

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Friday, August 18, 2017

## **North Regional Consultation on Electoral and Political Reforms**

Conference Focusses on Electoral Malpractices, First Past the Post versus Other Representation Systems, Electoral Bonds and Election Expenditure of Political Parties  
*~Improving Electoral Integrity and tackling Electoral Malpractices~*

New Delhi - A North Regional Consultation on Electoral and Political Reforms was organized by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) at India International Centre (Annexe), New Delhi on 17<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 to review the first-past-the-post electoral system, curb electoral malpractices and explore new initiatives and to improve transparency and accountability in funding of elections and expenditure of political parties. The conference was inaugurated by Mr. O.P. Rawat, Election Commissioner of India.

Expert panelists and speakers from non-profit organizations, government bodies, political parties, media and academic communities participated in the consultation along with students, senior journalists, ex-bureaucrats and national election watch members from various states in northern India. The panelists delivered value-added discussions at this relevant consultation on electoral and political reforms.

Mr. O.P. Rawat, Election Commissioner talked about the need to strengthen the mechanism with regard to election management so as to curb electoral malpractices and bring a change in law to stringently punish the guilty in a time bound manner. He asserted that India's electoral integrity has been compromised due to lack of reforms in campaign finance, campaign media and voter registration. He said that the Election Commission of India has been focusing on improving these crucial areas. On the issue of 'paid news', Mr. Rawat said that abetting and publishing of paid news should be made an electoral offence and should be punishable by imprisonment of 2 years.

The EC expressed his apprehensions regarding 'electoral bonds' and the recent steps taken by the Government of India (GoI) by changing relevant provisions of the Income tax Act, the Representation of People's Act 1951 and the Companies Act 2013 and said that the implications can be retrograde as far as transparency is concerned. He underlined the need to inculcate attributes with regard to funding of political parties that will enhance their transparency and accountability aspects rather than making it more and more opaque.

Mr. Paranjay Guha Thakurta (Sr.Journalist, Political Commentator) stated that 'paid news' is the latest form of electoral malpractice. He suggested that the way forward to resolving this issue is to add disclosure with every paid news containing details of who paid for the news and what amount. Taking the discussion forward, Dr. Vipul Mudgal (Trustee - ADR/ NEW) pointed out that the main reason for electoral malpractices is the lack of regulation in functioning of political parties. Mr. Chandra Bhushan Kumar (CEO-Delhi) mentioned that replacing ballot papers with EVMs helped in tackling booth capturing. He highlighted ECI's practices of vulnerability mapping, shadow registers, and ECI's model code of conduct. He emphasized that the main issue these days is the misuse of money power in elections.

Speaking on the first-past-the-post system, Mr. G.R. Sufi (Former Chief Information Commissioner, J&K) said that India should gradually reform the system, however, it should be done carefully as the proportional

representation system may lead to mushrooming of countless political parties. Prof. Trilochan Sastry (Founder –Trustee, ADR/NEW) laid down some of the pros and cons of the major types of electoral systems prevalent throughout the world and suggested a few options which could be explored like increasing the seats in the parliament and multi-member constituencies to ensure better representation of the people.

Mr. Shahid Khan (Former Member – CBBT) stated that the Electoral Bonds introduced by the GoI may lead to contributions from shell companies as the changes made in the Companies Act allows any company to donate to political parties irrespective of whether they are making loss or profit. He also pointed out that since the Electoral Bonds keep the name of the donor anonymous, no record would be available with the ECI and the political parties would also be not required to maintain any such records, thus adding to the opaqueness regarding funding of political parties. Mr. Venkatesh Nayak (Programme Coordinator, CHRI) pointed out that the government in power may have access to who purchased high valued electoral bonds from banks and may misuse that information.

Prof Jagdeep Chhokar (Founder-Trustee - ADR/ NEW) said that the Electoral Bond scheme was guilty of being opaque as the Finance Minister had not taken the inputs from the citizens as they are one of the main stakeholders of the scheme. He said that ADR was planning to file a PIL against the new Finance Act, 2017 to declare Electoral Bonds as *ultra vires* of the Constitution.

Mr. Salman Soz (Spokesperson-INC) expressed his concerns on the increasing cost for contesting elections. He said that there should a forensic audit of paid news cases by the ECI and that all public meetings of the political parties be registered in a data base. Mr. P.K. Dash (Additional Secretary & Financial Advisor, Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change), suggested that similar to limits on a candidate's election expenditure, there should be a limit on the expenditure of political parties. Sruthisagar Yamunan (Writer-Scroll.in), pointed out that there is a strong nexus between political parties and companies and the parties have developed different ways to bribe voters and influence them to vote for their candidate.

Prof. Sastry gave the closing remarks and thanked the audience and the panelists for their thought provoking discussions and said that consultations like these validate the need for electoral and political reforms and is an essential requisite for a positive and productive path towards a better future.

For Additional Information please visit: [www.adrindia.org](http://www.adrindia.org)

### **Association for Democratic Reforms**

T-95, C.L. House, 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor,  
Near Gulmohar Commercial Complex  
Gautam Nagar,  
New Delhi-110 049  
Phone: +91-011-4165-4200  
Fax : +91-11-46094248  
Email : [adr@adrindia.org](mailto:adr@adrindia.org)