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by George Rodríguez

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Honduras’ Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE)—the country’s top election authority—has released results for last month’s primary elections by the Central American nation’s parties for next year’s presidential, congressional, and municipal contenders.

TSE figures indicate that voter turnout this year exceeded that of 2008, a trend that, by those estimates, dramatically lowered absenteeism from almost 62.8% to 54.9%.

In the primaries held four years ago, of the 4.3 million registered voters, some 1.6 million showed up to cast their ballots, while this year, of the 5.1 million registered voters, turnout was around 2.4 million, according to the TSE.

The Ley Electoral states that primaries be held the third Sunday in November the year prior to general elections—which are also held in November—and that they take place under the direction, control, and supervision" of the TSE, with support from each party’s Comisión Nacional Electoral (CNE).

Following the 2008 primaries, the November 2009 general elections were held within the violent framework of repression under the de facto régime that followed the bloody coup that five months earlier toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, punished for his populist stand and his promotion of a constitutional reform (NotiCen, July 2, 2009).

Winner of the 2009 general election (NotiCen, Dec. 3, 2009), amid massive criticism from civil society organizations opposed to the coup, was President Porfirio Lobo, who had been nominated by the rightwing Partido Nacional (PN).

Three main parties vie for presidency

Of the nine parties now gearing up for next year’s elections, the three major political organizations—the governing PN; its historic rival, the center-right Partido Liberal (PL); and the center-left Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), recently founded by Zelaya—took almost all the votes cast in the Nov. 18 primaries.

TSE figures show that the PN rounded up a massive 1.1 million votes—just over 558,000 of which were valid. The PL followed, with some 717,000 votes—a little more that 618,000 valid. LIBRE was third, with around 589,000 ballots—some 558,000 valid.

The PN presidential nomination was won by Juan Orlando Hernández, president of the unicameral Congreso Nacional (CN), with 45% of the valid votes, followed by Ricardo Álvarez, with 38.75%, and Miguel Pastor, with 12.12%.
In PL ranks, Mauricio Villeda managed to get 51.99%, while rival Yani Rosenthal came up with 44.21%, and in LIBRE, with no one else running for the presidential nomination, Xiomara Castro, Zelaya’s wife, obtained all the votes.

**Primary results challenged**

As soon as the TSE began producing reports, the figures were challenged.

Álvarez put to doubt the TSE numbers for Hernández, as both claimed to be the victorious cachureco (as PN members call themselves and are commonly known in Honduras), and along those lines, in the PL, Rosenthal challenged Villeda’s victory.

Álvarez told a partisan meeting, "We’re the ones who won the elections, we’re the ones who got the most vote in the elections." He even asked the election authority to recount the votes cast in the PN primary, but the request was turned down, as TSE secretary-general Alejandro Martínez told local media.

Regarding the LIBRE results, doubt has surfaced within civil society, where it is felt that Doña Xiomara’s numbers were actually higher than the official figures.

Three days prior to the primaries, the 16 countries making up the Grupo de Países Cooperantes (G-16)—where the bulk of international aid to Honduras originates—issued a communiqué supporting preparatory work by the TSE and Honduran civil society leading to the parties’ internal vote and called on political parties and everyone else involved in the process to fully respect transparency.

"Fair, free, and transparent elections are of vital importance to ensure that results reflect the electorate’s will," warned the G-16. "The legitimacy of Hondurans elected to govern is directly related to the credibility of the electoral process of 2012 and 2013."

**Human rights activist calls process "ethical disaster"**

But human rights activist and head of the human rights nongovernmental organization Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH) Bertha Oliva said nothing of the sort happened last month, mainly because of what she describes as a lack of political ethics, which is the reality Hondurans are faced with. "I believe that in Honduras we’ve lost…political ethics and values because of the lack of punishment for those who commit electoral crimes, in this case," she told NotiCen.

"Along that line, there’s a high level of professionalization in the institutions in charge of the electoral process, where they spoke a language that was so democratic that you believed and took for granted that all that was going to happen that day [Nov. 18] would conform to standards of noncorruption," Oliva said. "But that’s the danger—the double morality—we live in this country. There’s a double morality, which leads you to a double discourse. They say one thing, but they act differently, going back over what they’re saying, and within this scenario the primary elections were held."

"I honestly believe the most vulgar electoral action took place that the history of Honduras could have ever registered: an adulteration of the results," Oliva said. "But where the most vulgar manipulation of results is clearly evident is in the Partido Liberal, mainly one of its candidates—
Mauricio Villeda—whom the oligarchy is selling as the suitable person, who, in pre-election polls had no popular support, and turns out as one of the most voted for."

"If [next year’s] general elections had been held on Nov. 18, Doña Xiomara would have won the presidential vote, but the official figures are not the results she should have, and it shows you, then, the level of manipulation, the loss of credibility, which day after day the authorities of the Tribunal Supremo Electoral show," Oliva underlined. "If a loss of values was reflected in these internal elections, its logical to assume what will happen in the general [elections] and it also shows us that we’ve entered a critical time. So, what I think is that we’re in a state of ethical disaster."

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