



INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

*An initiative of
the National Academy of Public Administration,
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,
Princeton University*

Oral History Program

Series: Elections
Interview no.: J3

Interviewee: Md. Humayun Kabir

Interviewer: Varanya Chaubey

Date of Interview: 17 February 2009

Location: Dhaka
Bangladesh

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CHAUBEY: My name is Varanya Chaubey, and I'm speaking with Mr. Humayun Kabir, who is Secretary of the Election Commission Secretariat at Bangladesh Election Commission. Today is the 17th of February, 2009. Firstly I'd like to thank you very much for participating in this interview.

KABIR: *You're welcome.*

CHAUBEY: We'd like to begin by asking a little bit about your personal background. So would you describe the position that you hold now?

KABIR: *I am currently working as a Secretary of the Election Commission Secretariat. I come from the government. My background is civil service. I worked in various ministries, and before coming here I was the Managing Director of Sadharan Bima Corporation, which is the national insurance corporation of the country. Only general insurance company in the public sector. I also worked as Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Tourism. I also worked in the Cabinet division as Deputy Secretary and some of the Ministries. I also worked in the Department of Environment. So I have some experience of the Secretariat, field offices and in corporations as a chief executive. So this was my first position as Secretary, really.*

I came here when we had the 1/11, or the caretaker government was changed and the Election Commission was undergoing a transformation. It was reconstituted. So I was here with newly reconstituted Election Commission from the very beginning.

CHAUBEY: That was—?

KABIR: *The Election Commission was reconstituted on the fifth of February 2007. So two commissioners were appointed at first. They came here possibly on the 9th, and another commissioner joined the Commission later, I think after a couple of days, possibly on the 11th or so.*

CHAUBEY: Would you describe a little bit about how you got involved in the elections work.

KABIR: *In fact, usually this position is always filled in by the Secretary, usually from the government. It was because when I came here, it was a full-fledged division within the setup of the government, so it was considered as a division and it was filled in by the Secretary from the government. So we had, at that time I joined here, we had the election in mind. So we really didn't know how long it was going to take, but the reform agenda, you know, things leading to the emergency and other things. So a lot of activities were forthcoming, but we were not really sure at that moment. But we knew that we had a long list of work to do.*

The Commission thought reform was the basis for their work. From the very beginning, I was working with the Commission which had in mind reforming electoral laws, election procedures, lots of things.

CHAUBEY: I'd like to ask a little bit about the scheduling of the December 2008 election. What were the factors that determined that date as the final election date?

KABIR: *Initially when we, because there was a postponement of the ninth parliamentary election in January, 2001, which was scheduled to be held on the 22nd of January, 2007. It was postponed due to a faulty voter list. So we definitely knew*

that the voter list would have to be prepared afresh, so a new voter list. And there was demand from the political parties that you have to make it foolproof, and there was demand for photographs, a voter list with photographs.

At that time, the Election Commission didn't have the technology and no experienced, I wouldn't say no experience, because the Election Commission had a very bad experience while preparing voter ID cards. In the late '80s, there was a project which prepared photo, voter card with photos, but there was a mismatch and difficulties with preparing, a mismatch with photos and not giving everybody voter ID cards. Ultimately, that project was not successful. So we had—I'd say, not a very pleasant position, and our experience was not good.

And so when the Commission decided—it was decided from the very beginning that voter list must have photos; otherwise, it cannot eliminate duplication and lots of other things, and also to meet the demand that people should recognize who are in the voter list and nobody is coming twice, things like that. So that was a challenge.

Immediately, the caretaker government prepared one committee headed by a renowned IT (information technology), most venerable IT sector specialist, Professor Jamilur Reza Choudhury who had been a VC (vice chancellor) of the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET). He was also an advisor in a past caretaker government. So that committee, in that committee there were specialists, computer personnel. And they suggested that it is possible to prepare a national ID card. When these things were merged, the photo voter list, it seems it is possible, and we also got input from UNDP (United Nations Development Program). Because at that time there was a small project which had some consultancies. So the Election Commission, in the first couple of months, looked at these reports and also got inputs from consultants and decided that it's possible to prepare an electoral roll with photographs. So it went like that. Not the scheduling, sorry, I missed one point.

At that time, we didn't really decide about the December 2008. The Commission discussed, looked at the timeline, because when the Commission decided that the photo voter list will be prepared with photographs, then came a lot of issues, technical issues, really, like preparing, sending, collecting photos of the voters. Obviously, if you collect photos then you have to put them in a computerized format, a database. You have to collect data from the field, put it in a computer, and you have to have a network for connection with the centers.

These things really—it required a lot of money. So things were not easy because at that time the donors, the development partners, supported us. Otherwise the government would have to implement the project. In any case the donors were forthcoming, and we had to prepare the project. So preparing a project means there are steps in getting it approved.

You start preparing projects, send it to the Planning Commission and the Planning Commission will place it before the Executive Committee (of National Economic Council or ECNEC). So a lot of bureaucracies. But we started work, to tell you frankly, even before getting the project approved. It was possible, because we involved the army in the registration work, so they can sequence the work. And also they had access to some computers. So on a very small scale, and as we didn't have any idea, the Commission decided that we should have one pilot project to test the hypothesis, whether it is possible and what are the challenges.

So I think in June, July, we did a small pilot project in a close area (to Dhaka). Then we figured out that preparing the voter list takes at least 18 months, really. So that's how we came to the conclusion that it is not possible to hold the election. You have to look at how we prepared the voter list in the past. In the past, we would mount an operation in a month. So all the people would simultaneously, with employment registration officers and enumerators who would visit door to door. So they would just have a form, a pen, collect the data, come back to the supervisors, hand the forms over to him. He'll prepare a list, get it printed. So that operation would require one to two months at best. You can mount it simultaneously in all the centers around the country.

