

Kathmandu Declaration on Strengthening Democracy and Promoting Electoral Integrity through Electoral Reforms in Asia

(Outcome of the Sixth Edition of the Asian Electoral Stakeholders' Forum)

Preamble

Recalling and respecting the significant contributions made in the past five editions of the Asian Electoral Stakeholders' Forum to promote electoral democracy in Asia through exchange of information, experience, mutual assistance, collaboration and partnership among the Election Management Bodies, Civil Societies, Media, Policy makers, Academe, Researchers and the people,

Acknowledging the progress achieved since the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration for Free and Fair Elections (2012), the Dili Indicators of Democratic Elections (2015), the Bali Commitment to Electoral Transparency and Integrity (2016), the Colombo Pledge to Promote and Defend Electoral Democracy in Asia (2018) and Memorandum: The Way Forward for Elections Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic (2021), is a clear indication of solidarity and resiliency in promoting free and fair democratic processes. Recognizing the current civic and electoral environment of democratic elections since the inception of the Asian Electoral Stakeholder Forum, we are encouraged to assess the state of the implementation of these Declarations;

Advocating to establish independent election management bodies to deliver democratic ideals and promote electoral integrity through feasible and timely electoral reforms, incorporate meaningful participation of people with diverse identities, interests, and capacities, and ensure commitment for participative, inclusive, and techno-friendly electoral processes;

We, the undersigned election management bodies, election-related stakeholders, policymakers, donor agencies, researchers, media, and civil society actors of Asia and beyond, having intensive discussion, exchange of perspectives and sharing of knowledge on 6th and 7th of the month of December, 2023 in Kathmandu of Nepal, hereby declare our shared commitments as follows:

1. Undertake a thorough review of existing electoral management systems, to promote the adoption of proportional representational methods, inclusive election management practices, accountable exercise of the elections for increasing public trust in the electoral processes, address and review the issues on issue of malapportionment which gave rise to other electoral challenges such as gerrymandering, and engage in electoral reforms ahead of Elections through the Election Management Body and/or Congress/Parliament/National Assembly;
2. Contribute to strengthening legal framework for elections to align with democratic ideals by pursuing technically sound and politically feasible reforms;
3. Provision an appropriate dispute resolution mechanisms ensuring fast and transparent resolution of disputes;
4. Launch civic education campaigns in communities and education settings with emphasis on the importance of elections in upbringing the quality of democracy at different levels of government;
5. Consider the introduction of modern day and appropriate election technology to expand inclusivity in electoral processes while maintaining transparency and accountability of elections;
6. Identify and manage cybersecurity risks in the use of technology in the electoral process and establish guard rails against the weaponization of artificial intelligence in electoral processes;
7. Utilise advance cybersecurity measures to safeguard ICT-based electoral technologies and exchange expert ideas, new knowledge on advance technologies, and good electoral practices to increase the trustworthiness of electoral processes;

8. Navigate affirmative action policies to increase the representation of marginalized communities with particular attention on disability community in electoral management practices through implementing disability-friendly measures, and regular training of Election Commission staff;
9. Design policy incentives to boost female representation to tackle their underrepresentation and gender disparity by considering mechanisms such as gender quota and earmarking public/state funding for this purpose, and ensure the voting rights of LGBTQ individuals are protected, including measures to address potential voter suppression or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity;
10. Enact and enforce affirmative action policies to increase the electoral participation of marginalized communities including the migrants and indigenous peoples in electoral bodies, political parties, and elected offices through alignment of every policies with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the Universal Declaration on Democracy;
11. Develop voter and electoral education curriculum in multiple languages to minimise the information barrier for increasing participation of marginalised groups/societies in electoral processes;
12. Invest in electoral infrastructure to make polling stations, election paraphernalia, and electoral information more accessible to persons facing barriers;
13. Promulgate social media literacy campaigns to educate the public on discerning credible information from misinformation, disinformation, or mal-information;
14. Collaborate with social media companies to establish and enforce transparent rules for political advertising, combat the spread of false information, and influence operations;
15. Create accountability mechanisms against architects of disinformation to address the problems on global and local political economic arrangements that allow them to thrive;
16. Adoption of open election data principles in all stages of the electoral cycle to be implemented by the Election Management Bodies;
17. Encourage and support law enforcement authorities to fight against unethical and corrupt practices during elections;
18. Strengthen the capacity and independence of oversight bodies responsible for monitoring and regulating campaign financing, ensuring they have the resources and authority to effectively enforce electoral regulations;
19. Launch nationwide partnerships with civic groups, emphasizing a decentralized reporting approach to address vote buying, vote selling, and abuse of state resources in elections which aims to change norms through investigation, enforcement, and prosecution;
20. Develop guidelines for environmentally sustainable election practices, including the reduction of paper usage, the use of eco-friendly materials in campaign materials, conduct a comprehensive assessment of the carbon footprint of electoral processes, and implement strategies to offset or reduce environmental impact, and raise public awareness on the environmental impact of elections and encourage responsible behavior among political parties, candidates, and citizens;
21. Promote climate governance in civic and voter education, and on meaningful public participation in climate adaptation mitigation projects that are promoted especially during campaign period;
22. Strengthen legal safeguards to protect the rights of civil society organizations, journalists, and citizens to freely express their opinions without fear of harassment, intimidation, or reprisals;
23. Monitor retaliatory actions against ordinary people by organised groups during elections, with appropriate provisioning of safeguarding democratic civic space;

24. Ensure a multi-stakeholder committee comprising representatives from government agencies, political parties, civil society, law enforcement, and international organizations to formulate a comprehensive and multifaceted approach in mitigating election violence, and provide specialized training for security forces on crowd control, conflict resolution, and human rights.
25. Strengthen election observations missions and programs (whether domestic or international) by providing systematic methodologies which adhere to international election standards in assessing the integrity of the electoral process and election results;
26. Increase international collaboration in line with the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness to guarantee adequate funding is available for electoral reforms;
27. Publish regular progress reports on the implementation of electoral reforms, and provide transparent information to the public and international stakeholders, and conduct research to assess the existing electoral practices to support evidence-based policy making.

Call to Action and Enforcement

This Kathmandu Declaration is aligned with the principles of international election standards, emphasizing the commitment to recognized norms and best practices in democratic processes.

We affirm our dedication that achieving free, fair, accountable, transparent, inclusive peaceful, and democratic elections is attainable in every Asian country. As active participants in the Asian electoral community, we commit to concerted efforts to transform this belief into a tangible reality.

While this document is non-binding, the signatories to this Declaration nevertheless recognize and resolve to address, where they exist in their respective countries, the electoral challenges discussed.

These can guide election stakeholders, such as election management bodies, civil society organizations and observer groups, to strive to improve electoral processes in their respective countries in pursuit of sustainable democracy. It is designed to be a dynamic document, evolving organically over time.

Date and Place of Signature:
(Thursday) 7 December 2023, Kathmandu, Nepal