



Organization of
American States

REPORT TO THE PERMANENT COUNCIL
Electoral Observation Mission
Plurinational State of Bolivia
Sub-national Elections, March 29, 2015

Background

The Supreme Electoral Court of the Plurinational State of Bolivia (TSE) sent a formal invitation to the Organization of American States on December 16, 2014 to deploy an Electoral Observation Mission to the country for the election of departmental, regional, and municipal political authorities. The Secretary General accepted the invitation and appointed Former President of the Republic of Guatemala, Mr. Alvaro Colom Caballeros, as the Chief of Mission.

The OAS has been part of the democratic process in the Plurinational State of Bolivia since 1966 through its Electoral Observation Mission, observing a total of 16 electoral processes, including: seven (7) general elections, four (4) local elections, four (4) referendums, and one (1) election of the highest authorities of the judiciary and the constitutional court.

With the signing of the agreement for the observation procedures in the third week of March, the OAS Electoral Observation Mission (OAS/EOM) began its work in Bolivia. The Chief of Mission held meetings with electoral and government officials, candidates, members of the various political parties, civil society representatives, as well as the international community accredited in order to gather direct information on the organization of the elections, to dialogue with the main candidates, and to observe the progress of the electoral campaign.

The OAS/EOM was comprised of 15 international observers from nine member states. They were deployed to seven departments throughout Bolivia (La Paz, Cochabamba, Chuquisaca, Beni, Pando, Santa Cruz, and Tarija) to observe how the elections were run.

Election Day

On March 29, 2015, more than six million Bolivian citizens were registered in the voter registry to elect nine governors and another 4,987 positions subject to popular vote, including deputy governors and assembly members at various levels of government.

Election Day was peaceful, with a high voter turnout. This demonstrated the people's great civic commitment as they turned out in overwhelming numbers to perform their duty to vote, despite the limited vehicular traffic permitted on Election Day.

The OAS/EOM underscores that there were diverse political options on the ballot on Election Day, which resulted in a change of party control in several of the country's departments. This is a sign of the force and strength of the country's political system, affording a balance of power indicative of a healthy democracy.

On Election Day, the Mission observed confusion among voters as to how to vote for their candidate of choice, as a result of disqualifications and replacements up until the day before the election. Furthermore, some polling centers did not have electoral notaries, which exacerbated citizens' lack of information.

The Mission observed specific instances in which voters, who said they had voted at a certain voting precinct in the last elections, were listed as disqualified or were not on the voter list. In terms of the polling station conditions, the Mission noted that some did not guarantee proper facilities for accessibility for persons with disabilities.

The process for counting, transmitting, and reporting the results was carried out in keeping with legislation. Although the Mission did note the slow delivery of the results, it highlights improvements over the previous electoral process held just months prior to these sub-national elections. The delay in delivering the results was due to a slow tallying process at the voting tables and lacking logistics for transporting the records from the polling station to the departmental counting center. As such, an accurate tally of the results was again not available on election night.

It bears noting that, as part of these elections, there was a run-off election for the governors of Tarija and Beni on May 3, 2015, given that, according to the outcome of the election in these regions, no party obtained an absolute majority or a lead of more than 10% over the next closest contender. Due to funding limitations, the Mission could not be present for this runoff election.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The OAS/EOM congratulates the country on the maturity that the Bolivian people overwhelmingly showed on Election Day and expresses its satisfaction with the process.

The Mission underscores the participation of foreign citizens residing in Bolivia who were able to vote in municipal elections, once they met the legal requirements, as a policy

for political inclusion. The plurality expressed at the polls is another measurement indicating the strengthening of democracy in the country.

Although the presence of notaries at polling stations still needs to be improved, the OAS/EOM recognizes the efforts of the Supreme Electoral Court (TSE) to increase the number of electoral notaries that are onsite at polling stations, as well as to strengthen training strategies for electoral juries, in compliance with one of the recommendations set out in by the OAS Electoral Observation Mission during the 2014 elections.

