



Organization of
American States

**REPORT TO THE PERMANENT COUNCIL
Electoral Observation Mission (EOM)^{1/}
Republic of Colombia
Election of Local Authorities — October 25, 2015**

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Background

On June 3, 2015, the OAS received an invitation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to deploy an Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) for the election of local authorities to take place in Colombia on October 25. The Secretary General of the OAS, Luis Almagro, accepted the invitation on June 22 and appointed Álvaro Colom, former president of Guatemala, to serve as Chief of the EOM.

The OAS has deployed Electoral Observation Missions for 13 electoral processes in the Republic of Colombia, including the EOM of October 2015, which makes it one of the countries that has benefited the most from the Organization's observation efforts and one of the most open to international scrutiny of its elections. Most recently, the OAS observed the election of local authorities in October 2011 and the legislative and presidential elections of 2014.

The electoral process that the OAS observed on this occasion took place at the same time as the ongoing peace process negotiations between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Those negotiations influenced the dynamics of the electoral process, given that if a peace accord were to be signed in the near future, the local authorities elected on October 25, 2015, could potentially be responsible for implementing, at the departmental and municipal levels, an important portion of the agreements reached.

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1. In Spanish, the OAS's Electoral Observation Missions to Colombia are styled *Misiones de Veeduría Electoral* (EVM), due to the existence in Colombia of the *Misión de Observación Electoral* (MOE), a platform of civil society organizations that promotes the citizens' right to participate in the establishment, exercise, and oversight of political power.

However, the OAS/EOM found that the peace process was not a central topic in the electoral campaign. The campaign priorities of candidates and citizens alike were education, road improvements, health care, and citizen security, along with other analogous needs at the local level.

Pre-election Phase

The OAS Mission began its field work in the fourth week of September, when the office of the Mission Chief made its preliminary visit to Colombia. During that visit, meetings were held with electoral authorities and government officials, political parties, and civil society organizations. The purpose of those meetings was to gather information on the organization of the electoral process, to observe the prevailing climate of the campaigns, and to learn about the concerns of the main political players.

During the preliminary visit, the heads of the OAS/EOM attended the National Commission for Electoral Follow-up, led by the Ministry of the Interior of Colombia. The OAS Mission was able to appreciate the value of that Commission as a forum for interinstitutional coordination among public authorities, political parties, and civil society organizations, and it acknowledged the commitment of Colombia's institutions as a whole toward guaranteeing transparent and safe elections. In light of that successful experience, it would be useful to assess the possibility of having the Commission operate permanently as a forum for dialogue and consensus-building regarding reforms and proposals for the continuing improvement of the Colombian electoral system.

Subsequently, the OAS/EOM deployed a team of 40 international observers — 18 women and 22 men, representing 19 different nationalities — in 22 of the Republic of Colombia's departments to conduct observations on the day of the election. The OAS observers visited 115 municipalities in the week leading up to the election, where they held meetings with local public officials, political parties, and social organizations.

Election Day

On October 25, 2015, slightly under 34 million Colombian citizens were called on to elect governors, mayors, deputies, councilors, and members of local administration boards, who are the elected officials responsible for the nation's municipalities and for its 32 departments and the Bogotá Capital District.

On election day, the OAS's international observers were present in 214 voting centers in 22 of Colombia's departments. The OAS mission observed that the voting centers opened on time, were equipped with the materials needed for their tasks, and for the most part were established by the primary polling station committee members.

Worthy of note was the broad participation by party inspectors and domestic observers at the polling stations that the OAS observed. The Mission believes that greater observation by local players strengthens the transparency and reliability of the process. The majority participation of women as station chiefs, inspectors, and domestic observers warrants a particular acknowledgment.

The OAS Mission observed the implementation and operation of the 2015 Democracy Plan: an effort coordinated by the Ministry of Defense through the National Police with the aim of building ties among the Colombian security forces in order to create the necessary security

conditions and ensure that the elections throughout the nation's territory unfolded without disturbances. Nevertheless, the OAS/EOM learned of a number of isolated incidents involving violence on election day in the departments of Bolívar, Huila, and Chocó; these included hindering the installation of voting centers, the destruction of electoral materials, and attacks by hooded individuals on public thoroughfares.

As regards security concerns, the OAS/EOM highlights the reaction of the law enforcement agencies, which brought those isolated outbreaks of violence under control, ensured that in general matters proceeded calmly, detained a large number of people for alleged electoral crimes, and seized funds and other materials related to those possible offenses. The OAS Mission acknowledges the effective and timely work of the security forces who, through the 2015 Democracy Plan, made a significant contribution to reducing electoral violence, making this one of the most peaceful local authority elections of recent years; at the same time, however, it urges the competent authorities to ensure that the outbreaks of violence that occurred on election day do not go unpunished.

As voting concluded, the OAS Mission once again observed the swiftness of the system for communicating preliminary results, and it congratulates the National Civil Registry for its diligence and professionalism. This is an area where the Civil Registry could cooperate with other countries in the region, by exporting the Colombian system and adapting it to other national contexts in order to improve the reporting of preliminary results in the hemisphere.

Post-election Phase

The OAS Mission noted the increased importance of coalitions in the 2015 local authority elections. Coalitions are electoral alliances between two or more political parties that present a single candidate for an elected office. Whereas in the 2011 elections only two governorships were won by coalitions, in 2015 the figure rose to 17.

