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George Rodr guez

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A Tangled Vote Count in Honduras Leads from Tension to Violence

by George Rodríguez

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The Nov. 26 general elections in Honduras looked problematic from the start, with the incumbent president seeking reelection, an option greenlighted by a much-questioned judicial ruling despite a supposedly iron-clad constitutional ban ([NotiCen, Oct. 6, 2016](#), [Jan. 5, 2017](#), [Aug. 3, 2017](#)).

An opposition, two-party alliance strongly campaigned against President Juan Orlando Hernández, repeatedly warning about the possibility of a rigged vote to secure his win.

But the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), Honduras' top elections authority, kept reassuring the public that, unlike the previous election, won by Hernández and the right-wing Partido Nacional (National Party, PN) in 2013, this vote would run smoothly ([NotiCen, Dec. 5, 2013](#)).

Nevertheless, Salvador Nasralla, a sports journalist and television host who was the presidential candidate for the center-left Alianza de Oposición Contra la Dictadura (Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship), and the rest of the Alianza's leadership, were skeptical. They still are.

No incidents on Election Day

Voting on Election Day was incident-free, as TSE president David Matamoros had promised, and after ballot centers closed, Hondurans settled to wait for the results. That was when the situation began to change and tensions started to grow.

The four-hour span that had been allotted to count the votes and announce the results came and went in TSE silence. Members of the alliance and the PN, whose presidential candidates were the favorites among the nine hopefuls, began to feel restless. So did the media.

The election authority was providing the political parties, as well as observers, data contained in ballot-center records as those documents reached the computing center at a hotel in Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital. And then, shortly after midnight—eight hours after voting had ended but with no official announcement—Nasralla claimed victory, based on the figures so far provided by the TSE.

"I can tell you that I'm the new president of Honduras," Nasralla enthusiastically told followers at the Alianza's headquarters in another Tegucigalpa hotel. "We have defeated fraud! ... There's no way this result can be turned around." His sympathizers repeatedly interrupted him, chanting "Salvador! Salvador!"

In their camp at another Tegucigalpa hotel, followers of the PN, who are known as cachurecos, kept silent for about 90 minutes, until Hernández assured them that he was winning by about seven points.

Cries of 'four more years'

"Seven points, considering that only 50% of the records are in the system," he said, and called out: "¡Cuatro años más!" ("Four more years!"), his campaign slogan, which was immediately chanted back several times by his followers.

It wasn't until 15 minutes after that, shortly before 2 a.m., that Matamoros made the much-delayed first announcement at the TSE's computer center. After counting the ballots from 57% of the voting centers, he said, Nasralla was in the lead, with 47.17% to Hernández's 40.21%.

Matamoros explained that the votes counted were coming from Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, the country's top textile center, 200 km northwest of the capital. He also said that it would take three days for all the voting centers to report, and that the full results would be announced then.

Shortly after, Hernández issued an audio message confidently saying that, once rural votes were counted, the numbers would show that he had won.

When most of the votes were finally in two days later, the TSE showed Hernández climbing to first place, leaving Nasralla in second position by an extremely narrow edge. Another two updates in the following 48 hours secured the president's position by a widening, albeit still slim, margin.

Tension grew, as Nasralla publicly accused Matamoros of obeying orders from Hernández, something the TSE chief denied. Nasralla repeatedly called on his supporters to defend his victory in the streets. Tension eventually turned into violence.

Five days into the seemingly unending vote count, with violence raging on streets in several cities, the government decreed a nationwide 10-day, 12-hour curfew, from 6 p.m. until 6 a.m. Three days later, it reduced the curfew to six days, nine hours per day.

According to the figures posted on the TSE web page, with all the votes counted, Hernández won the presidential election with 42.98%, closely trailed by Nasralla, with 41.38%—a 1.6-point margin.

But due to the complexity of the vote-counting process, and with an ongoing period for challenging the results, by Dec. 7, the TSE had not made an official announcement as to who the winner was.

Tensions foreseen

The scenario had been predicted by local political analysts, who pointed to the electronic system as a particularly weak point, specifically the procedure to digitize data contained in handwritten records and scanned at voting centers for delivery to the TSE's computer center.

On Nov. 22, four days before the elections, Agence France Presse had quoted Víctor Meza, a researcher with the non-governmental Centro de Documentación de Honduras (Honduras Documentation Center): "The system's frailty lies in data transmission of the scanned records arriving at the computer center from the different voting centers," he said.

Meza explained that one of the two servers at the data center was programmed to process stained or otherwise flawed records, while the other would be used to process physical records sent "from [voting] centers where there's no electricity or [with] low connectivity, which make up 20%."

Meza then warned that, in the first case, "it's where results could be changed to favor reelection," and, in the second, real results "could be replaced with boosted results to favor the president."

Meza predicted delays in TSE reports on vote counting. So did the historian Omar Turcios, who also warned, "There's a big possibility that PN could mobilize clash groups to defend fraud, and the opposition could go out and defend their votes."

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