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PRESS RELEASE

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National Democratic Institute Reports on Concerns over Tension Surrounding Nicaraguan Elections and Recommends Steps to Build Confidence

A delegation from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) met with political and civic leaders in Managua from August 14-17. The NDI mission demonstrated continued international support for a peaceful and open process surrounding the November 4 elections and explored ways in which the Institute could assist Nicaraguan efforts to increase confidence in that process.

“A highly polarized environment has led Nicaraguans to express concerns about the conduct of the elections and growing political tensions,” said NDI President Kenneth Wollack who led the delegation. “Under such circumstances, extraordinary efforts are needed by the election authorities, political parties and candidates to build confidence in the process, protect the integrity of the vote and ensure a peaceful electoral environment.” One of these efforts, Wollack said, should be professionally trained party pollwatchers (*fiscales*) who will be present at each of the more than 8,400 polling sites. The participation of nonpartisan Nicaraguan observer groups, such as Ethics and Transparency, will also help bolster voter confidence, he added.

During its visit, the NDI group met with the President of the Republic, the three presidential candidates, vice presidential candidates, members of the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), political party and civic leaders, political analysts and members of the foreign diplomatic corps based in Managua. The mission also included Matt Dippell, NDI deputy director for Latin America and Caribbean programs, and NDI program officer, Nicole Mlade.

A potential electoral problem identified by Nicaraguans concerned the capacity of political parties to train and deploy enough pollwatchers to assure the presence of more than one party at every voting site (*junta receptora de votos*). Concerns were also expressed about the possibility of aggressive behavior by pollwatchers who could intimidate voters and disrupt the tabulation of results by filing politically motivated challenges (*impugnaciones*).

NDI plans to support the observation and “quick count” efforts of Ethics and Transparency and other local monitoring groups. The Institute also plans to work with the political parties and CSE to develop a code of conduct for party pollwatchers and assist the parties in their pollwatcher training. These NDI programs would be funded by a grant from the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The Institute is opening an office in Managua this week to facilitate these activities. The office will be headed by Dr. Guillermo Marquez Amado, a former President of the Electoral Tribunal of Panama, who has extensive experience in organizing party pollwatching efforts. Most recently, Dr. Marquez worked with NDI to monitor the Peruvian elections.

“Well-trained pollwatchers deployed throughout the country can reassure voters and, therefore, represent an integral part of any credible election process,” Wollack said. “Pollwatchers have the right to appropriately defend their respective party’s interest but also the responsibility to work cooperatively with their counterparts from other parties to protect the democratic process.”

Party leaders with whom the delegation met expressed interest in developing a pollwatcher manual that would include a code of conduct. The manual and code could then be incorporated in training programs, educating pollwatchers on the electoral process, as well as on their rights and responsibilities.

NDI is a non-profit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote civic participation, openness and accountability in government.

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