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“As ‘defenders’ of democracy, observer groups in restrictive environments should lobby governments for the right to observe, effectively utilize technology, improve on the system of indicators, and develop synergy with international groups. Despite the challenges they face, election observers must continue to adapt their strategies and methodologies to new political and economic situations. They must never give up the fight for free and fair elections.”

—Abril Pérez
Election Observer, Nicaragua

“Is Effective Election Observation Possible in Politically Restrictive Environments? Perspectives from Nicaragua”

June 27, 2012

In countries where semi-authoritarian regimes seek to maintain power while benefiting from “democracy” status, domestic election observers have increasingly come under fire for reporting on instances of electoral manipulation and fraud. As Nicaragua’s preeminent election observer organization, Grupo Cívico Ética y Transparencia has adapted to such restrictions by training election experts and educating citizens as observers, developing risk maps of areas most vulnerable to manipulation, and implementing a set of measurable indicators for electoral fraud. In her presentation, Reagan-Fascell Democracy Fellow **Abril Pérez** encouraged election observer groups in restrictive political environments to build on the Nicaraguan experience, particularly by expanding on and refining their system of indicators to objectively and comprehensively evaluate the entire electoral process.

With the development of enhanced measurements, Pérez argued, a set of indicators can serve as an indispensable tool for observers working in a range of challenging settings, allowing for comparisons of electoral systems and outcomes across time and space. In particular, indicators allow experts to conduct sophisticated statistical analyses while also enabling citizens to engage in observation—a strategy Ética y Transparencia has called “being massive and elite at the same time.”

NED’s program officer for Latin America and the Caribbean **Julio Rank** echoed Pérez’s concerns about increasing impediments to electoral observation in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America. In these difficult contexts, he argued, electoral observers must distinguish between electoral fraud and electoral malpractice, and tailor their recommendations to the government’s intentions and challenges. Whereas regimes committing electoral malpractice may simply need assistance in conducting elections more effectively, regimes engaging in fraud require stringent monitoring.

In response to questions, Pérez explained that more detailed indicators of electoral fraud will facilitate engagement by “citizen observers.” With clear guidelines of what to look for, citizens will be empowered to observe and report on instances of fraud. In the face of continued challenges in restrictive environments, Pérez emphasized that observers must do everything they can to remain nonpartisan and continue the fight for free and fair elections.

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