

PRESS RELEASE
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**INTERNATIONAL VISITORS LAUD ELECTORAL ADVANCES BUT
URGE ACTION TO REMEDY VOTER-COERCION AND MEDIA
BIAS**

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An international pre-election delegation from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) visited Mexico this week and commended advances that have increased confidence in the electoral process, but cautioned that additional steps are needed to address concerns about the use of social programs to influence voters and continuing media bias that could undermine the credibility of electoral results.

"Reforms adopted in recent years have given Mexican political actors confidence in the election process," stated Dr. Felix Ulloa, former magistrate of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal of El Salvador. "At the same time," added Dr. Fausto Rosario, a journalist from the Dominican Republic, "biased media coverage and allegations of voter coercion related to federal assistance programs threaten these gains"

The delegation noted that it arrived at an important juncture in Mexican political history. For the first time in 70 years, voters will cast ballots in elections whose outcome for the presidency is uncertain. Public opinion polls show an extremely close race between the candidate of the ruling PRI, Francisco Labastida, and the Alliance for Change - PAN candidate, Vicente Fox. The electoral advances seem to parallel the economic and political opening that has taken place in Mexico in recent years. In contrast to past presidential elections, electoral reforms have given political actors confidence that the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) is committed and capable of administering democratic elections. The media is providing more balanced coverage of candidates. The PRI has also adopted a new more democratic candidate selection process.

The delegation learned that unfortunately it is widely believed that the closeness of the election has led to certain practices, particularly by the ruling party, that are reminiscent of past elections. According to denunciations by independent and opposition sources, federal assistance programs, such as PROGRESA and PROCAMPO, are being used to illegally influence voters. Since the first NDI mission in May, IFE, the daily newspaper Reforma and the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos have also reported that the significant bias in media coverage has continued.

These issues threaten to undercut the significant democratic advances that have bolstered the legitimacy of the election process. International experience demonstrates that extraordinary steps by a government are often needed to establish confidence in the genuineness of a country's political and electoral process. Governments in these circumstances must go beyond minimum requirements for democratic elections. This lesson appears to be

applicable in Mexico.

The delegation was impressed by the uniform confidence expressed in the ability of the IFE to administer transparent and fair elections. However, the confidence enjoyed by the IFE at the national level does not extend to the state and district level authorities. While changes cannot be made before the election, state and local authorities should consider adopting the reforms that have provided the IFE with the credibility it enjoys -- such as complete independence from state and local governments and a nonpartisan governing council and civil service.

Nonpartisan election monitoring organizations like Alianza Civica, COPARMEX and the Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos have made important contributions to the electoral process - particularly in the pre-election period. These organizations will continue to play an important role on election day by fielding networks of volunteer observers and conducting "quick counts" to provide independent verification of the results.

In the area of campaign finance, the IFE has requested that the political parties provide periodic information on campaign expenditures during the election period. This is an important step toward increasing transparency and disclosure in the party finance system. In the same vein, in the future, consideration should be given to having the political parties provide similar information during the primary process.

The delegation heard testimony that the major political parties have used government resources to benefit their candidates. These practices violate Mexican law and undermine public confidence in the election process. One of the institutions established to address these abuses, the Special Prosecutor for Electoral Crimes (FEPADE), is perceived as lacking in political will and plagued by inefficiency. For future elections, however, legal reforms that help to better define electoral crimes may serve to strengthen FEPADE. In addition, increasing FEPADE's staff, budget and autonomy from the federal government would help bolster the agency's efforts and credibility.

The NDI delegation included: Felix Ulloa, a former magistrate of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal of El Salvador; Fausto Rosario, a journalist from the Dominican Republic and Communications Director for the civic organization Participación Ciudadana; Angel Vivas, NDI's representative in Mexico and a former congressman from Venezuela; Gerardo Le Chevallier, a former congressman from El Salvador and NDI Director for Latin America and the Caribbean; Matt Dippell, NDI Deputy Director for Latin America and the Caribbean; Katy Mudge, NDI Senior Program Officer; and Anya McMurray, NDI Program Assistant.

The delegation's observations were formed in the course of intensive meetings with representatives of broad sectors of Mexican society that are playing key roles in the developing electoral process. The delegation expresses its gratitude for the warm reception it received from all with whom it met. This delegation was the second in a planned series of three NDI delegations that will observe the pre-election period and the election itself. In addition, NDI has opened an office in Mexico City to closely follow the entire electoral process.

NDI is an independent, nongovernmental organization working to promote democracy around the world. NDI has conducted impartial election observation programs in Mexico in 1994 and in more than 50 countries in the Americas and around the globe.

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