But when we were talking about photographs and all these technical issues, it was not possible to do it at a time. So we had to sequence it, how to do it. We had to look at how many computers we could have access to. You see a lot of procurements, which is the most difficult subject in our system. Because in terms of procurement, and we also suffered a lot due to—because you have competitiveness and other international bidders. You have to go for the lowest evaluated price. The lowest is not always the best.

In any case, all these things, we realized that we cannot really, actually, even though before, the first half of 2007, it was decided that the Commission would be preparing for the electoral roll with photographs, it was not possible to start the operation really, full-scale operation before procurement and projects. In fact, the actual work started in October, full-scale operation started in October, late October. By that time, we could procure the computers and everything. So you see, we started in July the pilot project. We started work with a small number of computers. Then we get all the computers, start our work. From that point it required almost twelve months. Not only data collection, because the voter list, they had that you have to print a draft list first.

So you prepare a draft list, make it public and ask for people's opinions. They can raise objections, errors, omissions. So you correct it, and you prepare a final voter list. So nationwide, we could only finish, the timeline said, because as we go on, the Commission also declared a road map. In that road map which activities can be covered in how many months, the timeframe was declared. So that's how the Commission decided that it was not really feasible or realistic to complete the voter list before October (2008). Before finalizing the list, you cannot declare a schedule. So that's the regulation. The Returning Officers, the polling personnel, they must have, even the personnel, the contestant, candidates, they must have the voter list ready before they contest the election.

So all these things really made it, the timeframe, only we could do it. Maybe we would have time, fifteen days plus/minus. But it was not possible to do an election before December 2008. There were a lot of technical challenges, procurement challenges, administrative and management problems, because if you miss one deadline in terms of procurement, you don't know how you are going to manage it. That's why you couldn't really—because we had a project by UNDP, we missed some procurement deadlines. We couldn't get it from market. Our system didn't allow us to procure directly or shorten the timeframe.

So we had to go to UNDP because their system, they have some flexibility within their system. So we could get, in fact, finally we had to buy laptops through UNDP, very frankly.

CHAUBEY: I'm going to come back to some of the registration and procurement questions, but you mentioned the road map that I believe was announced in July 2007.

KABIR: Yes, July 2007.

CHAUBEY: Who were the people involved in creating that road map?

KABIR: *That road map, in fact—you have seen the road map? You've got a copy of it?*

CHAUBEY: No, I've seen it in the press only.

KABIR: *Maybe, I think I have a copy of it in Bengali, maybe you will have to get it translated. The road map was decided by the Commission immediately after the reconstitution of the Election Commission. People were, the political parties, even the interest groups, NGOs, they were visiting the Commission and the Commission was aware of the problems. And also they had meetings with NGOs, and politicians, formal meetings. The Commission had three rounds of discussions with political parties. This is something unique in the history of—maybe the Election Commission previously also had meetings with political parties, but this time, as the Commission was going for registration of political parties and total electoral reforms. So they initiated, they started discussion with political parties.*

So I think though within a couple of five or six months it was decided—the Commission, by that time, the Commission had lots of experience with discussion with parties and looking at the technical and management issues. So it was—and also they looked at, I think you have to accept the fact that the Commission was a reformist Commission, in any case. So because they took responsibilities at a time when the reform was—now reform is the buzzword. People were all talking about reforms. So they also had a lot of issues they had to address. It was not only voter list or elections.

In fact the Commission looked at the local government election. It came very much in the reform agenda, though at that time we didn't have any legal coverage. There were no upazila elections. You are familiar with the upazila, I suppose?

CHAUBEY: Had the Commission earlier proposed to hold upazila elections before the national?

KABIR: *Yes. Because, you know, as I mentioned, this time, earlier, since the voter list was declared on a specific date, it was published, like finalized. This time, as we were finishing in some areas, we were able to declare, finalize the voter list. So by Commission, they tried to hold elections by October, because by that time, by June we had the voter list of some upazilas. You know, we had 481 upazilas in Bangladesh and 300 constituencies for general elections. So in some constituencies there are two or three upazilas, but in some upazilas the voter list was completed. So Commission says it is possible to hold elections in upazilas, say a number, a hundred to two hundred at best, not all really.*

But you know, because the political parties objected to it, so people were not ready to hold elections with the Election Commission. After discussion with political parties, the Commission decided that okay, a national election is their first priority, and also it was in the caretaker government there was some

discussion about which should come first. So the Commission abandoned the idea, that's okay. So it came through discussions with all the stakeholders.

CHAUBEY: I'd like to talk a little bit about the election management body here, which is the Bangladesh Election Commission.

KABIR: *The Election Commission, yes.*

CHAUBEY: I know there have been some very recent changes.

KABIR: Yes.

CHAUBEY: Would you describe the structure of this management body now, and how it has changed from the past?

KABIR: *In fact, we now have a separate Election Commission Secretariat Ordinance. So this gives it legal status as to its independence. So this independence means financial and administrative independence. I think, if you frankly ask my opinion, I see this as a matter of perception, really, because as Secretary, I am not responsible to any minister, even if I am with the Prime Minister's office, usually I won't be reporting to the Prime Minister because all my files, decision making, lies with the Commission.*

Basically even before, I think you will find the difference, in my opinion, with others who say that the independence... But in any case, independence is not really that the law guarantees that. It is within the mindset, all the procedures which you follow or how you work. In the past, this position was held by a Secretary, and he was someone from government, as I am. But we had one Secretary who was not with government, Mr. (S.M.) Zakaria. He had been for long Secretary here, became Commissioner. So there was a strong demand that the Election Commission Secretary should be made independent. So we got our independence. I think functionally it really didn't change a lot.

