

Contested Elections in Honduras

Peter J. Meyer

Specialist in Latin American Affairs

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Honduras has descended into political crisis in the aftermath of disputed elections held on November 26, 2017. On election night, with 57% of the vote counted, Salvador Nasralla, a television personality and sports commentator backed by the left-leaning Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship, held a [five-point lead](#) over incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández of the conservative National Party (PN). Hernández [edged ahead](#) of Nasralla several days later, however, after the country's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) belatedly processed the outstanding votes. The Opposition Alliance and the center-right Liberal Party (PL) denounced the TSE's delays and lack of transparency, and alleged that the results of the presidential race—as well as legislative and municipal elections—had been manipulated. Independent analysts contend that the dramatic swing in the late vote toward Hernández was [statistically improbable](#). The TSE agreed to conduct a partial recount of voting center tallies, which produced few changes, and then officially certified Hernández as the winner on December 17.

Secretary General Luis Almagro of the Organization of American States (OAS)—the multilateral institution that groups together the nations of the Western Hemisphere—has [called for new elections](#) to be held. According to OAS election observers, the Honduran electoral process was “characterized by irregularities and deficiencies” that “make it impossible to determine with the necessary certainty the winner.” Nasralla and the third-place candidate, Luis Zelaya of the PL, have embraced Almagro's call for new elections, but Hernández has rejected it.

Over the past three weeks, Hondurans have carried out a series of mass protests against the alleged election fraud, with some individuals engaging in vandalism and looting. Hernández initially responded by issuing a decree that imposed a 10-day curfew, suspended certain constitutional rights, and empowered the military to detain those who disobey the order to stay off the streets. He later rescinded the decree, which Secretary General Almagro had deemed a “[disproportionate](#)” response to the situation. Human rights groups maintain that Honduran security forces continue to use [excessive force](#) against protestors, killing at least 23 individuals to date.

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Political Context

The disputed election has reexposed deep divisions in Honduran society that emerged in 2009, when President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009) was [forcibly removed](#) from office. Hernández, like most of the Honduran political class, backed the coup, ostensibly out of concern that Zelaya's push for constitutional reform could allow him to consolidate his hold on power. Upon his return from exile, Zelaya joined with fellow PL dissidents to establish the left-leaning Liberty and Re-foundation (LIBRE) party, which is the principal force behind Nasralla's Opposition Alliance.

Hernández was elected in 2013 with [37% of the vote](#), and he remains a polarizing figure in Honduras. Over the past four years, he has enacted a series of business-friendly economic reforms and hard-line security measures, which many Hondurans credit for a significant reduction in homicides. Others question Hernández's legitimacy 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 programs.

Critics contend that Hernández and his party have weakened the country's fragile 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.

Implications for the United States

U.S. policymakers have devoted considerable attention to Honduras and its Central American neighbors in recent years 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, others have expressed concerns about the [centralization of power](#) and [human rights abuses](#) that have occurred during his administration.

The contested elections and ensuing political crisis could hinder U.S. objectives in Honduras by exacerbating the poor economic and security conditions that drive irregular migration. In the aftermath of the 2009 coup, Honduras experienced steep declines in tourism and investment. It also experienced significant increases in crime and violence as Honduran security forces shifted their focus from combating transnational organized crime to repressing domestic dissent. A similar situation could lead to a reassessment of U.S. support for the Honduran government. Some Members of Congress already have called for an [immediate suspension](#) of U.S. security assistance, which exceeded \$49 million in FY2016.

Nevertheless, the official U.S. response to the elections has been fairly muted. The State Department has called on Hondurans to remain calm and refrain from violence. It also has called on the country's political parties to [respect the results](#) issued by the TSE, and to [present any challenges](#) they may have through the process established in Honduran law; opposition parties do not trust the formal complaint process since the TSE and the Supreme Court are controlled by Hernández loyalists. On November 28, the State Department certified that Honduras had met [the conditions](#) necessary to release 50% of the aid appropriated for the central government in FY2017. The certification states that the Honduran government is "taking effective steps" to combat corruption and to protect the rights of political opposition parties, human rights defenders, and other civil society activists to operate without interference, among other actions.

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