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REPORT TO THE PERMANENT COUNCIL
OAS ELECTORAL OBSERVATION MISSION
Suriname
General Election, May 25th, 2015

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Mrs. Sachi Antrieka Ramlal-Soekhoe, Interim Representative of Suriname
Secretary General, Luis Almagro
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Permanent Representatives and Permanent Observers
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is an honor for me to appear once again before this Permanent Council to report on the OAS Election Observation Mission to Suriname.

As you are aware, the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS) received last year in August an official invitation from the Republic of Suriname to deploy an Electoral Observation Mission (EOM) for the General Elections to be held on 25 May 2015, invitation which was accepted and I had the honor to be appointed to lead the OAS Electoral Observation Mission.

Since 1987, the OAS has deployed Electoral Observation Missions to Suriname for all seven General Elections.

The Mission that I headed and was co-chaired by a very able member of the Secretariat, Ms. Brenda Santamaría, consisted of 24-members of 13 different nationalities, which concentrated its efforts on observing a broad range of issues, including structural elements such as electoral organization and technology, boundaries definitions, gender equality, political financing, and the electoral dispute resolution system. In addition, the mission deployed international observers in all 10 constituencies on Election Day.

On Election Day, Suriname's citizens elected 51 members of the National Assembly of a total of more than 380 candidates, and 774 members of the Local Councils. The 118 members of District Councils were selected indirectly on the basis of the results of the Local Councils.

I will now refer to the work the Election Observation team did in the field prior to the election, on Election Day, and will also share with you some conclusions and recommendations.

In preparation and prior to the trip to the trip to Suriname we met with Ambassador Niermala Badrising in the OAS Mission in Washington, who is currently the Foreign Minister of Suriname, and she and her staff provided all the necessary support, opening doors for us in their country.

Throughout the week prior to the election, I together with members of the EOM, met with the national authorities to gather information on the process put in place and the preparedness for the elections. Authorities contacted included the Vice President, Robert Ameeralli; Minister of Foreign Affairs, Winston Lackin; Minister of Home Affairs, Edmund Leilis; the chair of the National Assembly, Ms. Jeniffer Simons; the chair of the Central Polling Authority, Eugene Merkus; and the chair of the Independent Electoral Council, Jennifer van Dijk – Silos.

The Mission also met with all relevant stakeholders in this election including political parties, civil society organizations, the international community, academia, and the media. In these meetings, and the ones held by the experts and observers at the local level, the Mission gathered information on the organization of the election, the implementation of technological solutions, and the campaign in progress.

Observers also had the opportunity to visit a number of campaign rallies, that in some cases were also attended by supporters of different political parties, a token of the camaraderie that is quite particular to Suriname. Party followers peacefully enjoyed the festive spirit of these partisan activities and demonstrated a civic interest in politics. A total of 25 political parties registered for the elections, 4 alliances counting 18 political parties, and 7 political parties registered individually.

Election Day

The team observed the elections in 61% of polling stations in all 10 districts of the country. The Mission was pleased to witness that the process was carried out in an orderly, peaceful and even festive manner. Observers were able to verify that most members of the polling stations were well trained, and that they understood and applied the legal procedures needed for election day.

The polling stations observed opened on time, were adequately staffed and fully equipped with all the materials required for the election. The Mission would like to highlight again the extraordinary commitment of polling station members, oversight personnel and security agents in the exercise of their duties and commends political parties for the camaraderie also shown throughout the day at polling stations.

The OAS/EOM was pleased to verify that some of the recommendations made by the OAS in 2010 had been adopted for this electoral process. These include the introduction of separate ballot boxes (stembuzen) for the local and national elections, which facilitated the ballot counting after the closing of the polls, and also the increase in the political representation of women in political party candidate lists.

The OAS/EOM welcomes the efforts made to improve the access to polling stations for persons with disabilities, including the introduction of special voting booths. However, the country would benefit from a more uniform procedure to assist them, as throughout the country OAS observers noticed that there were a high number of people assisted at the time of casting the vote, without clarity on who was supposed to help them, generating some confusion. In some polling stations family members accompanied them, while in others assistance was provided by polling station personnel, or party representatives.

The Mission observed that during the voting process and the counting of the ballots, political party representatives were, in most cases, seated outside the polling station, despite the fact that by regulation two parties are allowed to witness the process inside the polling station. They could take turns to do so if necessary, so that different parties could

be inside at different times. Political party representatives did not always understand their right to have formal representation inside the polling stations during the election and once the counting of the ballots began.

During the night of the election, the Ministry of Home Affairs collected and made public unofficial results for the National Assembly. That night results were published, giving an indication as to what the expected outcome of the election would be. The OAS/EOM requested to observe this informal process and the observation access granted was restrictive.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I, and my OAS Mission Team, want to take this opportunity to first congratulate the Government and the People of Suriname for their commitment to democracy and a well-run election process, and to thank the Government for the invitation to the OAS to observe the May 25th 2015 General Elections. I also want to express our gratitude to all the State institutions, political parties, civil society organizations, security forces, international community representatives, and the citizens of Suriname for their warm welcome to their country.

Before I go into the findings and recommendations, it is very important to note that already the very own Surinamese OKB, or Independent Electoral Bureau, made their own report identifying many of these issues and some more, and are acting on them.

