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16 September 2010

BGD103531.E

Bangladesh: National Identity (NID) Card; its use as a voter's identity card; procedures to obtain one

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In anticipation of national elections held in 2008, the government of Bangladesh launched a process to update the voter list ([UN Mar. 2010, Sec. 5.3](#); [UNB 21 Mar. 2007](#)). At the same time, using data collected for voter registration, the government issued National Identity Cards (NIDs) ([UN Mar. 2010, Sec. 5.3](#); [The New York Times 30 Nov. 2008](#); [UNB 21 Mar. 2007](#)). According to the United Nations (UN) Development Programme (UNDP), the production of the NID cards was a "by-product" of the updating of the voter list ([UN Mar. 2010, Sec. 5.3](#); [ibid. n.d.](#)). In 18 August 2010 correspondence with the Research Directorate, an official at the High Commission of Canada to Bangladesh explained that

[p]rior to 2008, the voter identity card was in the form of paper slips given to enrolled voters upon request. It included name, address and voter number. There was no formal identity card with photographs, while the voter roll did not have photographs either (it was a manual database). This caused fraudulent voting and there were allegations of a large number of fake voters in the electoral roll. During the tenure of the caretaker government, the Election Commission (EC) [...] developed an electronic database of voters with photographs and their particulars. The voter identity card has taken the form of a National Identity Card issued by the Election Commission (with permission from the Ministry of Home Affairs) that can be used for voting as well as other purposes (e.g. opening bank accounts, applying for credit cards, etc.). (Canada 18 Aug. 2010)

When the election list was updated, over 80 million voters were photographed and provided with NIDs ([The New York Times 30 Nov. 2008](#); [UN n.d.](#)). In a March 2010 report evaluating the 2008 national elections in Bangladesh and events surrounding them, the UNDP stated that "[t]he creation and issuance of NIDs was integral to the voter registration process, although technically and legally, it remained a separate exercise" ([UN Mar. 2010, Sec. 6.2.6](#)). A 21 March 2007 article by United News of Bangladesh (UNB) quotes the Chief Election Commissioner as stating that the production of the NID and the voter list would be done simultaneously and that a separate voter's identity card would not be necessary since the NID would fulfil the needs of a voter's card and contain more information.

According to the UNDP report, there was confusion among the public as well as among some election officials about whether the NID was required for voting ([UN Mar. 2010, Sec. 6.2.6](#) and [Sec. 8.9](#)). The report states that although it was not mandatory to have a NID card to vote during the 2008 national election, the vast majority of the population believed that the card's main purpose was as a voter's identity card and that it was necessary to have a NID card to vote ([ibid., 6.2.6](#)). Nonetheless, according to the report, the national identity number found on NID cards and the voter identity number assigned to voters on the election list were not the same and it was therefore not possible to locate a voter on the list using a NID ([ibid., Sec. 8.9](#)).

Conversely however, the Canadian Official stated that "[a]ll eligible voters

[citizens over the age of eighteen years old] are required to obtain the [NID] card to cast their vote" (Canada 18 Aug. 2010). He explained that only voters are eligible to get a NID since the cards are produced based on the Election Commission's voter database but that there was no legal obligation to register as a voter (ibid.). However, not registering to vote would mean that the citizen could not receive a NID, which might make it eventually difficult for a citizen to access government services (ibid.).

The UNDP report states that the NID was a "major incentive" for eligible voters to register (UN Mar. 2010, Sec. 6.2.6), as the card was promoted as being essential to obtain 22 governmental and business services, including opening bank accounts, buying or selling land, obtaining passports, getting connected to utilities, telephones, internet and cable, obtaining trade licenses, registering marriages, registering for public exams and obtaining government allowances, among others (ibid.). However, the report states that an enabling ordinance establishing the legal status of the NIDs and an agency to oversee them was not ratified by the Bangladesh Parliament after the elections (ibid.). The report adds that an EC official declared in a 6 October 2009 interview that the Bangladesh Parliament was "likely to consider a bill that would establish the [EC] as the agency responsible for managing NIDs" (ibid.).

Similarly, the Canadian Official stated that

[the NID] is still not compulsory for usage in government service delivery because there are some voters who have not received their cards yet (though the project distributing the cards has covered the vast majority of voters during the last election). The government is likely to make the use of the [NID] compulsory for all government service delivery, bank transactions, etc. once all voters (i.e. 18+ citizens) have [NID] cards. The government feels that the usage of the [NID] will prevent fraud and identity thefts. (Canada 18 Aug. 2010)

In January 2010, the Bangladesh Parliament passed the National Identity Registration Bill 2010, which fixes the validity of a National Identity Card to 15 years from the date of issuance and sets penalties for its abuse (*The Financial Express* 21 Jan. 2010; bdnews24.com 20 Jan. 2010). According to the Dhaka-based daily *The Financial Express*, the law also "empowers the Election Commission (EC) to carry out all activities regarding registration and issuance of the identity cards" in collaboration with other government departments (21 Jan. 2010). According to the Dhaka-based online newspaper bdnews24.com, all eligible voters will receive an identity card and will have to apply and pay a fee to the EC six months before the expiry of the card to re-register (20 Jan. 2010).

