

International Presence in the Venezuelan Elections: Sovereignty and Cooperation as the Governing Principles

Electoral Power and Electoral Accompaniment

The Electoral Power is one of the five public branches that make up the Venezuelan State structure. The National Electoral Council (CNE, for its initials in Spanish), is the institutional organ and the governing entity of the electoral processes in Venezuela.

The National Electoral Council and the electoral accompaniment in Venezuela

The National Electoral Council, in the most transparent way possible, has opened a window to the world, through which the integrity and reliability of the Venezuelan automatized voting system has been projected and known. Since the year 2006, the National Electoral Council applied an International Accompaniment Plan, which is composed by two aspects: The Electoral Missions and the Accompaniment Program.

The Electoral Missions: According to the characteristics of the electoral process, the National Electoral Council assesses the scope and features of the International Accompaniment Plan, and decides whether the Electoral Missions will be invited to the country. The National Electoral Council allows the participation of the Electoral Missions of the international organizations it is a member of, or multilateral organizations with which it has promoted or developed electoral cooperation.

The International Accompaniment Program for each election includes the invitation and accreditation of electoral or political authorities, institutions, organizations and foreign personalities so that they can bear witness to the strength and transparency of the electoral processes carried out in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela. Such program involves participation in the technical stages and the activities scheduled to be performed before the election day, during the development of the mentioned election, and immediately after it.

What are the legal foundations that gave rise to electoral accompaniment in Venezuela?

Two main principles define the international electoral participation in the Venezuelan elections: Firstly, respect to the sovereignty of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, its democracy and its electoral processes; and secondly, the international electoral cooperation.

The Venezuelan laws and electoral standards set forth as follows: “International accompaniments are those institutions, electoral authorities, international organizations, or organisms from other States, as well as the institutions and persons in general, that have been properly accredited as such by the National Electoral Council, by means of an invitation issued by the organization, or by a request submitted before the National Electoral Council, in the times and under the conditions set forth in the corresponding plan”.

What happens with the international electoral observation in Venezuela?

In Venezuela, observation of the electoral event is exclusively reserved to Venezuelans, who are allowed to witness the transparency of the electoral process if, and only if, they are members of a civil organization, properly accredited by the National Electoral Council.

Since the application of the observation program in the year 2006, many national civil organizations have participated as observers, with representations throughout the country. More than 3,000 observers are accredited in every electoral process, who visit in average more than fifty percent of the active polling centers.

What are the differences between accompaniment and observation?

The international electoral observation process that has been in force since the decade of the 60s is associated to the processes of decolonization; it was created with a North-South, Eurocentric, and ethnocentric vision. The observation of the electoral processes is coming to be a common practice, and is marked with a strong asymmetric, mentoring and legitimating approach, on the grounds of the domestic values of the one who observes. This legitimating, self-referenced function has many times been excessive, endangering the processes of democratic consolidation.

In practice, the International Electoral Observation has become a sort of supranational action, governing over the State and also over the authority in charge of organizing the electoral process. Such figure is allegedly the holder of a collection of criteria, knowledges and instruments of technical evaluation, which ASSESSES the electoral process to DEMONSTRATE and CERTIFY its correct development. This condition, which has been established in terms of asymmetry and not in terms of equality, only takes into account its own criteria and intends to

become the only legitimation source of the national processes, with no regards of the cultural, political and social aspects of the countries visited by them.

The International Electoral Accompaniment is the alternative to this model, and it has increasingly being adopted by different electoral organizations and countries in the region. The international electoral accompaniment, which has been created in Venezuela, is a very broad and deep technical activity that covers all the stages and activities of the electoral events, and offers the accredited accompaniers' extensive guarantees in their work so that they are able of, in effect, verify the reliability and transparency of the electoral processes and their results. The activities and conditions performed in this process are innovative and original because of the high electoral technical development existing in Venezuela, which in all cases are considered to be superior that the so -called international standards.

What does the international electoral accompaniment program imply?

The International Electoral Accompaniment Program establishes the foundations for the presence and participation of electoral experts and other accredited persons, in all the technical and institutional stages, prior to the electoral event, during the development of the event, and after it.

