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IN THIS

Features

What Latin A
Elections

Human Righ
at United

News Stories

Carter Cent
Fight Wi

Growing a
in Niger

News Briefs

Parity, Stig
Health Concerns 8

Latin America Takes Steps to Strengthen Democracy

During the first six months of this year, four Latin American countries exercised democracy by scheduling elections. The Dominican Republic, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela laid the groundwork for electoral processes, though only the Dominican Republic and Mexico actually held elections as planned (see also "What Latin America's Elections Really Mean," Page 10). In all four cases, however, Carter Center delegates went to monitor the proceedings. Below are the countries and their elections, listing the most recent election for each.

Mexico V decade.

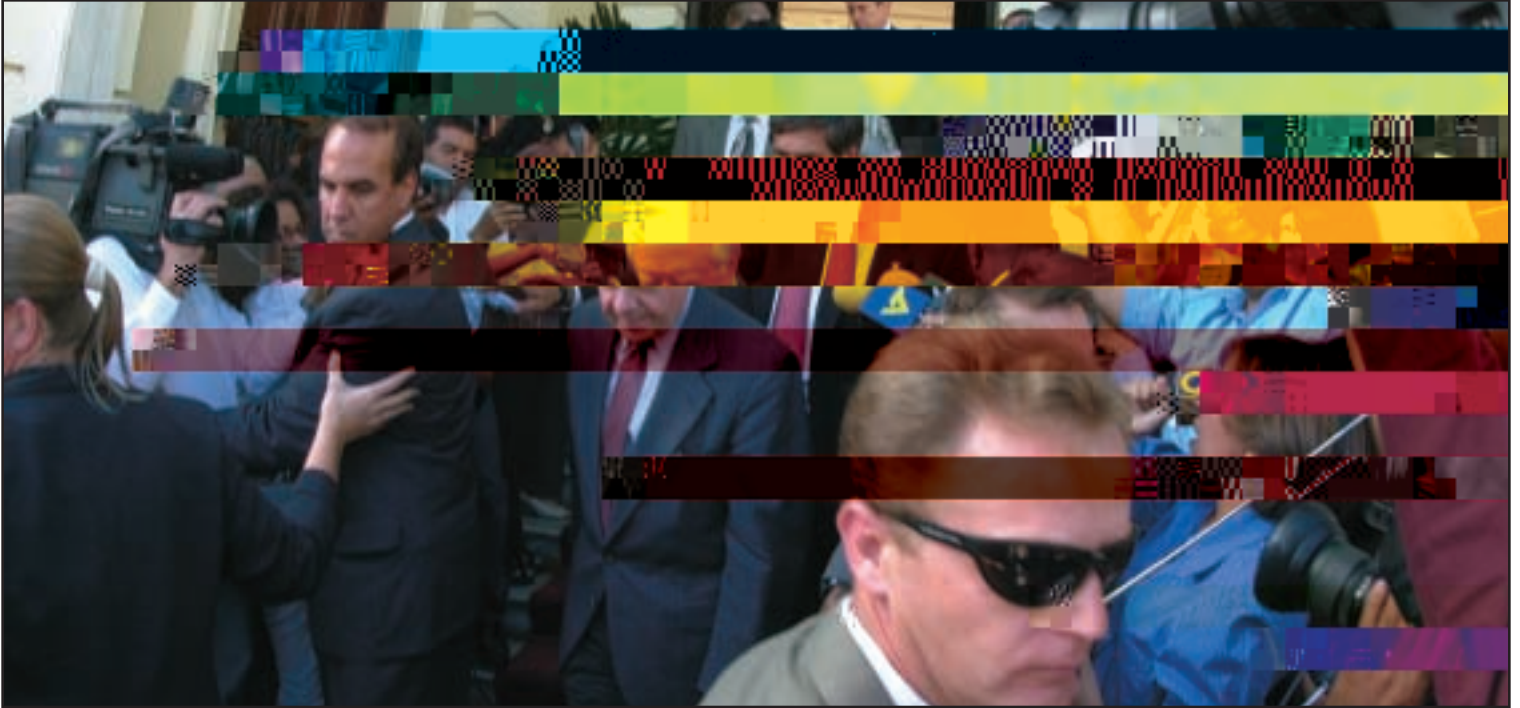


...er organizations in eradicating the disease.

Latin American Elections Unfold

continued from Page 1

Rick Diamond



A media frenzy surrounds President Carter as he exits the Presidential Palace in Miraflores, Venezuela.

parties,” said Dr. Pastor. “Continuous exchanges of information built confidence so that by the end of election day, the losing parties accepted the results.”

