



International Election Observers: Partners for democratic advances

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As the date set for the Thai general election looms closer, there is growing debate as to whether international poll observers should be allowed to monitor the ballot on February 24. To defuse any controversy, the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) wishes to explain why it believes the presence of international observers would be beneficial to the first electoral process since 2011 where Thai citizens will be able to fully exercise their political rights.

International election observation is a universally recognized activity, whose goal is to provide “accurate and impartial” analysis of the overall electoral environment, as explained in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation¹. Contrary to a common misconception, international observers are not there to distribute penalty cards but to offer an educated and productive assessment of the period including pre- and post-election activities. They must comply at all times with the appropriate regulations and codes of conduct, and may never interfere with national politics in any way.

International observers not only contribute to the integrity of elections by detecting irregularities, but also constitute a deterrent to electoral violence, strengthen the trust of the public in the process, and submit recommendations to improve perceived weaknesses ahead of the next electoral cycle. ANFREL missions bring together experienced election observers from the region with their own expertise, to frame electoral processes into a distinctively Asian perspective. They operate in full autonomy and offer a different approach from domestic election observers, but contribute to amplifying the audience and impact of their advocacy efforts.

Concretely, election observers are tasked with evaluating whether international standards for human rights and best electoral practices are met, using as the basis for their assessments tools such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights (1966) and, in the scope of ANFREL observers, regional documents like the Bangkok Declaration on Free and Fair Elections² (2012), the Dili Indicators of Democratic Elections³ (2015), and the Colombo Pledge to Promote and Defend Electoral Democracy in Asia⁴ (2018).

No election observation effort can be considered credible without a solid methodology and engagement with all electoral stakeholders, including state authorities, political competitors, civil society organizations, vulnerable populations, and voters. In this sense, cooperation with election management bodies is always foremost, and ANFREL welcomes in a positive light the statements

¹ https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/1923_declaration_102705_0.pdf

² <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/The-Bangkok-Declaration-on-Free-and-Fair-Elections.pdf>

³ <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/2015-Dili-Indicators-of-Democratic-Elections.pdf>

⁴ English version: <https://anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Colombo-Pledge-edited-in-breakout-session.pdf>, Thai version: http://aerc-anfrel.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Colombo_Pledge_Thai_language.pdf

from the Chairman of the Election Commission of Thailand (ECT), Ittiporn Boonpracong, that the Commission would not break from its practice from past years and grant accreditation to international observers who formally announce their intent to participate in the upcoming election, as ANFREL did.

We believe our long history of cooperation with the Commission, which includes a program in 2017 to ensure the accessibility of polling stations to persons with disabilities, will allow ANFREL to be recognized as an international observer for the 2019 Thai general election. The relationship between our two organizations is one based on respect and mutual understanding as we work to secure better electoral processes for all Thai voters.

Following a four-year ceasure in democratic governance, ANFREL hopes the general election of February 24 will provide an opportunity for all Thai citizens to freely cast their ballot in a reliable and inclusive polling process, at the term of a fair and vibrant electoral campaign. We remain optimistic about the prospects of international election observers being present to monitor the reintroduction of democracy in Thailand and invite the Election Commission to share as soon as possible the accreditation process and guidelines applicable to international observers.

Founded in 1997 and based in Bangkok, ANFREL is a network-based organization with 26 members in 16 countries across Asia. It has fielded around 60 international election observation missions (IEOMs), including in Thailand in 2001, 2005, 2007, and 2011. In 2014 and 2016, ANFREL did not deploy election observation missions but instead conducted smaller-scale study missions to assess the situation on the ground.

For more information, ANFREL can be reached at anfrel@anfrel.org