the COVID-19 situation

Mr. Mani Kr. Ghaley from the ECB stated that there are more than thousand islands in Maldives and travelling from one island to another takes good amount of time. This being the scenario, he asked about the modus operandi adopted by the ECM for monitoring the use of technology through which social media may be put to use by electorates in all these islands.

Responding to the queries above, Mr. Mauz stated that as of now, the literacy level of the Maldives stands at 97 percent. Accordingly, the scenario of the mobile phone users' registration status shows more than the total population. Consequently, there is a high percentage of internet users. Given the enabling environment for use of technology in the country, ECM shared that

they have been able to make most out of technology during the elections in the Maldives amid the pandemic.

Country Paper Presentation by the Election Commission of Sri Lanka

Presentation Synopsis

Mr. K.U.G.S.N. Kaluwewe, Additional Commissioner of Elections, Election Commission of Sri Lanka made the presentation on the Social Media in Elections in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic: Sri Lankan Perspectives.

His presentation illustrated the influence of social media on elections in relation to two scenarios under consideration – the impact of social media on elections when the society is in panic mode; and/or when the society resumes normalcy. He asserted that conducting an election when the society is in panic mode is democratic nightmare.

Besides, Mr. Kaluwewe also briefly explained the area and the manner in which the social media is being misused to benefit the selfish motives.

Discussion Session

Mr. Forhad Ahmed Khan, Joint Secretary of the Bangladesh Election Commission asked the Sri Lankan Presenter about the specific legal provision that helps in regulating the social media behavior. To this end, Mr. Kaluwewe responded that they have a comprehensive legal framework developed as per Article 14 of the Sri Lankan Constitution to manage the social media platform.

Country Paper Presentation by the Election Commission of Bhutan

Presentation Synopsis

Mr. Phub Dorji, the Secretary of the Election Commission of Bhutan outlined that the earlier leaders of ECB having realized the crucial function of social media and the risks associated with the use of social media, has instituted the Social Media Rules and Regulation, 2018. He further informed that the ECB Facebook page, Twitter, Youtube and website are the social media platforms put to use to inform the voters and the general public in the form of Press Releases, Notifications, and Public Advisories among others.

In addition, he said that Media Arbitrator and Social Media Monitors are appointed across 20 Dzongkhags to monitor social media usage during the elections. Explaining the social background of the use of social media in elections in Bhutan, he said that social media played a major role in conducting Local Government (LG) Elections, Parliamentary Bye- Elections and Thromde (Municipality) Elections during unprecedented times of COVID-19 pandemic. He reiterated that the campaign videos/ advertisements of the Political Party or candidates posted on various social media platforms are regulated and scrutinized by ECB. Further, the general public was informed through bulk SMS and screening short clips using mainstream media such as Television and Radio.

As to the challenges of monitoring the use of social media in elections in Bhutan, the presenter said that fake news using fake accounts and the complaints lodged in relation to it are the most difficult and daunting tasks the ECB receives.

Discussion Session

Mr. Khan from the Bangladesh Election Commission questioned the Mr. Phub Dorji about how the use of social media in elections help control the election expenditure. The presenter reverted to this query by clarifying that the elections to parliament in Bhutan are state funded. However, if the candidates and/or political parties wish to spend, are allowed to do so an amount equal to state funded amount. Once the elections are over, they are required to submit the election returns which is audited by the Royal Audit Authority. In addition, the ECB during the election period

appoints National Observers, whose primary role, is to monitor the election expenses by the candidates and political parties among others. Mr. Mani Kumar Ghaley also added that election campaigns [Common Forums] and public debates are being arranged by the ECB and they are being strictly monitored. As such, there is no specific role that the social media needs to play in terms of monitoring the election expenditure unless there is illegal use of muscle and money power in elections to be brought to the public notice.

Concluding Remarks

The representatives from the five Election Management Bodies participating in the Interactive Session of FEMBoSA were given three minutes each to deliver their concluding remarks. Dasho Ugyen Chewang, the officiating Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan as the Chair of FEMBoSA presided over the Concluding Session.

Before calling the respective presenters to make their concluding remarks, Dasho thanked all the presenters and delegates for making the interactive session very fruitful. Besides, Dasho expressed his prayers for total relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions so that EMBs could plan for meetings in a physical setting. In particular, Dasho requested the ECI to kindly consider inviting the officials from the FEMBoSA Member EMBs for training opportunities through IIIDEM if COVID-19 Pandemic renders favourable.

All the presenters from five EMBs expressed their appreciation to the ECB for hosting the FEMBoSA Interactive Session. They said the interactive session had enabled them to share their experiences and update the existing situations in their respective EMBs. Almost all the presenters also shared that the interactive session was timely and beneficial.

Concluding Remarks by the Chairperson of FEMBoSA

Dasho Ugyen Chewang, Hon'ble officiating Chief Election Commissioner of Bhutan delivered the concluding remarks of the FEMBoSA Chair.

Distinguished Delegates, Representatives and the Focal Officers of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia;
Ladies and Gentlemen!
Good afternoon!

1. The Election Commission of Bhutan is very grateful to all of you for taking the time out to be part of today's virtual Interactive Session of FEMBoSA despite your busy schedules.

2. I wholeheartedly thank the representatives from the FEMBoSA member countries of Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Sri Lanka for your kind participation while equally regretting for the absence of representatives from the EMBs of Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan. I hope they will be able to join us in our future interactive sessions.

3. We owe our insurmountable appreciation and debt of gratitude to the Focal Officers of the EMBs of Bangladesh, India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, for rendering unwavering support and cooperation towards making today's Interactive Session a grand success. Your good will, support and cooperation rendered towards making of this session fruitful, stands as a testimony of your commitment to take the collective cause of FEMBoSA to greater heights.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

4. From what has transpired during the course of deliberation here today in this session, it is evident that all EMBs in the region, as is the case with globally, social media in elections play a pivotal role.

5. More so, in an environment of extraordinary times of the COVID-19 pandemic, social media occupies a central stage. This powerful medium called social media is being used by the electioneering authorities to disseminate the electoral information while the political parties and candidates seize social media to vigorously impart their campaign manifestoes. Also, social media is seen as an effective medium through which health safety messages are passed onto the electorates during the elections held amid pandemic, on the positive note.

6. However, it is not without ill face. Quite often than not, social media is being used to garner the electoral support to benefit the selfish motives by individuals or entities to deliberately misinform or dis-inform the electorates. Fake news and hate speeches often go viral in social media thereby wreaking havoc in the communities and creating disharmony. This being the scenario in most of the communities globally, our session's theme has been kept as social media in elections specifically in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic. I am very sure that our topic for today's virtual Interactive Session stands timely and as apt one.

7. The invaluable experiences that were shared here today by the presenters, I am told by my colleagues that they were highly educative and beneficial. The **take-aways** from today's session, I believe are too many, and let us all pledge to apply those ideas in our context to further strengthen the electoral capacities to deal with social media during elections more proactively so that mission for free and fair elections are achieved.

8. With this brief note, I once again thank you all before I declare the Session concluded.

9. I am pleased to inform all our distinguished representatives that the proceedings of today's interactive session are being recorded to be shared in a couple of days' time to all the EMBs.

10. As it stands, our session today was a simple one yet it stood very effective one. This is simply because it had to be coordinated immediately after the lockdown here in Bhutan. We will definitely make the next interactive session grander.

11. With this commitment, once again, allow me to sincerely thank everyone for your contribution and commitment towards ensuring a successful conduct of first-ever Interactive Session.

12. I would like to wish you all good health, happiness and success in the pursuit of your election mandates.

13. Finally, I hereby declare the session, Closed.

Thank you and Tashi Delek!!!

Vote of Thanks

Mr. Mani Kr. Ghaley, Head of Policy and Planning Coordination Division (PPCD) expressed sincere gratitude to the all the Election Management Bodies (EMBs) who have participated in the first-ever Interactive Session hosted by the Election Commission of Bhutan. He said that the cooperation and positive response rendered by the EMBs towards making the interactive session a grand success within short span of time speaks volume about the commitment of all EMBs to take the collective aspirations of FEMBoSA to fruition.

Rules of Procedure
(RoP)

In pursuance with the agreement under Point No. 13 of the Thimphu Resolution of the 11th Meeting of the FEMBoSA held on 11th August 2021 in Thimphu, the Election Commission of Bhutan will be organizing an interactive session on a digital platform among the FEMBoSA Member Countries.

The main objectives of the interactive session are:

3. To strengthen cooperation and mutual relationship among the FEMBoSA member countries;

4. To use this common platform for sharing experience among the FEMBoSA members and exchange knowledge and skills related to new ideas and innovations in election management among the fellow EMBs.

Details of the Interactive Session

1. **Date of Event**

The First-ever Interactive Session of the FEMBoSA will be held on 26th of April 2022

2. **Mode**

Webinar via Zoom

3. **Participants**

The interactive session shall have the participation of identified official(s) representing the respective EMBs of the FEMBoSA member states, via Zoom.

4. **Theme of the interactive session**

1. The theme of Interactive Session: ***"Social Media in Elections in the Context of COVID-19 Pandemic."***

2. The respective EMBs shall submit their country paper, power-point presentation, scanned copy of passport size photograph of presenter and curriculum vitae latest by 21st of April, 2022 to Session Focal Point Mr. Govinda Subedi at email gsubedi@ecb.bt

5. Terms of Reference For the virtual meeting on Zoom

Before the Interactive Session

1. The Zoom meeting link, along with all required credentials, shall be shared in advance with the participants via email or WhatsApp on 22nd of April 2022.
2. A test run for zoom session shall be conducted on 25th of April 2022 at 10:30AM Bhutan Standard Time (BST). All the Focal Points of the FEMBoSA Member Countries will be required to attend the test run for smooth conduct of Interactive Session on the following day.

During the Interactive Session

1. Interactive Session shall commence from 10AM (BST) on 26th of April, 2022.
2. Participants shall join the virtual meeting at least half an hour prior to the start of the time fixed for the session. During this period, any technical issue arising therein shall be resolved.
3. Participants shall attend virtual meeting in formal dress.
4. Participants shall keep their cameras on throughout the session.
5. Participants, when not speaking, shall keep their microphones **mute**.
6. Use the 'raise hand' feature available in Zoom before commenting or speaking.
7. Presentation paper (PPT) shall be shared from the screen of the host computer to avoid technical glitches.

Moderator

During the Pre-interactive session, the moderator shall ensure that he/she:

1. Is familiar with names and bio-data of the speakers.
2. Outline clear strategy for running the interactive sessions.
3. Read the agenda thoroughly and have clear understanding of all engagement activities.

During the interactive session, the moderator shall:

1. Introduce the speaker representing the concerned EMB with a welcome note to the participant indicating his/her name, title and allocated time for presentation;
2. Handover the discussion session to the Chair;
3. Monitor the time of the presentation, informing the speaker, if necessary, of the time left or of the need to conclude his/her presentation;
4. Give the floor to the participants for open discussion, questions, remarks, and comments.
5. Provide time to the speakers to reply or comment on questions and issues raised by the audience.
6. Thank the speakers and the audience for their participation; and
7. Close the Session when concluded and announce the next event which might take place thereafter.

Technical Team

The Technical Team consisting of ICTD staff and Audio-Visual Technician shall:

1. Oversees all the technical aspects of the session;
2. Create Webinar ID and Passcode and share instructions for joining the session;
3. Conduct test run of the interactive session;
4. Facilitate in sharing the presentation slides of the presenters;
5. Mute/unmute the mic of the participants as and when (if required).

Session Chair

1. Mr. Phub Dorji, Secretary of the Election Commission of Bhutan shall chair the discussion sessions;
2. Chair shall open, moderate and close the discussion sessions.
3. Chair shall ensure only one speaker speaks at a time for effective deliberation.

Rapporteurs

1. Take note of the main findings, conclusions and recommendations of each presentation.
2. Take note of questions/remarks from the floor to include in the proceeding as well as of the replies from the speakers.

3. Assist/support the Editors in correct input of the recorded information.

Chief Rapporteur

Present the plenary resolution reading for adoption.

Editors

1. Oversee the work of all the rapporteurs
2. Oversee the content of each proceeding and resolutions
3. Proofread and edit the report compiled by the rapporteurs
4. Sharing of the final report to the Member Countries of FEMBoSA.

Technical Team:

ICTD staff and Audio-Visual Technician

Rapporteurs:

Kezang Wangdi, PPCD

Pema Chedup, PPCD

Norbu Zangmo, PS

Chief Rapporteur/Editor:

Govinda Subedi, PPCD

Moderator:

Mani Kumar Ghalay, Head of PPCD

***

PRESENTER'S CURRICULUM VITAE (CV)

BANGLADESH ELECTION COMMISSION (BEC)

MR. FORHAD AHMMED KHAN

Joint Secretary (Election Management)

Currently Mr. Khan is Joint Secretary (Election Management), Bangladesh Election Commission. He worked more than 25 years in the election field, in which more than 5 years of experience working in the field of teaching and training.

