



Contested Elections in Honduras

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Honduras held presidential, legislative, and municipal elections on November 26, 2017. Initial returns suggested that Salvador Nasralla, a former television personality and sports commentator backed by the left-leaning Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship, was poised to defeat President Juan Orlando Hernández of the conservative National Party. Honduras's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) was slow to release additional results, however, leading Nasralla and some observers to speculate that Hernández may be attempting to manipulate the outcome; the latest TSE count has given Hernández a lead. Election observers have urged the TSE to process the remaining votes without further delay and called on Hondurans to respect the final results. The election could complicate U.S.-Honduran cooperation on a range of issues, including efforts to combat narcotics trafficking and deter irregular migration.

Political Context

The Honduran political system historically has been dominated by the Liberal Party (PL) and the National Party (PN), both of which have distributed public jobs and contracts in exchange for party loyalty. The two-party system fractured in 2009, when President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009) was ousted in a coup backed by most of the political class, including fellow members of the PL, after he proposed a series of populist measures. Upon his return from exile, Zelaya joined with other PL dissidents and left-leaning sectors of Honduras to establish the Liberty and Re-foundation (LIBRE) party. Other Hondurans disillusioned with the traditional parties gravitated to a new Anti-Corruption Party (PAC) led by Nasralla. The new parties won nearly 40% of the seats in the Honduran National Congress in 2013, but the PN held onto a legislative plurality and Hernández won the presidency with 37% of the vote.

Hernández had an approval rating of 56% prior to the election, but he remains a polarizing figure. Over the past four years, he has enacted a series of business-friendly economic reforms and tough security measures, which many Hondurans credit for a significant reduction in homicides. Others question Hernández's legitimacy, however, as a result of allegations that his 2013 campaign was financed, in part, with bribes from drug traffickers and funds embezzled from the national health care and pension program.

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Critics contend that Hernández and his party have weakened the country's democratic institutions by eroding checks and balances. In 2012, the PN-controlled Congress, led by Hernández, appeared to overstep its constitutional authority by replacing four Supreme Court justices who had struck down a pair of high-profile government initiatives. In 2014, the same Congress appointed a new slate of magistrates to the TSE on the last day of the legislative session. The appointments were made in an irregular manner since the incoming Congress, in which the PN lacked a majority, was scheduled to name the electoral body's leadership later in the year. In 2015, the Supreme Court struck down the constitution's explicit ban on presidential reelection, allowing Hernández to seek a second term. The members of the court who issued the ruling were the same justices who had been installed by Hernández in 2012.

The major opposition parties condemned Hernández's reelection attempt. LIBRE, former members of the PAC, and the small Innovation and Unity Party formed the Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship and united behind Nasralla in the presidential race. The PL opted to field a separate candidate, Luis Zelaya, an academic and former university rector.

Initial Results

The TSE did not report any election results for nearly nine hours after polls closed in Honduras, by which time Nasralla and Hernández both had claimed victory. The initial report from the TSE, with 57% of votes counted, placed Nasralla in the lead with 45%, followed by Hernández at 40% and Zelaya at 14%. Zelaya recognized Nasralla as the winner, but Hernández insisted he would be reelected once the PN's strongholds in rural Honduras reported their results.

The vote totals remained unchanged for a day and a half, leading Nasralla and some analysts to question whether Hernández was trying to alter the election result. One report asserted that the PN was negotiating with opposition parties to ensure immunity from prosecution for current officials and a share of positions in the next government. The opposition had been warning about potential fraud for months and alleged plans to rig the election circulated in the days before the vote. International electoral observers and the U.S. State Department have urged Hondurans to remain calm and called on the TSE to process the remaining votes expeditiously and transparently. The TSE has had shifting explanations for the delays.

Facing domestic and international pressure, the TSE began to update the vote total on the afternoon of November 28. As of the morning of November 30, with nearly 89% of the vote counted, Hernández held a 42.5%-41.7% lead over Nasralla. Nasralla has called on his supporters to take to the streets.

Implications for the United States

U.S. policymakers have devoted renewed attention to Honduras and its Central American neighbors as the region has become a major transit corridor for illicit drugs and a significant source of irregular migration to the United States. U.S. assistance to Honduras has more than doubled since the 2014 launch of the U.S. Strategy for Engagement in Central America, which aims to promote prosperity, security, and good governance in the region. Although some analysts argue that Hernández has been a strong ally in these efforts, Members of Congress have expressed concerns about the centralization of power and human rights abuses that have occurred during his administration.

The outcome of the election could affect U.S. policy in Honduras significantly. Nasralla has called for deeper bilateral security cooperation but also has stated that he would review the U.S. troop presence in the country and alter many of Hernández's security policies. His coalition also has pledged to treat irregular migration as a human rights issue and to pursue a more independent foreign policy. A legitimate Hernández victory may allow the continuation of existing U.S. programs in Honduras; however, clear evidence of electoral fraud could push Honduras into political crisis and force a reassessment of U.S. engagement in the country.

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