



*For Immediate Release:*

### **Borderless Democracy: Election for Tibetans in Exile Inspires and Offers Lessons for the Future**

**DHARAMSALA, 20 October** – The Asia Democracy Network (ADN), the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), and the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) wish to congratulate the Tibetan Community in Exile for turning out in large numbers to exercise their democratic right to select their leaders in a peaceful and orderly manner. These three network based organizations, ADN, FORUM-ASIA and ANFREL, believe that the preliminary Elections for Sikyong and Tibetan Parliament in Exile and the lessons learned from them will result in another important step towards consolidating democracy for the Tibetan Community.

Compared to the same point in the 2011 election cycle, the 2015 Preliminary Election saw members of the Tibetan diaspora engage more actively and deeply in the Electoral process, as evident in the more vigorous debate, discussion, and campaigning evident during the pre-election period and the long queues of voters patiently waiting their turn to vote during the 18<sup>th</sup> October Elections. The people's deeper engagement in the political process is a positive sign that should be embraced and encouraged before the 20 March 2016 Second Round of Elections.

We also greatly appreciate the efforts of the Election Commission(EC) of the Central Tibetan Administration working in a difficult environment to manage the preliminary round of the election. Given the stateless Diaspora's spread across the globe, the inclusive nature of the Election Commission's organizing voting for communities of Tibetans in smaller qualifying numbers than before is admirable and worthy of imitation by much larger and more established Election Commissions in other countries.

With the outcome still unknown and five months before the second round, we believe that this is a good time to reflect on the successes of the first round and take necessary steps to further strengthen the process in preparation for the 2<sup>nd</sup> round. By taking those necessary steps now to ensure the integrity of the primary's post-election period and by reforming some procedures before the 2<sup>nd</sup> round, we believe that the momentum coming out of the first round can be used to ensure an even more free and fair second round.

As is true for every election, the integrity, independence, and professionalism of the Election Commission is of paramount importance. To further consolidate the Election's and its own integrity, we hope that the Election Commission can take steps to improve and more uniformly enforce its Code of Conduct. It should, for example, seriously consider steps to level the playing field, especially as it concerns campaign finance, and to make announcements regarding the number of Sikyong candidates advancing to the 2<sup>nd</sup> round as soon as possible.

The EC's creation of campaign spending limits and finance reporting requirements for candidates seems to be a sincere attempt at greater fairness and transparency in the campaign. The implementation and enforcement of such rules is key however. In this case, the exemption of certain recognized groups from these spending limits damaged the credibility of the campaign finance rules and unnecessarily tilted the campaign playing field towards those candidates with backing from the outside recognized groups. To strengthen the fairness of the campaign finance rules and avoid accusations of partisanship, the Election Commission should either remove the exemption for certain groups or allow all independent, outside groups to campaign.

To be even more consistent with the inclusive nature of these elections, the team also believes that voting rights should be uncoupled from the requirement for a person to have paid their voluntary contribution to the CTA. While we appreciate the necessity of raising revenue, voting is a foundational right that should not be linked to a person's having paid their contributions. Hopefully, other incentives can be found to encourage the paying of the voluntary payment so that voters not making their payment are not discouraged from participating in the democratic process.

The Election Day environment in the limited number of areas observed by the team was calm and peaceful. Polling Station staff were generally professional and efficient. That said, in some areas, the unique openness of the preliminary round presented challenges to the smooth management of Election Day Voting. Due to the open nature of the Preliminary Round, the corresponding lack of names on the ballot, the requirement to fill four different pieces of information for each candidate, and the large number of MP candidates to select, voters were faced with a uniquely challenging and time consuming task to fill their ballots.

In some places, the difficult voting process led to lengthy queues. Many voters only voted for a few candidates rather than the full allotment of ten persons and some of those voting used their friends, family or their phones as reference materials to complete their task. While such group behavior is understandable and appeared to be welcomed by all involved, it is hoped that a system could be developed before the next preliminary elections that would simplify the process for voters, ensure the secrecy of the ballot, and speed up the voting process while allowing all voters to fully exercise their voting rights.

A simpler voting method in the preliminary round would also enable the Election Commission to finish counting and announce results sooner. As a general rule, results released soon after polling stations close earn greater public trust and provide less opportunities for fraud to take place. Along those lines, simplifying the voting could allow for polling station level counting and the proper, immediate destruction/invalidation of unused ballots. Such steps would, we believe, help to protect and safeguard the voting and counting processes before any serious problems arise.

To support the cause of Tibetan Electoral Democracy, our team will be releasing a brief report with additional findings and recommendations as we continue to follow the important Post-Election Period. During this vital time, it is important to see a transparent and fair counting and consolidation of Election results followed by, if necessary, timely, professional, and impartial Electoral Dispute Resolution.

The democratic example set on the 18<sup>th</sup> of October by Tibetans in Exile is a powerful one. The Tibetan diaspora's building of a borderless democracy is an inspiring parallel to the Tibetan community's broader struggle for freedom and justice. By taking necessary steps to strengthen their electoral process, Tibetans in Exile will deliver a more just system for their people and further strengthen the moral example they display to the world.

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