

News Release



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An international delegation, sponsored by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), visited El Salvador February 19 - 24, 1989 to review the legal and administrative framework for the presidential election scheduled for March 19.

The delegation, composed of electoral experts and regional specialists from Guatemala, Venezuela, Puerto Rico and the United States, met with a variety of government and non-government officials, including representatives of the Central Election Council, the Supreme Court, the political parties, the Catholic Church, human rights groups, the Ministry of Defense, labor organizations, lawyer federations and the academic community.

Given NDI's continuing interest in supporting democratic institutions, including electoral systems, the delegation focussed its efforts on the newly enacted Electoral Code reforms, the administrative preparations for the election, the campaign climate and the recent proposals by the FMLN as they relate to the electoral process.

Based on the information received during the abovementioned meetings, the delegation offers the following summary conclusions:

- * The process established by laws and regulations for the conduct of the March 19 election compares favorably with that of democratic countries around the world. A comprehensive framework for a procedurally correct election has been devised that includes multiple safeguards against manipulation of the vote.
- * The Central Election Council has thus far fulfilled its legal responsibilities in a generally fair and expeditious manner.
- * The actual implementation of the written legal and administrative procedures in the period leading up to, during and after election day will be the key factor in assessing the fairness of the election.

Among the specific issues reviewed were the following:

- * Although the recent reforms to the Electoral Code produced an initial disagreement between the Executive and Legislative branches of the government, a consensus was eventually reached on the disputed issues. The accepted reforms establish an electoral system that, in general, has functioned smoothly.

- * The delegation was, by and large, favorably impressed with the general preparations for the election. Administrative delays, where they exist, appear to be the result of systemic problems that are not unique to El Salvador.

Concerns were expressed that certain citizens otherwise qualified to vote could not do so because of problems with the processing and delivery of voting cards. The delegation was informed about the particular difficulties encountered by people displaced from conflictive areas of the country who were unable to prove their identities and thus qualify for voting cards. While it is commendable that the Legislative Assembly extended the period for delivery of the cards by fifteen days, it would have been preferable if the period had been further increased to allow an even greater number of Salvadorans to exercise their right to vote.

- * The electoral campaign has taken place within a climate of violence that has increased as election day draws nearer. While the delegation believes that measures to safeguard the election should be strengthened, it notes that government policy has thus far encouraged the open participation of all contesting parties.
- * The delegation believes that the electoral reforms contained in the recent FMLN proposals, relating to the extension of the vote to Salvadorans living outside of the country, expansion of the Central Election Council, and the role of the military in the electoral process, merit appropriate study and consideration.

In summation, the delegation concludes that despite current circumstances in El Salvador, the electoral system provides an adequate framework for a free and fair presidential election. It is hoped that the delegation's efforts will lend support to those Salvadorans who are committed to ensuring a peaceful and democratic transfer of power.

NDI plans to produce a report of the delegation's findings that will serve as a resource document for groups observing the election. Although such efforts are important in providing additional support to the electoral process, the delegation is keenly aware that it is ultimately the Salvadoran people who must judge the legitimacy of their own election and its ability to promote the consolidation of democracy.

It is our hope that all Salvadorans will recognize that the democratic system offers the best means of resolving societal conflicts and resisting the challenges of extremist individuals or groups that take up arms to advance their cause.