



Report to the Permanent Council¹
Electoral Observation Mission
General and Regional Elections in the Cooperative Republic of Guyana
May 11, 2015

Organization of
American States

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

On December 4, 2014, the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States received a request from then President of Guyana, Donald Ramotar to observe the 2015 General and Regional Elections. On January 14, 2014, Secretary General José Miguel Insulza accepted the invitation and appointed Senator Lisa Shoman, from Belize, to lead the OAS Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) in the country and designated Mr. David Álvarez Veloso as Deputy Chief of Mission.

After signing the Electoral Procedures Agreement on April 8, 2015, the Mission officially started its activities, which included a preliminary visit to Guyana from April 12 to April 15. The Mission arrived in the country on May 2, 2015 and concluded its work on May 15, 2015.

The OAS/EOM fielded a gender balanced team of 22 observers from 13 countries. It was the fifth time the OAS carried out an Electoral Observation Mission in Guyana.

Pre-electoral period

During the pre-electoral period, the Mission met with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM), President Donald Ramotar, representatives from all political parties, diplomatic officials, civil society organizations, labor unions, religious representatives, police officials, members of the Chamber of Commerce, and other electoral observation missions, who shared their perspectives regarding the electoral process.

One of the main concerns which was brought to the Mission's attention was the general consensus among all interested parties that the tone of the political debate during the electoral campaign had been particularly provocative. In the run-up to Election Day, the Mission witnessed an escalation of offensive language used by key actors, generating tensions among contenders.

Regarding the organization of the elections, the Mission commends the significant effort made by GECOM to plan and prepare for the 2015 electoral process. The OAS/EOM

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observed significant improvements since its 2011 Electoral Observation Mission, especially with regard to the packing and distribution of electoral material well ahead of Election Day, the extensive training provided to poll workers and the education of the electorate about voting procedures and the electoral process. The OAS/EOM also acknowledges GECOM's efforts to include representatives of political parties in all aspects of the organization of elections, including the packing and transportation of ballot boxes and Election Day materials.

In the lead-up to the election, the Mission also heard concerns related to the increment in the official list of electors. A total of 570,786 electors were eligible to vote for the 2015 General and Regional Elections, an increase of 20% compared to the 2011 electoral process.

Another issue brought to the EOM's attention was media access, particularly equitable access to state media and information service. Some political parties and stakeholders opined that the then governing party appeared to enjoy an unfair advantage in this regard, occupying most of the time and space available for political advertising and public announcements.

As far as political financing is concerned, the system in Guyana is defined by the exclusive dependency on private sources. In this context, several stakeholders, especially smaller political parties, shared with the Mission how their financial situation rendered them unable to manage and maintain even the most basic elements of the elections, including the recruitment of election agents (scrutineers). While a legal framework already exists, there is no reference beyond the issue of spending limits, making it necessary to revise and modernize aspects that could contribute to a modern and equitable political financing system.

In terms of gender equality, the Mission recognizes that Guyana is the only country in the Commonwealth Caribbean with a gender quota, which requires that candidate lists be composed of at least 33% women, on both the national top-up and geographic levels. While the EOM commends GECOM's effective enforcement of this quota during the pre-electoral period, the Mission noted that political parties have complete discretion in determining which members of the list are actually selected to take a seat in the National Assembly, thereby functionally undermining the potential effectiveness of the law.

The OAS/EOM observes that the Guyanese electoral code permits "proxy voting" for election employees, returning officers, rural constables, candidates and other electors who are engaged on Election Day. Voters with physical disabilities are also eligible to designate a proxy to vote for them. Police, members of the Guyana Defense Force and others who are employed *for electoral purposes* at a polling place other than where they are registered to vote may apply for a certificate of employment, which allows those persons to exercise their franchise at another polling place in their district. For the 2015 electoral process, however, GECOM made the decision to not grant certificates of employment to party agents witnessing the poll although this had reportedly been done in the 2011 elections.

Election Day

On May 11th 2015, OAS observers were present at polling stations in all 10 regions of the country from prior to the opening of the polls and up to the counting of the votes, visiting a total of 253 polling centers and 379 polling stations.

OAS/EOM observers reported that elections started on time, at 6:00 am, in all 10 regions, that polling stations had all the necessary materials for the voting process and that polling agents were consistently well trained and diligent in the exercise of their duties. The high turnout of electors during the early morning hours, nevertheless, generated in some areas long lines of citizens that patiently waited to cast their vote.

The Mission acknowledges that priority access to the elderly and disabled voters was mostly guaranteed. In some polling centers, however, the installation of polling stations in second floors made it difficult for a section of the electorate to exercise the voter franchise.

The Electoral Observation Mission highlights the extraordinary commitment of GECOM officials, presiding officers, returning officers, poll clerks, and security officials in the exercise of their duties. Regarding the participation of party agents, the OAS/EOM observed that only two out of the eight political parties contesting the election fielded scrutineers, reflecting some of the difficulties faced by smaller political parties due to budgetary constraints.

In terms of the processing of electoral results, the Mission observed that two simultaneous tabulations were conducted, by returning officers at the district level and by the Chief Elections Officer at the national level.

