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Still Wounded by 2009 Coup, with Fraud Hovering Overhead, Honduras Heads for Elections that End Historic Bipartisanship

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Honduras is headed for its first elections since the much-questioned vote four years ago, within the framework of widespread repression under the de facto regime set up through the bloody 2009 coup that shook this poverty-stricken country to its very foundations and caused deep, unhealed wounds.

The vote was held five months after the illegal political-military action that on June 28, 2009, brought to an abrupt end to President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya’s populist government, constitutionally scheduled to finish the following January (NotiCen, July 2, 2009).

Strongly questioned by sectors opposed to the dictatorship headed by former Congress president Roberto Micheletti, the vote took place regardless of the highly irregular context, and Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo of the traditional, rightist Partido Nacional (PN) was elected the nation’s new president (NotiCen, Feb. 4, 2010).

Since then, the opposition to the coup mainly gathered around Zelaya—a former Partido Liberal (PL) leader—and the new, center-left Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), whose acronym is the Spanish word for "free."

LIBRE members include a considerable number of disgruntled liberales who left the PL angry that their former party was one of the forces behind the coup that brought down one of their own. Among its core aims, LIBRE seeks to establish a new Honduras, based on what it describes as democratic socialism.

Ousted president’s wife Xiomara Castro now a presidential candidate

Zelaya’s wife and LIBRE’s presidential candidate Xiomara Castro told a activist women’s meeting on Oct. 30, "Here, in LIBRE, there’s confidence and certainty we’re going for the refoundation and reconstruction of the new Honduras. No more confrontation in our country against teachers ... against workers and campesinos."

Castro—running for the country’s top job because the Honduran Constitution prevents her husband from seeking re-election—added, "The moment has come to rebuild our homeland for our country’s reconciliation through a social pact among all sectors, to draw up a good Constitution. We’re going for a National Constituent Assembly."

The presidential hopeful, whose husband, LIBRE’s co-founder and top leader, is running for a seat in the unicameral Congress, expressed what she described as "my commitment as a woman, a mother, a patriot to fight alongside the poor, sparing no effort, to attain victory and the refoundation of Honduras."
"Our country’s situation is extremely complex, violence has gone up since the coup, and we’ve backed off from the progress we had made in the Poder Ciudadano government, the government of President Zelaya," Castro warned.

Castro is the only woman in the eight-candidate presidential race, which includes the coup’s military leader, former head of the Fuerzas Armadas of Honduras and retired Gen. Romeo Vásquez of the rightist Alianza Patrótica (AP).

Election polls since the campaign began show Castro and the head of Congress Juan Orlando Hernández, the ruling, historic PN nominee, are top favorites, followed by Mauricio Villeda of the center-right and also historic PL, the latter’s rival in this country’s bipartisan political structure. Villeda’s father was Honduran President Ramón Villeda Morales (1957-1963).

Sports reporter and popular television host Salvador Nasralla, founder and candidate of the conservative Partido Anticorrupción (PAC), trails behind.

However, in more recent survey results, published Oct. 24, by seven of the 10 polling companies that are officially authorized to carry out surveys, Hernández would be the winning candidate.

**PL badly damaged by participation in coup**

The PL’s situation is that of a party that has been severely hit by the coup—as one of the forces behind Zelaya’s downfall—and that has not recovered from the high political cost of its action. PL leader and former Honduran President Carlos Flores (1998-2002) has been pointed out by civil society organizations as one of the coup’s leaders.

As one of the coup’s many social and political consequences, the historic bipartisanship—liberales and cachurecos (as PN militants are known in Honduras)—that has so far prevailed could be nearing its end, according to local analysts quoted by local media.

Four of the nine parties competing in this month’s general elections were created after the coup—the AP, LIBRE, PAC, plus the leftist Frente Amplio Político Electoral en Resistencia (FAPER), an element they point out, as an example. "The difference is that that now there are two new and strong options," said public Universidad Pedagógica Nacional Francisco Morazán professor Darío Cruz, referring to LIBRE and PAC.

The PL and PN were, until 2009, the options for 14 of every 15 Honduras, but this could be about to change, with the possibility of a new party taking over, added Cruz.

On a similar note, political analyst Manuel Torres’ opinion is that "Honduras is headed, with much democratic difficulty, for the first multiparty elections in its history, not only because of the higher number of political parties but also because of the broadening of the contenders’ ideological spectrum, going from extreme conservatism to … radical left."

But Torres also warned that "these elections carry much uncertainty because they bear a democratic deficit, mainly because the politicians taking part will continue to … all look at each other with suspicion and mistrust because of the possibility of vote rigging."

"Rigging is a very certain possibility within the election process, just as is the absence of a true citizens’ representation in the process, because the majority of the people are limited to being voters and not social auditors or watchdogs of the entire election process," added Torres.

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State Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) professor and sociologist Julio César Navarro said, "In Honduras the possibility always exists of [electoral] fraud, which has traditionally happened by the Liberal and Nacional parties, but now there are new guests. If those guests manage to organize themselves and send representatives to all the [voting] centers, they will be able to avoid any kind of irregular situation."

**Efforts to avoid rigged elections**

The country's top election authority, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), has taken measures to counter the risk experts have warned about.

One such step, which has been successfully tested, according to TSE Magistrate Enrique Ortez, is scanning original records, by each voting center nationwide, upon closing, through encrypted communication. For this, scanners have been borrowed from the Guatemalan government as well as from Honduran affiliates of the international private mobile telephone companies Claro and Tigo.

Within this initiative, some 5,000 UNAH students who volunteered to support the TSE as custodians in voting centers and as scanner operators throughout Honduras have been trained by the TSE.

As a move to strengthen political parties' election ethics, the eight candidates and TSE top authorities signed on Aug. 21, at the local UN headquarters, a lengthy, 18-point commitment to minimal ethical and transparency guarantees (Compromiso de garantías mínimas para la ética y la transparencia electoral).

Halfway through the document, the candidates committed "to respect and accept the elections results," in accordance with the Constitution and election legislation. "Also, to avoid all forms of incitement to violence, hatred, or confrontation as a consequence of election results," they further stated. TSE authorities committed "to guarantee the transparency and efficiency of the new results-transmission system."

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