With a view to continuing to strengthen electoral institutions, the OAS/EOM submits the following recommendations to Bolivian authorities based on its observations made in the Plurinational State of Bolivia:

Voter Registration

There were again complaints from citizens on Election Day that they could not cast their vote, creating discontent regarding the voter lists. In this regard, it is vital for the TSE to study the OAS report submitted on modifying the processes and mechanisms for updating and purging voter lists, in order to enhance the system's credibility and transparency.

Organization of the Elections

Compliance with the actions prescribed in the calendar for transporting election material was verified. However, the Mission noted confusion and lack of the necessary oversight during the delivery of the materials to electoral notaries. The Mission, therefore, reiterates the importance of having security and custody plans in place to ensure the diligent, constant surveillance of the material throughout the entire electoral process.

Electoral Training

Despite the TSE's efforts to improve electoral training, the Mission observed that the electoral juries at the polling stations were unaware of certain rules and procedures governing the opening, voting, and counting processes, thereby creating problems and delays in the tallying process. Moreover, some polling stations did not have electoral notaries to immediately address and solve citizen concerns. As has been mentioned during previous observation missions, the training system must be bolstered to ensure that it extends to all those holding responsibilities on Election Day and to continue progressively increasing the number of electoral notaries so that each voting precinct has an assigned official.

Transmission of the Results

Despite the TSE's significant efforts and the marked improvement since the 2014 election, the Mission verified that, due to how slowly the voting records were received at the departmental counting centers, the tallying and transmission process was suspended nationally. The OAS/EOM stresses the need to identify and address these types of structural, logistical, or organizational challenges that may come up in future elections. The Mission recommends analyzing the shortcomings presented in this section to improve the speed and transparency of the systems for counting, transmission, processing, and reporting the results.

The Mission observed the lack of common standards in the process for transmitting election results, as well as some variation in resources among the Departmental Electoral Courts and the Plurinational Electoral Body (OEP). To narrow this gap between the national authority and departmental authorities, the OAS/EOM submits to the TSE for its consideration the introduction of a formal policy laying out a specific documentation program for counting systems and establishing a single action plan with a technical calendar for rolling out the IT system.

Finally, the Mission reiterates its October 2014 recommendation in reference to the TSE implementing an official rapid-tally system, in order to prevent citizens from informing themselves with extra-official exit poll results.

Electoral Justice

The OAS/EOM heard complaints from various actors regarding the TSE acting as judge and jury in the electoral process it was organizing. Furthermore, the Mission noted that, in the post-election phase, this overstep of duties so weakened this electoral authority that several officials from the country's highest electoral court resigned.

The Mission believes that the post-electoral period poses the perfect opportunity for analyzing important reforms. This phase is ideal for opening a broad internal debate that is not limited to proffering candidates to fill the post vacancies, but also addresses the electoral institutional framework model that should be implemented before the next general elections in 2019. The OAS/EOM suggests defining the powers of the OEP and considering the possibility of dividing the administrative and jurisdictional responsibilities among independent institutions to avoid an excessive portfolio of duties.

In order to prevent a repeat of candidate uncertainty about whether or not they would be able to run for election until the day before, as well as voter confusion at the polls, given that the candidates printed on the ballots did not match the actual voting options, the Mission proposes amending the timeline for disqualifying or replacing

candidates to ensure that these matters are resolved prior to the editing and printing of the voter ballots.

This situation was brought to light in Beni, where – in the absence of an electoral law – the legal standing of an alliance putting forth 228 candidates for various positions throughout the department was withdrawn eight days before the election. The Mission noted that this situation created confusion among the electorate because the candidates were not removed from the ballot. This resulted in a significant number of null votes.

Acknowledgements

The Mission of the Electoral Observation Mission of the Organization of American States wishes to thank government authorities of the Plurinational State of Bolivia for ensuring that the OAS/EOM could properly carry out its work during the entire electoral process. It would also like to congratulate the Supreme Electoral Court for its great commitment to the timely delivery of all required information and to facilitating the carrying out of observation activities.

The Mission also thanks the United States and France for their financial contribution, which made it possible to conduct the Electoral Observation Mission in the Plurinational State of Bolivia.