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MaduroWin Honduran Election

by LADB Staff

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Conservative Honduran businessman Ricardo Maduro, 54, of the opposition Partido Nacional (PN), won the Nov. 25 presidential election, defeating governing Partido Liberal (PL) candidate Rafael Pineda Ponce, 70. The day after the election, the Tribunal Nacional de Elecciones (TNE) projected Maduro as the winner with 52.9% of the vote to 43.4% for Pineda. Three other minor-party candidates shared the remainder. Maduro begins his four-year term Jan. 27, 2002.

Maduro is a graduate in economics from Stanford University and served in the administration of President Rafael Callejas (1990-1994) as Central Bank president. Maduro's campaign was remarkable for overcoming an aggressive attempt by the PL to scuttle his candidacy by claiming he was not a Honduran citizen. Though born in Panama, Maduro's mother was Honduran (see NotiCen, 2000-11-09). The two parties agreed to set up a commission to decide the matter, but Pineda and the PL refused to accept the commission's report.

In a tricky maneuver, Maduro quit the race in December 2000, and the party picked Luis Cosenza to replace him. In February 2001, the party nominated Maduro while Cosenza acted as a placeholder until the citizenship question was settled by a congressional vote reaffirming Maduro's Honduran citizenship. The vote had the support of Assembly president Pineda (see NotiCen, 2001-02-08, 2001-03-01).

Election observers reported few election-day problems, although some 83,000 potential voters were unable to cast ballots because of census errors. The voting was marred by the assassination of Angel Pacheco, a PN candidate for a seat in the National Assembly. Three suspects who work for PL Assembly Deputy Manuel Vides were arrested. In another violent incident, shots were fired at PL headquarters in the northern city of San Pedro Sula. No injuries were reported. The violence underscored Maduro's campaign promise to reduce the country's soaring crime rate with a "zero tolerance" policy. His campaign slogan was "Maduro, pais seguro."

In this country of 6.3 million, police say there are 475 youth gangs (maras) that include more than 31,000 juveniles. After a visit with Mayor Rudy Giuliani in New York, Maduro said he would emulate that city's get-tough policy, starting with a crackdown on petty crime. Maduro's son was killed by gang members in 1997. Maduro said he would "end crime" by thoroughgoing reforms in the police and justice systems and by a program to increase economic growth and create jobs.

Election promises resemble those in previous campaigns

This campaign resembled the 1997 election won by current President Carlos Flores against PN opponent Nora Gunera de Melgar. In the Flores-Melgar race, the candidates issued similar promises to attack the same national problems of crime, poverty, corruption, and economic stagnation. Flores promised voters a "New Agenda" to fight poverty and corruption, while Melgar issued a similar 20-

year plan for her four-year term. For that matter, their programs were hardly different from that of then President Carlos Roberto Reina (1994-1998). "I will leave the country much better off than when I received it," Flores said.

Flores and Melgar hinted at a shift away from neoliberal economic policies that date to 1990. Flores said during his campaign that the International Monetary Fund (IMF)-imposed austerity policies were a disaster (see EcoCentral, 1997-12-04). But like his predecessors, Flores was unable to change the economic landscape and depended in large measure on restructuring the foreign debt under the World Bank's Initiative for Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) to fund his New Agenda attempts to energize the economy.

How the economy will fare under Maduro is unclear since he faces overwhelming problems, including a US\$5.5 billion foreign debt, collapsing coffee prices, global recession, and the lingering effects from the damage caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Maduro did not express any deep concern about the burdens of neoliberalism but said he would guarantee more growth "with equality," along with "environmental sustainability."

Claiming victory on election night, he promised to bring about a "profound change" in the country by reducing corruption and the immunity of public officials from prosecution. He also promised to begin a "true and effective" effort to promote Central American integration. "I won't just simply run the nation, but reform it with more democracy, transparency, and equality for all, especially those with less," he said. While Madura focused on the crime issue, Pineda campaigned for improvements in education.

A former teacher, Pineda proposed turning Honduras into "one big school." In that school, "like a good teacher," the president would be "the principal," Pineda said. Doris Gutierrez, an Assembly deputy for the small Partido Unificacion Democratica (UD), said before the election there was no difference between Maduro and Pineda. She told the Spanish news service EFE that both candidates adhered to the same neoliberal model, though Maduro wanted to make it a more efficient one. Because of delayed election returns from remote areas of the country, the TNE will not announce the final results until late December.

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