Sources report that the EC is considering replacing the existing laminated cards with more secure cards (Canada 18 Aug. 2010; bdnews24.com 14 Mar. 2010). In March 2010, bdnews24.com reported that the EC was "planning to issue new, more durable and secure national identity cards within the next five years," replacing the existing laminated National Identity Cards (bdnews24.com 14 Mar. 2010). The article reports that part of the reason for the issuance of new cards is to prevent forgeries (ibid.). The article also notes that the EC would decide on fees and the distribution of the new cards after the project gets under way (ibid.).

Procedures and requirements to obtain the National Identity Card

The Canadian Official stated that the NID is issued when a citizen registers to vote (Canada 18 Aug. 2010). According to the UNDP, voter registration involves digitalizing personal data, photographs and fingerprints, which are then integrated into a national database (UN n.d.). The UNDP report explains how the new election list was created and how registered voters obtained their NID:

The methodology involved a door-to-door enumeration undertaken by the BEC [Bangladesh Election Commission], after which voters visited registration centers, organized and managed by the Armed Forces, to be photographed and complete the registration process. Registered voters were issued a National Identity Card (NID) with a photograph. (UN Mar. 2010, Executive Summary)

The Canadian Official stated that the EC "carried out regular drives to enroll new voters" and provided the following details on the procedures and requirements used to obtain the NID within Bangladesh:

The main requirement to obtain the [NID] is to become enrolled as a voter. To become a voter, there is a prescribed application form available from the Election Commission central or local offices (each form is numbered and corresponds to the geocode of the area where the applicant wants to enrol as a voter).

For Bangladeshi citizens who are resident in the country, [an] EC team of enumerators make[s] door-to-door visits to update the voter list on an ongoing basis. The enumerators collect voter information in the prescribed form, which is then handed over to the supervisor in the EC office. After the voter particulars have been verified and entered into the database, the EC officials inform the new voters (through public announcement, newspaper advertisements, etc.) for a date, time and venue to take electronic photographs and fingerprints that will be included in the voter database. The prospective voter is given a receipt after that for collection of their [NID] (the expected date and venue of delivery are specified), which might take more than a month depending on the workload in the local EC office.

If a resident Bangladeshi has not been enrolled as a voter to get the [NID] yet, he or she has to wait for the next door-to-door drive by the enumerators. (Canada 18 Aug. 2010)

The Canadian Official added the following details for Bangladeshis residing outside Bangladesh:

In the case of non-resident/expatriate Bangladeshis living in other countries who are eligible to become voters, the EC accepts voter applications from them anytime and they do not have to wait for the door-to-door drive. They can visit their nearest EC office, show proof of their residence in another country and complete the form immediately for enrolment. They will then be informed for a date, time and venue to take photographs and fingerprints that will be included in the voter database. The prospective voters is given a receipt after that for collection of their [NID], which is supposed to be prepared on a priority basis but may often take some time. (ibid.)

In 7 September 2010 correspondence, the Canadian Official further explained that the nearest EC office refers to the nearest office to where a non-resident Bangladeshi is staying during a visit in Bangladesh, as non-resident Bangladeshis "have to be physically present in Bangladesh to obtain the card" and that, as of September 2010, "[t]he card cannot be obtained from abroad".

The Canadian Official added:

However, the government has agreed in principle recently that expatriate Bangladeshis will be allowed to vote for general elections in Bangladesh from abroad. This means that they will be allowed to register themselves as voters and obtain either the NID or some other form of identification from Bangladeshi missions abroad. This is still in very initial stages and may take at least a couple of years to roll-out. For the time being, the only option is to apply for the NID while being physically present in the country. (Canada 7 Sept. 2010)

Characteristics of the National Identity Card

A sample of the NID with annotations provided by the Canadian Official is attached to this Response (Bangladesh n.d.). The front of the card has writing in both English and Bengali (ibid.). The logo of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and a watermark of the Shapla, the country's national symbol, are on the card (Canada 18 Aug. 2010). Words in Bengali are found at the very top of the card, with the words "Government of the Peoples' Republic of Bangladesh" written in English in green directly beneath it (Bangladesh n.d.). The words "NATIONAL ID CARD" are found in red on the next line alongside words in Bengali (ibid.). A photograph and a

signature of the card holder are found on the left side of the card (ibid.). Spaces for the name and date of birth of the holder as well as for the ID number are identified in English (ibid), with spaces for the holder's father and mother's name indicated in Bengali (Canada 18 Aug. 2010). The date of birth and the ID number are in red (Bangladesh n.d.). On the back of the card, which has writing in Bengali only, there are spaces for the signature of the issuing authority, the card holder's blood type and the date of issue (Canada 18 Aug. 2010). A bar code is found near the bottom (ibid.).

References

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Additional Sources Consulted

Oral sources: A representative of the High Commission of Bangladesh in Ottawa was unable to provide information within the time constraints of this Response. Attempts to contact a representative of the Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC) were unsuccessful.

Internet sources, including: Bangladesh - National Web Portal of Bangladesh, e-Bangladesh, Embassy of Bangladesh in Washington, DC, High Commission for the People's Republic of Bangladesh in London, Bangladesh - High Commission of Bangladesh in Ottawa, Bangladesh - National Web Portal of Bangladesh, e-Bangladesh, United Kingdom (UK) - Home Office, United States (US) Department of State.

Attachment

Bangladesh. N.d. Bangladesh Election Commission (BEC). "National ID Card." Provided

by an official at the High Commission of Canada to Bangladesh.

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