

ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES



Opening Remarks

by

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**Third Meeting of the Association of
Caribbean Electoral Organizations (ACEO)**

Kingston, Jamaica
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The Most Honorable Bruce Golding, Prime Minister of Jamaica,
Professor Errol Miller, Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Jamaica,
Mr. Jean-Pierre Kingsley, President and CEO of the International Federation of
Electoral Systems, better known as IFES,
Distinguished Heads of Electoral Organizations of the Caribbean,
Members of the EOJ present,
Mr. Danville Walker, former Head of the EOJ,
Mr. Pablo Gutierrez, Political Affairs Secretariat OAS,
Specially invited guests, especially those who are coming from the African
continent,
Members of the Corps Diplomatique,
Colleagues from the OAS,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I thank you all for your presence here today at this important and timely
Third General Meeting of the Association of Caribbean Electoral Organizations
(ACEO). I am quite pleased to be here with you, at the opening of this meeting.
The convening of this Third General Meeting of the ACEO in Kingston
represents, in my view, a notable opportunity to re-engage the Caribbean
Community in further deepening democracy and strengthening electoral
processes in the Caribbean.

I take this opportunity to thank the Election Office of Jamaica for hosting
this meeting and for all the assistance provide so far and I am convinced that
also thanks to your unwavering support this will be a successful meeting.

I would like to thank all the election supervisors, officials, and
commissioners for their participation in this forum. I recognize your
commitment to the development of well- organized electoral processes and I
commend you for your continued efforts in this regard.

I also want to recognize IFES, Jean Pierre Kingsley and his team for supporting the OAS in the organization of this meeting. The OAS is pleased to collaborate with an institution such as IFES, because as many of you know, IFES has accumulated a great deal of election-related experience in a number of countries around the world, including Latin America and the Caribbean. IFES brings a great deal to this collaboration with a pool of more than 1500 democracy and governance experts capable of addressing almost any electoral challenge.

Elections are in the political life of any country critical moments, sometimes reflecting a continuation of a settled democratic tradition, and sometimes, as in the most recent elections in the Western Hemisphere, marking a remarkable historic moment, with global consequences. The election of Senator Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States not only symbolizes the turning of the page in the history book of the USA, but also provides for a platform for hope, for a future, as many expect, characterized by a new approach towards peace, security and prosperity.

The OAS leadership looks forward to a meaningful engagement with the new administration also hoping that the Western Hemisphere will be afforded an important place in the overall foreign policy. Many issues and interests will be communicated by a diverse group of international and regional actors and, I believe that in this competition for time, attention and priority it will be important for countries and regions, such as the Caribbean Community, to engage early and through the appropriate channels on a limited number of issues in unity with the new Obama administration.

Now back to the matter at hand. I strongly believe that the overall objective of the ACEO as stated in 1998 continues to be relevant today - to foster a self-

sufficient mechanism for horizontal cooperation among electoral organizations in the Caribbean in order to improve voter registration, voter turnout and quality of elections in this very important region.

In my view this re-engagement of the ACEO is not only timely but also necessary. We believe that the ACEO can serve as an important instrument for responding to the many requests the OAS receives from member states to provide targeted and adequate technical assistance to election offices throughout the region. As many of you know, during the past five years, the OAS has observed elections in countries such as Guyana, St. Lucia, St. Vincent & Grenadines, Jamaica and Grenada, to name few.

While we can confirm that these elections were conducted in a free and fair manner, it is important to continue to improve our electoral administration capacity by sharing best practices, sourcing more resources, developing better training programs and promoting peer group support through organizations such as the ACEO.

We have identified a number of factors critical to the overall quality of the election in the Caribbean and, which the OAS believes merits more attention by the electoral authorities.

For example, as public debate increases about the financing of political parties and campaigns, the ACEO can serve as a forum for election authorities and political leaders to discuss the viability of proposed financing regimes and their applicability in the Caribbean context.

What we have learned in the OAS long trajectory of election observation, over 130 elections to date, is that successful elections are built on a foundation of the legitimacy of institutional frameworks and institutions that regulate the

transparency of the electoral processes. I have stated before that it is important to strengthen electoral institutions by making them independent from the party-political process, by professionalizing and equipping them adequately and provide them with their own budget. In my view there is too much variety in the structure, operations and conduct of electoral organizations in the Caribbean. Pre- and post-electoral difficulties can be avoided or overcome if electoral institutions are respected and function as technically sound electoral machineries.