CHAUBEY: When was that independence granted?

KABIR: *2008, in May, we had an ordinance, an ordinance was passed. But this government is going to put the ordinance by the Parliament, I think. Hopefully, this will be placed before the Parliament very soon. So in my opinion, I think this is something not many people will agree, maybe. But in any case, the law says that the Election Commission Secretariat is not a part of government. It clearly says that it is not a part of government. So that is—and I think we previously even, the way the Secretariat worked under the Commission, it is almost the same.*

CHAUBEY: Are there some changes in day-to-day functions that came about with the change?

KABIR: *I don't see really any. The only thing, I think, one important change is that it says that financially, we are independent in the sense that we will budget. We are free to. The government will approve the budget, and we don't have to go back to the Minister of Finance for expenditures. But I think previously even, this was the same. But in any case, now it says, it is in law, it is okay. One important change is, for organizational changes like manpower increase or others, there is a system in our bureaucracy that you have to go to the Ministry of Establishment*

first, who will approve your organogram, manpower, human resources. Then you go to (the Ministry of) Finance, who will look at the financial implications.

So these things have been cut short. Now we have a committee headed by the Chief Election Commissioner. The two other commissioners are members, and both of them, they decide this committee. There is a representative from the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Establishment. So this committee decides. It will be approved. It says the government will approve on the basis of the recommendation of this committee. So this is one important thing. So it is no more part of government, that is also important.

CHAUBEY: How often does this committee meet?

KABIR: *It is not regularly required to meet, because you don't change your organogram quite often, just now and then. So it is maybe once in a—it is not mandatory to make a meeting. But you can meet as many times as you require.*

CHAUBEY: In your view, what are some of the—apart from this Election Commission Secretariat Ordinance, what are some of the steps that have been taken to grant the Election Commission independence?

KABIR: *The Election Commission has been given enough authority through the Constitution. We can ask for service from any government department. These are built within the system. I think the system would work. You can think about an ideal situation and a not so ideal situation. So this is not something you go always by book. It is very difficult. I think this has been mainly a demand from—it came from the people, NGOs. They are looking at the behavior of the Commission in the past. You look at it like the perspective of giving it— independent status, does it change the way you behave? Not really.*

Because the commissioners were never, never really, they didn't have to follow the orders of the government at any time, it was never really necessary. But we have seen in the past that people have complained, there were allegations that they were following.

CHAUBEY: Another important thing for election management bodies is transparency. So would you describe how there have been changes in the way the Election Commission is conveying information to the public and is opening up its workings to the world?

KABIR: *In fact we have tried to, in testing this, usually if you look at the form, the nomination forms which people sign, that someone proposes, it was a skeleton only, a few information it had. This Commission, it came through the high court and Supreme Court directives. But now there are disclosures to be made. Also at this time, some elements like disqualification criteria have been included, incorporated in that. We have tried. Like the election process, we have tried to make it as transparent as possible. But an election is really a very difficult management because you mount an operation on a single day and with lots of actors, like the teachers. You know their level of competence and level of understanding, these things really are difficult to monitor from the center.*

There is also, I'm trying to say that they will have the same level of competence, because they only come to work for two or three days. You train them, but how much is possible? I think that people have seen that in the 2008 elections the people have performed well. I think you won't hear any complaints out of them.

We have tried, always election results have been a crucial issue. People were curious to know. So this time, other than providing them—because whenever there were changes in laws you have seen—I think it will be difficult for you to understand what we have been providing in our website because all our contents are now in Bengali, because this is our mother tongue and our official language is Bengali. So mostly whatever we provide, it is in Bengali.

But if you look at this, you will see that lots of information we have made available through our website. This has also gone to—we launched a campaign which says that—mini info—so it is mini info, information which ran in all dailies for thirty or forty days and says basically how you behave, what the candidates should do. So if you look at these posters, you will see that we have attacked some behaviors of the candidates, like blocking the road for holding meetings. So it is not done now.

Posters, because previously, people were fixing posters on your wall, anywhere they like. Now it is not there and people followed because we printed it two or three months before the election, and people have done exactly so. You see they will just—the graffiti is on the wall, it's gone, it was not there. You just look at the walls of Dhaka. You are coming here one month after election, and you don't realize that there was an election because you don't see any posters, any graffiti.

CHAUBEY: In the past people would—?

KABIR: *In the past, even after three or four years, you will see graffiti, posters, everywhere. You will see some posters which are not related to elections even now. I think it was possible to change the behavior, I think because it was done through media campaign and other, lot of things, really. The public, people were informed quite well. So we used the electronic media.*

On election day, people were very much worried about what happens in elections. We tried to give results as soon as possible. So possibly, this is the first time that all the results of the elections were out by two or three a.m. Most of them, I think eighty percent were out in the middle of the night, two or three a.m. and by ten, all the people know who were elected and what was the number of their votes, and that didn't happen in the past.

CHAUBEY: And the counting, where was that done?

