

NDI REPORT: VOTER REGISTRATION AND DOMESTIC ELECTION OBSERVATION IN NICARAGUA

July 1996

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the first time in Nicaraguan history, citizens from across the political spectrum have come together to form a nonpartisan election monitoring organization called Grupo Cívico Etica y Transparencia '96 (Civic Group Ethics and Transparency '96 -- ET). In June, ET conducted its first activity in support of the electoral process by observing the controversial voter registration process in 26 municipalities in northern and central Nicaragua. The group covered more than 60 percent of the 972 registration tables in the area. According to Nicaraguan election officials, approximately 352,000 people -- or between 90 and 100 percent of citizens of voting age estimated to be living in the region -- registered during the process.

Election monitoring by civic organizations is not a new phenomenon. Since 1986, NDI has supported nonpartisan domestic election observation efforts carried out by civic groups and coalitions in Albania, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Chile, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Philippines, Venezuela and West Bank/Gaza, among others. Domestic monitoring initiatives have helped increase citizen participation and decrease apathy by generating excitement about the process. Domestic election observation creates a constructive, nonpartisan avenue for citizen participation in the electoral process. Domestic election monitoring also serves as a civic and voter education exercise. The act of training local observers, as well as the observation process itself, constitute a valuable civic exercise.

Ever since the civic group NAMFREL's historic observation of the 1986 elections in the Philippines, nonpartisan efforts to monitor elections by civic groups have promoted confidence and participation in election processes in more than 30 countries around the world. ET is beginning to make such a contribution in Nicaragua.

Ethics and Transparency '96

More than a year ago, NDI began receiving requests for information about domestic election observation from a variety of Nicaraguan civic groups and interested individuals. Many had heard about the positive impact of nonpartisan domestic election monitoring initiatives in Panama, Mexico and, most recently, Peru, and were interested in exploring the possibility of beginning such an effort in Nicaragua. Between June and October 1995, NDI staff members met frequently with interested Nicaraguans to share the Institute's experiences about domestic election observation in other countries and to discuss possible monitoring efforts for the upcoming national elections in Nicaragua.

In November 1995, NDI invited two Nicaraguan civic leaders to Peru to observe the civic organization Transparencia's observation of the municipal elections. Shortly thereafter, these two civic leaders joined other Nicaraguan citizens to form ET. Since then, ET has grown to become a broad-based and balanced umbrella for a national nonpartisan monitoring initiative. Members of ET believe the initiative could set an important example for the country's polarized civil

society.

An executive council comprising 10 Nicaraguan citizens leads ET: La Prensa political commentator Emilio Alvarez Montalván; Bishop Juan Abelardo Mata; constitutional lawyer and former Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) ambassador to the United States Carlos Tünnerman; Atlantic Coast school teacher and Reverend Doris Merlin

Forbes; Dean of the Polytechnic University Sergio Denis Garcia; medical doctor Roberto Calderón; Professor Digna Zamora de Corea; Director of the television program Esta Semana and former Editor of La Barricada Carlos Fernando Chamorro; economist



ET Executive Director Marvin Saballos addresses journalists during a press conference in Managua

Francisco J. Lainez; and engineer and owner of Nicaragua's Budget Rent-A-Car Gabriel Solórzano Perez Alonso. The executive council chose Marvin Saballos, former director of the United Nations University for Peace project, as executive director of the group.

ET also counts on the support of a diverse advisory board, composed of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and universities, upon which it draws for its network of volunteers and trainers. Civic groups participating in ET's NGO board include: Centro de Educación para la Democracia (CED); Centro de Estudios Estrategicos de Nicaragua (CEEN); Consejo de Iglesias Evangelicas Pro-Alianza Denominacional (CEPAD); Coalición de Mujeres; Comisión de Verificación Cardenal Obando; Consejo Nacional de Universidades; Grupo FUNDEMOS; Hagamos Democracia; Instituto de Investigación y Asistencia Legislativa (IIAL); Instituto Martin Luther King; Mujeres Nicaragüenses Conciencia; Universidad para la Paz (UPAZ); and Nicaragua's three leading Human Right's Organizations -- Asociación Nicaragüense Pro-Derechos Humanos (ANPDH), Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos (CENIDH) and Comisión Permanente de Derechos Humanos (CPDH).

NDI plans to continue supporting ET with technical and financial assistance during the coming months. The Institute has had two domestic election observation experts on the ground working with the group's technical team since March and has sent international advisers to Managua on several occasions. In addition, NDI recently sponsored the visits of ET members to the May 16 and June 30 national elections in the Dominican Republic, where they observed the civic organization Participación Ciudadana as it monitored the electoral process. NDI's program with ET has been made possible by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development.