Born in 1st April 1966 in Mymensingh, Bangladesh, he holds BSc Honors and MSc from University of Dhaka. He started his career as lecturer in a graduate college.

He has wide range of experience in the election field, working in a variety of different environments and undertaking varying functions including Joint Secretary, Deputy Secretary, Director of Electoral Training Institute, Regional Election Officer, Senior Assistant Secretary, Assistant Secretary, Electoral Trainer, and also work as a Consultant in Asia Foundation.

Conducted as a Returning Officer of parliamentary bye elections. He successfully conducted countrywide logistical support for the parliamentary general election.

Apart from this he worked in drafting of Electoral laws- rules and the preparation of manuals, guide, and instruction for the election procedure.

He was international observer in the parliamentary election of Sri- Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan, Ecuador and South Korea. He participated in annual International Conference "The Seoul International Forum on Election in 2018.

He was one of the members of electoral system & process study group in Australia, Malaysia and Thailand. He worked as a Vote Audit Advisor in UNDP, Afghanistan

He Studied Civil Service and Governance Course in China in 2017. Mr. Khan is married and blessed with 2 sons.

Address and other details

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		forhadakecs@gmail.com
Permanent Address	:	Village-Khalsaid Kona, P.O-Telatia, Police Station-Phulpur, District-Mymensingh, Bangladesh.
Present Address	:	**Joint Secretaty,** Bangladesh Election Commission, . Tel : +880255007525 (Off), 880241090276 (Res), Fax : +880255007558
		Cell phone No. +8801715000749

Ms. SHEYPHALI SHARAN
Director General

Ms. Sheyphali Sharan is an officer of Indian Information Service. She has been Spokesperson for Election Commission of India since July 2018.

Ms. Sharan is actively involved in all the public outreach efforts of ECI for wider dissemination of initiatives taken with respect to Electoral Roll issues, Voter Awareness Initiatives, Voter Facilitation Initiatives as also all the policy decisions taken by the Commission.

ECI has been pro-actively engaging with Social Media Platforms and Ms. Sharan has been associated with all the developments thereof.

MR. AHMED MUAZ

Deputy Director, Registration Section

Ahmed Muaz has been working at Elections Commission of Maldives since 2007. And has been through working in take a responsible role in leading some processes and sections. The processes include Managing of Elections Results process, Elections Commission ICT Network infrastructure and security, International and Local observers and media and their logistics. Election planning and scheduling the activities are some of the accountable processes that he has managed during this long length service rendered in the elections commission.

1) Some of the sections that he has led are Information Communication Technology Section. Planning Section, Publication and Archive Section and Procurement Section. He is currently directing Registration Section since February of 2022.

2) Has been a team player with the major presidential, parliamentary and Local Council Elections since 2008 till 2022. Worked at the National Meteorological Centre from 1993 to 2007 as an Assistant Engineer, managing the technical Section.

3) Qualification and skills include Elections Management and supervisory skills and Meteorological Engineering field and Computer systems Engineering, Semi accredited Bridge facilitator.

Mr. K.U.G.S.N. KALUWEWE
Sri Lanka Administrative Service Officer
Phone: +94 (0) 112868441-3
E-mail: addcomla@elections.gov.lk

PROFILE

At present serves as the Additional Commissioner of Elections (Local Authorities Elections) of the Election Commission of Sri Lanka. He had served as the Secretary to the Committee appointed by the Hon. Prime Minister of Sri Lanka to look into the matters that had arisen after the signing of Cease Fire Agreement with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (2002). He also had served as a Member of the CHOGM Task Force 2013 (Sub Committee on Media and Publicity)

WORK EXPERIENCE

Additional Secretary to the President - Presidential Secretariat, Sri Lanka

16th January 2016 – 1st January 2020

Director General of Government Information - Department of Government Information

27th October 2018 – 5th April 2021

Additional Commissioner of Elections (Local authorities Elections)

Election Commission of Sri Lanka

EDUCATION

University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka - B.Sc. (Hons) Second Class (Botany Special)

National Defense University, Washington DC, USA - Executive Diploma in Defense Studies

University of Colombo - Master in Business Administration

University of Canberra, Australia – Master in Public Administration

Reading for a PhD at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

MEMBERSHIPS

Member of the Sri Lanka Administrative Service Association

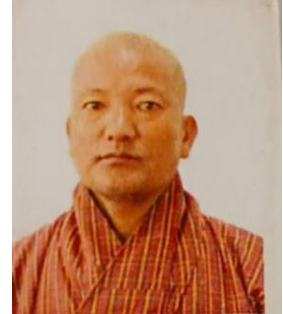Member of the Alumni Association of University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Member of the Alumni Association of the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, Hawaii, USA

Member of the Alumni Association of the Near East Asia Center for Security Studies, Washington D.C.

MR. PHUB DORJI

Secretary, Secretariat of the Election Commission of Bhutan

Mr. Phub Dorji is the Secretary of the Election Commission of Bhutan. Mr. Dorji started his career as a Teacher under the Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan. He served as Head of Division (HoD) for English Department in many schools. Prior to becoming the District Election Officer of Samtse District in 2006, he served as Vice Principal and later as Principal.

Also, he had served as the head of the Department of Elections as well as Department of Civic and Electoral Training before assuming the post of Secretary.

Mr. Dorji was conferred bronze and silver medals by His Majesty the King for his dedicated service in the country.

Currently, he shoulders the responsibility of the Registrar of Political Parties. Apart from this, Mr. Dorji is actively involved in the numerous Working Committees of the Election Commission of Bhutan such as Apex Committee of the Election Commission, ECB Welfare Scheme, HRC, and Tender Committee among others.

He is married to a teacher and has two sons.

Country Paper by Bangladesh Election Commission

Election During Covid -19: Challenges and Measures for Addressing them with Special Reference to Social Media

Bangladesh Election Commission is an active and founder member of forum of Election Management Bodies of South Asia and a member of South Asian Association for regional co-operation. Bangladesh Election Commission is established under the provisions of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. The Commission is responsible for voter registration, conducting elections and announcement of results ending with its publication in the Official Gazette under a set of legal frame work, which ensure for carrying out responsibilities in a fair and transparent manner. In support of the legal framework, information communication technologies such as Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) and other devices are in process of introducing for conducting the election in a more transparent and authentic manner replacing manual systems. The Commission is committed to ensure inclusive elections ensuring environment for people to join elections in a festive mood. The media and observers enjoy free access to voting procedures. Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) may take opportunity from the outcome of the meetings of FEMBoSA for enriching its capacity.

The Parliament and its Elections:

The Parliament is a legislative body consisting of 350 members, 300 members elected by adult franchise and 50 seats are kept reserved for the women for being elected by the members of Parliament. These reserved seats are distributed proportionately among the political parties on the basis of occupying the positions by them through direct election. The tenure of the Parliament is five years.

The elections for the members of Parliament is held within ninety days before the expiration of tenure, and within ninety days upon dissolution of Parliament by reason other than expiration. The Representation of the People Order, 1972 (RPO), the main legal instrument, has spelled out the detail functions of the Commission for conducting elections. Subject to relevant provisions of

the RPO, the Commission can regulate its own procedure for the purpose of conducting elections.

Establishment of Election Commission:

The President exercises his authority under Article 118 for establishing the Election Commission of Bangladesh. The first Election Commission of newly independent Bangladesh was established in 1972. Since then 12 Election Commissions were formed. The President has appointed the present Commission composing of one Chief Election Commissioner and four Commissioners in February, 2022 with.

1. Mr. Kazi Habibul Awal, Chief Election Commissioner
2. Mr. Md. Ahsan Habib Khan, Election Commissioner
3. Ms. Rashida Sultana, Election Commissioner
4. Mr. Mohammad Alamgir, Election Commissioner
5. Mr. Md. Anisur Rahman, Election Commissioner

The Chief Justice of Bangladesh administers the oath of the Election Commissioners by custom for a reason that the Commission is a constitutional body.

 The Constitution of the People's Republic enshrines the provision of elected representatives in all government bodies of the country. In fact, Elections to both national and local government bodies is the threshold for all democratic practices. Covid-19 pandemic posed a big challenge against the continuation of this democratic process.

Legal Obligation:

Arrangement of elections to parliament within the specified time is mandatory in existing legal frame work. However, Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh has some limited Power to defer the election to the parliament upto ……. days for each constituency. Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) exercised that power by deferring the date of Election at the begging of Covid-19 pandemic. But it did not work as the pandemic prolonged unexpectedly for a longer time. So BEC had to conduct elections during pandemic for legal compliance.

Election in Bangladesh during Covid-19.:

As mentioned above, for legal bindings, Bangladesh Election Commission arranged quite a good number of parliamentary and local government elections during Covid-19 pandemic. A list of those elections is furnished below:

After outbreak of COVID - 19 in Bangladesh in March 2020, BEC has so far conducted elections of approximately 400 national and local bodies including 17 constituencies of national parliament. Initially in some cases, BEC needed to defer election time under the legal provision. Amidst Covid 19 pandemic, BEC conducted 17 Parliamentary by - elections : 31 Gaibandha 3 , 183 Dhaka-10, 98 Bagerhat – 4, 36 Bogra – 1, 90 Jashore – 6, 71 Pabna – 4, 178 Dhaka - 5, , 51 Naogaon - 6, 191 Dhaka - 18, 62 Sirajgonj - 1, 275 Laksmipur-2, 187 Dhaka - 14, 253 Kumilla-5, 231 Sylhet 3, 255 Kumilla-7, 67 Sirajgonj – 6 and 136 Tangail 7

Besides general and by - elections in different post of 354 Union Parishad, 13 Upazila parishad , 17 Zila parishad and 11 Municipalities elections were held till mid - November 2020 .

Voters' turnout of these elections was more than 65 % on an average. Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) were used in the parliamentary by - elections of Dhaka - 3 , Dhaka - 5 , Dhaka - 18 and Sirajginj - 1 constituencies and some local bodies elections . Initially Negative campaign had taken place against the use of EVM with plea that touching a machine by finger would help spread the Corona virus among the voters. It had caused a poor turnout in some cases.

BEC has to conduct the election in the face of various challenges. On top of this, BEC has been relentlessly conducting elections at various levels to keep the democratic process afloat by tackling challenges like the epidemic Covid – 19.

BEC has setup Standard of Operations for the election conducting officials conducive in a pandemic situation. BEC has taken a widespread publicity activity on COVID - 19 health guideline through Electronic media, social medias , newspaper advertise . Leaflets were

distributed among the voters, poster , banner festoons were hanged in different strategic points of electoral area including polling stations .

Since Covid - 19 pandemic Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) have been conducting election taking some extra precautionary measures. These includes maintaining health code for polling officials and voters. At the same time plans have been taken to prevent the pandemic from spreading due to the election. BEC never compromise with the health hazard of any electoral officials as well as voters. In every cycle of electoral process BEC issues the instructions to strictly follow health guidelines. So far there is no report of incident that electoral officials infected with covid due to election duty.

Elections were conducted in both Electronic Voting Machine (EVM) and paper ballot voting system. Bangladesh Election Commission tried its best to follow Covid-19 protocol as much as possible in conducting Elections by maintaining social distance among voters and providing facilities for washing hands with soap. Face mask and alcohol based hand sanitizer were also made available for electors who come to exercise their voting rights.

Role of Social Media

Social media is still a prominent platform for anti-establishment stake holders. Negative campaign is also vibrant there. However, the positive aspect of the social media platform is that candidates' were almost solely dependent on social media campaign. Candidates' Campaign helped disseminate the information regarding contesting Candidates' and election centers. Regarding negative or damaging campaign on election procedure Election Management Bodies (EMBs) might think of campaigning 'Silent Period' policy for media on specific issues in election procedures.

At present, around the globe, people are connected with each other by means of social networks or social media. Now a days in the field of communication social media enables people to participate in social networking. In this regard election is no exception. In fact, it is gaining the position of a potent tool for election management, campaign, spreading awareness, encouragement of voters and many more. It is increasingly influencing the voters, the candidates as well as political parties. The political leaders and celebrities influence the public opinion and

voting behaviors via different social media. During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, for reducing the risk of public transmission of the fatal virus, social media have emerged to play a vital role. It is observed that the election campaign were mostly done through social media.

Various social media helped to run elections smoothly even after the outbreak of pandemic. According to mcbi.nlm.gov in the USA a lame, the social media site increased directly by about 60000 voters   and indirectly through social contagion by another 280000 voters, for a total of 340000 additional voters in 2010. This statistic illustrates that at present, social media could play a greater role in voter turnout even during the outbreak.

So far the election is concerned, in our country, the early April of 2020 to late December of 2021 was the prime time for the pandemic. Throughout this period the elections in our country were held taking various measures. It has lots of advantages, while there are some other points against it. The prime example of it can be the numerous misinformation which might be the cause of the lower voter turnout. In addition there are issues security, election imposture etc. Despite the flaws, social medias like face book, twitter, LinkedIn etc. have immense positive impact on practice of election. If the Election Management bodies (EMBs) steps forward to improvise social media policies in elections and take steps to eradicate its damaging influences, it will play a vital role in the field of election information dissemination in the future.

