

Post-Election Statement

INTERNATIONAL DELEGATION TO THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN PARAGUAY

May 27, 1991
Asunción, Paraguay

We are pleased to offer a statement on behalf of the international observer delegation sponsored by the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs. This delegation, which consists of 16 members from eight countries, yesterday witnessed Paraguay's municipal elections.

The delegation observed the balloting and counting in five major cities — Asunción, Carapegua, Ciudad del Este, Concepción and Pedro Juan Caballero — as well as in smaller surrounding towns. Because these elections were local, we have focused our efforts on observing and gathering information on about 10 of the municipal elections held yesterday. This statement represents a consensus view of our observations. In the next few weeks, we will prepare a detailed report and issue it publicly.

We realize that we have witnessed an historic event, Paraguay's first mayoral elections. Paraguayans responded enthusiastically to the opportunity to elect their mayors. Political parties and independent movements organized throughout the country to campaign and monitor the elections. Civic organizations also were active, encouraging people to vote, distributing information on the electoral process and the candidates, organizing civic education programs and conducting parallel vote counts. On election day, voter turnout was high. In the face of frequent confusion, voters went to great lengths to exercise their right to vote. Many of our delegates observed a festive atmosphere and a high degree of cooperation among the parties and electoral officials.

Shortcomings existed, however, in the administrative preparations for the elections. This was evident on election day, which was marked by confusion and chaos in many areas. In about 20 municipalities, the elections were suspended because materials did

not arrive in time or did not arrive at all. In other areas, voting began up to four hours late because of the late arrival of electoral materials. As a result, many voters became discouraged and left before the balloting began. In Pedro Juan Caballero, the delegation saw ballots that did not include all the candidates. In Ciudad del Este, a candidate who had been challenged and had appealed the challenge was crossed out on the ballots until midday, when the local electoral board ruled that he should remain on the ballot.

Perhaps the most serious problem was the disenfranchisement of people who could not get accurate information about where to vote or whose names did not appear on the electoral registries where they believed they were supposed to vote. Precise figures are not available on the number of people who were disenfranchised in that way; but the delegation was told by party pollwatchers in some polling sites that a significant percentage of the people who arrived to vote were unable to because their names did not appear on the registries.

The political parties believe that these irregularities were mostly administrative in nature and were not engineered in favor of or against a particular candidate or party. All parties were affected. The election results would appear to discredit any charges that the irregularities were politically motivated.

The delegation has heard allegations of other irregularities as well, such as the buying of *cedulas*, the alteration of *cedulas*, people voting in areas where they do not reside and the existence of pre-marked ballots. We have not seen documentation of these practices. Their effect on the process, if they did occur, is believed to have been marginal.

The dedicated members and staffs of the electoral boards and tribunals, who worked tirelessly so that these elections would take place, recognize that there were administrative deficiencies. Electoral officials and political leaders acknowledge that the electoral law, which is considered fair but imprecise, needs to be amended. We are confident that political leaders and members of the electoral bodies have learned a great deal from this process and are prepared to introduce measures to improve the administration of elections in the future. Electoral officials will face their next test later this year, when elections for a constituent assembly are to be held.

Despite the administrative flaws in this electoral process, the holding of the elections represents another important step in

Paraguay's efforts to consolidate its nascent democracy. For the first time in Paraguayan history, the citizenry elected its mayors. Paraguay's local governments are now representative of the country's political spectrum. The newly elected city councils will provide forums to democratically debate and determine public policies that affect Paraguayans daily. The electoral results and the political parties' acceptance of them demonstrate that Paraguayans are committed to the democratic process. Paraguayan political analysts note that the results and the splitting of ballots portend the development of a more pluralistic political system and attest to the sophistication of Paraguayan voters despite having been deprived of their democratic rights for years.

The democratic progress that Paraguay has made over the past two years is unquestionable. NDI was present in 1989 for the presidential and congressional elections, when President Rodriguez and the Colorado Party won an overwhelming victory following a brief electoral campaign that afforded the political parties little time to organize and campaign. For these municipal elections, the opposition parties participated in the drafting of the electoral law and the administration of the elections. Two NDI pre-election missions, which visited Paraguay in March and April, concluded that no restrictions were placed on the parties' ability to operate. A vigorous and responsible press also contributed to the process by reporting about all aspects of the elections.

We have all learned a great deal from this experience. The Paraguayan people have taught us lessons that will prove instructive for the people in our own countries. We thank the Paraguayan government, the political parties and all those who shared their views about their country with us, and look forward to receiving an invitation to return in the near future.