Based on the information gathered during the Mission and in the spirit of further assisting Suriname in its efforts to continue strengthening its well-developed electoral process, the Electoral Observation Mission would like to offer some specific findings and recommendations, which are based on a thorough analysis of the electoral legal framework, the information gathered through meetings with stakeholders and direct observation. The findings are related to apportionment, electoral organization, transmission and processing of results, campaign financing, women participation and legal remedies.

- **Apportionment**

The OAS/EOM noticed that the average number of people represented in each electoral district varies significantly. A seat in one district can represent almost ten times more voters than in another. These distortions could be eventually revised in order to ensure a more balanced representation of inhabitants per district while ensuring that all regions in the country have access to parliament and political representation.

Suriname could explore mechanisms to remedy these disparities to ensure a more balanced representation of inhabitants per district while at the same time securing representation for all regions.

- **Electoral Organization**

The OAS/EOM Mission noticed that 64,590 polling cards, representing 18.3% of the total, had not been delivered to voters one week before the election took place. During the meetings held, the Mission noted that electoral officials and political parties did not have clarity if the polling card was in fact a necessary requirement for citizens to cast a vote. The OAS recommends an evaluation on the use of the polling cards and the creation of additional information mechanisms to inform voters regarding the location of their polling stations.

During some meetings, the Mission received concerns regarding the selection and appointment of the members of polling stations. The Mission consulted the Ministry of Home Affairs regarding these procedures and received a prompt written explanation. The Mission considers that this situation could be avoided if the polling workers were appointed by an independent electoral institution.

Regarding assisted voting, the Mission suggests that electoral authorities consider drafting a uniform procedure for those particular situations in order to avoid suspicion around this modality of voting.

- **Transmission and processing of results**

The EOM took note of some distrust and confusion regarding the technology used for the transmission and processing of the electoral results. In response to these concerns the Central Polling Authority organized a presentation in order to inform political parties and the Independent Electoral Council about the procedures. The Mission attended the session in order to better understand the concerns presented by political parties and the official responses to them. Also, the OAS/EOM expert on electoral technology received in depth information regarding the procedures.

The Mission considers important that the authorities evaluate the possibility of performing independent audits of the software itself and the results it produces. It is also advisable that a hard copy of the results is available for political parties at the end of the counting process at the polling stations in order for them to have the possibility to compare and contrast the information.

- **Campaign financing**

The EOM noted that in Suriname political parties do not receive any form of direct or indirect public funding and that much of their financing comes from voluntary contributions by party members. It is also important to notice that there are no regulations on private financing and anonymous contributions are permitted. In addition to this, it is not expressly forbidden in the law for governing parties to utilize public funds to promote their candidates.

The Mission analyzed the legislation and noted that political parties have to publish information about their sources of income and accounts annually. However, there is no entity directly responsible for the supervision of political financing and there are no sanctions in case the information is not presented on time or if it is inaccurate.

The OAS/EOM identified the need for Suriname to discuss and incorporate regulations regarding political-campaign financing and to consider introducing some sort of public funding scheme for political parties. To make any law further effective, it would be paramount for a government institution to be responsible of supervising political party finances.

- **Women participation**

In preparation for the general election in Suriname, both the Government and NGO's made important efforts to raise awareness on the importance of women's role in politics through discussions on strategies and more profiling of women during election periods. This effort was certainly crucial in promoting a higher participation of women in this election across the country.

The 2015 general elections were marked by a higher number of women candidates being fielded and elected by party combinations in comparison with 2010 general elections. Women participation has grown in comparison with last election when only 5 women were elected to occupy a position at the National Assembly. In 2015, 13 women were elected to occupy seats at the national level, representing 25% of its members.

Despite the efforts aimed to increase women participation, challenges still remain in order to give women more opportunities to occupy decision maker positions both at the government level institutions and political parties. In this context, the Mission urges parties to continue providing women with more favorable positions within their structures and in the candidate lists. It also recommends the passing of legislative regulations at a national level, for implementing effective quota mechanisms to ensure women equal access and participation.

- **Legal remedies**

The Electoral Law identifies the Independent Electoral Council as the authority in charge of taking measures in case complaints regarding an inadequate functioning of any polling station or main polling station are presented. However,

the law doesn't prescribe a procedure for filing and follow-up of these complaints. Moreover, the Electoral Law only regulates remedies for decisions taken on the voters' list; the registration of political organization; and the nomination of candidates. In all of these cases, the petitioner may appeal the decision to the President, who resolves the matter with the advice of a Legal Commission. However, matters concerning amendments to the voters' list may be brought to a judicial process.

The OAS/EOM recommends that legislators make efforts to ensure that the Electoral Law clearly defines what constitutes an electoral offence and to establish clear procedures for the presentation and investigation of complaints for election law violations in each stage of the electoral process. It also suggests that in all cases the stakeholders have the possibility to appeal to a judicial authority for that due process is respected.

Acknowledgements

Notwithstanding the recommendations I just mentioned, let me reiterate that the unanimous conclusion of the EOM is that the election in Suriname complied with international standards and expressed the will of the People.

Finally, I want to acknowledge and express our gratitude to the governments of Canada, Chile, France, Italy, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom, the United States for their contributions that made this mission possible.

And I would be remiss if I did not thank the OAS DECO team, Gerardo de Icaza, Brenda Santamaría, Julieta Maroni, and all the technical experts, for their tremendous know how, support, and professionalism which helped make this EOM mission a success.

Thank you very much for your attention.