

## **Introduction**

With USAID funding, The Carter Center conducted a targeted observation for Guyana's August 28, 2006 national elections to demonstrate the Center's interest in and support for Guyana's democratization process. The Center also sought to assess the political and electoral environment in Guyana surrounding the 2006 elections in follow-up to former U.S. President Jimmy Carter's 2004 visit to Guyana. The 2006 elections marked a historic event in the country, as the country experienced its most peaceful election in recent history.

The Center received invitations from the Government of Guyana, the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM), and the newly created Alliance for Change (AFC) political party to observe the election. All major political parties welcomed the Center's observation initiative. The project included the establishment of a field office, the deployment of medium-term and short-term observers, and engagement with key election, government, opposition party officials, and international stakeholders in Guyana. The Center's observation efforts were coordinated with international observer delegations from the Organization of American States (OAS), and the Commonwealth.

The Carter Center's decision to field a small-scale election observation presence reflected the Center's principle for non-duplication of efforts and the fact that the OAS and other international observers were fielding comprehensive observe delegations. The Carter's mission was consistent with the guidelines set forth by the *Declaration of Principles and Code of Conduct for International Election Observation*<sup>1</sup>.

Because of the small size and limited scope of its observation presence, The Carter Center mission did not intend to draw conclusions or issue public judgments about the overall election process. Nonetheless, given its longstanding engagement in the country, the Center's mission aimed to assist Guyana to use the elections and the post-election period as an opportunity to reaffirm its commitment to substantive governance and electoral system reforms.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation* states, "Stand-alone specialized observation missions may also be employed, as long as such missions make clear public statements that their activities and conclusions are limited in scope and that they draw no conclusions about the overall election process based on such limited activities."

In implementing the initiative, Center staff and observers regularly met and exchanged information with national, regional and local level Guyana Election Commission (GECOM) officials, government officials, ruling and opposition political party leaders, and domestic and international observer group representatives. These meetings were conducted in Georgetown and in areas outside of the capital city. The Center participated in periodic donor coordination meetings, providing an overview and analysis of findings. The Center encouraged steps to ensure inclusive governance in private meetings with GECOM, government, and political party officials.

The Carter Center delegation was led by Sir John Compton, former Prime Minister of St. Lucia. The delegation leaders met with President Bharrat Jagdeo, PNCR-1G leader Robert Corbin, AFC leaders Raphael Trotman and Kemraj Ramjattan, and senior civil society leaders. On 31 August, The Carter Center released a Preliminary Statement on the elections that was delivered by Sir John Compton and was well received by major stakeholders. The statement commended the people, government, and political parties for a good election and encouraged a redoubling of efforts to ensure full implementation of agreed constitutional reforms, strengthening of the National Assembly's Constitutional Review Committee, and full implementation of the Herdmanston Accord – steps that would build greater inclusiveness in the nation's institutions and practices of governance.

During the post-election period The Carter Center remained in consultation with key elections officials, political and civil society stakeholders, and members of the diplomatic community in order to ascertain various approaches to addressing pertinent issues such as local government systems and election reforms. Private meetings with senior political leaders offered an opportunity to relay Carter Center concerns regarding the country's democratic development as well as to reiterate the Center's overall commitment to Guyana.

## **Overview of Project Activities and Findings**

### **Pre-Election Period**

In early August 2006, the Center established a field office in Guyana, with Mr. Jason Forrester serving as director. Three medium-term observers arrived on 7 August with election observation experiences, legal expertise, and familiarity with Guyana's political and electoral history. The team focused on assessing the pre-election period in selected areas, including Buxton, the Corentyne, Linden, West Demerara, and Georgetown. Some of the locales observed during the election were chosen because they had previously been identified hot spots, and where complaints were concentrated in previous elections. In addition, areas where controversy had been minimal were also observed.

The core team managed field operations and provided briefings to Atlanta headquarters on key electoral developments. Specific activities included meeting representatives of the diplomatic community and domestic observer groups. In addition, multiple meetings with OAS, Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB), CARICOM, and the Commonwealth were conducted in order to coordinate election observation activities.