Elections during Covid-19 were challenging. But the continuation of democracy is also as important as our day to day life. Pandemic situation might not end altogether. We need to adjust our life as well as democratic practices with this pandemic situation and we must engage social media platforms for enhancing a conducive election environment.

Challenges and remedies

Main challenge is to face misinformation and negative propaganda in social media during election and pre-election period.

- Positive campaigning is remedy to negative and misinformation in social media.
- Bangladesh Election Commission made all out efforts to disseminate information that health safety measures would be in place in all polling booths. BEC engaged traditional

print and electronic media along with social media for this positive campaign. Short Text Messages (SMS) were sent to the concerned voters. Social media platforms were also used in behalf of election commission.

- EMBs need legal mandate to curb propaganda.

- Regarding negative or damaging campaign on election procedure Election Management Bodies (EMBs) might think of campaigning 'Silent Period' policy for media on specific issues in election procedures.

- EMB official must post positive video clips in social media routinely on daily basis till the election time is over.

- By out numbering negative campaign by positive campaign electors can get the real picture of the situation and the effect of negative campaign, wrong information and rumor could be eradicated or at least neutralized.

Interactive session on digital platform with FEMBoSA members

Date: 26 April 2022

Theme: Social Media in Elections in the context of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Forum of the Election Management Bodies of South Asia FEMBoSA

Forum of Election Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA)

According to the discission (Thimpu Resulation) of the 11th meeting of the FEMBoSA held on 11 August 2021, all members agreed to have interactive session among the FEMBoSA members on a half-yearly basis

Election During Covid-19

Challenges and Measures for Addressing them with Special Reference to Social Media

Presented by

FORHAD AHMMED KHAN
Joint Secretary
Bangladesh Election Commission

- Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) arranged quite a good number of parliamentary and local government elections during Covid-19 pandemic.
- After outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2020, BEC has so far conducted elections of approximately 400 national and local bodies including 17 constituencies of national parliament .
- Initially in some cases , BEC needed to defer election time under the legal provision. Amidst Covid 19 pandemic, BEC conducted 17 Parliamentary by - elections.
- Besides general and by - elections in different post of—
- 354 Union Parishad
- 13 Upazila parishad
- 17 Zila parishad (District Council)
- 11 Municipalities and 4 City Corporation Elections elections were held till mid November 2020 .

Election During Covid-19
Parliament byelection:

- 31 Gaibanda-3
- 183 Dhaka -10
- 98 Bagerhat-4
- 36 Bugura-1
- 90 Jashore-6
- 71 Pabna-4
- 178 Dhaka-5
- 51 Naogoan-6
- 191 Dhaka-18
- 62 Sirajgonj-1
- 275 Lakshmipur-2

- 187 Dhaka-14
- 253 Cumilla-5
- 231 Sylhet-3
- 255 Cumilla-7
- 67 Sirajgonj-6
- 136 Tangail-7

During Covid-19
Important Local Government Body elections

- Dhaka North City Corporation
- Dhaka South City Corporation
- Chattagram City Corporation
- Narayongonj City Corporation

Legal Obligation

- Arrangement of elections to parliament within the specified time is mandatory in existing legal framework.
- However, Chief Election Commissioner of Bangladesh has some limited Power to defer the by-election to the parliament upto 90 days for each constituency.
- BEC exercised that power by deferring the date of Election at the beginning of Covid-19 pandemic.
- But it did not work as the pandemic prolonged unexpectedly for a longer time.
- So BEC had to conduct elections during pandemic for legal compliance.

Election in Bangladesh during Covid-19

Time	Elections	Best Practices	Remark
une–'0 to)ec–'1	Parliament constituency By-elections	• EVM used, Covid Health protocol: • The BEC had taken extra precautionary measures for voters, polling staff, polling agents and members of law enforcing agencies such as—	average voters' turnout 65%
\ug–'0 to an–21	City Corporation Elections	• disinfecting polling booths before starting polls • polling personnel wear hand gloves and face masks • voters maintain safe distance while casting votes	
\ug–'0 to an–21	Municipalities General Elections	• Voters used hand sanitizer before entering the polling booths • maintaining distances of minimum one meter in the queue and in the polling booths	
uly–'0 to an–21	Union Council Elections	• checking of voters' body temperature on entry to the polling station	
\ug–'0 to an–21	Local Government by-Elections	• instructional posters regarding awareness of COVID-19 outside of polling booths • polling staff and agents to wear protective equipment • constrained campaigning of the candidates with no	

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Election in Media

Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS)
National News Agency of Bangladesh

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EC Khanam emphasises on holding free, fair UP polls

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All News

GAIBANDHA, JAN 26, 2022 (BSS) - Election Commissioner Begum Kabita Khanam today underscored the need for holding free, fair and credible Union Parishad (UP) election across the country.

"The EC is fully determined for holding an acceptable and fair UP election and will do whatever is necessary to make the election more acceptable ," She

Polling Station in Media During Covid

Role of Social Media

- Social media is still a prominent platform for anti-establishment stake holders
- Negative campaign is also vibrant there
- positive aspect of the social media platform is that candidates' were almost solely dependent on social media for election campaign
- Candidates' Campaign helped disseminate the information regarding contesting Candidates' and election centers
- Regarding negative or damaging campaign on election procedure EMBs might think of campaigning 'Silent Period' policy for media on specific issues
- At present, around the globe, people are connected with each other by means of social media

Role of Social Media ..Cont

- Now a days in the field of communication social media enables people to participate in social networking
- election is no exception
- It is gaining the position of a potent tool for election management like—
  - campaign
  - spreading awareness
  - encouragement of voters
  - many more
- It is increasingly influencing the voters, the candidates as well as political parties
- Political leaders and celebrities influence the public opinion and voting behaviors via different social media
- During the recent COVID-19 pandemic, for reducing the risk of public transmission of the fatal virus, social media have emerged to play a vital role
- It is observed that the election campaign were mostly done through social media.

Use of social Media in Bangladesh during COVID situation

- Early April of 2020 to late December of 2021 was the prime time for the pandemic
- Throughout this period the elections in our country were held taking various measures
- It has lots of advantages, while there are some other points against it
- The prime example of it can be the numerous misinformation which might be the cause of the lower voter turnout
- In addition there are issues of securities, election impostures etc.
- Despite the flaws, social medias like—
  - Facebook
  - Twitter
  - LinkedIn
  - etc.

have immense positive impact on practice of election

Use of ICT during COVID situation

BEC has readily adopted different types of ICT in electoral process

- BVRS (Voter Roll Preparation System)
- Database system (to support voter registration process and National Identity registration systems)
- Geographic Information Systems (GIS based delimitation tools)
- some ICT based pertinent services.
- Election Management System—
  - Election Schedule Management System (ESMS)
  - Online Nomination Submission System (ONSS)
  - Candidate Management System (CIMS)
  - Polling Station Management System (PSMS)
  - Polling Personnel Management System (PPMS)
  - Result Management System (RMS)
- Since the emerging field of electronic voting is new and exists primarily within the field of electoral administration, BEC has introduced Electronic Voting Machine (EVM)

Electronic Voting Machine (EVM)

- EVM is one of the significant steps of BEC to shift from manual process to technology based process in election management
- BEC has already implemented EVM as a pilot program in some elections

EVM- Control unit

Electronic ballot unit

Technologies use promoting voter educational programs

- Text SMS
- Voice SMS
- WhatsApp/ Messenger Groups
- Uses of Musical Loud speaker
- TV Channel
- Call centers

Challenges and Remedies

- Main challenge is to face misinformation and negative propaganda in social media during election and pre election period
  - Periodic positive campaigning is remedy to negative and misinformation
  - BEC made all out efforts to disseminate information that health safety measures would be in place in all polling booths
  - BEC engaged traditional print and electronic media along with social media for this positive campaign
  - Text massages were sent to the concerned voters
  - Social media platforms were also used in behalf of election commission

- Need legal mandate to curb propaganda
- ➢ Regarding negative or damaging campaign on election procedure EMB might think of campaigning 'Silent Period' policy for media on specific issues in election procedures
- ➢ By out numbering negative campaign by positive campaign, electors can get the real picture of the situation and the effect of negative campaign, wrong information and rumor could be eradicated or at least neutralized

FEMB

Conclusion

If EMBs steps forward to improvise social media policies in elections and take steps to eradicate its damaging influences, it will play a vital role in the field of election information dissemination in the future

Questions/Comments

Thank You

Country Paper on Social Media and Indian Elections by Communication Division of the Election Commission of India

Introduction:

Traditionally Legislature, Executive, Judiciary and the Media have been considered the pillars of Democracy. The term Fourth Estate was assigned to Media, recognising the explicit capacity and power of Media in shaping political discourses. Now Social Media is being recognised as the 5th Estate thereby acknowledging its emerging power.

Increasing use of Social Media, Internet and microblogging sites have become a common phenomenon in Indian households aided by competitive markets and easy availability of smartphones and internet connectivity. With about 50% of the Indian population on these platforms, it is obvious that social media platforms are playing an important role in everyday exchange of ideas and expressions and also consequently during elections.

Widespread use obviously has its advantages and disadvantages. Given the mandate of ECI to maintain a level-playing field amongst stakeholders in elections, 'Social Media and Elections' is consequently becoming a connect to reckon with. Enhanced need for virtual interaction during Covid times has indeed brought the focus on Social media even more.
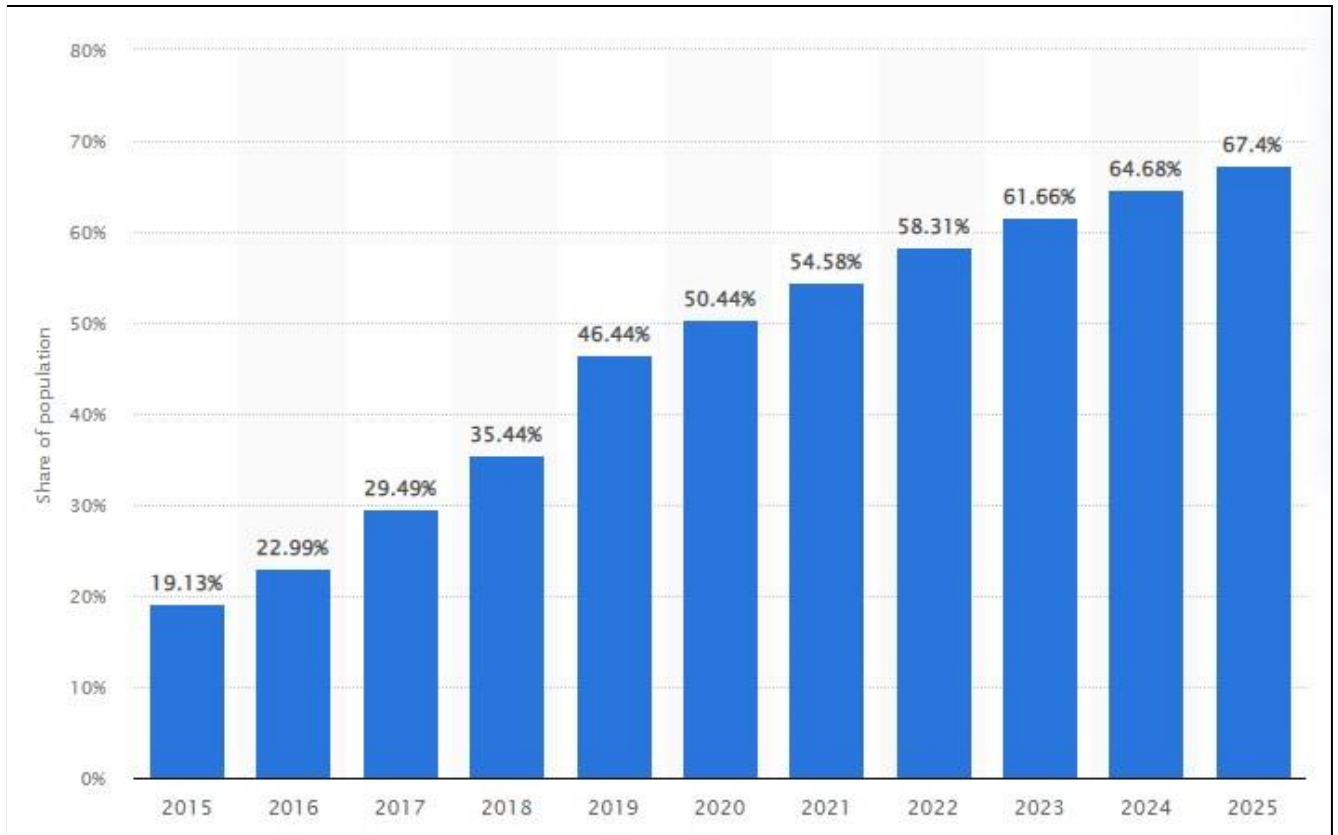
Social network user penetration in India from 2015 to 2020, with estimates until
2025 (Source: statistica.com)

Present Scenario:

The use of the internet across the world has increased manifold in recent years and will continue to multiply further in the coming years. COVID-19 pandemic has given the latest push to the surge of digital means of communication. People and organisations have fast adjusted to this new reality of the digital age. Among many other aspects of internet usage, the use of various Social Media Platforms is particularly noticeable.

