

International Pre-electoral Observation Mission in Colombia

Executive Summary

General overview:

The Mission identified the following factors that impede free and fair elections in some areas of Colombia that we visited:

1. The presence of illegal armed groups in the electoral process: paramilitaries, narco-traffickers, emerging violent groups and other armed actors in some regions:

- * There is widespread fear among the Colombian population in these regions. This sense is prevalent among the electorate, public officials, and members of political parties, directly affecting the electoral process.

- * This situation detracts from the perceived legitimacy of those who are elected in the process.

- * Many sources report that public monies are being transferred for illicit uses in the elections.

2. Fraud and electoral crimes:

We found that many negative practices persist, such as:

- Vote buying and selling.
- Misuse of identity documents.
- Illegal possession of identity documents, including stolen documents.
- Coercion and intimidation of voters.
- Fraud committed by polling officers at the voting stations.
- Obstruction of electoral observers, preventing them from carrying out their functions and accessing polling stations.
- Control over public transportation to prevent voters from moving freely, as well as transporting voters to voting places that are not their places of residence in order to support certain candidates.
- Absence of educational outreach to voters to teach about the importance of citizen participation in political processes and the necessity of protecting a voter's right to decide free from bribes, threats or other payments.

3. Illegal campaign financing

- * The use of public funds to benefit particular candidates

- * The alleged use of money from illegal activities, particularly from drug trafficking, to finance campaigns
- * Agreements between candidates, government officials and companies to award government contracts after the elections in return for financial support
- * Exceeding campaign financing limits.
- * A culture of impunity and widespread fear that deters citizens from reporting illegal financing and other irregularities
- * Political parties do not routinely audit their campaign accounts until after the elections
- * The National Electoral Council (CNE) lacks the resources, logistical capacity, and independence from the Congress to investigate all alleged irregularities.

3. Manipulation of social programs for political ends:

- Since the first declaration of the International Observation Mission, numerous cases have been identified where government-aligned candidates have threatened recipients of “Families in Action” benefits with the loss of those benefits if their candidates do not win at the national, regional and municipal levels.
- There is also evidence that officials from the government program, Social Action, which handles the Families in Action program, have pressured program beneficiaries to attend political meetings or to vote for governing party candidates.

Conclusions and Recommendations:

The International Pre-Electoral Observation Mission recognizes that problems with electoral systems and deficiencies in democratic processes exist in our own countries, and we are committed to working there to achieve full democracy as well. We are convinced that building democracy is a constant task in all our countries, and we emphasize that Colombia is not the only society that confronts this challenge.

The following conclusions and recommendations are offered in the spirit of democratic solidarity, based on our professional observations and the concerns of hundreds of Colombian citizens expressed to us, with the full conviction that achieving greater democracy in Colombia is a fundamental humanitarian concern for the country and for the Hemisphere. At all times, it is the men and women of the Colombian people who are the final arbiters of their sovereignty and national destiny.

Recommendations:

1. The Mission is gravely concerned about the evident control exercised by illegal armed groups in the regions visited, with special emphasis in the city of Buenaventura. The Mission urges local and national governments to act on the concerns of the citizens in vulnerable sectors and to take all necessary measures to control and dismantle these criminal elements.
2. The Mission urges the immediate employment of effective measures by the Colombian government at all levels to avoid acts of intimidation and manipulation of the vote by armed criminal bands operating in the regions, as well as the adoption of adequate measures to avoid “capture of the State” by these delinquent groups.
3. The Mission recommends that the executive branch and the national Congress provide sufficient human, financial and organizational resources to electoral institutions, to enable these to carry out their duties fully and autonomously.
4. The Mission recommends that the legal sanctions against the perpetrators of electoral crimes such as tampering with election results, registering voters outside their places of legal residence, collecting voter credentials, violating the Law of Guarantees, etc. be imposed in an expeditious and effective manner. It is necessary to strengthen the operations of the justice system in electoral matters, since impunity is an invitation to fraud.
5. The Mission recommends that the nation update its electoral census to avoid situations reported in which “the dead vote”, and other anomalies in voter registration lists.
6. The Mission recommends supporting efforts to build greater citizen participation in social control of electoral processes so that local authorities and government offices charged with monitoring the elections can achieve the full trust and confidence of the citizenry and the political parties. As part of these actions, it is necessary to strengthen Electoral Observation initiatives among various groups of civil society.
7. The Mission recommends increased efforts to vigorously apply laws that limit campaign publicity, guarantee greater transparency and legality in access to and benefits from social welfare programs and public policies, limit and regulate the use of government contracting during electoral periods, and other laws and regulations regarding free and fair elections.

About us:

Global Exchange is an international human rights organization that supports democratic participation as a prerequisite of social, economic and environmental justice. For more than a decade Global Exchange has actively supported international democracy in the world through electoral observation.

We have lead or participated in election observation in more than a dozen countries, many of which have been in transition from dictatorship to democracy. In cooperation with local civil society organizations, we have observed or monitored elections in Mexico, South Africa, Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia and United Stated. To this end, Global Exchange has established itself as a credible defender and supporter of democracy.

To carry out pre-electoral observation in Colombia, Global Exchange brought together a team of investigators, professionals, citizens and democracy advocates for Colombia from the following organizations:

- CUPE – SCFP Canadian Union of Public Employees.
- Washington Office on Latin America.
- Fellowship of Reconciliation.
- Co – Development Canada.
- The Council of Canadians.
- Afrodes USA.
- U.S. Office on Colombia.
- CIP Americas Program.
- The Sonja Haynes Stone Center for Black Culture and History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
- Network for Advocacy and Support of Grassroots Afro - Colombian Communities.

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The International Pre-Electoral Observation Mission is deeply grateful for the support we received from the Misión de Observación Electoral (MOE), on both the national and regional levels. The MOE is a civil society organization that carries out extensive research to identify and analyze electoral risks in Colombia and has been a pioneer worldwide in the field of identifying and minimizing threats to the proper functioning of democratic systems. As an independent effort, we share MOE's objectives to strengthen democracy and advance the political rights of all citizens. We thank the men and women of MOE--and especially the regional MOE members in the departments we visited--for their courage and commitment, and the support they gave us. While we acknowledge their indispensable support, the findings and conclusions of this report are exclusively those of the international mission and we take sole responsibility for them.