OAS Mission Commends High Turnout in Bolivia’s Constitutional
February 22, 2016

The Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States (OAS/EOM) in Bolivia, headed by former President of the Dominican Republic Leonel Fernández, congratulates the Bolivian people for the high turnout, civic spirit, and sense of democratic commitment they showed in the constitutional referendum held on Sunday, February 21.

While this is the sixth time the country has held a referendum, it is the first that a one-time reform to the constitution is being determined through an exercise of direct democracy. Given that alternation of power is an intrinsic part of democracy, it is understandable that the people be consulted on the possibility of deciding about a key aspect of the country’s institutional structure.

The OAS/EOM was composed of 63 international observers and specialists in electoral organization, the media, political analysis, and mechanisms of direct democracy, from 18 OAS member states and two observer states. Of the total members of the Mission, 61 international observers were present in Bolivia’s nine departments, where they visited 713 polling stations in 447 precincts; two observers, meanwhile, visited 24 polling stations in three voting precincts in the United States, in Virginia and Washington, D.C.

The OAS Mission confirmed that the polling stations it observed opened on time and that a high percentage of them had the necessary election materials for ballots to be cast. However, it took note of specific cases in which the materials were not delivered on time and polling stations opened with significant delays. In the opinion of the OAS/EOM, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) made an opportune decision in authorizing late-opening polling places to operate for a minimum of eight hours from the time they opened. The Mission regrets the acts of vandalism that led the voting process to be cancelled in 24 polling stations in the department of Santa Cruz; a special vote will be held in those places on March 6.
The Mission verified that the polling stations it observed were made up of the regular members and that there was a significant presence of delegates representing different alternatives, with equitable participation by men and women. The Mission was concerned to note the lack of national observers.

The OAS/EOM highlights the improvement in the TSE’s technical capacity and leadership. It recognizes that the TSE has worked to implement the recommendations the OAS has made in its various reports. During yesterday’s voting, the institution was able to efficiently resolve a complex situation, protecting citizens’ right to vote.

Based on its observations and the information it collected in meetings with electoral authorities, members of the government, and representatives of different alternatives and of civil society, the OAS/EOM presents the following preliminary observations and recommendations:

**Election Campaign**

In terms of the election campaign, the Mission observed that supporters of different alternatives were able to express themselves and have their arguments freely heard. However, the tone of the campaign was aggressive, and unequal access to the media was observed. In this regard, the Mission considers it important for the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to have the authority to establish time slots devoted to election advertising.

The OAS/EOM also took note of the nonexistence of direct public financing, which affects the fairness of the electoral contest. The Mission reiterates the recommendation it made in 2014, when it suggested discussing a law on political organizations that would address the issue of inclusive media access and campaign financing in order to improve the conditions of competition. Any reform along these lines should include the active participation of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal.

**Electoral Roll**

The Mission recognizes the progress made by the current electoral management body with regard to the electoral roll. For example, it notes that a system to identify changes of address and new voter registrations was designed; the infrastructure for continuing with the biometric roll was strengthened; and the cross-checking of databases that serve as sources for the electoral roll was begun. However, the Mission received repeated complaints concerning the updating of the electoral roll.
The Mission believes that the Bolivian electoral system would benefit considerably if the doubts concerning the voter lists were able to be cleared up. Therefore, it recommends a thorough and comprehensive audit of the electoral roll. The Mission also believes it is important for the competing forces to have access to the voter list prior to the elections.

**Electoral Organization**

The Mission observed a disparity in the quality of the organization of the electoral process in different departments in the country. The system is designed in such a way that leads to differences in processes that should be uniform and standardized throughout the country.

The Mission believes a review is important to create better coordination between the department-level electoral management bodies and the TSE.

**Consolidation and Release of Results**

The process of computing, transmitting, and releasing results was carried out in line with the procedures established by law. The Mission once again observed that results were released slowly due to the rules that are in place.

Taking that into account, the OAS/EOM suggests implementing legislative changes and applying the necessary programs so that—as is usually the case in other countries in the region—the electoral management body can release preliminary election results with a high degree of accuracy and avoid the process being questioned.

The recommendations presented aim to help improve structural aspects of the Bolivian electoral system. The Mission will delve more deeply into the abovementioned issues and recommendations in its report to the OAS Permanent Council.

Finally, the Mission would like to express its appreciation for the openness showed by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, the Departmental Electoral Tribunals, and the various political and social actors who participated in the contest. It also appreciates the financial contributions made by Canada, Korea, the United States, Spain, Italy, France, Luxembourg, and Turkey.