The Digital India programme has now become almost a movement which is empowering most Indians with the power of technology. The extensive spread of mobile phones, Internet etc. has enabled many SMPs to expand their footprint in India. The following is the user base of major social media platforms in India as on on January 2022 *:

- WhatsApp users: 48.7 Crore
- YouTube users: 45.9 Crore
- Facebook users: 23.9 Crore

- Instagram users: 23 Crore
- Twitter users: 2.3 Crore

*Source: https://www.statista.com/

ECI initiatives: Milestones in Social Media Engagements

Election Commission of India taking cognizance of increased use of Social & Digital Media for election campaigning, have taken various steps and issued guidelines from time to time. ECI in 2013 itself, issued its first set of instructions to guide the use of social media in election campaigns. Salient features of the instructions:

1. All contesting candidates to furnish details of their authentic social media accounts at the time of filing nominations thereby recognising that social media handles had come to play a significant role in the manner in which contestants were reaching out to voters.

2. Social Media by definition falls under the category of digital electronic media. In the absence of any guidelines or regulatory act, the Commission through this 2013 instruction brought the Social Media sites under the purview of pre- certification. This meant that all political advertisements on social media would require proper pre-certification from the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee before being used/posted on social media.

3. It laid out clear guidelines for expenditure incurred on election campaigning on social media. All the candidates need to incorporate expenditure of social media campaigning including expenditure on political advertisements, cost of maintaining the accounts, developing content and salaries of the employees who manage the accounts in the election expenditure account of the candidate.

4. Model Code of Conduct for political parties and candidates that comes into effect post announcement of an election shall be applicable on the content posted on the internet, including social media websites by candidates and political parties.

Subsequently the Commission further clarified that all the political advertisements published in the e-papers also require pre-certification. The instruction however gave clarity that any political content in the form of messages/comments/photos/videos uploaded on blogs/social media platforms will not be treated as political advertisement.

Consultative Process

The initial instructions of 2013, paved the way for further deliberations and discussions after experiencing the effective use of social media in general elections held in the country in April – May 2014. The Election Commission of India in 2015 organised "Consultation on Social Media" with a view to build an understanding of social media. The Consultation revolved around accessing and learning from the experiences of different organisations and developing a framework for the possible and fruitful use of social media by the Election Commission and at the State and district levels. The consultation saw active participation from representatives from different ministries, private content developing agencies, technical educational institutions and officials of the Commission.

Based on the suggestions and the final report of the consultation, the Commission decided to enhance its interaction and involvement on social media. On 6th September, 2016 it instructed all the Chief Electoral Officers in the States/UTs to start actively engaging with all the stakeholders in the electoral process by inducting use of social media at district and state level. The active engagement through social media was aimed at creating awareness on electoral processes, voter awareness and education, regular & efficient information dissemination on various aspects of elections especially to youth and other stakeholders at large. Presently, most of the Chief Electoral Officers are present on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram and are actively engaging with users in an interactive manner. District Election Officers also have their social media accounts.

Social Media Cell

The instruction also proposed to set up an ECI level Social Media Cell to monitor and guide states and districts for greater and effective use of Social Media platforms. Ahead of the 17th General Elections, the Election Commission of India established a dedicated Social Media Cell in 2018 to effectively engage with its various stakeholders. ECI actively started using YouTube channel way back in August, 2013, Facebook in January, 2018 while in March 2019 ECI started using Twitter and Instagram to better connect & engage with larger audiences.

Social Media experts in Media Certification and Monitoring Committees

On 25th February, 2019 all the CEOs were instructed to reconstitute the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees and include a Social Media Expert at district and state level. The social media expert was given the following tasks to handle in the MCMC:

1. Assist the MCMC in the matter of certification of political advertisements proposed to be published on social media platforms.
2. Assist MCMC in scanning social media platforms for suspected cases of Paid News.
3. Assist MCMC in submitting a daily report to the accounting team with a copy to RO and Expenditure Observer w.r.t. expenditure incurred by the candidate on election advertising on social media platforms.
4. Assist the MCMC in the matters of queries/complaints related to media platforms.
5. Make sure that the Election Laws are strictly adhered to with matters related to advertisements on social media platforms.
6. Assist MCMC in handling the violation cases on Social media.
7. Being part of State level MCMC, he/she will assist in deciding appeals from District and Addl. /Jt. CEO Committee on certification of advt. on social media and also examining all cases of Paid News on appeal against the decision of District MCMC or cases that they may take up suo-motu.

2019 Elections: *Voluntary Code of Ethics*

Ahead of 17th General Elections, ECI under the aegis of the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) brought together all major Social Media Platforms to mutually devise a 'Voluntary Code of Ethics', first of its kind initiative amongst EMBs. The code came into immediate effect from the day it was presented to the Commission on 20th March, 2019. The IAMAI further extended the Voluntary Code of Ethics to all future General Elections and Legislative Assembly Elections.

The salient features of "Voluntary Code of Ethics" are:

a) Social Media Platforms and ECI developed a notification mechanism by which ECI can notify the relevant platforms of potential violations of Section 126 of the R.P. Act, 1951 and other electoral laws.

b) Social Media platforms to create a high priority dedicated grievance redressal channel for taking expeditions action on the cases reported by the ECI. ECI's directions to take down objectionable posts would be attended to on priority within 3 hrs of intimation made to SMPs.

c) Platforms will ensure that all political advertisements on their platforms are pre-certified from the Media Certification and Monitoring Committees as per the directions of Hon'ble Supreme Court.

d) Participating platforms are committed to facilitate transparency in paid political advertisements, including utilising their pre-existing labels/disclosure technology for such advertisements.

e) Social Media platforms will voluntarily undertake information, education and communication campaigns to build awareness including electoral laws and other related instructions.

Appointment of Nodal Officers

Subsequently for 17 General Elections, ECI nominated three Nodal Officers at the ECI level for reporting posts or political advertisements in social media in the light of violations of Model Code of Conduct or any provisions of electoral laws to expedite action. For this purpose ECI also instructed all the CEOs to appoint Nodal Officers at State level. The State Level Nodal Officers were also provided with a SOP for escalating the cases of violations in social media for time bound redressal.

Elections during the pandemic

The election to the Bihar legislative assembly in 2020 was the first election in India to be conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Before conducting the elections, the Election Commission of India (ECI) deliberated proactively on how to conduct the elections in a safe and effective manner. ECI consulted its counterparts in several countries and asked them to share their experiences. Equipped with such knowledge as well as its own experiences, the ECI issued detailed COVID guidelines for the Bihar assembly polls.

Besides the usual norms related to sanitising and social distancing, these guidelines included a reduction in the limit of electors per polling booth from 1500 to 1200 to prevent overcrowding, addition of extra polling stations and consequently additional EVMs, reduction of counting tables per hall etc.

The Commission also imposed several restrictions on campaigning to avoid large crowds. Another breakthrough to minimise the impact of Covid-19 on voter turnout was ECI's decision to extend the postal ballot option to senior citizens over the age of 80 years, COVID-positive/suspected patients and Persons with Disabilities.

The successful conduct of Bihar elections paved the way for future elections which were held during the pandemic, including assembly elections in 10 states and bye-elections in several states.

In recent elections in 5 states in 2022, with Uttar Pradesh the largest with electorate size of nearly 151 millions, ECI put in place graded response with guidelines being reviewed and modified on a weekly basis starting from initially banning all election rallies, thus promoting virtual means of campaigning through digital media platforms, and social media platforms specifically playing a vital role.

Social Media to spread the message of COVID safe elections

With a presence on prominent social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp and Youtube, the ECI has been trying to extend its voter outreach programme and engage directly with the voters. Social media platforms provide a direct communication channel between ECI and the voters. Following its core information dissemination framework the Commission consistently provided information regarding its various guidelines and motivated the electorate by assuring that casting vote is safe. During elections, ECI's social media posts aggressively highlighted all Covid safety measures taken by the Commission from sanitisation at polling booths to the extension of postal ballot facility to different categories of voters. ECI utilised its social media handles to assure the electorate that polling stations are safe and sanitised. This confidence building exercise was done to draw the electorate to the polling stations.

ECI through its various apps like Voter Helpline app, have tried to simplify and provide no contact services like registration, online political party registration, online nomination filing, reporting of violation of MCC etc.

Sample Posts

Voters' **to do** list

✓ Check your name in the Voter List
✓ Check your Polling Station
✓ Know your Candidate
✓ Carry any of the 12 documents as an identity proof at polling station

Most importantly, follow all guidelines for COVID safe elections & cast your VOTE

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Election Commission of India

HOW TO CAST YOUR VOTE SAFELY DURING ELECTIONS?

PRACTICE SOCIAL DISTANCING

WEAR A MASK AND USE HAND SANITIZER

GET YOUR TEMPERATURE CHECKED

Are you **Covid Positive**, a Person with Disability or 80 years or above?
FILL FORM 12D AND AVAIL ECI'S POSTAL BALLOT FACILITY & VOTE FROM THE COMFORT OF YOUR HOMES

Follow us on : 🅕 🅣 🅘 ▶ | www.eci.gov.in

SAFE **VOTING** WITH **POSTAL BALLOT**

Electors who are eligible for optional Postal Ballot voting:

➤ Persons with Disability flagged in the electoral roll

➤ Senior citizens (Above 80 years of age)

➤ Electors employed in Notified Essential Services (Absentee voters)

➤ Covid suspect or affected persons

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Election Commission of India

SAFE **VOTING** WITH **POSTAL BALLOT**

How to avail optional postal ballot VOTING:

➤ Fill Form 12D and apply to Returning Officer within 5 days of notification

➤ PwD voters to submit copy of benchmark disability certificate

➤ BLO will collect Form 12D from elector's house

➤ Candidates will also be provided list of such electors, If they wish to depute their representatives to watch the process.

भारत निर्वाचन आयोग
Election Commission of India

SAFE **VOTING** WITH **POSTAL BALLOT**

How to avail optional postal ballot VOTING:

➤ Team of polling officials visit the elector's address to collect his/her vote

➤ Electors will be intimated in advance of their visit

➤ A videographer shall accompany polling officials along with police security cover

➤ Absentee voters in essential services can vote at postal voting centres. Poll Officials will **not** visit their homes.

➤ They will be intimated of dates on which postal ballot facility will remain open through SMS

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Election Commission of India

SAFE **VOTING** WITH **POSTAL BALLOT**

➤ Electors who have been issued postal ballot are not allowed to vote at a polling station

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Election Commission of India

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Political parties adapting to the changing reality of digital campaigning in the pandemic

Ever since the Election Commission of India (ECI) barred political parties from holding huge rallies and gatherings, they swiftly moved away from the traditional mega rallies to virtual rallies, entering the landscape of digital campaigning. Experts argue that digital election campaigns are not only about circulating and promoting political and electoral campaign material but also reaching out to the electorate through audio and video messages and calls and even using LED screens in small towns and cities and remote villages. Political parties effectively used their social media platforms as a means to communicate with their voters.

However, the sudden shift to intensive election campaigning on social media also meant that ECI needed to actively monitor all such campaigns right till the district level through its three tier monitoring mechanism i.e. Media Certification and Monitoring Committees. With ECI's foresight and preparation, the MCMCs with a social media expert monitored social media platforms to ensure compliance of election laws/ECI guidelines by political parties and candidates. While ECI has already issued instructions way back in 2013 for extension of provisions of Model Code of Conduct to content on social media platforms and inclusion of expenditure on social media and advertisements in election expenses account, considering the ECI thrust on virtual campaigns during Covid situation, a separate and dedicated format for accounting of expenses on virtual campaigns for both candidates and political parties was devised for accounting of such expenses during the recent Assembly elections in 2022. Further,

to encourage political parties to utilise electronic media for election campaigning, ECI doubled the free broadcast time allotted to the parties to campaign on government media channels.