On 24 August, The Carter Center leadership delegation arrived, led by Sir John Compton and accompanied by Dr. David Carroll and Ms. Rachel Fowler of the Center's Democracy Program. Two additional Atlanta-based staff, Mr. Jeff Mapendere of the Conflict Resolution Program, and Ms. Ketura Brown of the Democracy Program, also arrived to manage internal field operations. The delegation leadership met with President Jagdeo, PNC/R-1G leader Robert Corbin, leaders of the AFC, GECOM chairman Steve Surujbally, the heads of both the Guyana Defense Force, as well as the European Union, Commonwealth, U.S., and CARICOM ambassadors and group leaders, and senior civil society leaders.

Seven Carter Center short-term observers arrived on 25 August and in preparation for election-day activities, the delegation leadership conducted debriefing meetings. Short-term and medium-term observers were deployed early to establish communication with observers from other groups, to map out polling place locations and routes, and to meet with security sector officials.

In total, The Carter Center's election observation presence fielded five teams in four regions. The Center's observation supported efforts of the OAS, EAB, and the Commonwealth.

### **Election Day Activities**

Carter Center teams observed voting day processes at nearly 50 polling stations. At each polling station visited, Carter Center observers consulted with the Presiding Officer, party agents, international and domestic observers, and voters to identify any concerns of irregularity, voter intimidation, and/or improper campaigning. Frequent consultations and sharing of information between the international and domestic observers occurred throughout the day. Observers remained at polling stations for the majority of ballot tabulation and in most instances, were able to view the entire tabulating and reporting procedures, including the sealing of ballot boxes and receipt of voting material by the Deputy Returning Officer.

Most polling stations were reported to be fairly well organized with a limited number of complaints. Teams opened and closed at the same location, examining poll and ballot box opening procedures, and the availability of materials such as voting placards, ink, pencils, and voting booths.

### **Election Findings**

The Carter Center's limited assessment of the August 2006 election was positive. The Center observed prompt poll openings and closings, and a commitment by polling officers at each station to ensure proper and smooth voting. Although the process for ballot tabulation was seen as arduous, polling officers remained vigilant in following established procedures. Carter Center observers recorded the presence of political party agents from the ruling and major opposition party at each polling station visited. The OAS, EAB and Commonwealth observers were seen at most polling stations and AFC agents were seen at some. Guyana Public Service Union observers were not observed at most polling stations.

The most consistent complaints included voters not knowing where to vote, confusion over the use of pens or pencils for ballot marking, and the initial exclusion of Alliance for Change (AFC) agents from polling stations. The confusion emerged when some polling agents demanded both letters of certification and identification cards. However, both were not necessary and Chairman Surujbally made an announcement on the radio to this effect.

In comparison to previous elections, the most striking difference in this election was the absence of pre-and post-election violence as well as polling protests. These observations are consistent with the findings of the OAS, European Union, Commonwealth, and EAB.

### **Post-Election Activities**

The Carter Center Preliminary Statement on the Guyana 2006 Elections, delivered by Sir John Compton, was generally well received. The statement focused on the largely violence-free election environment and the need for elected officials to recommit to democratic and inclusive governance. The central message of the Center's statement was the following:

**The Carter Center commends the people of Guyana, the political parties, and the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) for what so far has been the most peaceful and orderly electoral process in recent history. This speaks to the maturing of Guyana's political culture and the deep yearning for peace and progress, which is shared by all Guyanese. That said, the frustration and fear that exists across society must be acknowledged and mitigated through actions of political leaders over the coming days and beyond. If Guyana is to realize its great potential and be genuinely responsive to all its citizens, the government of Guyana must be perceived as the government of all the people and must equitably distribute the benefits derived from the efforts of all. The challenge facing Guyana's leaders is to use these elections as an opportunity to build new bridges, engage in genuine and sustained dialogue, and develop mechanisms that will allow Guyanese, down to the community level, to have confidence that the instruments devised for their governance address the needs of all.**

The Carter Center's delegation leadership paid courtesy visits to newly-elected President Bharrat Jagdeo, PNC/R-1G leader Robert Corbin, and AFC presidential candidate Raphael Trotman and prime ministerial candidate Khemraj Ramjattan. President Jagdeo's inauguration on 2 September was attended by Carter Center representatives who again offered congratulations and reiterated Center support for Guyana.

As the generally positive spirit obtained in the immediate aftermath of the elections continued to hold, the Center engaged key government, civil society, and diplomatic stakeholders to assess leaders' commitment to and approaches for addressing proposed substantive governance and electoral systems reform, as well as the prospects for meaningful local government reform and later local government elections.