KABIR: *The counting, in our system, the counting is done in the center. The Commission really is thinking now that counting should be separated. But, you know, you cannot change all the systems in a day. So at the moment—and also our law says that—the Election Commission, this time, introduced a system where you can hold elections on separate days, like what happens in India or in many other countries. But in our country, national elections must be held on a day. This is the practice, and you count votes immediately after closing the center. So these are some problems maybe. We have to just, at this point in time in future—.*

CHAUBEY: I did look at your website, and there is a considerable amount of information available even in English, so I was wondering who are the people who drove this idea and took the website online?

KABIR: *In fact, when I came here there was a website, no doubt about it. There was some information. But in fact, you might say that I took a lot of interest in my*

website. So that's why you see the posters on our site. You see the movies on our website and a lot of information, other information. In fact, I personally gave a lot of time behind this website. I can't say that I am giving a lot of attention to it at this moment, because updating is a crucial part of any website. So maybe we're not as fast updating it right at this moment. But I can assure you that you see still a lot of information will be forthcoming on our website.

Now, like we have plans, center-wide information is a major issue. We, because we had two elections back-to-back, you can imagine how difficult it is, more than 30,000 centers, a lot more than 1 million people involved. It is really a gigantic task. So that is why we are not still able to—but we have plans to give center-wide information on our website in the future. We have really, if you look at this, we have trained a lot of people in IT. We have intranet, a network connected to all upazilas which no other department in Bangladesh have. We have trained all the people to send their disclosure information. So all the disclosures, which have been given in affidavit, they have to—all the candidates have to disclose—[interruption].

So I should talk about the name of that later.

CHAUBEY: I would like to ask a little bit about the relationship between the Election Commission and the political parties. I know that recently, the registration of political parties was made mandatory. Would you talk a little bit about the kinds of consultations you held with parties and what emerged from these meetings?

KABIR: *It's quite interesting, because you know, the registration, if you look at it, we had a lot of issues, the Commission decided, the Chief Election Commissioner, very early in the tenure, said political party is the most important client of the Election Commission. So they would discuss whatever reforms, must discuss with the political parties. So the first, I think the draft—basically, we had a lot of issues to discuss with the political parties. When you are trying to reform electoral laws, and who will be the users of that, targets of those, they are definitely the political parties.*

So the Commission prepared one draft. Before starting discussions with the political parties, they had two big meetings with the editors and senior journalists and other important persons. They came to a consensus of which are the areas that should be addressed. Then, they prepared one draft of the Representation of the People Order and the conduct rules, Code of Conduct for Elections and then also—these were the two important—and registration—of political parties' rules.

So basically, if you look at our RPO, which is available in English, it says registration is, political parties can be registered. So it was there for the last five or ten years, but it was not mandatory, so the Election Commission couldn't register any political parties. Even though some minor parties, I use the word minor, some parties definitely applied and they completed the formalities. But this time the Commission decided that this should be made mandatory. The reason, in terms of any social organization or any work within government, all have to have a kind of formal linkage with any common body. So the Commission was keen to have registration with the political parties.

The very first draft it was there. But there were a lot of other things as well, like disclosure requirements, disqualification, election expenses. In fact the Commission had a lot of issues, like the provision of "NOTA," none of the above. No-vote. These things were included in the draft. So the registration of the

political parties was included in this draft. The first draft—and then none of them really objected to registration and many of the parties welcomed the proposal.

When the first—we had difference on many other issues. I remember saying that in the first draft, there were not many differences and in the second draft, so. The Commission in fact had three rounds of discussions with political parties, always one-to-one. By that I mean one political party and the Commission. So three rounds of discussions with sixteen political parties. At first BNP was left out, a major political party, but CEC (Chief Election Commissioner) formally apologized so in the third round BNP was invited.

CHAUBEY: Why was BNP left out?

KABIR: *I think initially at that time, in the Commission view, if you look at the Commission's view, there will be definitely other views. The Commission's view was that at that time, the General Secretary was sacked, and another had to be approved by a standing committee. That is the view of the Commission. So the Commission was not sure who was representing the party. So the Commission in fact invited one faction which turned out to be not the right one. This is political. The Commissioners—you have talked to the Brigadier General; he -- should be able to answer it more elaborately. Usually I don't like to go into political issues because I'm a career civil servant. But this is how the Commission perceived it. So that's how this problem all got*

But you know it is easy to say later it was wrong for them, but at that time it was very difficult. Sometimes you don't know, you have to take a decision and without proper, sufficient information, you might take a decision which may turn out to be wrong at a later point of time.

So these discussions basically, registration issues—. Though the political parties welcomed registration, there were two issues, two or three issues on which it was very difficult to come to a consensus.

The premise was that the Commission said, the Commission tried to minimize the differences as much as possible. In some cases, the Commission said this will fail, at least one party the candidate said...91E, are you familiar with 91E?

CHAUBEY: What is it?

KABIR: *It says that the Commission can terminate the candidacy before the election. So this is something the political parties didn't like. In fact it was never really—I've seen that in the election. It was not necessary to use this provision. But the Commission saw it as a deterrent. If it is there, maybe the behavior pattern will change. It was not really, I wouldn't say any parties did like it, but the Commission wanted to have it so it was there. But mostly you see, the Commission, the report of the political parties—. We have a report of political parties in Bengali. If you like to have it, I can give you a copy. It is in Bengali. The Commission also and CEC took a decision lately that he will release also because the documents are with him. These things will be made available, the audio tapes, like what you are taking today. These things will be made available online through our web site.*

CHAUBEY: These are audio tapes of—?

