

# Coming Soon: the Bangkok Declaration

December 8, 2012

On December 10 and 11, 2012, Election Management Body (EMBs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) working to promote free and fair elections across Asia will gather in Bangkok, Thailand for the inaugural meeting of the Asian Electoral Stakeholder Forum to endorse the Bangkok Declaration on Free and Fair Elections. The Bangkok Declaration is the product of over a year of effort to craft a document which can serve as a beacon of electoral virtue in Asia. More than that, however, the effort as a whole is the culmination of years and decades of struggle towards fairer elections and more representative governments in Asia, where progress towards free and fair elections has been measurable but where much remains to be done to insure that all citizens are able to freely choose their governments.

In South Asia, for instance, democracy has been part of the political culture for many years. In contrast, several countries in Central Asia and in parts of South East and East Asia have hosted nominally open elections for decades, although full democracy has not always accompanied them and, all too often, those elections have been more show than substance. After reviewing various electoral practices for their strengths and weaknesses, it appears that all systems which have not matured into fully fledged democracies could benefit from consideration of internationally accepted election principles, incorporating those principles in a document written by Asians which speaks to Asia's many peoples.

Work on the Bangkok Declaration began in January 2012 when representatives of 20 CSOs met in Pattaya, Thailand to brainstorm electoral issues common to Asia. It was at that meeting that the foundation for what would become the first draft of the Bangkok Declaration was laid. Input from the Pattaya meeting was the basis of the first working draft of the Bangkok Declaration. This first draft was then circulated across Asia to over twenty CSOs, most of which focus specifically on election monitoring and democracy promotion.

Once CSOs had agreed on a working document fit for distribution and greater feedback, the document was shared with electoral management bodies, obviously crucial players in every election, for additional review and comment.

After a consensus among EMBs and CSOs had been reached, publicity and promotion of the Bangkok Declaration began in order to build support leading to December's Signing and Endorsement Ceremony. At that event, endorsers will have the chance, before the public and the media, to declare their support for free and fair elections and to show their engagement and leadership in addressing the challenges to conducting free and fair elections in their countries.

The key objective of the Bangkok Declaration on Free and Fair Elections is to "identify the most significant and widespread barriers to free and fair elections in Asia and strengthen the resolve of the Asian people to address them by involving all relevant national, regional and international stakeholders." It seeks to do this by, more specifically, realizing the following goals:

1. Provide a sense of ownership to the peoples and electoral management bodies of Asia through the creation of a document that recognizes the sensitivities of culture,

religion and customary practices in Asia. In support of this goal, a large group of stakeholders has been engaged in the entire process, from start to finish, thereby creating a legitimacy and ownership of democratic principles that is difficult to challenge or deny and, consequently, more readily implemented.

2. Focus the broad universality of international principles on specific issues applicable to Asia. By doing so, a regional declaration helps to strengthen the application of the international principles in Asia.
3. Encourage the participation of women and minorities as voters and leaders. Women, in particular, are an extremely important and, too often, an overlooked part of society. Any attempt to suppress the rights of women must be strongly resisted. Indeed, women's involvement must be encouraged without dismissing cultural considerations, attention to which can help to prevent unnecessary conflict. A regional declaration can promote respect for women's rights and the rights of minorities and the full participation of each in the electoral process.

The succinct Bangkok Declaration manages to address all major issues involved in the electoral process including, inter alia, EMB independence, the universal franchise, voter information, training of election officials, voter registration and accuracy of voter lists, campaign finance, unfair and dishonest campaign practices, election observation, safeguarding and counting votes and resolution of electoral disputes.

In its final form, the Bangkok Declaration focuses attention on electoral issues that are often overlooked or not understood by the public. Such a focus will encourage the document's adoption not only by electoral practitioners but also by a broad spectrum of each country's citizens. While the target audience is electoral stakeholders across Asia, particularly those directly involved, in whatever capacity, in elections, the document is written so that it is easily understandable by the public. Moreover, despite the attempts to keep the document simple enough for the public to understand, all electoral practitioners can benefit from the document due to its unique scope and exceptional origin.

Of course, once the Bangkok Declaration has been executed, the real challenge will then begin, as it must be implemented in each of the participating countries in the region. The Asia Network For free Elections (ANFREL) and its members plan to use their unique experiences to help Asian countries to turn the principles of the Declaration into reality in the electoral process. The Committee for Free and fair Elections in Cambodia (COMFREL), and the Neutral & Impartial Committee for Free & Fair Elections in Cambodia (NICFEC) are strongly supporters of the Declaration, will be working to implement the principles of the Bangkok Declaration in Cambodia. Since implementation can only be successful with the active support of electoral management bodies, COMFREL and NICFEC expects to work closely with the National Election Committee (NEC) in Cambodia, political parties, CSOs, and other election stakeholders to make the Declaration a reality in Cambodia. COMFREL and NICFEC are confident that, working together with NEC and election stakeholders will result in considerable improvements in the electoral process in Cambodia.

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