### **Recommendation/Issues to be Addressed**

The Carter Center hopes that the general conduct and peaceful atmosphere, largely free of violence and voter intimidation, that prevailed in the campaign, election, and post-election period, signals a significant step towards strengthening democracy in Guyana. We commend GECOM for their efforts in carrying out a successful elections process. The Carter Center remains willing to support and strengthen democratic institutions in Guyana, and, particularly, the electoral process. To this end, we recommend that GECOM and the Government of Guyana work cooperatively to address the following issues. These observations and/or recommendations are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather are intended to highlight issues that The Carter Center believes merit immediate attention:

#### **1) The Voter Registry:**

- (a) GECOM should conduct a broadly-acceptable verification of the voters' list. The conducting of house-to-house verification is strongly recommended as it is the most likely means of increasing voter confidence in the list.**

## **2) Reforming GECOM:**

- (a) GECOM should be independent from the government and be accountable to and receive funding from the National Assembly. The independence of GECOM from the government's administration will bolster the Commission's credibility and independence**
  
- (b) The Cater-Price formula for GECOM should be changed to ensure that GECOM is not divided solely along political lines**
  - (i) GECOM should be composed of individuals who are solely committed to carrying out a successful and transparent elections process, and who have the confidence of political parties, but who can also maintain independence. As noted in The Carter Center's report on the 2001 elections, "As part of electoral reform efforts, Guyana should give careful consideration to alternative models, possibly reducing or eliminating political party representation and increasing the role of independent members of civil society and professional experts."**
  - (ii) Gender representation should be ensured in GECOM's composition**
  
- (c) Communication between GECOM, the political parties, civil society, and election observers needs to improve. This can be achieved through the establishment of a liaison office to coordinate communication with political parties, observer groups, and civil society. Such an office would need adequate staffing and funding.**
  - (i) GECOM's transparency will be elevated by additional communication with these parties, and could easily be achieved through the publication of GECOM meeting minutes or a summary of such minutes.**
  - (ii) Improved communication will also strengthen the relationship between GECOM and domestic observer groups.**

- (d) Ensure that appropriate legal remedies be exercised in considering challenges to the electoral results. In addition, new legislation should be debated that provides for correcting results, if evidence is later provided that errors were made in determining the composition of the National Assembly.
- (e) Speed up the reporting of the vote count. This might be achieved using electronic means to transmit preliminary results. Such means should be tested thoroughly before the next general elections, if possible, during local government elections.

### **3) Local Elections:**

- (a) Local elections, granted sufficient and thorough preparations are completed, should be held before the end of 2007. GECOM and Government of Guyana should act with all deliberate speed to prepare for the elections.
- (b) GECOM should implement the expansive voter and civic education program as outlined in their 2001 recommendations immediately.
  - (i) GECOM should pay specific attention to ensuring that correct and consistent information is disseminated as it relates to elections and voting processes. For example, leading up to disciplined services voting, voter education ads showed that ballots would be stamped at the polling place on election day. This was true for general voting, not disciplined services, thus creating confusion.
- (c) The Government of Guyana and GECOM should consolidate election laws for the purpose of simplification, codification, and accessibility.
  - (i) As called for in GECOM's 2003 3-5 year Development Plan.

“The consolidation of the Election Laws, incorporating all the amendments hitherto made, in order to make it user friendly for all and sundry that have to apply them in their official capacities, and also, to make it more intelligible to those who want to know the extant

**laws insofar as they relate to Parliamentary, Regional and Local Government Elections”.**

**(d) Revitalize the Task Force on Local Government Reform**

- (i) Implement the agree-upon recommendations of the Task Force on Local Government Reform**
- (ii) Finalize work of the Task Force on Local Government Reform on outstanding issues, specifically in the areas of allocating the greatest number of seats possible on a constituency/ward basis, as well as in determining overall system of local government and the formula for fiscal transfers**
- (iii) Consider contesting local elections on a non-party basis.**

These recommendations have also been identified by fellow international observer groups including the Organization of American States and the Commonwealth. The Carter Center recommends that GECOM closely review and consider the additional recommendations made by those organizations.

The Carter Center is willing to engage in subsequent conversations with GECOM to expand upon our recommendations. We also remain supportive of the Government of Guyana as it continues to strengthen democracy through the development of democratic institutions and practices.