- KABIR: Audio tapes of the discussions with the political parties; they're also available in the Election Commission.*
- CHAUBEY: Oh, wow.
- KABIR: The Commission decided that they should be made available online. But the third round of discussions were not recorded, because at that time the Commission decided that there were some issues that maybe—and also, the nice part of the discussion was that the journalists were allowed to remain in the meetings. So it was really open, public, so everybody can see and know what is happening.*
- CHAUBEY: Sorry, I didn't catch why the third round were not recorded.
- KABIR: They were not recorded. The Commission, at that time, maybe it seems that there were some issues, maybe to see that if, maybe the Commission wanted to see whether there were some issues they don't want to make public or discuss in public. But in fact, it was just possible the political parties wouldn't have objected to recording, that is my feeling.*
- CHAUBEY: I'd like to ask a little bit about the conditions that were tied to registration. Was there a Code of Conduct that was part of this?
- KABIR: Code of Conduct is not part of registration, but as I mentioned, there were some elements for getting the registration. Like the political parties are not allowed to have some, we call them their affiliated organizations, with students, affiliated organizations, labor, things like that. The labor is—I mean the teachers. So these things are not allowed in RPO. So they had, the political parties had some objections. Also the Commission said that what their Constitution, the party constitution should have. So when the RPO was out, the Representation of the People's Order, and the registrations were formulated, we found that some parties had some provisions which were not really compatible with the registration rules.*
- The Commission requested the parties to revise their constitutions, and a couple of parties did revise their constitutions to make those compatible with and also there was an exemption in the law because in order to change the constitution, you need to have conventions within the political parties, because they cannot decide it through their executive committee. There has to be a broad-based convention, conference, so they didn't have time. So the Commission allowed that. Okay, you approve it through your executive committee and get it approved through your general members through conventions later.*
- CHAUBEY: I'd like to talk a little bit now about the registration exercise.
- KABIR: Yes.*
- CHAUBEY: You mentioned that the registration was done in phases.
- KABIR: No, the registration was not done in phases. You want specific dates?*
- CHAUBEY: Was it a nationwide exercise that commenced at the same time?
- KABIR: You mean the registration of voters?*
- CHAUBEY: Yes, the registration of voters. Sorry, yes.

KABIR: Yes, it was done in phases, yes.

CHAUBEY: Why was it conducted in phases?

KABIR: *Because we had realized that we have to make person-to-person contact with all the voters. People, the enumerators, were visiting door-to-door. So that they'd come to my place, give me a form. I fill in the form. Then his name, his data would be put in the computer and his photograph would have to be taken and again his fingerprints are to be captured. So these things you cannot go door-to-door, the enumerators. You require data entry operators who are in a stationary, sitting in a place. So we targeted that we will cover the registration—we will have to open registration centers. Basically, those are the polling centers, those have been used in the past as polling centers. So in the polling centers, people would go because ideally, one computer could only, one data entry operator could register 60 voters in a day, or at best 100, depending on their experience. But if you do it very fast, then the data will be a problem. Also taking photographs. So three or four minutes each to register, and also others. We would be having, in the registration centers, you have five to ten computers in one center. Through one registration center, you can cater to 2000 to 2500 people. So you send your team, ten computers, twenty computers, thirty computers, to a center. They finish their work there, they go to another center. So this is why you had to do it in phases and all over the country. But this was done by the Bangladesh Army, really.*

They were very good at management of logistics and using about 10,000 laptops, equivalent number of scanners, webcams because we could procure only webcams, not digital cameras, because the digital cameras are the right kind of thing for taking photographs, but taking it with laptops, some are sitting at a table with a laptop, and if he takes a digital photograph, the time taken, requiring a lot of time. People are not ready to give us that much time. Also, the digital cameras are expensive. So that is how we would establish one registration center, move from one place to another.

Just think about the number of people involved in this exercise. Loads of data entry operators are not available locally. In some areas I think I could give you some videos and that will be helpful to you.

CHAUBEY: I think that would be nice.

KABIR: *I have some videos. When we finish, you know Asaduzzaman (public relations officer) can give you—.*

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that procurement was a challenge.

KABIR: *Exactly.*

CHAUBEY: Could you describe how you went about that. [interruption end of file 2].

KABIR: *The procurement was a challenge because, you know, we were looking at procuring 10-12,000 laptops, the same number of scanners, the same number of webcams, and we are giving them to operators who have never used. Maybe these laptops with things integrated in this manner... We had to procure keyboards separately because the laptops are meant for using single-handedly. So if 10 persons are using the laptops within two months, the wear and tear, the*

equipment does not last. So we have to procure keyboards for them. There were lots of technical issues. Getting the right kind of equipment was a challenge because the scanners...we were not able to very good scanners, and it was a problem. That's why, in many cases, the quality of fingerprints failed. The webcams were also not the right kind. Also webcams are another technical challenge. The webcams were not for taking good quality pictures. So the pixels were lost, and lots of other things are not really good for print quality or other quality. Again the lighting conditions.

*Also the webcams, I think webcams are not really good for interior. Maybe it will take pictures like this, but it is not really very good for it. That's why, to get good photographs, we had to realize that we have to buy the high-energy lights to illuminate the face, to get a good picture. We had to do a lot of changes in mid-stream. The challenge was that when we floated tender for the laptop...our committee, which was looking at the technical issues, didn't find the right kind of laptops. So we were faced with a dilemma. If we do go for a tender, it will take three months, and we cannot add three months to our schedule because people would not allow. So we took assistance from UNDP, because that was a project implemented by UNDP. So thanks to UNDP, it was possible to get it.
[interruption, end of file 3]*

CHAUBEY: You mentioned some mid-stream corrections.

KABIR: Yes.