Challenges

Though the use of social media in the election process has huge potential which will continue to grow further in future elections, it also poses various challenges for the EMBs across the globe. Factors like hate speech, misinformation, reach beyond geographical boundaries, broad community guidelines rather than country specific context, difficulty in tracing the origin of the content in terms of geographical location and user identity, issues of deep fake, recirculation of old clips, paid news/ surrogate ads often hinder the level playing field which is essential for free, fair and democratic elections.
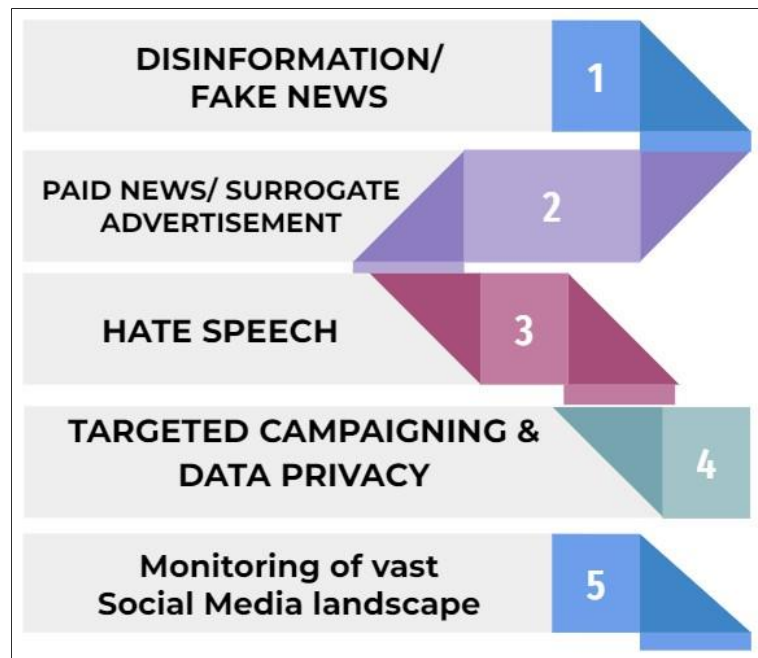
Way Forward

To tackle the above mentioned challenges, EMBs can do the following:

1) In order to deal with the dynamic times, it's imperative to modify old or existing rules to the current scenario. EMBs need to factor in the problems of 'today' and deal with them by revising the laws. Thus, electoral reforms play a crucial role in dealing with these challenges.

2) Fake news or misinformation are a major nuisance during election times. Tackling them by strengthening monitoring mechanisms and sharing correct information is critical in curtailing its spread. Social media platforms can play an important role in that.

3) Ensuring Training and capacity building of election personeel to effectively monitor and provide grievance redressal.

4) Political parties being a critical stakeholder, their sensitisation to the rules and regulations at regular intervals serves as an important tool in tackling various challenges.

FAQs on Social Media:

As part of its Media handbook, the Commission has also prepared a list of readymade Frequently Asked Questions related to use of social media in elections.

Q. Do candidates have to mention details about their Social Media accounts at the time of filing nominations?

A. Authentic social media account (if any) should be informed by the candidate in para 3 of Form-26 at the time of filing of nomination.

Q. Does political advertisement on Social Media sites come under the purview of pre-certification?

A. Yes. Since social media websites are also electronic media by definition, therefore Commission's instructions with regards to pre-certification of political advertisements shall also apply *mutatis mutandis* to websites including social media websites.

Q. Does the Model Code of Conduct apply to the content on the internet including social media?

A. Yes. Provisions of Model Code of Conduct and related instructions of the Commission issued from time to time shall also apply to the content being posted on the internet, including social media websites, by candidates and political parties.

Q. Do candidates/Political parties have to include their expenditure on advertisement of Social Media while submitting their final statement of expenditure?

A. Yes. Candidates and political parties have to include all expenditure on campaigning, including expenditure on advertisement on social media while submitting final statement of expenditure. This shall also include payment made to internet companies and websites for carrying advertisements and campaign related operational expenditure on creative development

of content, operational expenditure on salaries and wages paid to the team of workers employed by such candidates and political parties to maintain their social media accounts etc.

Q. Will the content in the form of messages/ photos/ comments/ videos/ blogs/ self accounts' on websites be treated as political advertisement and therefore required to get pre-certification?

A. No. Any political content in the form of messages/ comments/ photos/ videos posted/uploaded on the 'blogs/ self-accounts' on websites will not be treated as political advertisement and therefore would not require pre-certification, even if the same is posted/uploaded by the political parties/ candidates.

Q. Can any person issue a paid advertisement/boost a particular post on social media for the purpose of promoting or procuring the election of such a candidate without his consent/permission?

Section 171H of the Indian Penal Code, 1860, prohibits incurring of expenditure on, inter-alia, any advertisement, circular or publication, for the purpose of promoting or procuring the election of a candidate, without authority from the candidate. The person shall be punished with a fine which may extend to five hundred rupees.

Q. Can a contesting candidate/political party share content/posts on their individual social media platforms during the period of forty-eight hours ending with the hour fixed for the conclusion of the poll (silence period)?

As per Section 126 of the RPA 1951, display of any election matter which is intended or calculated to influence or affect the result of an election, by means of cinematograph, television or other similar apparatus is prohibited during the period of forty-eight hours ending with the hour fixed for the conclusion of the poll for any election in the polling area. Since, social media websites are also electronic media by definition, the above provisions to be observed on social media also.
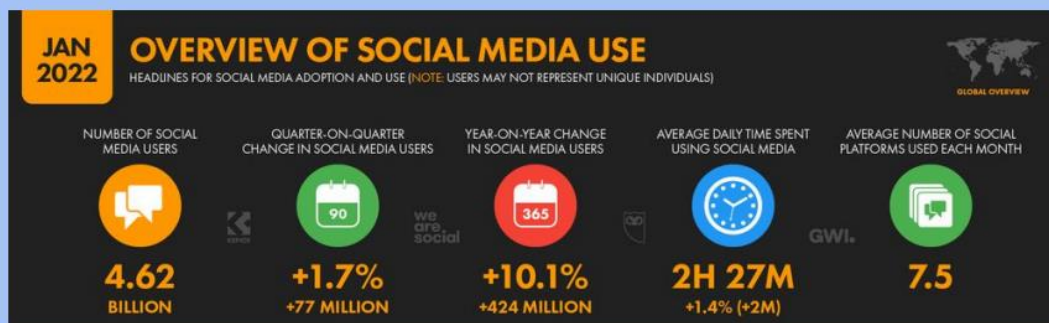
Social Media in Elections- INTRODUCTION

- Across the world, over 4.62 Billion users are said to be actively using Social Media to interact and communicate.
- Social Media is playing an important role in moulding opinions and setting up narratives globally.
- Modes of election campaigning has seen a paradigm shift with social media playing a crucial role as pivot of electioneering.
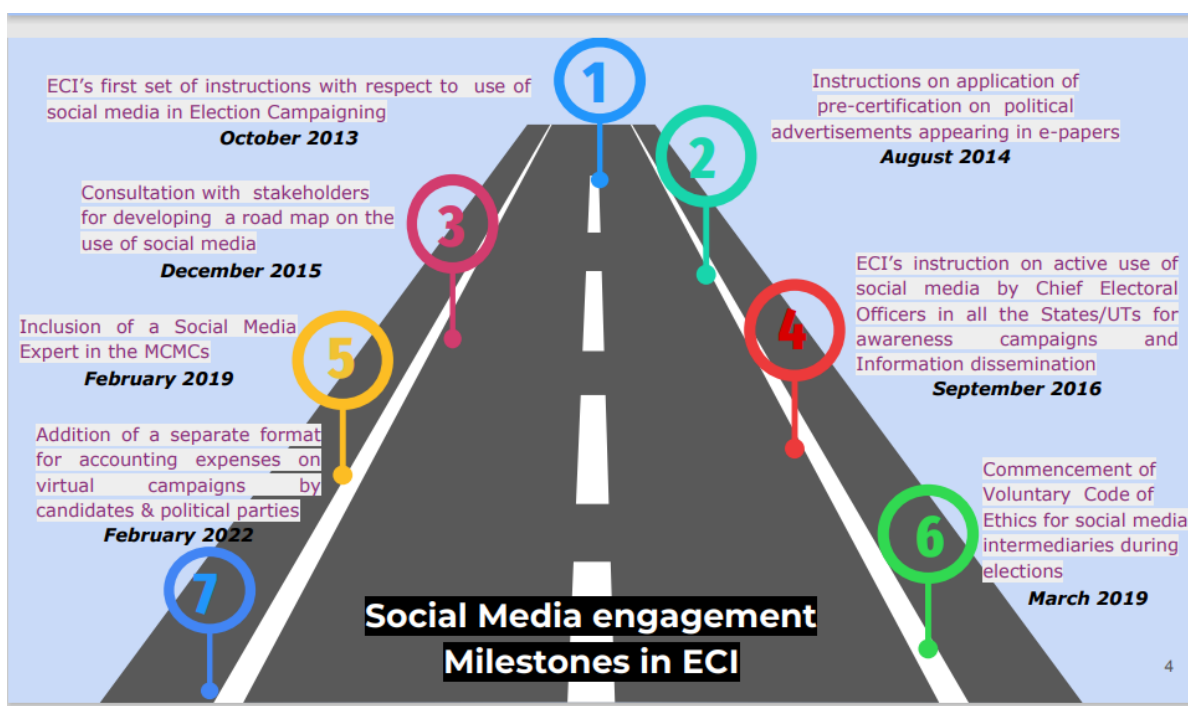
Social Media users across the world

JAN 2022 **OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA USE**
HEADLINES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA ADOPTION AND USE (NOTE: USERS MAY NOT REPRESENT UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS)

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

NUMBER OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS	QUARTER-ON-QUARTER CHANGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA USERS	YEAR-ON-YEAR CHANGE IN SOCIAL MEDIA USERS	AVERAGE DAILY TIME SPENT USING SOCIAL MEDIA	AVERAGE NUMBER OF SOCIAL PLATFORMS USED EACH MONTH
4.62 BILLION	**+1.7%** +77 MILLION	**+10.1%** +424 MILLION	**2H 27M** +1.4% (+2M)	**7.5**

Source: https://datareportal.com/social-media-users   3

ECI's first set of instructions with respect to use of social media in Election Campaigning
October 2013

1

Instructions on application of pre-certification on political advertisements appearing in e-papers

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ECI's first set of instructions with respect to use of social media in Election Campaigning
October 2013

Consultation with stakeholders for developing a road map on the use of social media
December 2015

Inclusion of a Social Media Expert in the MCMCs
February 2019

Addition of a separate format for accounting expenses on virtual campaigns by candidates & political parties
February 2022

1

2 Instructions on application of pre-certification on political advertisements appearing in e-papers
August 2014

3

4 ECI's instruction on active use of social media by Chief Electoral Officers in all the States/UTs for awareness campaigns and Information dissemination
September 2016

5

6 Commencement of Voluntary Code of Ethics for social media intermediaries during elections
March 2019

7

Social Media engagement Milestones in ECI

4

ECI's Initiative- 2013 guidelines

- ECI brought in its first set of instructions to guide the use of social media in election campaigning in 2013.

- Since then ECI has been proactively collaborating with stakeholders and Social Media Platforms to ensure a level playing field during elections on these platforms.

ECI's Initiative - Voluntary Code of Ethics

In the year 2019 ahead of 17th General Elections, ECI under the aegis of the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) brought together all major Social Media Platforms to mutually devise a 'Voluntary Code of Ethics', first of its kind initiative amongst EMBs which is applicable in all general elections since then. The Voluntary Code is based on four fundamental points:

1. SMPs would devise a high priority and dedicated grievance redressal channel for ECI. The Platforms assured ECI and have been taking due action against reported cases of violation on real time basis.

Voluntary Code of Ethics...contd

2.   SMPs agreed to ensure that all political advertisements hosted on their platforms would be pre-certified by MCMCs as per the Hon'ble Supreme Court's directions.

3.   As a step towards increased transparency in paid political advertisements, SMPs would provide a mechanism to provide ad transparency.

4   And lastly the Platforms would voluntarily undertake voter awareness & education campaigns and information dissemination about elections.

7

India leading the way - Bihar Legislative Elections 2020, The First Elections during Covid-19 and recent ones in early 2022

- When the entire world was grappling with the pandemic and democratic processes were even deferred in some places, India took a bold calculated decision to conduct the Bihar Legislative Assembly elections.
- Bihar elections (with electorate of over 73.64 millions) was the largest election to be conducted during the pandemic.

8

- To ensure safety of the election officials and electors, ECI laid out elaborate guidelines for the conduct of elections. This included mandatory use of mask, sanitiser and thermal scanning.

- Due emphasis was laid on social distancing - number of electors per booth was reduced to 1200 from 1500; Postal Ballot option to vulnerable categories; limiting numbers at Rallies for election campaigning and door to door campaigning.

- In recent elections in 5 states in 2022, with UP the largest with electorate size of nearly 151 millions, ECI put in place graded response with guidelines being reviewed and modified on a weekly basis starting from initially banning all election rallies, thus promoting virtual means of campaigning through digital media platforms, and social media platforms specifically playing a vital role.

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How ECI used Social Media to spread the message of COVID safe elections

- An important part of ECI's outreach programme during elections was to convey the message of COVID safe elections.
- ECI utilised its social media handles to assure the electorate that polling stations are safe and sanitised. This confidence building exercise was done to bring the electorate to the polling stations.

Your Vote is your Future

YOUR VOTE IS IMPORTANT

YOUR SAFETY IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT

All Covid related and other safety measures are in place for YOU at each polling station!

You are Welcome to Cast your Vote fearlessly.