The work schedule of the National Electoral Council allows us to follow the electoral process in every one of the stages, from a legal, political and technical point of view. The Venezuelan international electoral accompaniment is a pioneer and has been created on the basis of mutual cooperation and respect among sovereign countries. It complies with the principles set forth in the Venezuelan legal framework applicable to this matter, namely the principles of constitutional supremacy, legality, sovereignty, integrity and territorial inviolability, self-

determination of the nations, no inherence, impartiality, transparency and respect for the electoral rules and authorities.

What are the stages followed that the international electoral accompaniment process in Venezuela?

The process is carried out in three clearly established stages:

The pre- electoral stage, in which the electoral technicians, non-governmental organizations representatives, experts and scholars from many countries monitor the auditing process performed by the automatized voting platform and the electoral instruments.

The electoral stage, when the members of the accompaniment program are allowed to the activities related to the campaign closing, and the celebration of the elections.

Finally, the post- electoral stage, where the international accompaniers are allowed to attend the proclamation of the elected candidates, as well as the auditing processes after the election.

In all the stages, the accompaniers interact with electoral authorities, National Electoral Council technical support teams, electoral officials, and the technical and political representatives of the participating political organizations, as well as the mass media, all of this in the framework of the conditions set forth by the National Electoral Council.

Which are the activities that the international accompaniers must accomplish?

The international accompaniers shall accomplish the following activities:

- Participation in the auditing process of the electoral system, before and after the electoral event.
- Visits to the technical spaces, and the centers of production, storage and distribution of machines and electoral material.
- Tours to the different polling centers and free contact with the officials, witnesses, and citizens in charge of the process.
- Participation in the civil auditing process, which implies the opening of fifty-five percent of the boxes where the polling vouchers are safeguarded, and the confrontation with the scrutiny record issued by the polling machine. In this stage, the officers should verify the nonexistence of discrepancy between the data contained in the scrutiny record and the polling vouchers.
- Meetings with the National Electoral Council technical support team.
- Contact with the mass media.
- Delivery of a post- election report to the Electoral Power, regarding the conclusions drawn from the work executed, including a report of situations and recommendations.

What is the importance and significance of the international electoral accompaniment in Venezuela?

The National Electoral Council International Electoral Accompaniment Program encourages the participation and encounter among fellows, among peers, among those who know, because of their current or former condition as the organizers or administrators of electoral processes, about the how-to of an electoral process, its

intricacies, its complications, the implications of every stage, and every decision made, and about the contingences that can emerge, and the way to solve them.

The program bolsters the exchange of experiences, and mutual enrichment among the accredited experts and the electoral authority, by appreciating the knowledge among those who can understand and grasp the value of electoral management, the way in which each electoral administrator solves problems, improves and modernizes its procedures and, most of all, all of them can learn from the strengths of the polling systems from other countries. Because of all of this, the National Electoral Council believes that electoral authorities' accompaniment in every country of the world is essential in the task of the International Accompaniment.

New paradigms in the international electoral cooperation

This new concept of international accompaniment is not exclusive from Venezuela. As a result of the deepening and strengthening of democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean during the last decades, several countries are moving forward to a new paradigm, going from the traditional Observation Missions, which are characterized by their invasive and tutelary nature, towards processes of cooperation and institutional strengthening regarding electoral matters. The progress in other countries of the region regarding this subject is noticeable, while the countries that still embrace those old ideas, in which the recognition or accreditation of organizations, countries or multilateral organisms, which are not related to the nations and their citizens, are increasingly less.

Which international organizations have participated in the international accompaniment programs of electoral nature in Venezuela?

The National Electoral Council has incorporated a series of organizations and integration mechanisms to the international accompaniment program, such as the Union of South American Nations (USAN), the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR, for its initials in Spanish), the Latin America Electoral Experts Council (CEELA, for its initials in Spanish), the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States (CELAC, for its initials in Spanish), the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America (ALBA, for its initials in Spanish), the MERCOSUR Parliament (also known as PARLASUR, for its acronym in Spanish).

Additionally, the international accompaniment program relies on the participation of authorities and technicians from the countries that have entered into cooperation and exchange agreements regarding technological electoral development with the Venezuelan Electoral Power, such as the Russian Federation, India, Philippines, the Republic of Mali and the Republic of South Korea, as well as the electoral organization of countries members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and the African Union (AU).