

OAS Mission in Colombia finds tranquility and increased voter turnout

The Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States (EOM/OAS) deployed in Colombia underscores the climate of tranquility surrounding the first presidential elections held after the signing of the peace agreements. The Mission congratulates the Colombian people and welcomes the considerable increase in voter turnout, estimated at 53.38% of registered voters, the highest figure in the country's recent history. It also welcomed the clearly pluralistic nature of the election, which offered citizens a diversity of choices from the whole political spectrum.

The Mission, headed by Costa Rican former Vice President Kevin Casas, deployed 79 experts and observers in 25 departments of Colombia and the Capital District. The team was installed in the country on May 15 with the arrival of experts in electoral organization and technology, who did a substantive analysis of the administration of the elections and the computer systems used in the various stages of the process. The expert group was completed with the arrival of specialists in electoral justice and campaign finance.

During its stay in the country, the EOM/OAS met with the various candidates, political and electoral authorities, and security forces, among others, to learn at first hand their impressions of and concerns about the presidential elections. The Mission appreciates the openness and confidence that it received from all parties involved in the process.

The Mission observed a high level of tension during the campaign, which in some cases led to verbal and physical confrontations between supporters of the different candidates, and in threats against some of the aspirants. In addition, the Mission observed defamation campaigns and false news on the social media networks. In this context the EOM/OAS recognizes the calls for restraint of the various presidential candidacies, an aspect that was reflected in the many debates that were held. For the runoff election, the Mission makes a respectful plea to the candidates, political parties, the media, and the general public for a campaign that focuses on the discussion of proposals and is based on respect for other opinions.

During the months prior to the election, many opinion polls were published, which as required by law, explained their methodology. However, there was also release of projection models that were methodologically opaque and lacking scientific validity, which were used as tools to distort voters' intentions. The EOM appeals for the responsible publication of opinion polls, and especially avoiding release of electoral projections that can be used for voter manipulation.

In the final part of the campaign, there were increasing questions as to the electoral organization for possible vulnerabilities in the computer systems, and for the opacity in the mechanisms for nomination and selection of the voting judges. To respond to these concerns, the Mission was reinforced with additional technical personnel, especially computer experts. Similarly, the EOM welcomed the convocation by the President of the Republic, Dr. Juan Manuel Santos, of a special meeting of the National Commission for Coordination and Monitoring of Elections, which was held on Wednesday, May 23. The Mission was invited to participate in this meeting, in which election officials reported on steps taken to provide more guarantees in the elections. For the runoff, it is important to continue this practice so that the election institutions and campaign teams can maintain open communication to promote transparency and confidence in the election.

The Mission observed that, as in previous elections, some images of voting tallies from voting abroad were released to the media and social networks. In order to suggest substantive improvements in the voting and counting procedure abroad, the Mission will be accrediting observers at polling places outside Colombia in the second round.

On election day OAS observers visited 1,374 polling stations in 428 voting centers to observe the progress of the election, from the opening of the polling stations to the counting and transmission of results. They were also present in the counting committees, the Ministry of Interior Unified Command Post, and the Center for Consolidation and Dissemination at the national level.

Before the elections, and on election day, 140 polling stations had to be moved for weather reasons. No polling station in all of Colombia was moved for security concerns, a fact that merits special recognition. All of the polling stations observed by the OAS opened on time and had all the necessary materials for the voting. The EOM emphasizes that most of the voting judges were women. Once again it noted that the design of the screens and their location in some polling stations did not guarantee secrecy in voting.

The Mission noted that despite the increase in the number of witnesses registered in comparison with the 2014 presidential election, they had limited presence at the polling stations observed. Taking into account that monitoring by the parties at the polling stations is the first line of defense for the integrity of the vote, Colombia's election would benefit from a greater presence of witnesses at the polling stations, and other stages of the electoral process. The EOM encourages candidates who continue in the race to intensify their efforts to register sufficient witnesses in time for the runoff on June 17.

The Mission observed the high presence of armed forces at the polling stations visited and recognizes their important work, which contributed to the absence of violence on election day. With respect to offenses and illegal activities on election day, the Mission observed vote buying in Bogotá, Antioquia, Bolívar, Atlántico, and Norte de Santander, a practice previously seen by the OAS in Colombia. In addition, there was transfer of voters and campaigning outside some polling stations.

At the close of the polling stations, the Mission observed that the vote count was done in accordance with the established procedures, and that in the vast majority of the cases the witnesses could take a picture of the E-14 tally sheets. As is customary in Colombia, a few minutes after the polls closed information from the preliminary count began to be released.

Before 5:30 p.m. more than 99% of the preliminary results were released, and the various candidates respectfully honored them. As part of the observation, the Mission verified that the information received by the observers throughout the day coincided with that released by the electoral authorities.

Given that the presidential electoral process is not yet over, the Mission will await the holding of the runoff to present a consolidated report that will include observations and recommendations for electoral organization and technology, campaign finance, electoral justice, political participation of women, and other aspects.

The Mission gratefully acknowledges the cooperation of the National Registry of Civil Status and the National Electoral Council (CNE), which gave the Mission all information and necessary access to carry out its work.

Finally, the EOM/OAS appreciates the generous contributions of Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Korea, Mexico, Norway, Peru, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States, which permitted the deployment of 79 observers and electoral experts in Colombia.