

Press Release



Organization of
American States

Department of Press | 17th & Constitution Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20006 | Ph. [202] 458-3379 | Fax. [202] 458-6421 | www.oas.org

Belize City, Wednesday 7th of March 2012

Preliminary Statement

As part of its first ever Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) to Belize, the Organization of American States (OAS) fielded a team of 22 members from 13 countries to observe the March 7, 2012 General and Municipal Elections. On Election Day, observers were present in all six districts, visiting over 85% of the nation's polling areas.

The following preliminary observations are based on the direct observations of the OAS team, as well as meetings with electoral authorities, government officials, political parties, representatives of civil society organizations and the media.

Observations:

First of all, the mission wishes to congratulate the people of Belize for the peaceful exercise of their franchise during this electoral process, in what was a historically competitive and close election. The ability of Belizean political parties to incorporate all of the nation's diverse population should be commended as an exemplary practice for the region.

The mission also applauds the dedication and professionalism of the more than 3,000 polling officials that administered two simultaneous elections and ensured a smooth process throughout polling day.

Pre-electoral period

The OAS mission observed the significant preparations made by the Elections and Boundaries Commission and the Election and Boundaries Department. On the whole, this produced a clean and inclusive process. The mission would particularly like to emphasize efforts to provide voters with timely information through its website, which was periodically updated in the days before the election.

The OAS mission was pleased to observe the strong presence of women in the political process: at high levels of electoral administration, as senators and as secretaries general of political parties. Nonetheless, the mission noted with concern the extremely low numbers of female candidacies in both electoral processes. Only three out of the 74 candidates for the general election were women, a mere 4%.

During the pre-electoral period, the mission heard concerns with regards to the voters list, stemming from the extension of the registration period and alleged irregularities in the registration of newly naturalized citizens. The campaign period was also characterized by a perception of limited differentiation between the state and the governing party in terms of resources. The issue of campaign finance and other concerns surrounding the campaign process will be addressed in further detail in the mission's verbal report to the OAS Permanent Council.

Election day procedures

On Election Day, observers reported that 100% of observed polls opened on time at 7:00 am, that all were equipped with the necessary electoral materials and that the vast majority of polling stations were suitable for the purpose. Observers noted that polling officials were knowledgeable and well trained and worked diligently to orient voters and ensure an efficient voting process. The Mission would like to emphasize that women represented more than half of returning officers, polling clerks, counting clerks and party agents.

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The OAS mission observed that political parties were actively engaged with the electorate, orienting voters and educating them about voting procedures. Agents from the two major parties maintained a presence at all of the polling stations observed by the mission. Nonetheless, the active role played by party activists, who congregated in significant numbers outside of many voting centers, produced a less than conducive environment for the voting process. The electoral propaganda observed in the vicinity of polling stations and the prevalence of t-shirts bearing candidate names and symbols could be construed as electioneering. At one polling station, an OAS observer witnessed a party activist distributing money immediately outside of the polling center to a group of people after they had voted.

Tabulation and processing of results

After the close of the polls, ballot boxes were transported to centralized counting offices, where results were tabulated and then relayed to the Elections and Boundaries Department. The incorporation of new procedures to have large polling areas serve as counting stations and to simultaneously count multiple ballot boxes led to a more efficient counting process and prevented excessive delays. However, the counting process still went late into the night. Official results had not yet been disseminated by midnight on Election Day.

Recommendations:

Based on the information gathered by the OAS Electoral Observation Mission during its time in Belize, the mission would like to offer the following recommendations to further strengthen the Belizean electoral process:

1) *The promotion of female participation throughout the electoral process*

The OAS electoral observation mission recommends that efforts be made by both political parties and the government to promote the participation of women in electoral competition. In particular, the mission recommends the development of legal mechanisms to ensure women are incorporated on the ballot and the promotion of training programs for female political leaders. In this light, the fact that a woman was elected to parliament represents a positive step.

2) *The Enactment of Campaign Finance Regulations*

The Mission notes that political financing is unregulated in Belize. The current framework places no limits on campaign spending and does not require disclosure of campaign contributions or expenditures. In order to allow voters to make a more informed decision and to ensure more equity in electoral competition, the OAS recommends the development of campaign finance legislation that addresses these gaps.

3) *Reduction of Electioneering in and around Polling Stations*

The Mission recommends that the government and political parties take positive steps towards reducing the role and influence of party activists at voting centers, through more uniform enforcement of the 100 yard boundary around polling stations and through the enactment of stronger mechanisms to protect the ability of voters to vote without outside pressure or fear of reprisal as they exercise their voting rights.

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A more detailed verbal report on the observations and recommendations of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission will be presented to the OAS Permanent Council in Washington D.C. within the coming weeks. This report will be shared with all stakeholders in Belize and will be available through the OAS website at www.oas.org.

The OAS mission wishes to express its thanks to the Government of Belize for the invitation to observe this process and for the Belizean people for the warm welcome in which we were received throughout the country. In addition, the mission thanks the governments of Bolivia, Chile, Mexico, Switzerland, the United States and the United Kingdom for their contributions that made this mission possible.