

**OAS Delegation to the General Elections in Costa Rica**  
**February 5, 2006**  
**Observations**

At the invitation of the Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones, the Organization of American States sent a delegation of three persons to observe the elections in Costa Rica. Held on February 5, 2006, these elections selected a president and vice president, the 57 members of the unicameral congress and members of 81 municipal councils. The OAS delegation arrived on the Thursday prior to meet with presidential and vice presidential candidates. These meetings and other briefings were organized by the TSE and were attended by other accredited international observers, which numbered more than 60 by Election Day.

As is widely known, Costa Rica has a long history of democracy that began after the Revolution of 1948, which guaranteed universal suffrage and abolished the army. Costa Ricans value these traditions and actively participate in the selection of their leaders. Yet today, Costa Rica faces many challenges common in other Latin American countries, beginning with a growing disillusionment with the traditional political party system.

Until the elections of 2002, two parties dominated politics in Costa Rica. The first fissures of this system appeared in the last presidential elections of 2002. It was then that Otton Solis, a former member of the Partido de Liberacion Nacional, created his own political party, Partido de Accion Ciudadana, and first ran for president. His winning 26 percent of the vote in these elections forced an unprecedented second round election and challenged the hegemony of the two party system.

The relative weakening of the traditional parties was even more apparent in the elections of 2006. Despite a growing economy (estimated at 3.2 percent for the year 2005), the public had become impatient with a perceived inability of their leaders to address the concerns of the everyday citizens. Allegations of corruption and charges presented against three previous presidents only added to the discontent.

The primary issue of the 2006 campaign was the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Of all the Central American countries and the Dominican Republic, only Costa Rica has yet to ratify CAFTA. Most candidates with whom we met did not oppose the concept of free trade, but took issue with certain conditions of the present agreement. Other issues discussed were the urgent need to invest in the improvement and maintenance of the country's infrastructure and increased social investment for the population that despite its relative wealth have nearly 20 percent who still below the poverty line. Despite the political and economic challenges facing the country, the candidates demonstrated confidence in the democratic system and offered thoughtful proposals to address these challenges.

Fourteen candidates vied for the presidency and the candidates offered an array of different ideological and programmatic proposals. The Costa Rican system employs two vice presidents and the delegation make particular note that every one of the presidential

candidates had at least one woman on its ticket. In several cases, both vice-presidential candidacies were occupied by women. This observation, though, is tempered by the fact that all the presidential candidates were male.

On Election Day, the delegation visited polling sites in and around San Jose. Election Day in Costa Rica is a celebration: citizens of different political stripes peacefully gather together to vote and enjoy the festive atmosphere. Citizens of all social classes actively participate in these elections. In one polling station, for instance, the delegation had the privilege of meeting Dr. Franklin Chang, the first Costa Rican to travel to space, who was serving as a member of one of the voting tables. Costa Ricans carefully nurture their democratic values to future generations. A parallel election was available to children and the results of these elections were widely disseminated throughout the country.

The Tribunal Supremo de Elecciones should be commended for the organization of these elections. According to the TSE president, Oscar Fonseca Montoya, only one of the 6,163 polling sites did not open as planned. All of the other functioned normally and without incident. Preliminary reports show that only .42 percent of the ballots were spoiled and less than one percent of the ballots blank. Costa Ricans who decided to exercise their franchise were able to accurately make their preferences known.

It must be noted, however, that an unprecedented 34.56 percent of those registered to vote did not participate. While considered high in many countries of this hemisphere, 65 percent participation is the lowest on record for Costa Rica. In his address on Election Day night, President Fonseca noted his concern about the low turnout.

The comportment of the presidential candidates in the post-electoral period deserves special mention. Despite the razor thin difference between the first- and second-place candidates – less than half a percentage point – both called for calm and encouraged their supporters to refrain from premature celebrations. They and the other candidates expressed their confidence in the TSE and respect for its authority as the ultimate arbitrators in this election.

At this writing, the TSE has yet to certify the final results and declare a winner in the presidential race. Because congress is determined by proportional representation, the precise composition of this body is still not known either. Nevertheless, the political party candidates remain committed to the electoral process and the authorities who oversee it.