

# News Release



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I am pleased to offer the statement of an international delegation that observed the Paraguayan elections. This delegation, sponsored by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, includes 19 individuals from seven countries. We observed the elections in Asuncion, Concepcion, Ciudad del Este, Encarnacion, Villarica and their environs. Based on these observations, we will prepare a detailed report that will be published in the near future.

The present statement offers some preliminary conclusions. Before beginning, we note that our observations are offered in a spirit of friendship and respect, and are intended to assist in promoting Paraguay's democratic development.

Paraguay's lack of a democratic tradition, 35 years of brutal and repressive dictatorship, and the interrelation between the military and the ruling party provided the context in which these elections occurred. The three-month period since the February 2 coup was simply too brief for the creation of the pre-conditions necessary for fair elections. The democratic opposition parties faced the new circumstances without ever having had the opportunity or the experience of real participation in the past.

At the same time, the delegation acknowledges the significant political opening that has occurred since the coup. Paraguay, which just three months ago lived outside the community of democratic nations, has taken several major -- if tentative -- steps towards meeting its international human rights obligations and ensuring respect for the rule of law.

These steps were reflected in the openness of the campaign that preceded the elections. Persecutions of persons and other serious human rights violations diminished significantly during this period. Restrictions on the press were lifted, permitting several newspapers to resume publication and to operate freely and with vigor. Political parties that existed underground were recognized and campaigned throughout the country.

Given these circumstances, the opposition parties, despite not having achieved all their demands for changes in the electoral process, decided to participate in the elections, hoping to use them as a vehicle for furthering an on-going transition process. Leaders of the democratic opposition should be congratulated for their willingness to compete under such conditions; theirs has been a contribution made in the highest tradition of patriotism and love of country.

Despite the existence of a generally tranquil and peaceful environment yesterday, the conduct of the elections was far from perfect. Our delegation observed many irregularities and instances where the election law was violated. Electoral lists were inaccurate, there was a lack of uniformity in procedures at different mesas, and polling places did not assure the vote would be secret. Members of the delegation also observed the distribution of inscription forms on election day by some Colorado Party workers, evidencing a clear intent to commit fraud.

Many of the irregularities were the result of an election law designed to ensure that the Colorado Party maintained power. It is hoped that these matters will be addressed prior to the scheduling of any further elections. In addition, many Paraguayans, both from the Colorado party and from the opposition, told the delegation that a key requisite for expanding the democratic process will be reforms to allow for the direct election of mayors.

As for the more serious election law violations, these relate to the political culture in which undemocratic sectors of the Colorado Party dominated all aspects of Paraguayan society for many years. Changing this culture poses a major challenge for Paraguayans, both for those within the Colorado Party and for those who have challenged the Colorado Party's political domination through electoral competition. It will require maintaining the political space that now exists in the country as well as educating the citizenry regarding the responsibilities and rights of living in a democratic society. The elections, however, marked a beginning in the effort to change the political culture, as our delegation observed many instances where representatives of different parties worked together in a spirit of cooperation.

With enthusiasm, the government, which will be led by President Andres Rodriguez and dominated by members of his Colorado Party, has committed itself to change. The mandate given to President Rodriguez was in recognition of his commitment to this end, and a vote that Paraguay's democratic institutions and practices will be strengthened and fortified. Specifically, commitments have been made by the President and other leading Colorado party officials to reform the electoral law and the constitutional framework.

In our view, to accomplish the goal of creating a democratic Paraguay, changes should occur as the result of dialogue and negotiations between the various Paraguayan political sectors. Responsible political opposition, whether organized in parties or expressed in the media, should be encouraged. True democracy requires the spirited and conflictive exchange of ideas, and an unerring predisposition to compromise and to resolve all conflicts peacefully.

In this connection, we believe that any conclusion about the significance of the May 1 elections ultimately will be based on where they lead. If the elections are to represent a serious move toward democracy, then further reforms must inevitably and shortly follow. The international community will be monitoring future developments in Paraguay, and we will urge our governments and organizations to support the nascent democratic institutions. In the final analysis, though, the future of democracy in Paraguay is in the hands of the Paraguayan people.

MEMBERS OF THE NDI ELECTION OBSERVATION MISSION  
TO THE MAY 1, 1989 PARAGUAYAN PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS

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