ET also receives support from international nonprofit organizations such as the Center for Democracy, the International Foundation for Election Systems and the International Republican Institute.

Background on Voter Registration for the 1996 Elections

According to Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council (Consejo

Supremo Electoral -- CSE), approximately 2.4 million people of Nicaragua's estimated population of 4.5 million are eligible to vote in the October 20, 1996, elections.

The CSE initiated two parallel voter registration processes for the 1996 general elections. The first was a continuous registration process called "cedulazation" that covers 119 municipalities. The second was an ad hoc registration process (inscripción ad hoc) that covered the voting-age population living in 26 central and northern municipalities in the heart of the former conflict zone.

Voter Registration in the Pacific and Atlantic Coast Regions

Those persons of voting age who live in the 119 municipalities comprising the Pacific region, which includes Managua, and the Atlantic Coast region registered to vote through an ongoing process called "cedulazation" (cedulación). Through the cedulazation process, the CSE is updating the civil registry, creating a permanent voter registration list and issuing national identity cards called "cedulas" (cedulas). The cedula can be used for a variety of activities including voting, obtaining a passport, cashing a check and proving identity when applying for a job. The cedulas are free the first time and valid for ten years.

The CSE estimates that there are approximately 2.1 million eligible voters in the municipalities covered by cedulazation. To date, more than 95 percent of the estimated voting population in the cedulazation region has applied for a cedula. Those people whose cedula applications were not approved for one reason or another before the close of the process on July 22 will be issued a supplementary voting document (documento supletorio) that will enable them to vote in the elections while they are waiting to receive a permanent cedula.

Ad Hoc Registration

Citizens of voting age who live in regions not covered by the cedulazation process were eligible to participate in a voter registration process referred to as ad hoc "inscription" (inscripción ad hoc). A similar registration process was used during the 1990 general elections and the 1994 Atlantic Coast elections.

Nicaraguan electoral law stipulates that ad hoc inscription for the 1996 general elections takes place during the first two weekends of June. Citizens of voting age must present an identity card, passport, driver's license or two witnesses who can attest to the person's identity to receive a temporary voting card (libreta cívica) that can be used on voting day but will not be valid for other types of transactions.

The regions covered by the ad hoc registration process primarily comprised the mountainous central-northern section of Nicaragua and included many of the areas still plagued by violence and armed bands. Large numbers of people displaced by the civil war and many demobilized members of the former Contras live in the region.

Registration Controversy: Ad Hoc Inscription versus

Cedulazation According to the CSE and others familiar with voter registration in Nicaragua, the two-tiered system was implemented for several reasons. Since cedulazation efforts had been initiated in the Atlantic Coast and then continued in the Pacific region as part of an effort to update the civil registry, the CSE contended it made sense to continue this process in these two regions for the 1996 general elections. Citing time, logistic and financial constraints, as well as security concerns for its employees, the CSE decided that extending the cedulazation process to include the remaining 26 municipalities in the mountainous center and north of the country before the 1996

elections would create insurmountable challenges. The CSE chose to use the traditional ad hoc registration process in the 26 municipalities, promising that it would extend the cedulazation process to those areas after the elections. The CSE said that Nicaraguans are more familiar with the ad hoc registration process than with "cedulazation" since the ad hoc system was used in previous elections. The CSE also noted that inscription is less complicated for the citizen than the more drawn out cedulazation process.

The decision to hold separate registration processes generated a considerable amount of controversy. Some Nicaraguans and members of the international community charged that the use of the ad hoc system discriminated against citizens of voting age in the 26 northern municipalities, many of whom are former supporters of the Nicaraguan Resistance. Critics of the process argued that the ad hoc registration period is much too short, that many people in the former conflict zones do not have proper identification and that the CSE was devoting insufficient resources to educating and informing the local population about the process. They added that many people would have to travel a relatively long distance to inscribe because of a lack of registration tables in some of the more remote regions. OAS representatives observed that ad hoc registration would be further complicated by the fact that the placement and number of registration/voting tables (juntas receptoras de votos -- JRVs) would be based on census data, much of which is inaccurate for the central-northern regions.

Domestic Election Observation and the Ad Hoc Voter Registration Process

The controversial decision to hold separate registration processes drew attention to the ad hoc registration effort. Nicaraguan and international observers saw the registration process as a litmus test for the CSE and the electoral process in general. Most observers agreed that a flawed registration process in the former conflict zones would have extremely negative consequences on the election environment.

