OAS Mission Congratulates Costa Rican Citizens for Successful Elections

The Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States (OAS/EOM) in Costa Rica congratulates the country’s citizens, political parties, and various government institutions for the orderly and successful participation seen in yesterday’s elections, a sign of the strength of Costa Rica’s democratic system.

The OAS/EOM also recognizes the effort carried out by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) throughout the various stages of this process. It particularly commends its coordination in terms of organization and electoral logistics, as well as the fast and reliable transmission of results in the context of a new process in which for the first time all the country’s local authorities were elected on the same day, halfway through the government’s term, giving priority to municipal issues.

The OAS/EOM deployed 21 observers and experts from 12 countries of origin to Costa Rica’s seven provinces. Throughout the day, the observation team was present at 152 voting centers. The observers confirmed that polling stations opened on time and had all the necessary materials to exercise the vote.

It is also important to recognize the presence of political party poll watchers and national observers at the polling stations the OAS/EOM observed. Their presence strengthens the transparency and reliability of the process.

The Mission highlights the TSE’s initiatives to inform citizens and encourage greater participation through systematic communication efforts, such as its “Informed Voting” program. The Mission also notes the measures designed to promote greater inclusion and accessibility for voters, such as the program to make voting booths accessible and the tools to facilitate voting by people with disabilities, such as visual handouts for the hearing-impaired and Braille ballots.

Based on its observations and the information it collected in its meetings with electoral authorities, members of the government, political parties, and civil society representatives, the Mission offers the following preliminary observations and recommendations:
Composition of Polling Stations

Although the presence of party poll watchers strengthens the transparency of the process, the OAS/EOM was able to observe a low presence of political party members acting as members of polling stations, which meant that their duties had to be done, to a great extent, by the “electoral assistants” established under the law. The Mission would like to recommend, as it has in previous reports, that Costa Rica consider implementing other types of measures to determine the composition of polling stations, such as incorporating some sort of citizen position under the direction of the TSE, one that could strengthen the electoral management body’s responsibilities as they relate to the composition of polling stations and the training of their members.

Political-Electoral Funding and the Strengthening of Political Parties

The Mission noted the importance of having public funding available in this election. It also received complaints from different political parties regarding the difficulty of not having public funding in advance for their campaigns. The OAS/EOM reiterates its recommendation that, in order to ensure a fairer electoral contest, the following measures be considered: in the area of public financing, the possibility of establishing regulations for an upfront contribution of public funds allocated to political parties for municipal elections; and in the area of private funding, establishing campaign spending limits, in keeping with the positions up for election in each race.

These measures will help to strengthen the political party system and vitalize information campaigns and get-out-the-vote efforts. Likewise, the Mission believes that the political parties should do more to implement training activities, so as to develop new leadership within the party structure; this could encourage and promote more turnover in municipal offices. A review of the indefinite reelection of mayors could also contribute to this goal. While continuity in public policy is important, alternation of power is a sign of democratic strength.

Access to the Media

A number of political parties told the Mission that they felt at a disadvantage due to the inequitable access of their campaigns to the media. Since there is no law in place to promote greater control in terms of opportunity for media access, the OAS/EOM reiterates its recommendation to consider, along with the proposed electoral reforms presented by the TSE, the possibility of indirect public funding through free radio and TV election advertising slots. This would give political parties equitable access to the media based on the percentages of citizen support and representation established under the regulations.
Electoral Turnout

The Mission observed that although a higher percentage of citizens participated in this election compared with the previous election, the abstention rate continues to be a challenge for municipal elections in Costa Rica. This is a challenge which should bring together all segments of Costa Rican society, especially its political parties and leaders. Strengthening civic awareness and citizen participation is a high-priority task for democracy in the country.

Participation of Women

The Mission was concerned to observe the low participation of female candidates in these elections; fewer than 20 percent of mayoral candidates were women. While the 2009 reforms instituted the principles of parity and alternation, these reforms have not met the objective of increasing women’s participation in positions of more responsibility. In order to ensure greater access by women to popularly elected posts, the Mission recommends the application in future elections of horizontal parity, along with vertical parity, and alternation by sex of candidates at the tops of the lists, as well as the application of policies on gender equality and equity within political party structures. The OAS/EOM stresses that women had a significant presence as members of polling stations and as poll watchers on the day of the elections.

Finally, the Mission would like to highlight the professionalism of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal in the organization of this election, the progress made in the promotion of informed voting, and the respect for the secrecy of the ballot and for the people’s will. The Mission also appreciates the openness and spirit of collaboration with which it was received, both by the electoral authorities and by the various institutions that were part of the process.

The Mission’s final observations and conclusions will be compiled in a report that will be presented in the near future to the Organization’s Permanent Council in Washington, D.C. This report will be public and will be shared with the electoral management bodies, political actors, and citizens in the host country.

The Mission thanks the government of Costa Rica for its support and its openness in enabling the Mission to carry out its tasks without restrictions. It also thanks the governments of Bolivia, Korea, and the United States for their financial contributions, which made the deployment of this Mission possible.