

## **Preliminary Statement on Nevis Island Local Assembly Election Day**

July 13, 2011

Following an invitation by the Federal authorities in St. Kitts and Nevis, the Organization of American States (OAS) deployed an Electoral Observation Mission of five experts and observers from three Member States for Nevis Island Assembly elections. This was the first time that the OAS observed a local election in the Caribbean, and the second deployment of an electoral observation mission in St. Kitts and Nevis, the first being the 2010 General Elections.

On Election Day, the OAS international observers were deployed in all five constituencies and visited all of the polling sites. Once the polls were closed, they observed the collection and counting of the ballots.

### **Observations**

The Mission wishes to congratulate the people of Nevis for their high turnout and peaceful exercise of their right to vote during this election. Likewise, the Mission notes with satisfaction the dedication and commitment of the poll workers to ensure a smooth process during election day, and the improved distribution of voters through polling stations in accordance with the OAS observations made in 2010.

### **Voter Registration**

During its meetings with different political parties, the observers collected complaints regarding the preparation of the voter registry, and the Mission's legal expert observed the related cases presented before the High Court. The Mission noted that the procedures for objections and claims leading to the addition and removal of names and the dissemination of updated lists caused controversy. In this regard, observers confirmed that in some cases, notifications to voters whose names had been objected to were delivered after the scheduled hearing date, and that the procedure for investigation and resolution of objections lacked proper definition and transparency. In addition, the Mission also noted concerns related to the decision making process between the various levels of the electoral institutions regarding this matter.

On election day, the observers detected that a modified voter registration list had been produced for several districts on July 9th, while other districts maintained lists published on June 29th and July 1st. The Mission confirmed that voter names had been both added and subtracted to form the updated lists, thereby altering the eligibility for voting in certain areas two days prior to the election. This situation contributed to the atmosphere of confusion about and mistrust of the voter registration list that was observed during the process.

### **Election Day operations**

The Mission noted that almost all polling stations opened on time, all necessary

materials were present, and the poll workers and party agents were present and committed to carrying out their role in the process. The police were observed successfully ensuring that voters could exercise their right in a peaceful and orderly manner.

Nevertheless, the detailed explanations given to voters and lack of efficient procedures contributed to significant wait times for voters, with some individuals waiting in line for over two hours to cast their vote.

The Mission considers it important to take note of the significant gender imbalance in roles related to the electoral process: while women were highly involved in the lower levels of the process, serving as 83% of the poll workers and 90% of party agents, only one female candidate, out of ten, was presented to voters.

## **Recommendations**

With the goal of strengthening the Nevisian electoral process, and given that the observers did not note any significant changes since the 2010 General Elections in Saint Kitts and Nevis regarding the electoral system or its procedures, the Mission reiterates all recommendations from its previous report and highlights the following issues from the observations of the Nevis Island Local Assembly elections:

### **1. Improving and clarifying procedures for the conformation of the voter registration list.**

Similar to the issues observed by the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in 2010, the accuracy of the voter registration list was contested by various political actors. Specifically, disputes arose regarding the residency of voters, the objections, claims and hearing procedures, and the public dissemination of the revised lists. In this regard, the Mission reiterates its 2010 recommendation to “conduct a house-to-house verification process before the next election and a claims and objections period in which the voters list is properly adjusted to reflect the current reality of voter numbers and residency.” Moreover, in light of the recent controversy resulting from the weaknesses of the procedure of objections and claims, the Mission recommends a serious review of the notification timeframe and determination of mechanisms that guarantee equity and due process for both objectors and objectees regarding registration claims.

### **2. Revision and update of the electoral legal framework.**

While the OAS Mission observed that an important effort was conducted to improve the legal framework in 2007-2008, the complexity of the amendments and lack of mechanisms for definition of procedural and administrative modifications has created a cumbersome and complex instrument. Therefore, the Mission recommends a general review of the legal framework to consolidate and clarify the electoral regulations, including further definition of the legal criteria for residency at the local and federal

levels and the registration process. In addition, the inclusion of a mechanism for electoral authorities to establish clear procedures at the administrative level would allow for the improvement of issues such as closing procedures at the polling station without recourse to subsequent legal reform.

### **3. Increased stakeholder engagement in the electoral process.**

The Mission stresses the fundamental role played by political parties in the St. Kitts and Nevis electoral structure. Engaged dialogue and coordination by the political stakeholders are key to ensuring an equitable and credible electoral competition, as well as the legitimacy of results. The Mission reiterates its 2010 recommendation to develop “a cross-party accord on political financing that would promote transparency and accountability both in St. Kitts and Nevis,” as well as on questions of the implications of Diaspora voting, the establishment of mechanisms to promote female candidacies, and the criteria for legal residency and voter registration. The incorporation of civil society groups in these discussions would further contribute to the definition of equitable and legitimate electoral procedures and processes.

### **4. Enhanced voter information campaign.**

In order to promote transparency, instill voter confidence in the process, and reduce the amount of confusion surrounding electoral procedures, the OAS Mission recommends a voter information campaign be developed for all stages of the electoral cycle. Specifically, the Mission recommends that the electoral authorities publish a manual regarding the specific procedures, calendar, and responsibilities of all stakeholders, increased coordination with local media to ensure the accuracy of information provided to the public, and a general public sensitization campaign regarding the intricacies of the electoral calendar and procedures.

In conclusion, the Mission recognizes the adherence to established due process for the resolution of challenges in the pre-electoral phase, and calls on all parties to continue to air their claims and objections through the appropriate channels to further strengthen confidence in the Nevisian democratic processes.