

Political Developments

Citizen Verification of the Voter Registry

The Supreme Electoral Council (*Consejo Supremo Electoral*, CSE) conducted four days of citizen verification of the national voter registry, on June 10-11 and 17-18. The objective of the verification exercise was to report changes of addresses and incorrect information and purge the voter registry of deceased people before the November 5 national elections. The Institute for Development and Democracy (*Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia*, IPADE) reported a 28 percent citizen turnout.¹ IPADE and international observers alike, including the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center, called on the CSE to update the voter registry to include approximately 100,000 new voters and to strengthen training of CSE officials², and appealed to citizens to update their address information before the August 6 deadline.³ The low levels of citizen verification, in light of the high rates of error on the voter registry identified by Ethics and Transparency's (*Ética y Transparencia*, ET) recent national baseline audit, indicate that electoral authorities must be prepared to apply Articles 41 and 116 of the Electoral Law⁴ to avoid the disenfranchisement of a significant number of eligible voters on election day.

National Identification Card

On June 5, National Assembly member Delia Arellano proposed a partial reform of the Citizen Identification Law.⁵ This proposal arose from IPADE's presentation of the Atlantic Coast voter registry audit results on February 28, during which Arellano and other political party leaders discussed the costs of obtaining a birth certificate and a national identification card and how these present obstacles to voting. The proposed reform would require municipal authorities to no longer charge citizens for obtaining a birth certificate.⁶ According to CSE Vice President Emmet Lang, between 150,000 and 200,000 citizens do not have a birth certificate and therefore are not on the civil registry. Civic groups like the Movement for Nicaraguan (*Movimiento por Nicaragua*, MpN),⁷ as well as political parties like the Liberal Nicaraguan Alliance – Conservative Party (*Alianza Liberal Nicaragüense – Partido Conservador*, ALN-PC), the Movement for Sandinista Renovation (*Movimiento para la Renovación Sandinista*, MRS) and the Liberal Constitutional Party (*Partido Liberal Constitucional*, PLC) have called for an improved national identification card process.

Political Candidates and Public Opinion Polls

On June 11, a group of Nicaraguan expatriates organized a convention in Miami to discuss electoral issues, including candidate platforms and voting abroad.⁸ The convention featured three

¹ "Informe de Observación Electoral sobre el Proceso de Verificación Ciudadana," IPADE, June 23, 2006.

² "OEA da su Informe sobre la Verificación," *La Prensa*, June 22, 2006.

³ "Third Report on the Nicaraguan Election Process," The Carter Center, May 10, 2006.

⁴ These articles establish the right to vote of citizens whose names do not appear on the voters' list but who have a valid voter identification card.

⁵ The reform would require 47 of 90 votes in the National Assembly.

⁶ "Proponen Reformas a Ley de Identificación," *La Prensa*, June 6, 2006.

⁷ "Piden que se Facilite el Proceso de Cedulación," *La Prensa*, June 2, 2006.

⁸ Although Nicaraguans abroad have the right to vote, they have never been issued with the ballot papers to participate.

candidates for the presidency: José Rizo of the PLC, Eduardo Montealegre of ALN-PC, and Herty Lewites of the MRS, who died of a sudden heart attack just a few weeks later. Sandinista National Liberation Front (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*, FSLN) leader Daniel Ortega was not invited. In his address, Rizo denied that he is the puppet of PLC strongman Arnaldo Alemán, refuting critics who have pointed to the large numbers of Alemán loyalists on the PLC legislative candidate list as proof that the former PLC boss still controls the PLC. Rizo also said that Montealegre was splitting the liberal vote, which could usher Ortega in. Montealegre disagreed, stating that people will “vote for individuals who represent change and the future, not the reincarnation of Ortega or Alemán.” Ortega responded to the convention by accusing the United States and President Enrique Bolaños of trying to unify his three adversaries to stand against him.