Facilities at Polling Stations

10

- Following its core information dissemination framework, the Commission consistently provided information regarding its various guidelines; motivated electorate by assuring that casting vote is safe and lastly providing information about various facilities like gloves, sanitisers and postal ballot provided by the Commission to ensure safe participation by the electors. **Motto was to convey - safe voter and safe voting**

Samples of Social Media posts about guidelines to ensure COVID safe elections

Social Media posts about guidelines to ensure COVID safe elections

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No-Contact Service Delivery : Use of IT Apps to ensure safety against COVID in election processes

ECI through its ECOSYSTEM of mobile apps like Voter Helpline app, SUVIDHA app for candidates, have tried to simplify and provide **no-contact services** like registration, online political party registration, online nomination filing, reporting of violation of MCC etc.

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Election Campaigning through social media

- To encourage political parties to utilise electronic media for election campaigning, ECI **doubled the free broadcast time allotted to the parties to campaign on government media channels.**
- Taking a cue from ECI's strict stance on physical rallies all major **political parties amplified their election campaigns through various social media platforms.**
- During the Legislative Assembly Elections 2022 in five states, ECI has given thrust on virtual campaigns considering the Covid situation and thus, a **separate and dedicated format for accounting of expenses on virtual campaigns** for both candidates and political parties was devised for accounting of such expenses.

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Pre COVID election rallies   **Post COVID election rallies**

Leading news publications covered how political parties' extensively used social media for election campaigning during pandemic

Political parties gear up for digital campaign amid Covid surge THE WEEK

Punjab polls: Snappy slogans, hashtags spice up online battlefield *The Indian* EXPRESS

Political parties in Uttar Pradesh gear up for digital campaign amid Covid surge

UP polls: Political parties take to digital mode after Election Commission bans rallies THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Congress zeroes in on 'go virtual for victory' mantra for high-voltage five assembly poll campaign INDIA TODAY

17

Election Campaigning through social media

- Political parties in India were quick to adapt with the fast changing realities and moved from traditional mega rallies to crisp and interesting social media posts, virtual LIVE rallies etc.
- The sudden shift to intensive election campaigning on social media also meant that ECI actively monitored all such campaigns right till the district level through its three tier monitoring mechanism i.e. **Media Certification and Monitoring Committees.**
- With ECI's foresight and preparation, the MCMCs with a social media expert actively monitored social media platforms to ensure compliance of election laws or guidelines by political parties and candidates.

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Election Campaigning through social media (Rules)

- ECI has extended its provisions of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) and related instructions to the content being posted on the internet, including social media websites, by candidates and political parties.
- ECI has instructed all candidates and political parties to include all expenditure on campaigning, including expenditure on advertisement on social media while submitting final statement of expenditure.
- ECI has prohibited display of any election related matter intended to influence or affect the result of an election on electronic media including social media during the period of forty-eight hours before the poll (Section 126 of the Representation of People's Act 1951).
- ECI has mandated that all candidates must furnish details of their authentic social media accounts in Form-26 while filing nominations.
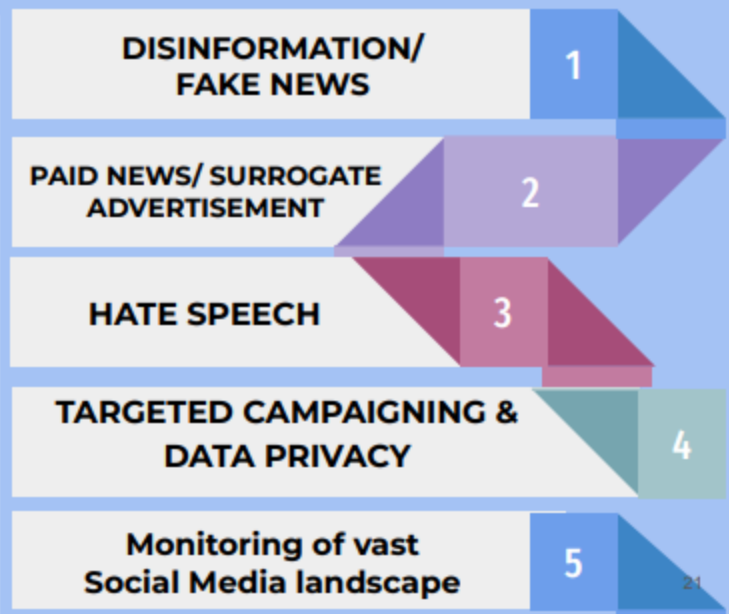
19

Complaints reported to various social media platforms and action taken during Assembly Elections 2022:

	Facebook	Twitter	Youtube	Whatsapp	Total
Political Posts/ads during silence period	14	12	6	1	33
Violation of Model Code of Conduct/Hate Speech	5	6	2	-	13
Voter Misinformation	4	1	-	-	5
Violation of pre-certification of political ads	-	-	2	-	2
	23	19	10	1	53

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Challenges

Though use of social media in election process has huge potential which will continue to grow further in future elections, it also poses various challenges for the EMBs across the globe. **Challenges like hate speech, fake news, surrogate advt, monitoring sans boundaries** etc pose greater threat to free & fair elections. Such dis/misformation hinder the level-playing field which is essential for all democratic elections

DISINFORMATION/ FAKE NEWS	1
PAID NEWS/ SURROGATE ADVERTISEMENT	2
HATE SPEECH	3
TARGETED CAMPAIGNING & DATA PRIVACY	4
Monitoring of vast Social Media landscape	5

Way Forward

To tackle the above mentioned challenges, EMBs can do the following:

1) Need to modify old or existing rules based on current scenario. EMBs need to factor in challenges posed by tech innovations and deal with them by revisiting existing laws.
2) Tackling fake news by strengthening monitoring mechanism and regular interaction with media.
3) EMBs through their official handles should bust fake news and disseminate the correct information on real time basis. SMPs can play proactive role.
4) Training polling personnel, so they can effectively monitor and provide grievance redressal as top priorities.
5) Sensitization of Political parties (as they are the major stakeholders) to updated rules and regulations at regular intervals serves as an important tool in tackling various challenges.

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Measures taken and usage of technology in the Electoral Process during Pandemic

Biannual Meeting of the Forum of Elections Management Bodies of South Asia (FEMBoSA) Thimphu, Bhutan 26th April 2022 by *Elections Commission of Maldives*

Introduction

The coronavirus has taken a heavy toll on electoral processes in the Maldives, with Local Council and Women's Development Committee elections being postponed from 2020 till 2021 because of COVID-19 and its global lockdowns. Ideally, postponing elections involved a sensible balancing act between the democratic imperative, enshrined in the law and constitutions, to hold regular elections, and public health requirements restricting large gatherings and minimizing close contact between people.

The crisis provided a unique opportunity for electoral reform. Extending opportunities for online platforms has been seen to reduce risk. However, much caution was put in thought, particularly as online registration, which involved limitations of unmanageable cyber-risks.

Elections commission of the Maldives (ECM) had the fear that the COVID-19 pandemic may lead to a conflict of rights between the right to health and to life, which was threatened during the pandemic, and the right to vote. In order to guarantee that all these fundamental rights were properly upheld, ECM had to undergo a delicate balancing process while fulfilling its mandate in conducting elections official training, public awareness and other electoral processes like registration for voting and together placing health and safety measures to protect the health of the population. The Process was costly, an additional MVR 29.8 Million was added to the LCE & WDC 2021 Elections budget.

Health and Safety measures for elections

The pandemic had called for solutions to ensure both public health interest and citizen's constitutional voting rights are protected. Hence, to protect the health and safety of voters and electoral officials, during LCE & WDC elections, ECM election officials were strictly instructed to wear face masks and face shields along with hand sanitization placed at all major verification points at the ballot stations. Quarantined persons and Covid-19 patients were allowed to vote after all others had casted their votes, however, Quarantined persons and Covid-19 patients were required to accompany a helper if they wish to cast their votes as they were not allowed to handle the ballots.

Although ECM decided to implement the health and safety measures as per Maldives Health Protection Agency's (HPA) guidelines with the existing manual electoral processes for the voting day, the major challenge was how to conduct the pre- elections voters awareness programs, polling station official's training sessions and re-registration process.

Use of technology in the process

Due to the restriction on movement, it was necessary to make the existing processes accessible to the public, digitally. Social media and other technological tools was used to give adequate and timely information to citizens and voters. Different technological tools were used to reduce the physical movements and contact among the general public. The newly introduced IT based electoral services helped to build trust in the elections process , as voters were able to use these online platforms for electoral services and awareness, the health and safety guidelines were fully implemented.

Awareness and Training: -

Due to the geographical nature of the Maldives along with the rules and guidelines implemented by the government on pandemic made it difficult to reach the public to conduct trainings, awareness programs on the LCE & WDCE elections. Travel bans were imposed and the training of approximately 6,000 Elections officials was a challenging task for ECM.

ECM was not ready for such a change, and ECM was in need of a rapid and alternative solution to replace its conventional method for elections official training. The only solution available was online meeting platforms. Applications like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google-meet, duo and Webex were used to conduct these obligatory trainings. However, the use of different online applications was a challenge itself as there is no predefined application that had a universal flow to its use, different people including ECM's training facilitator and officials were not familiar with different applications and different platforms. This caused technical issues during the training sessions, and proper evaluation of trainees and monitoring their attendance was an additional challenge.

The time was limited, huge efforts were made to put the training materials available online. The greatest challenge ECM faced was instructing the practical aspects of voting process for the trainees which normally was conducted in intensive practical face-to-face sessions. However, given the limited time and resources available, ECM was reasonably able to conduct the Elections official trainings and public awareness programs via online. Though, a lot of invalid votes were counted from various ballot boxes, indicating either poor performance of Elections official or lack of awareness among the voters as the 2021 LCE& WDC Elections was the first multi ballot election that was conducted by the election commission of Maldives. Nonetheless, a proper study is needed to conclude this assertion.

Voter's registration process: -
With average of 80,000 voters registering to cast their ballots and availability of a manual process which requires submission of paper based form, this process was not a very practical method with the ongoing pandemic and the implemented guidelines for public health and safety. A Digital solution was proposed and an online portal was developed for registration process to make this possible. All online registration for the elections held during the pandemic elections were completed via the newly developed online portal and is been heavily used on the by-elections since then.

This portal was designed with intension of multiple verification methods, minimizing fraud registrations. The registering voter was able to register using a laptop, mobile phone or computer

system with a web cam. As for the verification, it includes, a mobile token number to initiate the registrations process and the voter will be promptly asked to submit a picture of the National Identity Card and a live picture of the face (selfie) while registering. Submitted data were analyzed by two person, verification process, before the voter gets registered.

Upon completion of registration, the voter will receive a token which can be used to check the status of the registration via the portal or by sending an SMS to the short code 1414. And once the two processes of verification are finalized by the ECM officials, the voter will receive an SMS on their location of registration to cast their vote.

Conclusion

This pandemic made the ECM to explore the technologies and new ideas on how to conduct elections feasibly. Using online applications for training purposes methods of training was a success with many lessons learnt in making this a better next situation of a major election.

The newly introduced methods have given the ECM an in adept ideas which can be used to minimize the costs of logistics and transportation to the local islands and atolls for training and public awareness sessions.

Also, the online registration process has freed the ECM from the burden of manual sheets of thousands of papers. Similarly, quick processing and a better and easy management of the data are values added to the whole elections process with having voters access to the online registration throughout the country.

Everything has its drawbacks. Given its Pros and Cons of ICT, the ECM has experienced the use of technology on its electoral services during the Covid-19 pandemic. Speedy internet and access to internet is a necessity. Tech friendly, multi skilled facilitators are needed for future online trainings and awareness sessions. Better interactive materials (info-graphic video clips/lectures) needed to be developed in order to make the training sessions more consistent and useful.

