

12-11-2008

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### Recommended Citation

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## Honduras Primaries Leave Ruling-party Presidential Candidacies Unsettled

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Honduras

Published: 2008-12-11

Honduras has held its once-postponed primary elections (see NotiCen, 2008-11-06), but it is still not absolutely clear who will be carrying the ruling party's banner in the upcoming 2009 general elections. For the opposition Partido Nacional (PN), there is no question; last presidential election's loser Porfirio Lobo beat his rival Mario Canahuati in an 81%-16% blowout. But who his Partido Liberal (PL) opponent will be is a matter that cannot be settled at the polls.

The way it turned out, Mauricio Villeda won handsomely for the PL, trouncing President Manuel Zelaya's heir apparent, Roberto Micheletti, 52%-32%, and leaving three others in the single digits. But Villeda was not a real candidate; he was a stand-in, a surrogate, for Vice President Elvin Santos. Villeda was tapped to run in Santos' stead because the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) ruled the vice president ineligible. That was because the Honduras Constitution requires that a certain class of public officials must wait four years after leaving office before running again. Santos' term ends in 2010.

This has not been much of a problem in the past because Honduras usually does not have a vice president. The title was eliminated in 1980 to cut down on coups and keep officials in their posts. Santos is a very prominent and powerful member of the business class. He was added to the Zelaya ticket in the hope of bringing investment to the country (see NotiCen, 2005-12-01). The Sala Constitucional of the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) ratified the TSE decision by striking down a six-year-old law that changed the title of the office to vice president from the original designados presidenciales (presidential designees). This is the class of official who must wait four years to run.

Santos has said he will run in the general election, but it is not clear under what authority. Villeda has pledged to step aside. He said in his victory speech, "I reiterate my permanent and total loyalty to Elvin Santos. He has my resignation the moment he decides."

### *Repudiating presidential policies*

The election is seen as a defeat for Zelaya and for his decision to join Venezuela's, and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's, Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA). Villeda, Santos, and even Lobo all eschew Chavez and cleave to the US. Lobo has called Zelaya's ALBA initiative "a danger," and Villeda has vilified the relationship even though it has brought Honduras much needed material aid, cash, and fuel supplies.

The vanquished Micheletti, who could be his party's candidate if Santos attempts to run and is legally prevented, seemed to be keeping that door open in conceding defeat. "We place ourselves at the disposal of the candidate of the winning movement to contribute to winning the next elections.

Our support is for the candidate Mauricio Villeda. The candidate is named Mauricio Villeda," said Micheletti. Other than that, the elections went well.

The country chose not only presidential candidates but also candidates for 128 legislative positions, 298 mayoralties, 20 Parlacen slots along with their alternates, and officials of the party leaderships. In other important primaries, the mayors of Tegucigalpa, the PN's Ricardo Alvarez, and of San Pedro Sula, the PL's Rodolfo Padilla, won their primaries and will stand for re-election against Eliseo Castro and Arturo Bendana, respectively.

The process was witnessed and approved by 60 observers from 15 countries of the Organization of American States (OAS) and 600 appointed observers from the Honduras Comisionado Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CONADEH). No major incidents were reported, and no allegations of fraud or other serious irregularity were made. Election officials reported that 4.3 million Hondurans were eligible, all within the country. Hondurans abroad, including the 1.3 million in the US, can vote only in the general elections.

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