Ortega, who has been leading the polls lately, has predicted a first-round win for the FSLN. In the most recent opinion survey, conducted by Cid-Gallup and released June 29, three days prior to Lewites’ death, the ex-Sandinista reform candidates’ standing in the polls had slipped to 15 percent of voter preferences, putting him in third place. Ortega obtained 23 percent voter preference, followed by Montealegre, with 17 percent. Under Nicaraguan electoral law, a first-round victory requires either a minimum of 40 percent of the valid votes cast, or 35 percent plus a lead of at least five percentage points over the runner-up. The MRS has since selected Lewites’ vice presidential candidate, Edmondo Jarquín, to run for president and chosen as its new vice president candidate popular singer Carlos Mejía Godoy, a prominent FSLN activist who had recently broken with the Sandinistas to endorse Lewites’ reform movement.

Program Activities

Surveys implemented by NDI’s local partners show that more than a third of Nicaraguans are at risk of being disenfranchised in the November elections, a percentage that could influence the outcome of closely-contested presidential and legislative races. In partnership with Nicaraguan civil society organizations and with support from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), and the Royal Embassy of Denmark, NDI is conducting a national election monitoring and voter identification campaign program to help safeguard the elections. Elements include:

Two-Way Voter Registry Audits

NDI worked with ET and the Central American University (*Universidad Centroamericana*, UCA) to establish a baseline for an audit of the national voter registry.⁹ Overall, the data from this audit show that the Atlantic Coast region’s voter registration list is less reliable than the list for the rest of the country and point to three main issues of concern across the country. The first issue is that a total of 16.6 percent of citizens of voting age are not on the nationwide voter registration list. Secondly, 10 percent of voters who have national identification cards are not on the list. Third, a substantial proportion of the information on the voter registration list (29.1 percent) is either not updated (citizens either do not live at the indicated address or have died) or totally incorrect (people never heard of and never lived there, or address does not exist).

⁹ ET evaluated the voter list from the last nationwide municipal elections in 2004. Ideally, a more recent list would have been used in this investigation, but the CSE did not respond to ET’s February 10 request for an official voter list. On the other hand, three of the five political parties or alliances competing in the upcoming election requested that ET audit the voter registry and provided their copies of the 2004 voter registration list.

These problems mean that one in ten voters who have ID cards, but who are not on the list, would only be able to vote if Election Law Articles 41 and 116 are applied. Furthermore, those voters who are listed at the wrong municipalities or departments in the registration list would not be able to vote unless they update their data with the CSE or travel to their former address to cast a ballot at the corresponding polling place. The audit results were shared with the CSE and representatives of the political parties, the media, other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the international community.¹⁰ Combined with the Atlantic Coast audit implemented by IPADE last February, the national baseline audit was designed to focus attention on the need for the CSE to improve the voter registration list before the November elections. A subsequent audit will evaluate the voter registry and conditions just before the November elections.

National Identification Assessment

NDI is also working with ET and UCA to identify specific problems and propose solutions to the distribution of national identification cards required for voting. ET's Executive Director Roberto Courtney reported that an estimated 300,000 citizens eligible to vote in the upcoming elections do not have an ID card.¹¹ He estimated that those most affected are youth, 35 percent of whom do not have ID cards, and that the main reason citizens seek an ID card is for employment.¹² Obtaining an ID card in Nicaragua incurs costs associated with transportation, photos, obtaining a valid birth certificate and, in some cases, significant amounts of time. ET is continuing to investigate the 120 cases of participating applicants told by election authorities to return five or six months after submitting their applications to pick up their ID card. ET anticipates presenting a report in August.

Citizen Assistance Centers

NDI is supporting the efforts of the advocacy group MpN to improve the national identification card process and enable more citizens to participate in the upcoming election. Since February, youth representatives of MpN have assisted 3,000 citizens in obtaining birth certificates (1,050 required birth certificates) and fulfilling other requirements to obtain a national identification card through Citizen Assistance Centers (CACs) currently operating in Managua, León, Masaya, Estelí, Chinandega, Granada and Matagalpa. At a forum held on June 1, MpN called on the CSE to improve the national identification card application process and on citizens to verify their information during the two verification weekends. Separately, MpN has stepped up its national identification card campaign by reaching out to high school students who are interested in voting, but lack the required identification.

