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## Human Rights Groups Decry Post-Election Violence, Torture in Honduras

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The bloody 2009 coup d'état in Honduras is not actually over, and its negative effects are still being felt, as the violence that has gripped the country since the Nov. 26 presidential elections demonstrates.

That is the assessment of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and of a local organization made up of relatives of disappeared men and women in Honduras, the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos-Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH).

Incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández's victory, made official by the country's top electoral authority, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE), was the result of what political opposition forces and the population in general describe as flagrant fraud ([NotiCen, Jan. 11, 2018](#)).

### *Early irregularities*

Opponents say the irregularities that led to Hernández's second term in office started at the constitutional chamber of Honduras' highest court, the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), whose 2015 ruling, ratified in 2016, lifted the constitutional ban on presidential re-election ([NotiCen, Oct. 6, 2016](#)).

The irregularities continued when the preliminary results on election night were delayed for five hours by TSE president David Matamoros, who is a member of the ruling Partido Nacional (National Party, PN). The first set of results placed Salvador Nasralla, of the center-left Alianza de Oposición contra la Dictadura (Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship), ahead of Hernández by close to six points. An alleged crash of the electronic vote computing system followed, and by the time the system was back on, the two top positions were reversed, unleashing massive public protest and repression nationwide ([NotiCen, Dec. 7, 2017](#)).

The official results announced by the TSE three weeks after the vote declared Hernández the winner by a mere 1.6 percentage points.

Opposition street demonstrations and repression by police and Army troops continued into Hernández's inauguration on Jan. 27 with a high degree selective persecution, according to human rights watchdogs, repeating the pattern seen under the regime established immediately after the 2009 coup.

"The human rights violations described in this report occurred in the context of a political, economic, and social crisis that can be traced back to the ... coup d'état, and the subsequent delay in undertaking critical institutional, political, economic, and social reforms," the OHCHR said in a 34-page document issued on March 12 and titled "Human rights violations in the context of the 2017 elections in Honduras."

The UN agency concluded that “the protests that erupted in reaction to the perceived lack of fairness of the electoral process and the presidential results partly find their roots in the unsolved legacy of the 2009 coup d’état, namely the political and social polarization, and the failure to address state deficiencies.”

It warned that “the risk of a further deterioration of the human rights situation remains high, unless accountability for human rights violations is promptly pursued, and outstanding reforms in the social, economic, rule of law, and security sectors are undertaken and implemented.”

### *Lack of transparency*

But accountability in general terms, and particularly when it comes to human rights violations, is rare in Honduras, and reforms such as those singled out by the OHCHR are unlikely, as its report notes.

The Geneva-based UN agency said that it had found, in the context of the elections, “that the security forces had used excessive force, including lethal force, to disperse protests, remove roadblocks, and in pursuit operations.” It added that “most of these violations are attributable in principle to members of the Military Police of the Public Order (Policía Militar del Orden Público) and the Army.”

The OHCHR “considers that there are credible grounds to believe that the liberty of the person was restricted arbitrarily” after the ballot, while “some of those arrested were detained in military installations where some were subjected to ill-treatment.”

The OHCHR also said that throughout the post-election period under review, it had “found evidence of illegal house raids and observed a surge in threats and intimidation against journalists, media workers, human rights defenders, and other civil society actors perceived to be close to the Opposition Alliance or critical of the authorities.”

It added that “the lack of tangible progress in the investigation and prosecution of members of the security forces in relation to human rights violations, with no suspension or indictment yet issued, raises doubts about the genuine commitment of state authorities to accountability ... The situation of human rights in Honduras remains fragile, characterized by high levels of violence and insecurity, a pervasive social conflict, and impunity for past and ongoing human rights violations and corruption.”

The UN agency’s assessment coincides with a detailed report issued by COFADEH on Jan. 10 regarding the human rights violations committed during anti-fraud protests in Honduras.

“The institutional breakdown as a product of the 2009 coup d’état ... contributed to creating an environment closed to dialogue and negotiation, which prevented the required reforms to the election system,” COFADEH said in the report, a follow-up on a document published on Dec. 6, during the early stages of the post-election violence.

### *‘War tactics’*

COFADEH said that after its first report, it constantly received information that “the security forces were systematically using excessive force to disperse demonstrations, following a common pattern.” This included the use of “small anti-riot tanks,” as well “several dozen tear gas bombs,” while

demonstrators were chased into their homes and “military police bodies ... threw tear gas bombs into houses and shopping centers and fired conventional weapons,” it said.

Tactics also included “use of weapons of high explosive power” and “deployment of the Army and Special Forces in repression of public demonstrations,” all of which resulted in “death of demonstrators and massive arrests.”

COFADEH also reported that “war tactics were employed to capture demonstrators and political opponents,” adding that police “led the operations and employed the highest degree of violence against demonstrators and prevented immediate aid and transfer of those wounded to hospitals, which caused the death of some demonstrators.”

The human rights organization pointed out that the police and the high command of the armed forces “are actually led by the executive branch.”

The outlook, in COFADEH’s view, is somber, because impunity prevails.

“The serious human rights violations perpetrated by the armed forces and the police take place in a context of impunity, reinforced by the civilian authorities’ complicit tolerant attitude,” while “the authorities who must guarantee human rights have been absent, do not carry out the actions that guarantee that violations will be investigated and those responsible punished,” it stated.

COFADEH reported the existence of a government policy “aimed at repressing dissent and instilling fear by changing the patterns of attack against political opponents, through selective attacks that went from being general and open to being singled out, reflecting intelligence work in identifying the leadership and attacking it with paramilitary-type techniques.”

COFADEH also reported “a new arrest pattern,” where “the detained persons are driven for long hours in police patrol cars through different city sectors while they are punished with electric shocks or threats, causing terror and uncertainty in the victims.”

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