While this lends additional security to the tabulation process, the legal mandate which requires that original statements of polls be delivered from presiding officers to deputy returning officers, then to returning officers and ultimately to the Chief Elections Officer, causes an inordinate delay in the proclamation/announcement of the official results. This could lead to speculation and generate uncertainty among political parties and citizens.

In this regard, after the closing of the polls, the Mission received information of incidents of violence in some areas which purportedly affected the planned progress of the tabulation exercise. When possible, the OAS/EOM sent observers to verify the information; and otherwise received direct information on the same from other EOMS and/or law enforcement authorities, finding that in most cases the incidents were rumors and the counting process was being conducted normally. The Mission calls on all stakeholders to be cognizant of their responsibility in maintaining a peaceful environment for the elections.

Preliminary results were not released until 6:00 pm on Wednesday May 13th 2015, two days after polls had closed. Those preliminary results included less than 10% of polling stations and were limited to the coastal regions of Guyana, namely 4, 5 and 6. Official results in their totality were not announced until Saturday May 16th 2015, a full five days after Election Day.

The Mission commends Guyanese voters for their determination to fulfill their civic responsibility which was expressed in a voter turnout of 72.9%. Final results of the General Elections gave 33 seats to the then major opposition party APNU/AFC and 32 seats to the then ruling party PPP/C. On May 16th 2015, David A. Granger was sworn in as President of Guyana.

Recommendations

With the purpose of strengthening the electoral system in Guyana the Electoral Observation Mission would like to offer the following recommendations:

Electoral Campaign

- While the Mission recognizes GECOM's efforts to promote a peaceful atmosphere by sponsoring the signing of a Code of Conduct by all political parties, the delay in signing the Code and the lack of enforcement mechanisms prevented it from having any significant impact on the overall campaign. The OAS/EOM found the strident tone of the political debate leading up to Election Day, most regrettable, and therefore strongly recommends the introduction of a legal framework that promotes the celebration of elections based on positive political platforms that educate and benefit the Guyanese people in making choices, avoids aggressive personal and partisan rhetoric, and contains rapid and concrete sanctions for violating the same.

Results Transmission

- While the results transmission process in Guyana contains careful safeguards in order to bolster the veracity and credibility of electoral results, the manual nature of the process is inherently time-consuming and of necessity labor intensive. Given the geographical and logistical challenges of Guyana, the Mission encourages GECOM to implement, as soon as possible a system of electronic tabulation of preliminary results for national elections. An alternative system of communication between presiding officers, returning officers and the GECOM secretariat would, at least promote a more timely provision of results and serve to diffuse potential public tensions in future electoral processes.
- The Mission noted that GECOM's official website did not provide any timely information regarding the delivery of results during the tabulation and processing of the votes. Considering that GECOM is the only source for official results, the Mission recommends with some urgency, the development of an updated ICT strategy for GECOM and in particular its website, including historical information and resources regarding the registration process, civic education and processing of the election.

Media Access

- Recognizing the work done by the Media Monitoring Unit in highlighting the disparities in media coverage of the political campaign, the Mission recommends that consideration be given to regulations that promote, at all times, and not just during electoral periods, the equitable access to all contenders of the political and electoral processes.

Electoral Education

- The Mission calls on electoral authorities, political parties and all other relevant stakeholders to carry out a continuous national civic education program to promote political participation and democratic values in Guyana before, after and beyond the electoral period.

List of electors

- The voter registration process in Guyana benefits from the useful safeguards of house-to-house verification in the presence of party scrutineers as well as the pre-electoral claims and objections process. Nonetheless, the implementation of more robust procedures for periodic cleansing of the national voters list to remove deceased persons; and that ensures an ongoing updates of the voter registry would allow for a voter's list that more accurately reflects the current Guyanese electorate.

Political financing

- The OAS/EOM observed that while a legal framework regarding political financing already exists, it is necessary to revise and modernize aspects of the law which are obsolete and allow violations and non-compliance of the few existing sanctions. Additionally, in order to promote equity in the electoral process, the Mission recommends the consideration of some form of state funding for political parties. Amongst other ends, this would support smaller parties' efforts to recruit and train party agents to staff polling stations on Election Day, to aid greater transparency.

Gender

- The Mission congratulates the 13 (35.14%) newly elected women parliamentarians for their victory in the elections and praises the significant presence of women throughout the electoral process as poll workers, party agents and candidates. It does at the same time, however, make a decided call on all political parties and institutions to increase their efforts to further effectively promote the active participation and empowerment of women in public life. In particular, parties must make some effort to ensure an equitable participation of women when making choices from the lists after electoral victory.

Electoral Organization

- In order to avoid long lines of voters waiting to cast their ballots in the future, the Mission recommends the introduction of a standardized process that will allow the simultaneous verification of at least two or three additional voters while an elector is casting his/her ballot. Additionally, the Mission recommends the consideration of special measures to facilitate the access of disabled people and the elderly to polling stations.

The OAS Mission takes this opportunity to thank the Government of Guyana for the invitation to observe this process, the Guyana Elections Commission and the Guyanese people for their warm welcome to their country and their kind courtesies and attention during the stay of our mission.

In addition, the EOM is grateful to the governments of Canada, Chile, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom and United States for their contributions that made this critical Electoral Observation Mission possible. Our presence in Guyana and extended coverage of events, was possible because of your support.