As for the online registration plat form, public awareness on it, is needed. Public confidence in the process and its security must be established.
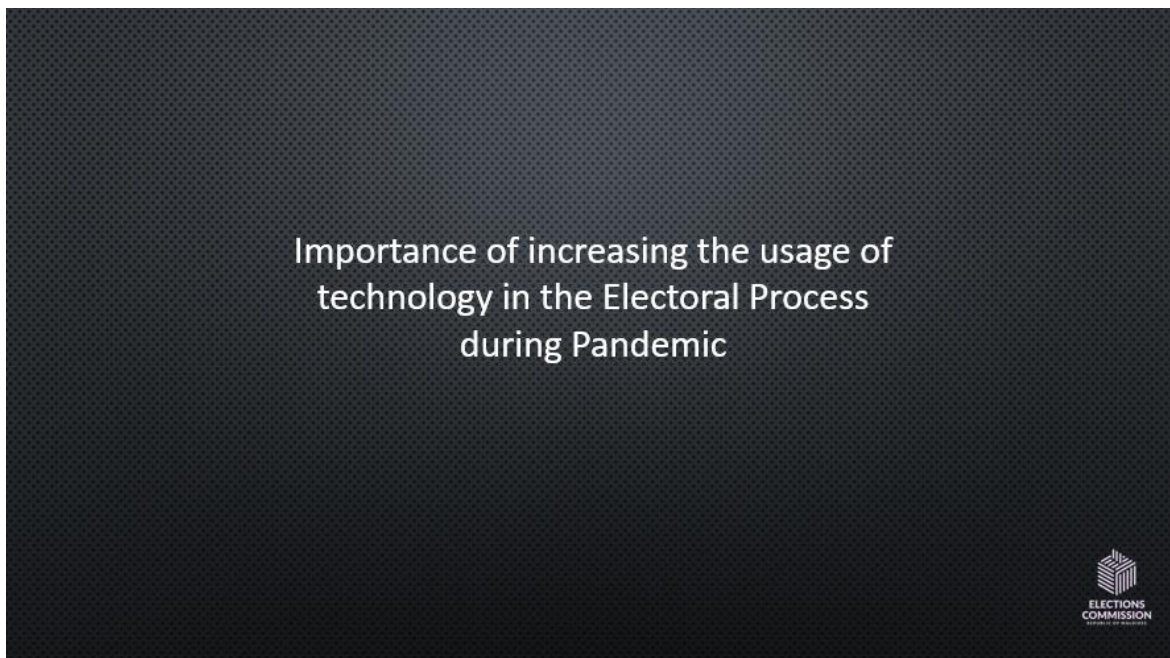
Introduction

- COVID-19, pandemic has brought new level of thinking to some of our processes.
- Accelerated the use of technology in the process.
- Making the existing processes access to the public digitally

Impacted electoral Processes

- Electoral Training
- Awareness
- Voters registration process

How Technology was used

- Electoral Training & Awareness
  - Online MS Teas, Zoom, Duo , Google Meet was used in conducting the training and awareness.
- Voters registration process
  - Developed an inhouse application for registration of voters with three level verification.

ELECTIONS
COMMISSION

Impact of Changes & Draw Backs

	Pros	Cons
Electoral Training	Logistically feasible Time & location convenience Cost Effective	Practical application was a major setback Internet speed issues A proper analysis on evaluation Monitoring of Attendance
Awareness	Logistically feasible Time & location convenience Cost Effective	Not every individual had the facility to participate Internet speed issues A proper analysis on evaluation Skilled facilitators with use of technology Monitoring of Attendance
Registration	Logistically feasible Time & location convenience Cost Effective Proper management of data Quick Service	Use of tech applications Internet speed issues A proper analysis on evaluation Security Issues

ELECTIONS
COMMISSION

Conclusion

- The use of online training & Awareness
  - Practical Session were not conducted and it was more based on the verbal explanation which lead to poor performance of officials worked in the ballot stations.
  - Selective platforms were used in dissemination of information to general public.

  Recommendations :
  - Include video and animations on the practical aspects.
  - Develop more applicable hand on packages.
  - Inclusive multiple platforms in dissemination of information to general public.

ELECTIONS
COMMISSION

Conclusion

- Online Registration
  - Online Registration of voters for the election was a successful implementation.
  - It made the process very reachable to all public
  - Though measurements implemented due to pandemic has been loosen ECM continued the use of this application as a part of electoral process.
  - This online process minimized use of paper.
  - Since this process is in its early stage, this is need to be made more aware to the public in using this platform.

ELECTIONS
COMMISSION

Social Media in Elections in the Context of the Covid 19 Pandemic
Sri Lankan Perspective

Prefix

This paper will discuss two scenarios to access the role of social media in elections in the context of covid pandemic. Two scenarios in which society is in panic mode and society is nearing normalcy will be discussed.

Overview

Sri Lanka is a country of about 22 million people. It records Digital literacy of 38.7% and IT literacy of 28.3%. The mobile phone subscription per 100 people is 103.16 and the home computer ownership is 23.5%. It also records email usage of 11% and internet usage stands at 21.3%. Further, the majority (60%) are men. There is a considerable difference in ICT readiness among the Rural, Urban and Estate sectors in Sri Lanka.

The COVID-19 pandemic has threatened human lives, disrupted livelihoods, and affected trade, economy and businesses worldwide. The global economy is beginning to show major disruptions and is heading toward a severe recession with an unprecedented economic crisis. Although all countries have faced difficulties due to Covid-19, South Asian countries, including Sri Lanka had to deal with a more challenging situation due to their inherited social economical features.

Analysis

(i)   Panic Mode

The most visible impact of Covid 19 pandemic on the democratic process of a country is not holding or postponement of scheduled elections. In the case of Sri Lanka, the parliamentary election was held in the month of August 2020, several months later than originally scheduled. Further, the term of office of local government bodies has been extended by one year till March 2023 by citing the impact of pandemic as one of the major reasons. Furthermore, socio - economic parameters such as GDP, inflation, cost of living and job security can adversely affect

the overall performance of the economy which results social unrest and political instability of the country. At present Sri Lanka is facing such social unrest and political instability mainly due to the severe economical impact of covid pandemic. Once a country reaches such status, losing interest and believe on democratic systems and values is inevitable.

Such status could be identified as the society is in the panic mode where social media plays a pivotal role, as in Sri Lanka today. Higher dependency on alternative information sources like social media is a prominent feature of such panic societies and it moves with the wave of dominant ideology where social media becomes the main influencer of the society. In other words, social media set the tone of such panic societies, leading to emotional decisions and less voice/listening for alternative ideas.

If the society is in such a panic status, holding an election would be a democratic nightmare as whole society is driven by the prejudices of the social media where Sri Lanka is still not having any such experiences. However, EMB's in the region must expect such eventualities in the era of beyond covid 19 pandemic as most of the societies are prudent for social unrest and political instability due to social economic impact of the pandemic.

(II)   Near Normal Status
As society nears normalcy, arguments can be identified on the negative and positive impact of social media in elections. Mainly, social media provides a cost-effective medium for all the stakeholders of elections to reach a large number of voters in a cost-effective manner and it facilitates two way communication. Further, social media provides a wide array of information for voters for more informed choices. In contrast, it argues that social media destroys pluralistic debate and gives voters access to the truthful information. Coordinated dissemination of false and demeaning information, creating social fragmentation towards democratic values, information and influence operations, hate speeches and fake news are considered as most dangerous involvements of social media towards conducting free and fair elections.

 Despite the various theoretical explanations for the impact of social media, it is worth to explore the real-life behavior to understand the different dynamics of social media participation in

elections.   The Presidential election of Sri Lanka which was held in 2019 was used as a case study to understand social media dynamics under real election circumstances.   As per the case study undertook by the Information technology society (ITSSL) of Sri Lanka Facebook has been identified as the most dominant social media platform associated with elections followed by Instrgram, You Tube, Twitter and Tik Tok.   Therefore, in the Sri Lankan context, Facebook was the main contributor which shaped political narratives and electoral agenda of the social media space.

Overall misuse of media created a highly disadvantageous situation for holding free and fair elections and when misuse of social media space in concerned, most of the misuse complaints (73%) were reported against Facebook.   These misuses are categorized as mudslinging, fake news, malpractice and malicious publications, misleading news and illegal election campaigns.

To understand the social media's influence on elections, it is worth to explore the pattern of voter interaction with different posts on social media. The case study on the Presidential election of 2019 identified several key themes in the various posts which attracts most of the viewer's reaction in the form of sharing. Such identified main themes in most shared posts are promotion of the candidates, distribution of fake news, social fragmentation and reduce voter's loyalty, social awareness, environmental protection, social security and human rights and racist violence. Among the prominent themes above, most reacted posts fit into the themes of Economic justice, social fragmentation and reduce voter's loyalty.

Discussion

The above analysis revealed that social media has the potential to generate discussion and debate and it creates guided and freely evolving influence/interactions.   The impact on political campaigns and voter's choices is highly significant.   Therefore, concerns on the effectiveness of existing legal and regulatory frameworks to adequately address rapid developments in online spaces arise within the larger debate on electoral system reforms, campaign finance law, social media regulation   and protecting freedom of expression.

It can be observed that Sri Lanka has a comprehensive legal framework including the constitutional provisions to safeguard freedom of expression and also to mange social media misbehavior. Existing laws dealing with election offences may be interpreted to apply to social media platforms. However, in real practice, there is a lack of oversight over social media platforms and there is ample opportunity for misuse and abuse.

Conclusion

The misuse of social media is becoming a major challenge for future free and fair elections in Sri Lanka. If society remains in the panic mode, then it creates more challenges. Therefore, highly effective and organized legal oversight is necessary to manage social media in future elections in Sri Lanka.

Social Media in Elections in the Context of Covid 19 Pandemic

Sri Lankan Perspective

Influence of social media in Elections

- **Two Scenarios**

  – When the Society is in **PANIC** Mode

  – When the Society is in **NEAR NORMAL** Status

Digital Literacy – Overview of Sri Lanka

- Population – 22 million
- Digital literacy – 38.7%
- IT literacy – 28.3%
- Mobile Phone Subscription – 103.6 per 100 people
- House hold computer ownership – 23.5%
- Email Usage 11%
- Internet usage – 21.3%

- 60% of Social media users – Male
- Major differences in ICT redness among Rural/Urban and Estate sectors in Sri Lanka

Covid 19 Pandemic and Beyond – Sri Lanka Challenges of Democracy

- Postponement of Elections
  - Conducted parliamentary elections in 2020 in spite of few months delay.
  - Extended the term of local government bodies by year till March 2022.
- Socio /Economic Impact
  - GDP (negative growth rate)
  - Inflation
  - Cost of living
  - Health care
  - Employment Security
- Social Unrest
- Political Instability
- Loosing interest and believe on democratic systems/values

- **PANIC MODE of the Society**
  - High dependency on the alternative information sources like social media
  - Society moves with the wave of dominant ideology
  - Social Media becomes the main influencer of the society
  - Social media predominantly respond for popular ideology
  - Less voice/hearing for alternative ideas.
  - Social media sets the tone of the Society/ Emotional decision making

CONDUCTING AN ELECTION WHEN THE SOCIETY IS IN PANIC MODE IS DEMOCRATIC NIGHTMARE

Impact of Social Media in Elections Theoretical Perspective

Positive

- Provides a cost effective medium to reach out large number of voters
- High return on investment
- Two way communication

Negative

- Destroy
  - Pluralistic debate and limits access to the truthful information
  - Ability to make informed decisions compared with ground campaigns
- Coordinated dissemination of false and demeaning information
- Social fragmentation towards democratic values
- Target personalities
- Information Operations/Influence operations
- Hate Speech/Fake news

Case Study of Presidential Election 2019 Most dominant platforms and Types of Misuses

Figure 1. Misuse of social media by type - 2019 presidential election.
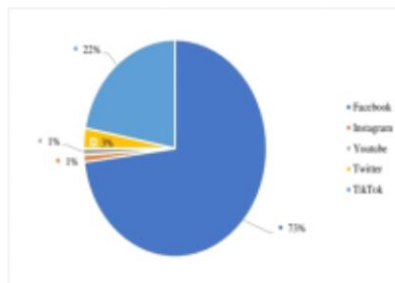
Source: ITSSL Social Media Monitoring Report (2019)

- *Source – ITSSL Social Media Monitoring Report*
  - Most of the social media misuse complaints reported against the Face book 73%
  - 1593 complaints
  - 240 incidents against campaign silence rules

Slide 1

Categorization of Misuses of Social Media
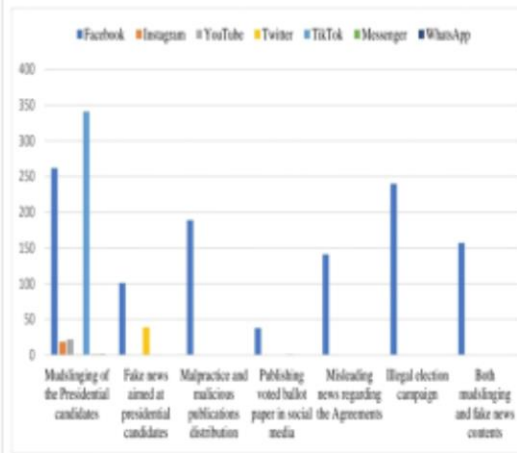
- Mudslinging of the presidential candidates
- Fake news aimed at presidential candidates
- Malpractice and malicious publications distribution
- Publishing voted ballot paper in social media
- Misleading news
- illegal Election Campaigns

Source: ITSSL Social Media Monitoring Report (2019)

Slide 2

Case Study of Presidential Election 2019

Social Interactions By Themes

MAJOR THEMES

- Promotion of the Candidates (26%)
- Distribution of Fake News (9%)
- **Social fragmentation and reduce voter's loyalty (17%)**
- Social Awareness (19%)
- Economic Justice (11%)
- Environmental Protection (3%)
- Social Security and Human Rights (10%)
- Racist Violence (6%)

Figure 3. Distribution of social interactions by theme related to the 2019 presidential election.
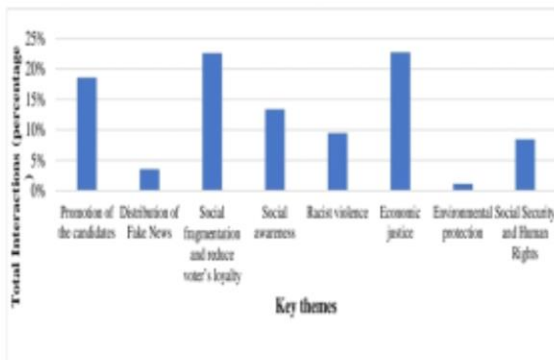
Viewer Generated Interaction by Type

Case Study of Presidential Election 2019

• Most viewers reacted –
  Economic Justice (23%)
• Most Shared Posts
  Social Fragmentation (23%)
  Reduce voter's loyalty
  Themes (23%)

Figure 4: Distribution of viewer's interactions by type related to the 2019 presidential election.
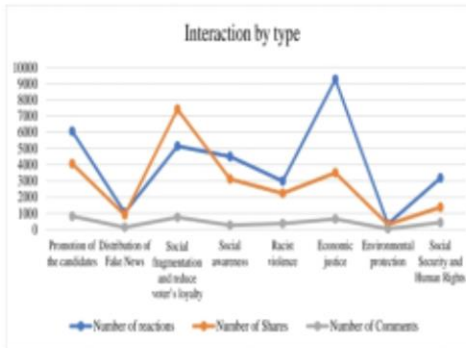
Discussion

- Social media has ability to generate discussion and debate (Mostly Promotions)
- Social Media Create Guided and freely evolving Influence/interactions
- Significant Impact on Political Campaigns and Voter's interaction

Discussion Cont...

