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Honduran Elections Turn Chaotic; Both Favorites Declare Themselves President-elect

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The Nov. 24 election in Honduras went on with no upsets, a considerably high turnout, and calls from different sectors for parties—both leaders and followers—to respect results.

Pre-election polls indicated that the favorites in the presidential election were Xiomara Castro of the center-left Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE) and Juan Orlando Hernández of the ruling rightist Partido Nacional (PN). Castro is the wife of former Honduran president Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), toppled by the bloody June 2009 coup (NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2009), and Orlando Hernández is president of the unicameral Congreso Nacional.

Several early polls gave the victory to Castro, who, during her husband’s exile after the coup, became an active leader of the popular resistance movement, which turned into the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP) and, after Zelaya's return, became LIBRE (NotiCen, Sept. 8, 2011).

But about a month before the Nov. 24 general elections, polls began placing JOH—as Hernández is known—ahead in presidential voter preference. The margin was slim: JOH’s support was around 28%, Castro's was around 27%, Mauricio Villeda of the former ruling Partido Liberal’s (PL) was third, with some 17%, and a political newcomer—but well-known sports journalist and television host—Salvador Nasralla, founder and candidate of the new Partido Anticorrupción (PAC), appeared fourth.

Voting day came, people cast ballots as scheduled—from 7 a.m. 4 p.m.—with an extra hour decided upon by the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) in view of the massive turnout.

Some three hours after ballot booths closed, TSE head David Matamoros came before national and international journalists anxiously gathered at the tribunal's luxurious hotel headquarters, and went live on national television, to announce that, based on 20% of the ballots counted so far, JOH was the winner, Castro was second, Villeda was third, and Nasralla was fourth.

Matamoros made it clear that the figures were "preliminary results" and warned that "there’s no other official voice but that of the Tribunal Supremo Electoral."

**Castro declares victory**

Some two hours later, Castro appeared before followers and journalists and gave differing figures—according to her party’s count based on data from LIBRE delegates at voting centers. These figures showed she was ahead, with 29% of the vote counted, Hernández was second, with a close 26%, followed by Villeda (20%) and Nasralla (17%).

"Those data ... are giving us an overwhelming and irreversible triumph in these elections," Castro told cheering sympathizers at a luxury hotel in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital. "I am the president of Honduras! Today, we can declare the victory of our party, LIBRE. ... I’m not going to let
you down; we’re going to keep up to the last word given to the Honduran people. A new era begins. Honduras for all! ... We’ve reached the dream."

Later in the evening, Matamoros made a new announcement, this time based on more that 42% of the vote, again giving Hernández the lead, with 34.15%, followed by Castro with 28.45%, Villeda, 21%, and Nasralla, 15.74%—the four presidential candidates with the highest vote count of the eight running. The TSE head said, "The country is calm, the country is in peace ... the security forces are ready" in case of any incidents during the night, and he repeated, "We’re not declaring winners," since the data was preliminary.

**Hernández also declares victory**

Hernández’s message of victory followed, at another luxury Tegucigalpa hotel, to a crowd of also enthusiastic followers. JOH expressed gratitude "for the vote I received ... and that now ... I’m going to be the next president of Honduras. Today, the Honduran people voted ... for peace, for reconciliation. They voted to leave the 2009 crisis behind."

"Today, the Honduran people chose lies over truth," Hernández added, referring to the countless reports of repression, violence, human rights violations, killings, and disappearances by civil society organizations against the de facto régime (June 2009-January 2010) set up under the coup and against security forces since then.

"Today, we turn a page," Hernández said. "I forgive those who attacked me," during the campaign, adding, "I’m going to govern for all Hondurans. Work starts tomorrow, to help the Honduran people. We can’t continue to allow impunity. ... This will be my cause."

