



OAS Mission to the Plebiscite in Colombia Underscores Civic Spirit and recommends Measures to increase Participation

October 3, 2016

The Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) of the Organization of American States (OAS) to the plebiscite held October 2 was headed by former President of Guatemala Álvaro Colom. The EOM applauds the Colombian people for pursuing the path to peace throughout these electoral processes. It congratulates the people, electoral authorities, and other State bodies for their contributions to ensuring a civil election day.

The mission was comprised of 75 observers, experts in direct democracy exercises, organization and elections technology, campaign financing, and media access, electoral justice, political analysis, and statistics. Throughout their stay in the country, they met with a wide array of representatives from the sectors involved in the process, including elections authorities, groups supporting both the “YES” and “NO” options, civil society organizations, academia, State security forces, international organizations, and members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Despite the limited time available to prepare and hold the plebiscite, the electoral process was properly organized. Election day was conducted successfully, in spite of the setbacks caused by inclement weather conditions.

OAS/EOM observers visited a total of 420 polling stations in 25 departments across the country, plus the capital district. They witnessed all of the observed stations open on time and noted that many of the stations were staffed by women, most of whom were serving as presiding officers. They also observed that there were few election witnesses from the YES and NO options. At the end of the day, the voting process at 97% of the observed polling stations was described as either very good or good.

The Mission points to the high level of abstention. This is an aspect that the OAS has repeatedly reported in various past reports on electoral processes in Colombia. The Mission reiterates its recommendation to adopt measures to increase citizens’ exercise of their franchise, to ensure that they fulfill their democratic responsibilities.

The Mission believes that the time between the call for the plebiscite and when it was held could have affected the Campaign Committees and citizens' understanding of the regulations and the content of the agreement up for vote, as well as citizen deliberations and political participation. These are essential elements for a direct democracy mechanism to function properly.

The government did provide access through various types of media and platforms to the text of the accords. However, the campaign was based more on abstract and aspirational elements than the specific content of the accord. The tone on both sides of the campaign focused more on provoking an emotional reaction than on informing the population. Based on this, it bears asking whether voters concretely understood the specific and immediate effects of each option.

The President of the Republic's call for the plebiscite was a constitutional and legal mechanism that was designed *ad hoc* for this peace process. It was a specific and reasonable formula for this situation. Given the exceptional nature of the plebiscite, it should be understood as forming part of a broad transition process to peace, which neither began nor ends with yesterday's vote. Nonetheless, it would be important for future direct democracy exercises for the general regulations be fairer and more thorough.

The Mission observed unequal access to both media and political and electoral financing in favor of the YES option. This has also been observed in other international experiences that have implemented this type of mechanism. This imbalance was exacerbated given that public officials could actively campaign for one of the two options, contrary to the Colombian tradition that they refrain from participating in the campaign.

The Mission commends the National Civil Registry's rapid transmission of preliminary election results. This lent certainty and confidence to the process, despite the close outcome. As such, Colombia emerges as a successful regional model in these matters. Election authorities responded professionally and efficiently to the conditions and challenges of this democratic exercise.

The Mission also appreciates the President's decision to allow the Colombian people to participate in this decision of paramount importance to the nation's future. However, it would be useful to carry out a hemispheric exercise to reflect on these direct democracy mechanisms, given that this type of consultation is increasingly frequent, and yet there are no clear regional standards for their implementation.

The Mission would especially like to acknowledge all of the actors for the democratic attitude they displayed with their early and timely acknowledgement of the election results. The

OAS/EOM hopes that this attitude of harmony persists in the months to come as the country pursues an effective path towards peace.

The Mission would like to thank the National Civil Registry and the National Electoral Council for its openness and for supporting the Mission's work. Your authorities and staff provided the conditions necessary for the EOM to fully conduct its work.

A detailed observation report, with its conclusions and recommendations, will be presented shortly to the OAS Permanent Council and submitted to Colombian electoral authorities.

Lastly, the Mission thanks Argentina, Bolivia, Canada, Chile, China, Dominican Republic, Germany, Holland, Italy, Mexico, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States for their contributions, which made it possible to deploy all the OAS observers and experts.