CHAUBEY: At what point in the process were these made and how did you go about making those changes?

KABIR: *During the pilot phase. What happened? As soon as we realized, we were ready for making changes. We realized it quite early.*

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that UNDP helped with the procurement.

KABIR: *With the procurement, yes.*

CHAUBEY: Of laptops?

KABIR: *Yes, laptops and also some scanners, fingerprint scanners.*

CHAUBEY: Where are all these things stored now?

KABIR: *We have decided that these are now, because we will be starting a new phase of updating, so we required laptops, about 5000 laptops in our upazilas. So we now have 9000 laptops, so we require 5000 to 6000 for our use. Since the project has not completed, we cannot distribute them, but now we are thinking about giving some laptops to other government agencies who are doing birth and death registration and also educational institutions in the rural areas where they can use them for training students.*

CHAUBEY: So could you talk a little bit about the pilot registration exercises that were launched?

KABIR: *In Sreepur?*

CHAUBEY: Yes.

KABIR: *It was launched in July 2007. It was a small area very close to Dhaka. It has a rural-urban mix. Some people are floating, like work in Dhaka, and maybe they come from outside Dhaka because Sreepur is close to there; there are lots of garment factories, people who work in garment factories. So we figured out that that was the right kind of place for doing the pilot. So in the pilot we tested—we had different modalities for registration. Like how you fill in the form. Do you fill in the form, and give it to the public, and put it in the computer before he comes to the center to report you, or do you do it afterwards? So we had some issues to address. If you input it into the computer beforehand, we realized that then we are stuck—because it was not networked within that registration center at that time. So we were sticking to one computer. So these are the things really you have to experiment and see how best to do. Also we were verifying, because the voter list has to be foolproof. So you must know that nobody is falsifying his name. He has to be verified.*

So first of all, we sent enumerators to one place and, we were verifying him at the centers. At the centers, we need to have local people, like local representatives, to verify him. There are a lot of issues we addressed at that time.

CHAUBEY: Some people are particularly difficult to register: people who live in remote areas, sometimes it is women, marginalized communities. What efforts were made to reach out to these voters?

KABIR: *A lot of efforts. In fact, I think, at the moment I don't have those reports available, but we have done some independent research and have gone to some areas about which were reported, a lot of people were made first voters in some areas. In some areas there were some minorities who were neglected. These independent results suggested an error rate less than 1; it was less than 0.5. The errors they identified, that those people were not there during voting registration period; that's why they were left out, and some people didn't bother to get registered. But I think the registration of the voter list...I didn't mention one thing. The registration of the voter list was a great success, but this success is due mainly to the ID card, I would say.*

It was meant for two purposes. One is to give one person one identity card. So we provided, side-by-side with voter registration, an ID card. People were getting one ID card. In this country people look at it as a matter of empowerment. Identity—some people who cannot establish their identity, are languishing in jail sometimes, it also happens. For VGF (Vulnerable Group Feeding – a social safety net programme) cards (4,5:19) and for various government services, you have to establish your identity. So people in fact, the registration, the success of registration owes a great deal to the national ID card.

But it was possible that the amount of information we get, it is lying in computers, so you can use it. They are reporting whatever you like. So we provided people with ID cards. Government was, the caretaker government, they said that a new department will take care of registration. But even if there is no separate department for registration, the Election Commission thinks that it is possible for the Election Commission to continue with this effort. So we can provide ID cards to people. We need to do some work.

But in this process, we have very strong IT support, IT infrastructure and with the right kind of people, it is—

CHAUBEY: I'd also like to ask how the integrity of the lists was safeguarded after they were compiled. How were they protected and stored?

KABIR: *Everything is in computerized format. In the database. We have to—
.[interruption, end of file 4.]*

I think the list, the database is well-protected, so no problem. If the database is right, we can print the voter list. And we have to update it in the meantime. We did it...people who were 18 in 2007 were registered. Now we have to include people who have become 18 in the meantime. So, in fact, for updating we are organizing another pilot in a very close area to Dhaka. So still we have to learn a lot, because managing a database of 80 million people is not a simple task. In-house we don't have that capacity. So at the moment we are dependent on consultants. We have only two IT permanent staff within our setup, but we are increasing that staff. So we have a pool of consultants working with us.

CHAUBEY: So far, it is the Army that is managing the list?

KABIR: *No, no. Now we are managing it with our own staff. It is not Army. In fact, the Army has transferred this to us. So we have a server and everything in our project office. We have all things, we have even duplicate copies of the database. God forbid for any reason the server gets lost, still we will have the data. We are thinking about storing it in another location in the future, maybe.*

CHAUBEY: I'd also like to ask you a little bit about the boundary delimitation here. Has it changed in the recent past?

KABIR: *There have been a lot of changes. In delimitation of constituencies, it is one of the important responsibilities of the Election Commission. In fact, they have three or four responsibilities like holding elections, local-level elections and preparation of voter list, election of President and boundary delimitation. It is mandated that after each census, you delimit the boundaries. So this time we had a census in 2001, but the last Election Commission didn't really delimit the boundaries. This Commission decided that it is their responsibility to delimit the constituencies.*

But our Constitution says that we can only have three hundred seats. So the Election Commission cannot increase seats. So what they do is they rationalize those boundaries. So basically, it is the population. So this time, we found that there has been a lot of migration, and in some areas people have migrated. The first draft of delimitation, we did it based entirely on geographic information system. Basically, it was computerized using census data with geographic mapping.