Two trends define the electoral results: the repositioning of the governing party in the governorships, and the diversification of mayoral winners in departmental capitals. On the one hand, the parties of the ruling National Unity (Party of the U, Colombian Liberal Party, Radical Change, and Citizen Option) won 28 of the 32 departmental governorships, either standing alone or in coalitions with other parties; in contrast, the best result among the opposition parties was obtained by the Democratic Center, which secured two gubernatorial victories. At the same time, the political map of the departmental capitals' mayorships underwent diversification: the Liberal Party won the most capital cities' mayoral races, with nine victories; it was followed by Radical Change with seven, the Center Democratic Party with five, the Party of the U with four, the Conservative Party with two, and Citizen Option with one.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Electoral Organization

The OAS Mission noted the efforts made by the electoral institutions to provide the members of polling station committees with adequate training. That training used a differentiated and targeted strategy that placed priority on on-site and on-line teaching methods. In spite of those efforts, the National Civil Registry's information system indicated that 48 hours prior to election day, training had been given to only 56% of the total number of polling station committee members.

The OAS/EOM urges the competent authorities to pursue the efforts needed to expand the coverage of training and information among all the electoral process's key players, in particular the members of polling station committees.

As in other elections in Colombia that the OAS has observed, the Mission noted that some polling centers and stations were not equipped to guarantee voting secrecy. The OAS Mission again repeats the recommendations it has made previously calling on Colombia to improve the positioning of screens at its voting centers, in order to ensure greater privacy for voters as they cast their ballots.

Citizen Participation

The average turnout rose slightly from 57.09% in the 2011 local authority election to 58.69% in 2015; however, the percentage of people who do not vote remains high. As noted in the OAS's reports from 2014, this is a complex challenge that must be addressed in a comprehensive fashion, and that task must involve all sectors of Colombian society and, most particularly, its parties and political leaders. The OAS/EOM recommends encouraging citizen participation through programs and campaigns to strengthen public awareness, and it calls for the start of a debate to identify and address the underlying causes of electoral abstentionism within Colombian society.

District-hopping and Vote-buying

District-hopping and vote-buying were the most common issues in the local authority elections. Those two practices, which have also been detected in previous electoral processes, distort the popular will as expressed at the ballot box and undermine democratic strengthening. District-hopping is apparently related to vote-buying, since it is assumed that people re-register their national identity cards in places where they are not residents in order to sell their votes in those other municipalities.

The National Electoral Council (CNE) adopted *ex officio* a procedure for identifying the suspected irregular registration of identity cards, in order to combat district-hopping and vote-buying. The procedure involved crossreferencing ID cards registered in other municipalities with the information held in databases belonging to public institutions, in order either to corroborate the information declared or to identify irregularities. When irregularities were detected, the CNE canceled the re-registrations and the voters were required to cast their ballots at the locations where they had registered originally.

The OAS Mission believes that the measures adopted by the CNE to combat these two scourges are an attempt to respond to a historical problem and to an imperfection in the electoral system. However, although it acknowledges the CNE's positive intentions and the efforts made, it also believes that the timing of the procedure and the way in which it was implemented could have affected people who were not seeking to jump from one district to another or to sell their votes.

The OAS Mission recommends creating a system for the permanent monitoring of the electoral roll and improving the mechanisms whereby voter registrations are verified. It also believes it would be useful to examine the electoral calendar, to ensure that the electoral roll is prepared and ready sufficiently in advance of the elections. The electoral organization model — and, in particular the structure of the CNE — must therefore be reviewed in order to equip the responsible authorities with the independence, powers, and resources needed to strengthen their

work. The improvement of the Colombian electoral system should be in line with the needs and challenges of the country's peace process.

The OAS Mission also acknowledges the efforts of the office of the Attorney General of the Nation which, acting in coordination with the National Police, detained a large number of individuals suspected of electoral crimes, many of which involved district-hopping and vote-buying. Nevertheless, it invites the authorities to avoid criminalizing the public and to adopt a comprehensive vision focused on dismantling the structures and leaders of suspected district-hopping and vote-buying networks. In a country with low voter turnout rates, focusing such a policy on the voters could serve to discourage participation.

Party and Campaign Financing

The OAS Mission applauds the efforts made by the CNE to control campaign income and expenditure. The *Cuentas Claras* ("Crystal Clear Accounts") app and the recent adoption of the Electronic Electoral Propaganda Map tool (MAPEE) represent useful contributions to that undertaking. According to the available information, however, only 28% of the candidates lodged reports with the app prior to election day. The OAS Mission calls on all candidates, campaigns, and parties to give a practical demonstration of their commitment toward transparency but, at the same time, it recommends requiring the obligatory use of the app and establishing sanctions for noncompliance.

Gender Equality

The participation of women in the local authority election of October 2015 was higher than in the 2011 election. Five women were elected as governors and 113 as mayors, while 68 women were elected to departmental assemblies and more than 2,000 to municipal councils. Nevertheless, the figure is still far below the gender-parity rate, given that slightly over 18,000 positions were up for election. The OAS Mission recommends that the 30 percent gender quota enshrined in Law 1475 be accompanied by training, funding, and the promotion of female leadership within political parties.

Acknowledgments

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