Mentioning some of the people’s demands regarding security, Hernández guaranteed a "process of police cleansing," saying, "We’re going ahead with this military police." He was referring to the Policía Militar de Orden Público (PMOP), in charge of carrying out regular as well as specialized police work in an effort to reduce crime rates, which was created Aug. 21 by the Congreso Nacional (CN). Described by its promoters as the Honduran SWAT, the PMOP—a unit assigned to the Fuerzas Armadas de Honduras—was to begin operating with 5,000 troops, but budgetary restraints lowered the starting number to 1,000 (NotiCen, Sept. 5, 2013).

Opposition leaders—including Nasralla—and political observers have said that the PMOP bill was hurriedly passed by the CN to have the force operational in case of accusations of vote rigging, which are now being massively reported.

Since the first TSE report, official figures have been questioned and allegations of vote rigging have been increasing. LIBRE and PAC leaders as well as candidates to different posts—including congressional and municipal hopefuls—and some international observers have been repeatedly reporting at press conferences and on radio and television news programs that fraud has characterized the elections.

LIBRE and PAC leaders and candidates, as well as opposition news commentators and political analysts, have also accused minority parties—each with less than 1% of the vote—of being accessories to fraud for having sold delegates’ identification cards to the PN so the ruling party could actually have more delegates than allowed at the more than 16,000 voting centers nationwide. Also, in some cases, voting records have been tampered with, by erasing figures from LIBRE and
PAC totals, according to those parties' reports. In one of many examples, LIBRE reported that, in one voting center, the party obtained 84 ballots, but the official figure was 4.

After a preliminary report by the Organization of American States (OAS) and European Union (EU) observer missions, stating that voting had been carried out with no major incidents and with a high voter turnout, international observer missions began issuing more precise reports, indicating irregularities in TSE procedures.

One was the Honduran nongovernment think tank Centro de Estudio para la Democracia (Cespad), whose observers issued a report on Nov. 28 demanding that the TSE "review the consistency of voting registers and refrain from officially declaring a winner in the general elections of last Nov. 24."

"Several international delegations have said in press conferences that they documented many irregularities in last Sunday’s elections and that the TSE hurried to unofficially declare the Partido Nacional pro-government candidate Juan Orlando Hernández the winner," said Cespad. "That should not occur unless the election body solve the fraud reports presented, review records that may have been altered, and immediately publish the voting centers that, because of infrastructure or technical flaws, did not use the transmission system though scanners."

On the official side was, among others, US Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske, who, hours after voting closed, and immediately after a meeting with Matamoros and the other two TSE magistrates at the TSE’s hotel headquarters, told a press conference she was "congratulating the people of Honduras" for the orderly vote and the high turnout. She also told reporters that 110 observers monitored "a transparent process," and "we saw a vote count that … was done with consistency. We support the process."

Five days after the elections—and the start of the TSE reports—LIBRE issued its report, again denouncing fraud by the TSE. "LIBRE neither accepts nor recognizes" the official results, and, among other proof, said that "82,301 votes in excess were counted in favor of the Partido Nacional" and that there has been "an inflation of results" in 12% of ballot boxes."

One day later, Matamoros reported that, with 99% of the vote counted, Hernández obtained 36.80%, followed by Castro with 28.79%, Villeda with 20.28%, and Nasrala with 13.52%. "The winner of the presidential election in Honduras is the lawyer Juan Orlando Hernández," said the head of the TSE in the announcement broadcast live on national television and repeated the following morning. Matamoros also announced that, starting then, the TSE was open to receive complaints on vote counting.

On the morning of Dec. 1, LIBRE held a mass meeting in Tegucigalpa, outside the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, followed by a march to the nearby TSE headquarters, to hand in a voluminous complaint.

At the start of the gathering, union leader Juan Barahona—the second of three vice presidential candidates for LIBRE—told reporters that the march to TSE headquarters was being held "to manifest our repudiation and our rejection of … their false data," adding that "they’re imposing a pro-government candidate."

LIBRE is demanding that the TSE recount every single vote cast, in a transparent procedure, with party monitoring, as the only means to accept the official results.