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## Devastating Rains Wash Out Honduran Elections

by LADB Staff

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Presidential primary elections scheduled for Nov. 16 in Honduras are to be postponed until Nov. 30. The Honduras legislature voted Nov. 5 to approve a recommendation from President Manuel Zelaya to delay the election because of extensive damage to the country from heavy rains. The damage is said to approach in magnitude that from Hurricane Mitch in 1998. "For this single exceptional, temporary, and unavoidable instance, the elections that the political parties are obligated to hold will take place on Nov. 30," read the congressional decree. The legislative action is constitutionally required to change an election date.

When the measure was first proposed, it was seen by some as a move to put off the vote for tactical partisan purposes. Patricia Rodas, president of the governing Partido Liberal (PL) and a Zelaya ally, brought the idea to Zelaya for consideration, and he took it public with the claim that the country is "in crisis and in emergency, and the armed forces do not have the operational capability to fulfill at the same time the rescue mission and the functions of support and protection to the electoral process." Rodas wanted to postpone the election until February 2009. That had been the original date for the primaries, but it was changed earlier this year.

One of the first to seize on the postponement-as-manipulation theory was opposition leader Pepe Lobo Sosa, the Partido Nacional (PN) candidate who lost to Zelaya in 2005 (see NotiCen, 2005-02-24) and who now claims that the president is angling to stay on in office. Next to pile on was Vice President Elvin Santo, who has pretensions to the nation's highest office but has been declared ineligible by the Tribunal Nacional de Elecciones (TNE). Santos ran afoul of the TNE again when he started advertising a write-in campaign.

The TNE, which is uniquely positioned to decide these things, has determined that only duly registered candidates may advertise their candidacies. The agency put out an official communique that "exhorts the media to avoid the diffusion of publicity and advertising that solicits the vote for citizens who are not registered candidates for election." It is not absolutely clear that the TNE can do this, but it did. Despite his ineligibility, Santos heads his own tendency, the Movimiento Elvinista (ME), within the PL. The ME is currently led by a surrogate, Mauricio Villeda Bermudez. The TSE is bound by law to follow the congressional resolution's dictum and change the date of election.

The country really is a mess from the relentless deluge; the ubiquitous mud and washed-out roads would unquestionably restrict turnout. However, the Servicio Meteorologico Nacional (SMN) and other international weather institutions have predicted rains continuing to the end of November, leaving unanswered the question, why just a two-week delay?

### *The damage to date*

Government sources have estimated some 270,000 people affected by the rains and more than 50,000 injured. A total of 34 people are known dead, and 17 are missing. Losses are estimated at US\$154 million, a very significant figure for this poor country. Severe rains are predicted to continue on the Caribbean coast, with the departments of Gracias a Dios and Olancho under red alert. The SMN has said the tropical depression responsible for the deluge would soon increase to a tropical storm. The UN has launched a flash appeal for flood relief in Honduras. It is seeking US\$17 million for food, shelter, health care, water, and sanitation. US troops have been deployed to supply potable water where flooding has contaminated wells and usual sources. Trucking water into affected areas has proved impractical, so the military has brought in equipment to purify water on the spot.

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