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As Honduran President Prepares for New Term, Doubts Persist Regarding Vote Count

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The messy outcome of the recent presidential election in Honduras was nothing close to a surprise, considering the fact that, by nature, politics in this Central American nation are, at best, complicated.

Promoted by the rightist and ruling Partido Nacional (National Party, PN), incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández rode on his administration's slogan, Honduras está cambiando (Honduras is changing), stressing that his social and security achievements needed four more years to be further strengthened ([NotiCen, Jan. 5, 2017](#), [April 20, 2017](#), [Sept. 14, 2017](#)).

The center-left Alianza de Oposición Contra la Dictadura (Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship), with Salvador Nasralla, a sports journalist and television host as its presidential choice, came out with a powerful message accusing Hernández of leading a corrupt and repressive regime, arguing that he would surely rig the vote to ensure his re-election.

The fraud warning was repeatedly voiced by the alliance's coordinator, Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, who was elected president of Honduras in 2006 and ousted in a coup in June 2009 ([NotiCen, July 16, 2009](#), [July 23, 2009](#), [Sept. 24, 2009](#)).

Election process turns ugly

The 18,128 election centers set up throughout the country to receive about 6.2 million registered voters on Nov. 26 closed by mid-afternoon, after a generally orderly, peaceful polling day. But the results were repeatedly delayed, with David Matamoros, president of the tribunal that supervises the elections (Tribunal Supremo Electoral, TSE), repeatedly assuring the public that preliminary results would be announced any moment.

Close to midnight, as the vexing official silence continued, Nasralla announced, based on data that was directly provided by the TSE, that he would be Honduras' next president. Shortly after that, Hernández did exactly the same. After much back and forth, Hernández appeared to go ahead of Nasralla, by a 1.23-point margin ([NotiCen, Dec. 7, 2017](#)).

Opposition anger immediately erupted, with the alliance saying it would not accept the new results and warning that the expected election fraud had been committed. Coalition sympathizers immediately and massively took to highways and streets countrywide, setting tires on fire to form barricades. When the demonstrations turned violent—with looting, cars set on fire, and damage to property—the coalition blamed the violence on infiltrated PN supporters.

Hernández eventually prevailed. Exactly three weeks after election day, on Dec. 17, Matamoros officially declared Hernández the winner of the presidential vote by a slight 1.6-point margin.

The opposition alliance went on an all-out effort to counter the official results. It stepped up demonstrations and issued public statements harshly criticizing what it described as the election authorities' blatant siding with Hernández.

While this was happening in Honduras, Nasralla made a brief visit to Washington, D.C., where he met with authorities from the Organization of American States (OAS), including its secretary general, Luis Almagro, as well as with US Department of State officials and with human rights advocates.

When Nasralla returned to Honduras, he reported that he had delivered substantial proof of vote-rigging by the TSE. But then the US, through State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert, recognized the official election results.

"Stability in political outcomes in any country really depends on [an] election process that produces a clear, accepted winner," Nauert said. "In this case, the TSE, which has representatives of all parties on it, has worked through what they believe is a final and complete result."

Nauert added that the close election results and the problems identified by the OAS and the EU election observation missions, as well as the protests across the political spectrum in Honduras "underscore the need for a robust national dialogue," and proposed that "a significant long-term effort to heal the political divide in the country and enact much-needed electoral reforms should be undertaken."

Human rights certification

Immediately after the general elections in Honduras, the administration of US President Donald Trump had certified the country as having made progress on human rights—despite blatant violations, including the murder, in 2016, of the internationally renowned activist and indigenous leader Berta Cáceres ([NotiCen, April 7, 2016](#), [Nov. 10, 2016](#), [March 23, 2017](#)). The certification came after Honduras became one of only nine countries to side with the US in a UN vote denouncing the US decision to move its embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Simultaneously, Hernández called for a wide-ranging, national dialog aimed at solving the political and social crises gripping the country as a result of the election and began meeting with civil society sectors to shape the talks.

Nasralla, for his part, announced that he was pulling out of the coalition and going back to television. A few days later, however, he spoke of the need for broadened alliance against what he has described as the "armed robbery" of the half a million votes that would have given him the victory over Hernández.

Haunted presidency

Legitimacy, or more specifically, the lack of it, will undoubtedly haunt Hernández's second term.

"Despite his illegitimate government and his illegal reelection, Juan Orlando Hernández will keep the throne and the scepter," Honduran sociologist Héctor Martínez wrote before the announcement of the TSE's controversial final figures. "But we predict that for not more than four years, in case the organized and mature society, politically speaking, allow him to reach the end of his doomed unconstitutional adventure."

Hernández's swearing-in for his second term is scheduled to take place on Jan. 27.

Nasralla has issued dire warnings for that day: "There could be shooting here, and any of us could be hit," he said. "The people, because of their bad economic situation at this moment, are willing to sacrifice their lives."

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