“The free election was possible because of significant electoral reforms in the past decade, including the creation of IFE – the autonomous elections governing body – state-of-the-art voter identification cards, and an electoral court to rule on disputes and certify results,” LACP Director Dr. Jennifer McCoy noted. Reforms allowed the Democratic Revolutionary Party to win the governorship of Mexico City in 1997 and the PRI to lose its majority in the Congress, also in 1997, for the first time. By this year, opposition parties governed almost one-third of all the states.

“The Federal Election Institute has become one of the most professional election commissions in the world,” President Sanchez de Lozada told the press. “We saw a process which gave legitimacy to Mexican democracy, and which will make Mexico an example for our hemisphere.”

Opposition candidate Vicente Fox, who won the presidency by a surprising

margin of seven percentage points over the ruling party candidate Francisco Labastida, begins his six-year term in December 2000.

Venezuela Delays Elections



Venezuelan voters’ saw their hopes for democratic elections stymied when the May 28 elections were delayed.

The Carter Center and representatives of its Council of Presidents and Prime Ministers of the Americas had been observing electoral processes in the South American country for extended periods. Having observed presidential elections in Venezuela in December 1998, the Center made four assessment missions this year to prepare for the scheduled May elections.

Initial observations found many areas of concern, including a questionable legal framework for the election, voters’ high level of uncertainty and distrust, and calls for an external audit of the automated vote tabulation.

At the invitation of Venezuela’s National Electoral Council (CNE), an

international election monitoring team led by former U.S. President Jimmy Carter and wife Rosalynn Carter, and former Costa Rica President Rodrigo Carazo and wife Estrella Zeledon de Carazo arrived in Caracas on May 22.

“The Carter Center has had a continuous presence in Venezuela since August 1999 to closely follow the drafting and approval of the new constitution and to assess conditions for the elections,” said Dr. Jennifer McCoy, director of the Carter Center’s Latin American and Caribbean Program, which organized the election-monitoring mission. “We went to show the international community’s support for Venezuelans during a time of great political change.”

Dubbed “mega-elections” because of their size and complexity, the Venezuela elections had more than 36,000 candidates competing for about 6,000 positions. Technical difficulties and lack of voter information – problems almost from the start – prevented reliable elections. Members of civil society, political parties, and electoral technicians began voicing

continued on Page 3

Latin American Elections Unfold

continued from Page 2

strong concerns about the elections' legitimacy. An appeal to Venezuela's Supreme Court brought a ruling to delay the elections.

"Postponement of the elections will allow citizens to be adequately informed about the candidates running for office and ensure that technical conditions are put in place to ensure the integrity of the elections," said President Carter at a May 27 press conference in Caracas.

"We will continue to offer our support and suggestions in a spirit of international cooperation and respect with the hope that the electoral process will accurately reflect the choice of the Venezuelan people."

Peru's Process Meets With Peril



Four observer missions, sponsored jointly by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and The Carter Center, pointed to fundamental flaws in Peru's 2000 electoral process.

These included unequal access to the media, media bias favoring the incumbent, smear campaigns against Peruvian election monitors and opposition candidates, the misuse of state resources for electoral advantage, and a climate of impunity.

Compounding these issues was an opaque vote tabulation process that, following the April 9 polls, was plagued by irregularities and inexplicable delays. All of these factors led a large segment of the Peruvian electorate to question the credibility of the polls and those administering them.

On May 5, NDI and The Carter Center issued a statement urging "immediate and comprehensive improvements" to build the credibility of Peru's elections process. Because these improvements were never made, the Center and NDI announced May 25 that they would not send an observer mission to the May 28 run-off.

"After seeing little improvement from our first mission in early December

to our third mission in mid-March, NDI and The Carter Center concluded that the electoral process was irreparably flawed," said Dr. McCoy. "We again called for changes after the April 9 first-round, but failing to see significant improvements, we concluded that these elections would not meet the minimum international standards for a democratic election."

The May 28 runoff transpired without an opposing candidate since opposition leader Alejandro Toledo refused to participate. The Organization of American States (OAS) election observer mission, as well as the national observer group Transparencia and the Ombudsman's office observer group, all declined to observe the run-off, citing an inability to properly assess the vote-counting process.

The final results showed President Fujimori winning 51.2 percent of the votes cast, Toledo garnering 17.68 percent because his name remained on the ballot, and 29.93 percent of the voters deliberately spoiled their ballots, perhaps rejecting the Fujimori candidacy. Blank ballots accounted for the remainder of the votes.

Dominican Republic Election Proceeds



Despite some minor voter registration problems, a joint delegation from The Carter Center and the NDI observed a smooth presidential election in the Dominican Republic.

More than 100 international election monitors closely observed the mid-May election. Carter Center staff also conducted three pre-election missions and has remained in the Dominican Republic to observe post-election activities.

