

2-24-2005

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Recommended Citation

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Honduras Primaries Yield Polar Opposites For President In 2006

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2005-02-24

Hondurans went to the polls Feb. 20 to choose candidates for national elections slated for Nov. 27. The following day, the Tribunal Superior Electoral (TSE) announced winners: Porfirio Lobo Sosa for the ruling Partido Nacional (PN) and Manuel Zelaya for the opposition Partido Liberal (PL). Voters also chose candidates for 256 congressional representatives and alternates, and for 298 mayors. The process went off without any disqualifying incident, as Organization of American States (OAS) observers anticipated, but there were serious glitches that disenfranchised some would-be voters.

Lobo is president of the Congress. Under his leadership, legislators passed a notorious anti-gang law noted for its brutal provisions (see NotiCen, 2003-08-28) and a law prohibiting same-sex marriage. He won the primary on a platform calling for more severe law-enforcement measures to combat crime, not least of which is a bill to establish capital punishment, abolished in Honduras in 1957. Lobo said he would apply the death penalty in cases of terrorism, narcotrafficking, murder, and rape.

Fierce opposition to Lobo

Opposition to Lobo was intense among human rights activists and others uncomfortable with the reach and scope of his national-security vision. Ramon Custodio, national human rights commissioner, said that allowing Lobo to run violates the Constitution. In a letter to Attorney General Ovidio Navarro, he called Lobo's candidacy "an assault on the state of law." Custodio cited Article 240 of the Constitution, which specifies who, by virtue of position within the state or relationship to the state, "cannot be elected president of the republic." He said he plans legal action to disqualify Lobo on constitutional grounds as well as pursuing an indictment of TSE members for having permitted the candidacy.

Also reacting negatively to Lobo, the Sociedad Interamericana de Prensa (SIP) sent a letter to President Ricardo Maduro expressing concern that the candidate threatened the media with criminal prosecution were they to publish the results of their own exit polls. The OAS mission, however, seemed to support the suppression of the polls. Said Moises Benamor, chief of the mission, "The [election] law provides, in Article 182, the possibility of doing this kind of polling. What it regulates is its release, and this, I believe, we as a mission see as a regulation aimed at not altering the normal order during the development of the process. One must be aware that exit projections are not 100% accurate, and that definitely does not help the voter who is still in line and the election worker who is still working."

Huge defeat for Pastor

Lobo Sosa beat Tegucigalpa Mayor Miguel Pastor for the PN top spot. Pastor did not expect the crushing defeat he suffered, but promised to fight on toward the 2009 elections, while at the same time calling for party unity and support for Lobo. Pastor was surprised at his loss because of the vehemence and breadth of the opposition to Lobo within and outside of the party. Lobo Sosa forces also won handily in mayoral elections.

Speaking for Trabajo y Seguridad, the pro-Lobo movement within the party, winning candidate Nelly Soliman said, "We won by a wide margin, we strengthened the movement, and the people trust us because we did a job before, during, and after [the campaign]." Trabajo y Seguridad is one of four distinct tendencies within the party.

Observers, critics, and analysts were left to answer not why Lobo Sosa won this was expected but why he won by such a large margin. Preliminary TSE figures tally the spread at 63%-34%. Sociologist Julio Navarro said that the reason lies deep in the traditional structure of the PN, that Pepe, as he is called, represents the very oldest values of the movement. He said that, in the campaign, Lobo positioned himself with a precise, brief, and authoritative message at a moment when society in general was crying out for authority. "Another important aspect is that Pepe Lobo knew how to take advantage of the image projected from the Congreso Nacional of being a conciliator, and even though he appears totally hard in the Congress, he was a peacemaker, and that helped him."

Former human rights commissioner Leo Valladares said Lobo was helped by his public image as a strong advocate of security measures, being at once mature but not old, being calm. All of that earned him more public confidence than Pastor could muster. Valladares called Pastor's campaign "counterproductive, which is to say, it touched on themes that were not of specific interest to the people." Moreover, he said, Lobo benefited from the campaign of insults hurled against him.

Oswaldo Ramos Soto, who ran with Pastor in the Nuevo Tiempo movement within the PN as a candidate for Congress, said that Lobo won the hard-line nationalist vote and that, in primaries, hard-liners tend to vote in greater numbers than do moderates. Another factor that worked against Pastor was his position as mayor of the capital. Pastor has an administrative style that works for Tegucigalpa but doesn't play well nationally, opined Navarro.

Pastor concentrated too much in the campaign on image, rather than defining himself in the mind of the voter. He attacked too many party stalwarts and assumed that the PN voter was more tolerant of independence than they turned out to be.

Analyst Juan Ferrera said, "The [Pastor] campaign strategy failed by not being decisive; it is a clear message both for the people and for the media that the voter reasons more [than they think]." Zelaya the populist Lobo will face off in November against the PL's Manuel Zelaya, a candidate of a different stripe. Leader of the Esperanza Liberal, one of eight movements within his party, Zelaya ran on a "citizen power" platform, stressing his intention to "profoundly transform the democratic system and develop the small-business people, rural and urban. In my administration I will decentralize the state so that citizens forge their own destiny in an autonomous way, without

government intervention into their personal business." He said he would turn power over to the country's 298 municipalities so that they would not have to depend on central government decisions.

Veering far from the concentration on security of his adversary, Zelaya promised, "I will organize society to give confidence to investors, and I will create a self-protected society." Zelaya is a businessman with rural roots who claims, "I know in depth the problems of the campo because that's where I was raised. Therefore I will improve the conditions of the campesinos of my country from [a position of] power."

Zelaya has been a deputy since 1994, elected three times. He was president of the Asociacion de Madereros de Olancho, a bank executive, and, from 1994 to 1998, minister of social development. He won over a field of seven with 52% of the vote. In all, Hondurans chose among 34,000 candidates for 3,000 offices throughout the country. The primaries did not go off smoothly. In many places, polling stations opened late.

There was a shortage of ballots and other essential materials, but, said President Maduro, "In general terms, the process developed in a peaceful and orderly way and what is happening is not out of the ordinary." Officials estimated irregularities in less than 0.1% of 18,368 voting tables in the 18 provinces of the country. The most serious flaw, according to the TSE, was that some 60,000 people were denied the vote because they did not have their identity documents in order. Voters, who must be 18 years of age or older, were required to show identification valid since 1996.

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