

GUATEMALA

ENCOURAGING INDIGENEOUS PEOPLES' PARTICIPATION

Indigenous peoples in Guatemala praised the EU EOM contribution with its recommendations and incentive to civil society's initiatives promoting electoral integrity.

The European Union Election Observation Mission (EU EOM) invited to observe the 2023 general elections in Guatemala reported on the limited political representation of indigenous peoples in the higher levels of policymaking. The EU EOM also observed a lack of voter education and limited campaign information available in indigenous languages, and how it impacted monolingual voters, primarily women.

In Guatemala, indigenous peoples account for almost 44 per cent of the country's population. While the 1985 Constitution recognises the social structure of the diverse ethnic groups, there is no normative framework in place to actively promote the indigenous peoples' political participation.

The presence of EU long-term observers throughout Guatemala boosted the confidence of the indigenous communities to engage and promote electoral integrity initiatives.

"The EU Mission was a source of motivation for our organisation", said Ms Gloria Núñez, based in Livingston, a municipality where she runs the NGO 'Political School for Garífuna Women' that promotes Garífuna and Afro-descendant women participation in politics. "They supported us, engaging in the discussion of Garifuna women issues, and made us visible", she added.

As part of its overall assessment of the electoral process, the EU EOMs always consider human rights issues, including the participation of minority groups in the political life and that includes indigenous peoples. Despite the limited representation, indigenous organisations were among the most relevant actors in supporting the integrity of the elections, actively calling for respect of the Constitution throughout the process, promoting voter education, citizen election observation, and women's participation, as highlighted by the EU EOM.

Civil society also drew attention to the lack of voter education materials suitable for indigenous peoples. The Garífuna are one of the least represented indigenous groups in the country, but they make up around 9% of the population of Livingston. Absence of sufficient voter education materials may have limited their access to information.

Gloria Núñez described the impact of the EU observers' presence as very encouraging and supportive of their work: *"When the observers first came to visit us at our office, it was a real milestone"*, she recalled.

"Later, when we organised a forum with all the women candidates for the Izabal department Assembly, the observers attended together with the Chief Observer, Mr Jordi Cañas", Ms Núñez underlined. "Many citizens in our area expressed satisfaction for having the observers among us", she added.

Deysee Maribel Cotom Ixcot is the general coordinator of the Mayan women political association, MOLOJ, which observed the elections and collaborated with the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) in conducting voter education workshops. She also pointed out that the lack of voter education and electoral information in indigenous languages hindered the access of monolingual voters to essential information.

Based on its meetings with a wide range of stakeholders, the EU EOM reported on the inadequacy of indigenous language voter education materials, which were scarce and published very late in the process. In its final report, the EU EOM recommended: *"The TSE to increase production and dissemination of voter education and election information materials in the most widely-spoken indigenous languages to provide voters, including rural monolingual population, with relevant information."*

“The findings contained in the EU final report are similar to those that we at MOLOJ identified and presented in our own election observation conclusions», said Ms Cotom Ixcot. “I believe the EU EOM’s recommendations are essential because they offer legitimacy to those we are also making as civil society”, she added.

The Moloj’s election observation initiative covered many municipalities in 10 departments, where they met EU observers. *“The relationship that the EU EOM established and the dialogues with indigenous authorities, women’s organisations and NGOs, offered opportunities for exchange, providing the local organisations with confidence, which also strengthened the respect that exists towards the European Union”, Ms Cotom Ixcot concluded.*