When the votes were tallied, Hipolito Mejia, the Dominican Revolutionary Party candidate, was just shy of the required 50 percent vote needed to avoid a runoff. Mejia's runner-up conceded defeat, negating the need for a second round.


More than 72 percent of the 4.3 million registered Dominicans cast ballots.

Mejia, a businessman and former minister of Agriculture during the 1970s, faces many challenges once in office. The Dominican economy – the fastest growing in Latin America – has moved toward a free market with the privatization of the state-run sugar and electrical production industries. However, it has failed to lift many of its people out of poverty.

Although turnout was high, some voters waited hours in line only to find they had been assigned to a new polling site. Some of the 11,400 polling sites were so crowded that security limited access, and not all voters were able to cast ballots before closing time. Some black Dominicans were denied their right to vote because polling officials alleged they were Haitian citizens, according to election monitors.

Even before the election, many Dominicans faced a confusing and unorganized registration process. As a result, some had to try more than 10 times to properly register.

"Many of the problems may be overcome in future elections with improved training for poll workers," said Dr. Gordon Streeb, who led the Carter Center/NDI observer team along with John Sununu, former White House Chief of Staff in the Bush administration, and H.E. Belisario Betancur, former president of Colombia. "These problems, although frustrating, did not seem to significantly affect any one of the presidential candidates."

This year's election is a democratic advance for the Dominican Republic. Its 1994 election was widely dismissed as seriously flawed, but the subsequent two elections were accepted as democratic. This year's campaign season saw less politically motivated violence. Dominicans told election monitors that there was more respect for electoral rights by all those involved. 

What Latin America's Elections Really Mean

Recent elections in Latin American countries (see "Latin America Takes Steps to Strengthen Democracy," Page 1) have prompted questions about these areas' political futures and how the outcomes may affect international monitors' roles. To address these concerns, Dr. Jennifer McCoy, director of The Carter Center's Latin American and Caribbean Program (LACP), shares her insight in the following interview:

Q: With recent presidential elections and violent demonstrations in Latin America, democracy seems to be backsliding. Why?

The backsliding is actually concentrated in Peru, Ecuador, Columbia, and Venezuela. Chile, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico are showing stronger institutionalization and more entrenched democratic traditions.

In the Andean countries, we can point to exclusion of some of the population. In Peru and Ecuador, there has been exclusion of the indigenous peoples. In Columbia and Venezuela, the political parties that have held control for most of the last 40 years have excluded

some of the lower classes and some of the newer social political groups. That exclusion is one reason we are seeing backlash now.

Q: Why is democracy so hard to achieve in Latin America?

The history of Latin America has been characterized by very strong leaders without a parallel development of institutions to serve as checks and balances. Latin America traditionally has had very weak judiciaries and legislatures. Often, independent groups in the society have not formed to lobby the government. So, part of the struggle is to establish these institutions.



LACP Director Jennifer McCoy discusses Venezuelan elections with President Carter.

Q: How can the international community help shore up democracy?

First, international observers need to be very honest about our observations of democratic processes abroad. The Carter Center did this in Peru before the election when we monitored the campaign conditions, and again when we decided not to observe the run-off election. We alerted the international community to our concerns.

Now, it is up to the governments, particularly the governments of the Western Hemisphere, to decide what to do about Peru. One option is diplomatic isolation by not inviting Peru to any meeting of democratic countries. Another is to send an international mission from the Organization of American States to discuss with the Peruvian government and the opposition how to restore democratic institutions, perhaps even calling new elections.

Q: How is the role of international observers changing in Latin America, now that most nations in the hemisphere have held democratic elections?

When we started this business 10 years ago, we thought we would not be observing elections today in Latin America. We thought most countries would have had electoral institutions that had the trust of their people. In fact, in some countries that have a long experience with elections, distrust has grown in recent years.

Our role is changing in that we are not just focusing on transitions from military to civilian governments, for example. We are focusing in countries that have experience with representative democracy, but because of the exclusion of certain peoples or other factors, distrust has grown, and they need international observers to restore that trust.





Growing a Better Future in Nigeria

Carter Center efforts to end hunger in developing countries by teaching new farming techniques were featured in the



Parity, Stigma Top Mental Health Concerns

Diane Lore of The Atlanta Journal-Constitution interviewed Mrs. Rosalynn Carter to discuss the findings of the U.S. surgeon general's mental health report. Excerpts of the May 23, 2000, article are reprinted below with permission from the Cox News Service:

In Georgia, more than 1.6 million residents struggle with mental illness, and one in every eight has a severe condition.

To raise awareness and help those in need, Rosalynn Carter has for more than a decade hosted the annual Georgia Mental Health Forum, where 350 consumers and policy-makers gathered Monday at The Carter Center in n