Often purely technical issues are politicized in the campaign leading up to elections and as a consequence frustrate, in a situation of often limited resources, the preparatory process towards elections. In addition, issues such as constitutional reform, electoral technology and electoral system design, the relationship between electoral systems and political party systems, access to media, education and communication programs, and the need to involve stakeholders through dialogue are often insufficiently understood or inadequately considered in planning election support.

Furthermore, ensuring public confidence in the integrity and viability of the many electoral activities – which form part of the electoral cycle, is not only a common problem for the Caribbean but in many countries around the world as well.

The challenges that the electoral organizations of the Caribbean face such as regulating their financing regime and introducing new technologies (e.g. voter registration) require more cooperation among electoral institutions in order to share experiences and solutions. Therefore, the strengthening of a sub-regional association like the ACEO would provide its members with an exceptional platform for much collaboration. In the long term, it will also ensure improved electoral processes, greater citizen participation and trust in their electoral

institutions, as well as facilitate horizontal cooperation among the member states of this region.

In many instances, specific legislation governing such issues as dual citizenship, residency, absentee voting, transparency and accountability of campaign financing, voter registration, the functioning and structure of political parties is absent or if addressed in the constitution or specific electoral laws not clear and open to multi-interpretation, which does weaken the democratic process. All above mentioned issues can generate tensions and conflict before, during and after an election process. While it is true that elections can be divisive in nature, credible, free and fair elections can also diffuse potential pre-and post-electoral conflict if the electoral institutions which regulate and manage are reliable, respected and authoritative.

For example, in the case of Haiti in the 2006 election preparation, we learned the importance and impact of strengthening electoral processes in the context of democratic governability and stability. Beginning in 2005, with the technical support of the OAS, as of today the provisional electoral council was able to register more than 95% of its adult population for the first time in modern history.

Since then, the OAS has been implementing a Program to modernize the Civil Registry and Identification System in Haiti contributing significantly to the revitalization of democratic institutions in the country. This has enabled the widespread participation of Haitian society in more than four electoral processes since 2006. I am pleased to note that the dates for the partial senatorial election have been set by the Government and congratulate the Provisional Electoral Council for this. The OAS stand ready to continue its support to the CEP to facilitate a smooth electoral process.

Undoubtedly, each election process is defined by its particular political, social and cultural context, and sometimes even by the financial and economic situation. Electoral officials should therefore evaluate the entire electoral cycle, and take stock of lessons learned.

In the end, the goal should be to develop sustainable and credible electoral institutions and processes which are central in building sustainable democracy.

In this regard, IFES and the OAS have identified two immediate objectives:

- Reinstitute the ACEO as a sub-regional forum for the further improvement of electoral processes in the region and diversify the target audience to embrace political, governmental and civil society actors and include them in the deliberations of the ACEO.
- Identify applicable models of enforceable disclosure requirements regarding campaign contributions and expenses in the Caribbean and actions to make registration easier, more inclusive and more accurate.

Besides the specific objectives set out for this meeting, we recommend that your discussions also take into account the several key conclusions and recommendations presented by recent OAS Electoral Missions in the Caribbean. These include regulating political party and campaign financing, appropriate use of electoral technology and the role of stakeholders in the electoral processes of the region.

The OAS along with IFES stands ready to work jointly with the ACEO to provide technical assistance to facilitate the consolidation of technically and financially well-equipped, independent, non-partisan electoral institutions in the greater Caribbean. We see this as an essential step toward enhancing

confidence in the electoral institutions of the future and deepening the democratic process.

As members of the ACEO, I call on you to go even further than the technical assistance component, though germane to the whole process, in order to find innovative ways to link electoral assistance to the well-established democratic frameworks the Caribbean region has cultivated and maintained for so long.

I wish you all the best in your deliberations and I look forward to working with the ACEO in the coming years, in partnership with IFES and other sub-regional and regional organizations.

I thank you very much for your attention.