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Honduran Presidential Election Throws Country Into Crisis

by LADB Staff

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The Honduran Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) has called the Nov. 27 presidential elections for Manuel "Mel" Zelaya of the opposition Partido Liberal (PL). Zelaya appeared to have beaten governing Partido Nacional (PN) candidate Porfirio Lobo Sosa in a close race punctuated with personal attacks and accusations. Lobo refused to concede as the early votes were counted, complaining that the TSE had called the race without presenting firm data. In fact, the TSE presented no data. As the week wore on, there was no official winner.

Called the dirtiest race in memory, the negative campaign was driven by the fact that the candidates were not very far apart on most issues. Where they did differ was on the return of the death penalty. Lobo was for it, Zelaya against. The death penalty issue was seen as a referendum on the Mano Dura policy of President Ricardo Maduro against the US-bred gangs menacing the country of late (see NotiCen, 2004-05-20). That policy saw alleged gang members given long jail sentences on the flimsiest of charges.

Both major candidates campaigned against the gangs, but Zelaya called for firm law enforcement within a context that sought to identify and change the social causes of the international gang phenomenon. Spiraling violence made the gang issue the central theme of the election, and Lobo took full credit for spearheading the Maduro government's severe policies against them.

Many analysts said Lobo's vehemence, amounting to an extermination campaign, boomeranged and cost him crucial votes. The commentators said too many people were reminded of the worst dictatorship in Honduras' history, that of the PN's Tuburcio Carias (1932-1949). Zelaya went into full presidential mode immediately after the TSE called the race, but neither Lobo nor President Ricardo Maduro accepted the result, which amounted to little more than an opinion on the part of TSE president Aristides Mejia. Mejia declared Zelaya the winner at about 6:30 p.m. on Nov. 27, but by noon on Nov. 29, official results had still not appeared on the TSE official Web site as promised.

No winner

Maduro remained adamant, declaring on Nov. 28 that, absent hard numbers, there was "still no winning candidate." He told reporters, "I want to emphasize and remind people that the official result, the official declaration of the elections at any level, be it of council members, deputies, mayors, or president of the Republic, is only made by the TSE."

Maduro acknowledged that previous elections had taken days to reach a final result. What he was objecting to, and what he found unacceptable, was the closed nature of the count and the total lack of preliminary results, which he said was unprecedented in the last 25 years of democracy. Irrate though he was, Maduro was careful to reassure the public that there was no crisis and that at some point there would be an official winner.

But the public was not reassured to learn from him that "we don't know what happened in the Tribunal Supremo Electoral." He speculated on the possibility of dissent among the members and urged them to publish some data, any data they had. The early call was thrown further into doubt the evening of Nov. 28, when TSE representative Jacobo Hernandez of the PN called Mejia's declaration "absurd." Mejia is a member of the PL and had urged that Lobo Sosa "should admit that there is a winner, and that winner is President-elect Manuel Zelaya."

By Nov. 29, at least one national newspaper was declaring the country on the verge of a "political and electoral crisis," and some media were reporting Lobo the winner. Also by that date, Comisionado de Derechos Humanos Ramon Custodio Lopez entered the fray, accusing the TSE of negligence. He did not threaten legal action, but his statement brought a response from Mejia.

The TSE president denied failure on the part of his institution and instead blamed a breakdown of the "mechanism." He said that holdups occurred when, for instance, "the teachers [polling officials] assembled, the Ministry of Education presented activist teachers of one party-the PN so this mechanism had to be discarded and at the last minute others had to be found who had never served [as officials.]" Other TSE officials offered other excuses.

TSE director Carlos Humberto Romero said, "In some voting centers officials were not allowed access to the data and were not allowed to leave with the information when it was available." The excuses fell on deaf ears around the country. In Tegucigalpa, more than 3,000 angry PN activists protested in the streets against the TSE with placards reading "Justice" and "We Demand a Vote Count."

In El Paraiso, 100 km east of the capital, a local PL official, Miguel Adrian Mejia, was shot to death in an interparty altercation regarding the delay. PN sympathizers accused the PL of a plot to steal the election. Maduro went into session with Organization of American States (OAS) Ambassador Frank Almaguer and with the candidates. "I met with them to make a call for sanity, patience, and I have asked the party leaders that they, too, collect their vote tallies and start to count so that they can start to transmit official results, more than just surveys," he said. This seemed to be backtracking from his previous statements, opening the door to resolution by means other than an official result.