Citizen Verification

On June 10, 11, 17 and 18, IPADE fielded 720 observers to 349 verification centers in 61 of the total 153 municipalities throughout the country. IPADE found that only 28 percent of citizens on the voter registries – 952,000 citizens of the total 3.4 million citizens on the national voter registration list – participated in the verification exercise at the verification centers observed. Of these citizens, 21 percent verified that their information was listed correctly, nine percent cited problems with their national identification card applications, five percent requested a change of address and two percent were sent to the respective municipal electoral councils to pick up their

¹⁰ "EyT Respalda Padrón Electoral," *La Prensa*, June 9, 2006.

¹¹ "Calculan que Tres Cientos Mil Votantes no Tienen Cédula," *La Prensa*, June 3, 2006.

¹² "Solo el Diez Por ciento de Jóvenes Solicite Cédula para Votar," *El Nuevo Diario*, June 3, 2006.

identification card.¹³ IPADE called on electoral authorities to update the voter registry and expedite the production and delivery of national identification cards and supplementary documents to vote.

During this same period, 300 ET volunteers conducted voter verification promotion activities in 14 departments in the Center-Pacific part of the country. ET employed loudspeakers, distributed a total of 200,000 fliers and hung banners in the main municipalities to call on citizens to verify their information prior to the August 6 deadline.

Political Parties

ET invited all Nicaraguan political parties to a presentation on the national baseline voter registry audit on June 9. Representatives from four of the five main political parties and alliances participating in the upcoming national elections attended the conference, including legal representatives from the Alternative for Change Party (*Alternativa por el Cambio*, AC), ALN-PC, MRS, and PLC. Following the conference, different political parties, including AC, MRS, PLC and the FSLN referenced ET's voter registry audit in the media.¹⁴ AC stated that the audit will permit parties to identify problematic areas in the voter registry and called for the application of Articles 41 and 116 to be applied so that citizens would not be deprived of their right to vote.¹⁵ For its part, the MRS complained to the CSE that the party had not received the official 2006 voter registry from the Council, despite CSE President Roberto Rivas' statement that the voter registry had been provided to all parties and alliances in digital format.¹⁶

From June 19 to 23, NDI Latin American Regional Director Jim Swigert and Executive Director of the Arias Foundation Luis Alberto Cordero met with representatives of all five political parties contesting the elections, as well as with some of the presidential and vice presidential candidates, including Edén Pastora (AC), Edmundo Jarquín (MRS), Fabricio Cajina (ALN-PC), José Rizo (PLC) and José Antonio Alvarado (PLC). The purpose of these meetings was to discuss concerns regarding the voter registry audit results and the electoral process in general.¹⁷ To respond to concerns by the MRS and others, NDI will develop a case study on charges of fraud that marred the 2004 municipal elections and deepened public doubts regarding the CSE. The study will be presented at a pre-election international forum to encourage appropriate countermeasures against any possible repetition in the November elections. Additionally, the ALN-PC, MRS and PLC requested additional information regarding the national baseline voter registry results and quick count methodology. NDI is working with ET to provide the requested information and to organize a multi-party forum on the quick count methodology.

¹³ Departments with the highest citizen verification turn out included Madriz (47 percent), RAAN (40 percent), Nueva Segovia, Matagalpa and Jinotega (36 percent).

¹⁴ "Eyt Presenta Auditoría a Partidos," *La Prensa*, June 12, 2006; "El Codiciado Voto Joven," *El Nuevo Diario*, June 12, 2006; "Ortega: EU Violenta Carta Democrática de la OEA," *El Nuevo Diario*, June 10, 2006.

¹⁵ "AC Tiene Triple Voto en Conicios," *La Prensa*, June 10, 2006.

¹⁶ "Alianza MRS Denuncia al CSE," *La Prensa*, June 12, 2006; "Roberto Rivas No Da Crédito a Acusaciones," *El Nuevo Diario*, June 15, 2006.

¹⁷ "MRS y AC plantean problemas a IND," *El Nuevo Diario*, June 22, 2006; "Llaman a vigilar boleta legislativo," *La Prensa*, June 22, 2006.