We, when we mapped the entire thing, it came out that—and the Commission decided, I think the mean was like 4 million. Not 4 million, 400,000 something, maybe 414,000 for a district, for a constituency. In Dhaka, we found that there was an increase of about nine seats would creep in, but the Commission decided that the small districts at least get two. So, basically all the people, based on, delimitation was based on geographic divisions as well as contiguity. I think an important factor in—important thing in delimitation was that the threshold level was quite high.

As we said, the average was, on average the Commission allowed plus/minus 25% would be acceptable. Still, 153 seats remained intact. So no changes in 153

seats, but the other 147 had to be changed, in a smaller or bigger manner. So some districts, like Faridpur, Barguna, in some districts they have lost one seat. So rural people were not really happy because in Bangladesh, in our culture, the MPs (members of Parliament) are very important persons, and they look to go to MPs for any problems. They expect development works and others to come through. A lot of people didn't like this delimitation.

After the delimitation, the Commission organized public hearings. They went to different division-level headquarters and also to other areas, some important districts. They heard them and tried to minimize it. Afterwards, I think still more than 100 seats were touched. But as I said, in Dhaka we had an increase of about seven seats. In urban areas people don't care really whether they get one MP or not, but this is in the law. So the Commission recommended, at that time, that maybe the Parliament should look at the "mother" law and see whether it should be based only on population or should it also adjust rural-urban mix or other things.

We also faced litigation on that issue, and people went to court even though our Constitution says that delimitation cannot be challenged before the court. People went to court. Finally the court decided in our favor.

CHAUBEY: Who were the people who went to court?

KABIR: *Some persons who were maybe MPs in the past and others. In fact, immediately, at that point in time, it seems that you cannot declare a schedule when there is litigation, when cases are pending before the court. It was becoming uncertain whether the Commission could hold the election in December. So there were a lot of difficulties.*

In October, I think, when we fought it in the court and finally our lawyer went to the Supreme Court. By that time, the High Court cleared all the cases. The moment all the cases were cleared, the Election Commission declared the schedule.

CHAUBEY: Were there any changes in procedures followed on election day from the past?

KABIR: *Procedures? One, I think one important thing this time, the results. They were counted in centers. We instructed the polling officials that they should give the result to all the agents. It was mandatory beforehand even. But this time, one important factor, that they should affix the result outside the centers so that everybody can come and see it. So it was done. I think this is one important thing. I think the principal thing was motivating the returning officers, the assistant returning officers, polling personnel. I think the caretaker government also did play a very important role, because the Chief Advisor himself went to districts, and he categorically emphasized that all returning officers, assistant returning officers, must remain neutral. We have laws that say people must be neutral.*

I think the whole environment at that time was really—they were playing their roles and responsibilities, fair to the charter of their duties, whatever it is.

CHAUBEY: Just to clarify. The results of the counting happened at the polling center—?

KABIR: Yes.

CHAUBEY: And then immediately the results can be posted outside?

KABIR: *Yes, in fact, counting, you see there are at least hundred polling centers in one constituency, maybe a hundred plus. Roughly, I say, because against 300 constituencies, we had 32,000 centers. So that means 100 plus/minus something. Maybe there are some 80s. So these, the presiding officers are at the head of their center. Basically, when election is going on, he is in charge of the centers, and he can decide whatever it is. He can stop the polls or call in law and order agencies or others and bar any people from entering.*

At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, the election is supposed to complete. So afterwards they start counting. When it is counted, they give the results. A sheet is prepared, given to the people. Then they stick everything in a sack, take the result and all the materials to assistant returning officers, who is the Upazila Nirbahi Officer in the upazilas. He is also the assistant returning officer, so he compiles the results of all the centers. So there you know, who has won or not. Then the assistant returning officer sends the result to the returning officer. The returning officer, center by center...he will see, and then he will let us know.

CHAUBEY: How are they sent?

KABIR: *This is by fax, by telephone. But from centers to assistant returning officer, this is physically. Like the presiding officer will have to report in person to the assistant returning officer, hand over the result sheets. The assistant returning officer will look at it, and then send the results to the returning officer. He will also take, if necessary, all the sacks and everything, because those are kept in the district, the returning officer's office. So in any case, those will have to be carried there.*

CHAUBEY: I believe this was the first time that transparent ballot boxes—?

KABIR: *Were used, yes. I think I missed that point earlier. So this is a very important element in the election. You know the CEC (Chief Election Commissioner) said in 2007, the transparent ballot box is not a major factor, because earlier even, we would open the cover, lid. People who represented the candidate can look at this. You then seal it, you close it. But anyway, there was a demand and the CEC later decided we hold very good elections, and some people say we haven't seen what is inside, and they will raise questions about it. So he decided, the Commission later decided that we should go for transparent elections. But you must realize that in any case, human factors are more important than technological inputs. In any election, you can provide all sorts of things, technology, anything, and the people who were at the polling stations, they are not behaving properly, are taking side—then everything can happen.*

I think we are satisfied with the outcome. So the transparent ballot box—but I think the transparent ballot box gives us, though I said this, it now gives us some tools. It gives us tools to actually use, like I was saying, that we can count it later in another place. Why? Because you have all the locks numbered, boxes are numbered. So it is possible to monitor which box was used in which center. Which numbered locks were used for which box? So it is possible. We provide numbered locks sheets to all agents.

But I see in hindsight that now, as we have started using it, definitely we can bring more transparency and change in other procedures of elections in the future; it is quite possible. It is within our power, our capacities, now.

CHAUBEY: You mentioned that people are important. Have there ever been any penalties for election officers that behaved inappropriately?