Mejia was reportedly hoping for a concession on someone's part, but Lobo had shown no indication of giving up, and Zelaya was already acting presidential. His Nov. 29 schedule called for, among other things, a trip to El Salvador to meet with President Antonio Saca. As further evidence of backtracking, or capitulation, Maduro said he had ready all the necessary transition documentation, whereas he had only hours before said there could be no question of transition activity until after the election was certified. The situation was deteriorating along with Maduro's position.

Zelaya called for Maduro to step down, insinuating that the president was leading the country toward further violence. "The refusal of Maduro to admit the defeat of his party is of great danger to the country, and therefore I'm not responsible for what happens to our democratic system if Maduro continues in this position," said Zelaya. He said Maduro was "playing with fire" by showing

disrespect for the popular will. He concluded, "Maduro has already done sufficient damage to this country and should retire from the presidency and go home."

The word "disaster" had begun to creep into media reporting. The word "crisis" had been legitimized as OAS observers announced late Nov. 29, after the TSE had failed to meet a self-imposed noon deadline in releasing results, that their election observers would remain in the country until the crisis was resolved.

The head of the delegation, Venezuelan Moises Benamor, said his 114 observers would remain "until the process ends." He criticized the TSE for the delay. Maduro did not immediately reply. Vice presidency resurrected. Meanwhile, for the first time since 1980, Hondurans also voted for a vice president. The title had been eliminated to avoid presidential coups. Both parties chose heavy hitters from the business class. The thinking was that, whoever won, a second in command from the business class would attract foreign investment.

The choices on both sides would serve the sector they represent. "Their loyalties are economic, not political," said political analyst Daniel Perez Funes. The choices made representatives of the minor parties, those with no hope of electing a president, nervous at the prospect of adding political power to the already formidable power of the private sector. Said lawyer Olvin Rodriguez of the Partido Democratico Cristiano (PDC), "Congress has divided itself into two large sectors, although one sector leans toward the PL and the other leans toward the Nationalists, what they are all fighting for are privileges and contracts that are sold afterwards. That is to say, they make politics an investment. Thus, both sectors get their needs met no matter who wins."

In the past, the private sector did not get directly involved in Honduran politics. Rather they supported friends in the military or in politics to achieve political influence. More recently, however, they have taken to sending their children to study abroad, and it is this generation that has entered the political arena, rising rapidly with the help of family fortunes.

Zelaya's running mate, Elvin Ernesto Santos Ordonez, was virtually unknown prior to this campaign. He is the director of Santos y Cia SA, executive vice president of the INVERSA group, and president of the Camara Hondureno de la Industria de la Construccion. His resume also includes high office in other industry organizations including steel, shipping, and oil, and director of the powerful Consejo Hondureno de la Empresa Privada (COHEP). The companies with which he is associated have large projects in the pipeline, including road building, the dry canal between the Caribbean and the Pacific, two hydroelectric dams, the enlargement of Puerto Cortes, and tourism-infrastructure projects. Santos studied engineering at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. He also served as Honduran Consul in Austin, Texas, and was his country's alternate representative at the UN.

Lobo Sosa's running mate is no less a business star. Mario Miguel Canahuati studied industrial engineering at Georgia Institute of Technology and clothing manufacturing in Italy. He was executive director of the Loyalbe Group and director of Creations Vantage, SA de CV. He currently manages several clothing-manufacturing and marketing companies and was president of the Camara de Comercio y Industrias de Cortes. He has, until this campaign, been Honduras'

ambassador to the US, chosen by Maduro. Canahuati has been accused of causing an embarrassing diplomatic situation for Honduras by convincing Maduro to present a US-sponsored petition against Cuba for that country's state of human rights.

The country was roundly criticized for kowtowing to US interests. Canahuati is a member of one of the most powerful families in Honduras. In the end, it was the business sector that was assured of its results in the elections first. It was only the presidential candidates, the 128 congressional candidates, the 128 congressional alternates, the 298 mayoral candidates, the 298 vice mayoral candidates, and the 2,000 council members who had to await the official results.

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