

For Immediate Release  
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## **IRI's Preliminary Statement on Venezuela's Presidential Election**

### **Introduction**

The International Republican Institute (IRI) dispatched 27 international observers to monitor yesterday's Presidential election in 14 states across Venezuela. The delegation includes specialists in election law, international affairs, campaigns, and communications. IRI has observed 67 elections, and the individual members of this delegation have observed 44 separate national elections in 20 different countries. IRI was invited to observe Venezuela's Presidential elections by the National Electoral Council (CNE), which provided official credentials for all members of the delegation. IRI would like to thank the staff of the CNE for their assistance during recent weeks.

For four years, IRI has supported the efforts of Venezuelan citizens to strengthen the country's democratic institutions, particularly to increase youth participation in the political system. IRI has also closely monitored developments in Venezuela, especially the ambitious electoral reforms approved by Congress in December 1997 and in May 1998. IRI deployed the largest delegation of international observers to monitor the November 8 regional elections.

The IRI delegation received extensive briefings on the challenges facing Venezuela's political and electoral institutions. Representatives of the CNE, political parties, polling firms, and civic groups discussed the election with the IRI delegation in Caracas and in the 14 states where the observers deployed to monitor the vote.

Yesterday, the delegates saw voting at more than 250 voting tables (mesas) and spoke with hundreds of voters about the election. The delegates monitored the vote count in automated and manual voting centers. They also scrutinized the procedures used at the vote-count facilities in the state capitals as well as here in Caracas.

This preliminary statement summarizes IRI's initial observations on the conduct of yesterday's election. IRI will follow closely the CNE's announcement of complete official results and the formation of the new government in the coming days and weeks. IRI will issue a comprehensive report on the delegation's findings in January and reserves the right to modify the following observations as events surrounding the election become clearer.

### **Preliminary Findings**

IRI judges elections based on four stages in the process. The first is the pre-election phase, in which candidates and parties representing a range of political views should be able to compete in an environment free of intimidation, and an electoral council should be formed capable of drafting rules to provide for a transparent electoral process. To a large degree, these conditions were present in the period before December 6, and Presidential candidates were able to freely offer their views to the public.

The second stage is election day, when the voters choose their preferred candidate in the secrecy of the voting booth. Third, the votes must be counted and tallied in an accurate and transparent fashion, and the contending parties must be given the opportunity to challenge specific aspects of the conduct of the vote. Finally, during the post-election phase, the election's results are reflected in the formation of a new government.

Several positive features characterized yesterday's vote:

- IRI's delegates were impressed by the civic duty Venezuelans demonstrated by voting in such large numbers. Turnout is estimated at 65 percent, a great increase over the last Presidential elections. After some minor administrative problems opening the voting centers, the election was conducted in an orderly fashion.
- Electoral reforms approved one year ago mandated that pollworkers and many other election officials would be selected at random from the voter registry. Despite delays in the selection, accreditation, and training of pollworkers, IRI assessors found that most of these citizens performed their duties with a laudable sense of responsibility.
- The balloting on election day itself was held in a largely tranquil, calm atmosphere.

IRI's observers did find room for improvement in the conduct of the election. None of the difficulties noted by IRI delegates compromised the basic integrity of the vote; rather, the following comments are respectfully intended to provide the CNE and the Venezuelan government with suggestions to improve the country's electoral system. IRI's final report on the delegation's findings will include specific recommendations focusing on these and other issues:

- There is room to question the allocation of CNE funding. For example, much was spent on voting machines (which did function surprisingly well given the many delays in procurement and programming process). Most of the CNE's television spots through the end of the campaign simply urged citizens to vote, despite ample and early evidence that voter interest was, in most categories, higher than in past elections. On the other hand, too little was done to educate voters on how to cast a ballot for the November elections. In the future, the CNE should devote a greater share of its limited resources to voter education. Democracy would perhaps have been better served if less money had been spent on the automation and turnout projects and more on voter education and pollworker training.
- Ballots should be simplified. Given other major changes in the electoral system, it is understandable that the CNE chose to alter the traditional ballot design as little as possible. However, the large proportion of spoiled ballots in the legislative and regional elections clearly indicates that a redesign of such complicated ballots is overdue. The ballot used in the Presidential vote was relatively simple, but the experience of the November 8 elections suggests that the ballot itself should specify clearly the number of ovals that should be marked and the office being contested.
- As noted above, most of the Venezuelan citizens chosen for electoral service complied admirably with this civic responsibility, but the CNE should have done more to support them in their labors. Greater efforts should be made in the future to notify those citizens

who are selected, to train them in their duties, to deliver credentials in a timely manner, and to pay their wages expeditiously.

- Venezuela's election law should be amended to provide greater clarity in the areas of media access and campaign finance. The articles in the Organic Law on Suffrage and Political Participation on these issues are alternately too rigorous or too vague. For example, Venezuela's Congress should consider amending the article that limits candidates to two minutes of television advertising per channel per day. IRI bases this recommendation on the principle that the rule of law is ill served when laws are not enforced.
- With Mr. Chávez's victory, constitutional changes are promised. Among those that should be examined is the possibility of requiring Presidential runoff elections. While a runoff was not required in this election, such a process is followed in many countries in Latin America and elsewhere, usually leading to increased political stability.

The municipal elections due in mid-1999 will provide an opportunity for the CNE to address these difficulties; and the remainder can be addressed before the next electoral cycle.

IRI promotes democracy in 30 countries around the world. In most, democratic institutions are just being founded, while, over the past 40 years, Venezuela's democracy has taken root. It has led to peaceful transfers of power through elections, a vibrant press, labor unions, private sector, and an active NGO sector that reflect the opinion of Venezuela's civil society. Venezuela's developed democratic system will continue to serve the country in the future. IRI looks forward to working with Venezuela's elected leaders and election officials to further strengthen the country's democratic institutions and values.

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