- Concerns on the effectiveness of existing legal and regulatory frameworks to adequately address rapid developments in online spaces arise within the larger debate on electoral system reformcampaign finance laws, and protecting the freedom of expression
- Sri Lanka – Comprehensive legal framework including constitutional provisions (Article 14 (1) (a))
- Existing laws that deal with election offences may be interpreted to apply to social media platforms
- The lack of oversight over social media platforms and the room for abuse.

Conclusion

- The misuse of social media has becoming a major challenge for future free and fair elections

- If the Society is in Panic mode , it creates more challenges

- Highly effective and organized legal oversight is necessary to manage social media in future elections

Social Media in Election: Bhutan's Perspective

Introduction

The Social Media platforms have become a major influence on elections, they are increasing being used to shape political opinion to garner votes. More so, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people have been spending even more time on their social media and all the political parties are anticipating to reap benefit by influencing the electorates.

On the other hand, the challenges such as fake news, hate speeches and anonymous accounts are prevalent during the elections. The Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) has specifically come up with the ECB Social Media Rules and Regulations in the year 2008 to guide the social media users, candidates and political parties during the elections.

1. Types of Social Media Used by the ECB

The ECB uses its official Website, WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and You Tube channels.

2. Role of

Social Media in Election

The ECB uses the above mentioned social media to disseminate electoral information in the form of notifications, announcements, press releases, public notifications, awareness videos and etc. to the general public.

The Political Parties and Candidates use Social Media:

- To present their approved manifestos and campaign materials during the election period to reach out to the voters.
- To form group within their members after submitting the social media links to the ECB in order to discuss and communicate on their party issues.
- Each Political Party has the official Facebook page where they upload all the information.

1. ***Media Arbitrator and Social Media Monitors***

The media arbitrator is appointed as per the Media Coverage of Rules and Regulations, 2021. The Office of the Media Arbitrator is established in the Thimphu.

Social Media Monitor are also appointed as per the ECB Social Media Rules and Regulations, 2018 from each district in the case of Parliamentary and Local Government elections. Social Media Monitors are ICT Officers from the Ministry of Information and Communications.

 The Social Media Monitors continuously monitor the social media pages such as We-Chat, Facebook, Websites and etc of the users, candidates and the political parties. The candidates and voters are first requested to remove any post found in violation. The challenges faced include when users do not pay heed to the requests or some users claim ignorance of the Rules and Regulations.

2. ***Challenges posed by the Social Media***
    - Penetration of the fake news

It is often observed that fake news spreads faster than the real news. People believe in whatever they read and see without verification. This normally happens during the election period to attack or put down another party.

- Difficult to track anonymous accounts

  People use anonymous accounts to say and do things they would not do in person. People under the guise of anonymity spread misinformation and manipulate the thinking of the people. Such kind of accounts are difficult to track down and fix accountability.

- Difficult to monitor Closed groups (Facebook, Wechat, Whatsapp)

  Monitoring social media closed group is found challenging. Closed group in Facebook allow only their members to view the content. Similarly, Wechat and WhatsApp group's content cannot be accessed unless you join the group.

3. *Social Media related disputes*

The Social Media complaints are Lodge complaint in Complaint Form No. 1 along with the evidences to the office of Media Arbitrator. Team in the Office of Media Arbitrator will register the complaint and according to the laws and by-laws will study the case and come out with the decision.

The appeal to higher election dispute settlement bodies can be filed if the complainant is not satisfied.

4. *Types of Social Media Complaints*

Complaints such as the Political Parties and candidates attacking rival Party and candidates using hate speech in order to influence the electorate are being lodged.

5. **Statistics of the Social Media Complaints received**
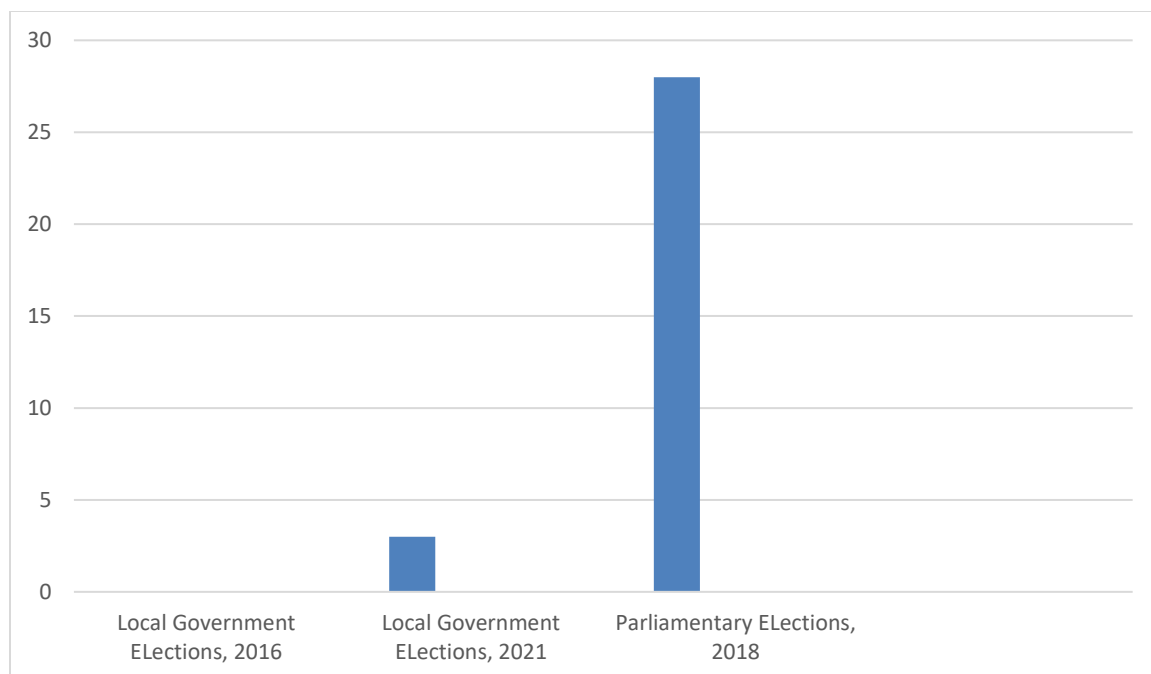
The graph shows the number of social media complaints received. In the Local Government Elections, 2016, there was no formal complaints received. 3 cases were received in the Local Government Elections, 2021. The Parliamentary Elections, 2018 saw 28 cases.

6. *Social Media in Elections amid the COVID-19 Pandemic*

The COVID-19 has caused unprecedented disruption in elections worldwide. While some postponed the elections, others went forward with their election. One of such Election Management Body who went on to conduct election amid pandemic and lock down is the ECB. The ECB had conducted three Bye-Elections and a Local Government Elections, 2021 amid the pandemic and lock down. The conduct of safe elections during pandemic and lock down was the top most priority for the ECB. Various strategies and standard operating procedures (sops) were develop to conduct the election with all the COVID-19 safety protocols in place such as hand washing, sanitizing and social distancing.

The Social Media played very crucial role in informing the general public, candidates and political parties on these strategies and sops.

Social Media was specifically used for the following purposes during election period amid pandemic and lock down:

1. ECB's awareness materials

With increased in number of voters engaged on social media during COVID-19 pandemic, the ECB made awareness materials for the elections such as lists of candidates document requirements, code of conduct on the poll day, safety protocols to be followed during the poll day, video on postal ballot registration and applications and etc. available through website, official face book page, twitter and YouTube channels.

2. Campaign platform

The ECB restricted Political Parties and Candidates from carrying out the traditional way of campaigning during pandemic and let them use social media as the campaign platforms to present their approved campaign materials thereby avoiding the contact/gathering with the voters to minimize the risk of transmission of COVID-19.

3. Party President's Video

The ECB initiated Party Presidents to create 3 minutes video each on their party and screen through TV and upload on their social media pages thereby preventing the Party Presidents from visiting the field which would call for a huge gathering.

4. WhatsApp group within the ECB

A WhatsApp group was created among the relevant ECB officials working during the lock down in order review the Political Parties campaign video which helped the officials to come together and discuss on the content of the video.

Conclusion

The rapid rise in the use of social media has changed the ways in which we communicate and share information online. These changes offers both opportunities and challenges for the EMBs.

The EMBs uses social media to educate and reach out to the particular target audiences and to build a greater sense of engagement and participation among the electorate throughout the entire election cycle. However, it is imperative to look into the regulations and review it with the change in emerging social media platforms and challenges.

The EMBs should also strive to sensitize the general public, political parties and candidates on effective use of social media during the election period.

Social Media in Election
Election Commission of Bhutan

Outline

1. Social Media?
2. Types of Social Media Platforms used by the ECB
3. Role of Social Media in Elections
4. Media Arbitrator and Social Media Monitors
5. Challenges posed by the Social Media
6. Social Media related disputes
7. Type of Social Media Complaints
8. Statistics of the Social Media Complaints received
9. Social Media in Elections amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Social Media?

- Social Media means the online and mobile communication, collaboration, sharing or publishing platform, whether accessed through the web, a mobile device, text messaging, email or any other existing or emerging communication platform used to publish and interact with the wider public or individuals. *(ECB Social Media Rules and Regulations, 2018)*

- The popular social media in Bhutan are Facebook, Wechat and WhatsApp.

2. Types of Social Media used by the ECB

- ✓ Facebook
- ✓ Twitter handle
- ✓ You tube
- ✓ Website

3. Role of Social Media in Elections

1. The ECB uses Social Media to disseminate information to the general public in the form of:

- Press Releases

- Announcements

- Notifications

- Public Advisories

- News Releases

- Other information

Continuation............

2. The Political Parties and Candidates use Social Media:

- To present their manifestos and campaign materials during the election period to reach out to the voters

- To form group within the party members in order to discuss and communicate on their party issues.

- Each Political Party has the official Facebook page where they upload all the information

4. Media Arbitrator and Social Media Monitors

✓ Appointment as per the rules

- *Media Arbitrator office is established in the HQ. Social Media Monitor are appointed from each district in case of Parliamentary and Local Government elections.*
- *Social Media Monitors are ICT Officers*

✓ Monitoring

- *Monitoring of social media: Facebook, Websites, blogs, We-Chat, WhatsApp etc. of the candidates, political parties and users*

✓ Promoting compliance to laws

- *Shall ensure all the electoral laws are adhered.*

5. Challenges posed by the Social Media

- Penetration of the fake news

- Difficult to track anonymous accounts

- Difficult to monitor Closed groups on Facebook

- Monitoring We-chats, WhatsApp groups are difficult

6. Social Media related disputes

- Lodge complaint in Complaint Form No. 1 along with the evidences to the Media Arbitrator.

- Team in the Office of Media Arbitrator will register the complaint and according to the laws and by-laws will study the case and come out with the decision.

- The appeal to higher election dispute settlement bodies can be filed if the complainant is not satisfied.

7. Types of Social Media Complaints

- Party attacking other party cases

- Hate speech

8. Statistics of the Social Media Complaints received

1. Local Government Elections,2016
   No formal complaint

2. Local Government Elections, 2021
   3 Cases

3. Parliamentary elections, 2018
   28 Cases

9. Social Media in Elections amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

The ECB conducted three Bye-Elections and a Local Government Elections, 2021 amid COVID-19 pandemic and lock down.

Social Media was specifically used for the following purposes during election period amid pandemic and lock down:

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Continuation......

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3. Party President's Video

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Continuation..........

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THANK YOU!

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