



Colombo, Sri Lanka

August 28, 2018

## **The Colombo Pledge to Promote and Defend Electoral Democracy in Asia**

We, the election stakeholders convening today at the fourth Asian Electoral Stakeholders Forum (AESF IV), reaffirm our resolute commitment and dedication to secure democratic elections for everyone in Asia. We believe it is our duty to act assertively on electoral issues and do everything in our power to achieve universal suffrage and peaceful political processes in our respective countries. Democratic elections, held periodically through a secret ballot, and accompanied by vibrant political competition, are the foundation of popular sovereignty, and a genuine necessity for equitable social, political and economic development.

Despite the progress achieved in some countries since the adoption of the Bangkok Declaration for Free and Fair Elections (2012), the Dili Indicators of Democratic Elections (2015) and the Bali Commitment to Electoral Transparency and Integrity (2016), we recognize that we confront deteriorating democratic conditions across Asia. We feel the need to address the state of implementation of these and other global instruments, in a civic space less favorable to the development of democratic elections than at any time since the first Asian Electoral Stakeholders Forum was held.

Through this document, we emphasize the importance of democracies that are inclusively developed. As electoral stakeholders, we recognize everyone's responsibility in the creation of credible electoral systems, and wish to emphasize examples of good practices that should be nurtured and replicated broadly to achieve more democratic standards of governance in the region. In accordance with the discussions that have taken place at this forum, we hereby identify particular current issues that, given recent developments, we feel need to be highlighted and are making recommendations to be implemented by electoral stakeholders in order to address them.

### **Electoral Integrity, Credibility and Individual Freedoms**

We commit to uphold the norms and principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Bangkok Declaration on Free and Fair Elections, and other international human rights instruments in formulating and implementing election policies and conducting electoral assessments. We believe that genuine democracy is not measured solely on the orderliness of the election process, but most importantly on the freedom which every voter enjoys. We will pursue to the best of our abilities means to address and ultimately eradicate vote buying, violence, threats, intimidation, and all forms of undue influence that undermine the will of the voter. We will support independent and accountable election management bodies and other stakeholders in their efforts to protect and serve the interest of the voters.

We express our belief in the importance of dissent and criticism in building democracies, and thus pledge to create space for constructive dialogue among all stakeholders. Civil society and media should be afforded autonomy as they perform their duties to the society. Finally, we commit to catalyzing and nurturing a culture of civic engagement to create and promote sustainable democracies in Asia and beyond. We will strive to protect the interests and rights of future generations.

## **Open, Balanced and Accurate Information**

Information is the backbone of transparency. Transparency is the core of a healthy election. A healthy election is the heart of democracy. We call on all election stakeholders to promote, embody and implement, the right to information, with a particular focus on proactive disclosure of election information and data on a timely basis. Such information must be accessible for all citizens.

We, election stakeholders, resolve to collaborate in enhancing and strengthening existing avenues for impartial and inclusive civic and voter education, especially during election periods. Furthermore, we urge governments to empower institutions and we resolve to support mechanisms to counter the spread of misinformation, disinformation, hate speech, intolerance and violation of codes of conduct. Voters have the right to be presented with facts and figures, and parties and candidates have the right to present their programs, enabling voters to make informed decisions. While doing so, governments must also refrain from resorting to the use of censorship, or policies which ultimately have the effect of self-censorship. Freedom of the media must be ensured in order for a variety of opinions to be expressed and so that healthy political debates can take place.

We recognize the important role of election observation as a tool to enhance accountability and propagate democratic values, when done properly. Thus, we will collectively pursue means to promote genuine election monitoring and discourage the spread of fake election observation that do not adhere to international and regional standards for election observation.

## **Efficient Electoral Justice and Legal Framework**

As election stakeholders, we consider transparency as the hallmark of an electoral process with integrity, and thus call for a framework of checks and balances among stakeholders concerned with election management to promote, instill, and allocate accountability. All legal systems should ensure fair competition, and reconsider laws which have the effect of unreasonably limiting or restricting electoral participation. We also wish to draw attention to the lack of effective political finance regulations and enforcement, which are common weaknesses of most Asian elections.

We advocate for effective electoral justice and timely conflict resolution throughout the electoral cycle. We urge governments to ensure the proportionality of sanctions for candidate and party infractions, where banning from participation and dissolution of entities should only be administered as a final resort. We encourage all states to utilize codes of conduct and accountability standards to foster trust in the electoral process.

## **Democratic Inclusion of Vulnerable Populations**

We, as election stakeholders, resolve to develop joint mechanisms to encourage inclusive and active participation of all vulnerable groups in planning, education, policy making, legal reform, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and data disaggregation of all aspects of the electoral process. Emphasizing that suffrage and political rights are the distilled essence of our fundamental human rights, we call on all states to eradicate disenfranchisement of any segment of society, remove legal, informational and physical barriers, and enforce accessibility and affirmative measures on the right to vote and political participation.

We also acknowledge that the present sociopolitical structures and norms have the tendency to negatively impact political empowerment of women, preventing them from reaching their full potential as candidates, voters, election officials, or members of civil society and the media. Likewise, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, religious and caste minorities, youth, prisoners, internally displaced persons, refugees, and other vulnerable groups are subject to discrimination and exclusion. We resolve to

take these injustices head on, and pledge to involve individuals, vulnerable groups, and the organizations that represent them, in all our activities and advocacy to ensure they can equally and meaningfully participate and contribute to electoral processes.

Facing what can only be described as a rollback of democracy in Asia, we choose not to be pessimistic and resigned, but instead be future-oriented and hopeful. In the spirit of the Bangkok Declaration and subsequent documents adopted previously by the AESF, we renew today our call to all electoral stakeholders to join us, as we sign the present pledge and commit ourselves to addressing any and all challenges to democracy. We agree to take action, promote good electoral practices, and report our progress at the succeeding Asian Electoral Stakeholder Fora, which will pursue collaboration between stakeholders until all citizens of Asia enjoy unencumbered access to democratic elections.