KABIR: *In the past, yes. In the past there had been... Also in upazila elections held later, some presiding officers were punished by the judicial court. So it is possible that there might be some bad elements. But I think the election, we didn't have—the election of 29th January was extraordinary. We didn't have any complaints about any polling personnel from anybody on that election day.*

CHAUBEY: Which election day was that?

KABIR: *The ninth parliamentary election.*

CHAUBEY: In December?

KABIR: *In December. And interestingly, usually the violence on polling day is quite common, so we were expecting some violence and that didn't happen! In the whole of Bangladesh, only three centers, out of 30,000 centers, only three centers had to stop, the election was postponed. That didn't have an impact on the results of any of the candidates. So this is extraordinary.*

CHAUBEY: Who was the agency that was responsible for election security?

KABIR: *They worked within the control of the Election Commission. So in fact we have our control room here, we are monitoring. In fact, the Election Commission is a very small outfit. We have three commissioners, we have the secretariat, It is like 200 personnel. Here the secretariat and about 2000 field staff in all upazilas. So this is what we work. But on election day, all the government agencies are supposed to work with us, if we request.*

So you see we had about 32,000 centers and 32,000 presiding officers. They have as many as five assistant presiding officers. That takes you to 150,000 more. And one, two polling officers for each booth. So all polling centers will have five booths or two booths, three booths. So this way, the civil employees were about 500,000 plus, 550,000 plus civil employees who are usually schoolteachers, officers working in sector operation, in government departments, colleges. Basically the schoolteachers and college teachers play a very important role in elections. Again, a similar number of law enforcement staff, like army, police and Ansars (para-military organization of Village Guard). Lots of law enforcement agencies, so more than a million personnel were employed.

Half of them were looking at law and order situations; others were in the duty of managing elections. So this is a huge operation. It is not possible for the Election Commission alone to do anything.

CHAUBEY: Were the security arrangements for the upazila elections in January different?

KABIR: *Not much. The army was also there, police, the same, not really different.*

CHAUBEY: But the incidents of violence were higher.

KABIR: *Usually local elections, they tend to be violent, because they are fought over closely. In our elections, this is our experience. But still I wouldn't say to a great deal, but in some centers, yes.*

CHAUBEY: We've covered a lot of ground. In conclusion, I'd like to ask if there is some innovation that you think was tried here that you would recommend to your counterparts in other countries, and the context in which it is likely to succeed.

KABIR: *I think it is a quite interesting question. I think you know the social variables won't be the same. There will be a lot of differences across societies, but I think in hindsight, I would say definitely electoral roll with photograph is a good thing to have for the election management, because the polling agents, even if earlier, you relied on the judgment of polling agents. The polling officials, they wouldn't, really they couldn't say which person was whom, but now you have a photograph. You ask the name, the polling officers, now they know that he is the right person.*

Also the transparent ballot box, I think this is great, and it will help us to further improve the elections in the future. We are also doing some other exercises, which I have mentioned, like we are trying to collect data electronically in the future, maybe it is possible, so that in real time you'll get very good response. But that will depend upon the network and other things. I think that from our point of view, we have managed—because we had time—we also could manage the political parties. Bringing political parties into consensus was also very important.

So I think if you discuss all the issues and discuss with them, mostly good things...

CHAUBEY: In conclusion, are there any other issues that I haven't raised that you would like to raise?

KABIR: *We have done so many works. Voter education is a very important area. We have tried, because like disclosures...we would expect that the candidates should be known to the electorate. So they should know whom they are voting for. So it has not really been possible for us to disseminate all the information. Again you have to see that in a democratic system, voting parties are important. Parties are a very important factor. Still, I think if people are empowered, we give them the right kind of information about the candidates and others, maybe it will help them to choose the candidates in the right—. [interruption, end of file 5, nothing on 6.]*

I think voter education is quite important, and dissemination of the information, like disclosure, we find it quite difficult, because how to reach—. You have like twenty days, fifteen days time. You collect the information. How do you reach people? In the country, you don't have television in rural areas. In cities you have lots of cable and newspapers. So people who are not literate, how do you reach them? There are a lot of difficulties. But I think we still try to, we should focus more on voter education, awareness, in the future. So this is a great challenge we need to take up as soon as possible.

CHAUBEY: And in the past what options did you consider for these previous elections, to reach people who are difficult to reach?

KABIR: *You mean on voting day?*

CHAUBEY: To provide education on the process.

KABIR: *Voter education has always been difficult. I believe it has always been so. Even for a candidate, it is not possible to reach all his voters. So for us, still we have to*

rely a great deal on mass media. We don't have many options. We try to use handbills, radio, TV. Most of these should be—and also, adversities. Election is an adversarial contest. We expect that some of it should be, and every candidate can take some of the issues himself as well. So providing, getting information and making it available to the persons who can use it, more important maybe.

CHAUBEY: If there is any other issue you'd like to bring up—.

KABIR: I think from the management side, the point that you have to take lots of small decisions very quickly. So this is, I think ultimately, now it seems that we have managed well, but many things could have gone wrong, especially the election materials, logistics, supplies. So many centers. Still, we are a homogenous country, I think. For us, many of the things are easy; maybe it will not be so for a country which is not geographically—the areas are distant. I think we have to bring a lot of change in the way we conduct elections in the future. So this is important.

At this time, all the parameters were right for election. We have a caretaker government. We don't do elections on that. The incumbency factor is not there at that time. So maybe for other countries, maybe procedures are more important. Also, I feel that we have to make some changes in the way we conduct elections in the future.

CHAUBEY: Okay, thank you so much for participating.