For these reasons, ET considered the monitoring of ad hoc voter registration to be a crucial piece of the group's overall observation program. As a nonpartisan domestic monitoring group -- which would likely be able to field a greater number of observers than the international missions -- ET could help collect factual, objective information and analyze it systematically to provide comments on overall patterns, rather than anecdotes alone.

ET had several goals in planning the observation. First, coverage of the registration tables, or JRVs, should be great enough so as to allow the group to make more than anecdotal observations about the process. Second, the observation should offer a constructive evaluation of the process, highlighting positive as well as negative aspects and identifying areas in need of improvement. Third, ET considered that the observation -- being the group's first activity -- should serve as a learning experience for the larger election-day monitoring effort.

To prepare for the observation of the registration process in the 26 municipalities, ET trained more than 100 volunteers in a May 25 workshop in Managua. A number of these observers, in turn, trained an additional 75 volunteers the following week at the local level. NDI sponsored the participation of Francisco Fong, former associate director of Panama's domestic monitoring group Justicia y Paz and the present administrative director of the Panamanian Electoral Tribunal, in the May 25 training workshop in Managua. Fong spoke

about his experience with domestic election observation and quick counts, and noted the important role that civic groups play in the electoral process. In addition, Fong advised members of ET's technical team and board of directors about organizing an observation effort, managing relations with electoral officials and training observers. Fong also met with representatives of political parties to discuss the benefits of domestic election monitoring.

Ad Hoc Voter Registration

The ad hoc voter registration process that covered 26 of Nicaragua's 145 municipalities took place during the first three weekends of June (Logistical problems in several municipalities during the first and second weekends of registration prompted the CSE to extend registration from the originally mandated two weekends to a third weekend). An additional weekend of registration on July 6 and 7 targeted 47 JRVs that had encountered more serious logistical problems.

By the close of the fourth weekend, approximately 352,000 people had registered and received their voting cards. This number constituted a registration rate of between 90 and 100 percent depending on which population estimates are used.

ET Observation of Voter Registration

During the first two weekends of ad hoc voter registration, 145 ET volunteers observed the process in the 26 northern municipalities. ET observers covered 589 registration sites, or approximately 60 percent of the 972 registration tables in the region. Members of the civic group in Managua processed the volunteer monitors' observations in a database created for the group by computer science students from a local university. ET submitted preliminary observations to the CSE after the first weekend of registration. The group released a public statement about the observation after the second weekend.

Preliminary conclusions from ET's observations coincided with information gathered by NDI and other international observers. Preliminary findings included: 1) Security in and around the registration places was satisfactory, although some citizens expressed concern about the security situation in the region; 2) Citizens learned about the registration process through a variety of sources, including the CSE civic education campaign and local NGOs; and 3) Most citizens who came to register did so successfully.

ET also observed a number of problems with the process, most of which were addressed subsequent weekends: 1) Some registration stations opened late, had to close, or failed to open because of general logistical problems and a lack of materials, especially witness forms; 2) some political parties campaigned near the registration places; and 3) some people had to walk great distances to register. The group also observed that some JRVs lacked sufficient materials to handle the large number of registrants relying on witnesses.

On June 21, ET held the first meeting of its General Assembly to recognize those who worked on the registration observation. Volunteers were presented with a certificate of merit for their work. Many of the volunteers who participated in the registration observation exercise will serve as the future local coordinators for the larger election day observation and parallel vote tabulation (PVT).

As an indication of ET's increasing credibility, the group was recently asked by the CSE to develop recommendations on a code of conduct for Nicaraguan political parties. ET was the only Nicaraguan civic organization asked to submit recommendations for the proposed

code. ET convened a broad-based committee of several of its members -- including the leaders of the ANPDH, CENIDH and CPDH -- to offer recommendations for the code. Given the history of ideological conflict between these three leading human rights groups, the formation of the committee alone was a significant accomplishment and a positive sign regarding the will of ET's members to move beyond Nicaragua's polarized past.

ET is currently planning to hold a national conference on domestic election observation on July 27. The conference will help launch an intensive volunteer recruitment and training drive. The group has invited civic leaders from election monitoring groups around the world to share their experiences with the Nicaraguans at the conference. In addition to supporting the participation in the conference of several civic leaders from other countries, NDI will send a team of PVT experts to help ET develop the methodology to conduct a quick count of the results on election day. NDI's field staff in Managua will continue to provide support and advice to the group throughout the electoral process.

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