



Commentary

4 December 2017

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Do the Numbers Lie? Mistrust and Military Lockdown after Honduras' Disputed Poll

With massive protests, armed clashes and a government-declared state of emergency, Honduras is in social and political chaos after the 26 November general elections. In this Q&A, Crisis Group's Northern Triangle Analyst Sofia Martínez explains what has sparked the crisis and its potential effect on armed violence.

What is happening in Honduras?

Honduras has entered a political crisis that is turning increasingly violent following the disputed results of the 26 November general elections. In a climate of deep mistrust between the two contenders – President Juan Orlando Hernández, from the conservative National Party, and Salvador Nasralla, left-wing opposition contender and TV personality – the final count concluded a week after the poll, with President Hernández emerging victorious. However, initial results in the early hours of Monday 27 November, when over half the votes had been counted, showed the opposition on course for victory with Nasralla claiming a 5 per cent lead. After three further days of vote counting, interrupted by a five-hour outage of the computerised voting system, the Supreme Electoral Court announced that President Hernández had taken the lead.

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The sudden switch in the presidential race has elicited disbelief and fury in opposition circles. Nasralla's Alliance party, which insists the entire electoral process has been compromised, refused to participate as an observer in the count of the last remaining votes. The opposition is demanding a more extensive recount, and has until Wednesday to lodge formal complaints against the election.

Opposition anger has ignited across the country, leading to blocking of roads, running clashes in major cities between protesters and security forces throughout last week, as well as more peaceful displays of outrage, such as the large marches last Sunday and a cacerolazo (pot-banging protest). Incidents of looting and attacks on businesses during the protests suggest the political crisis has been affected by Honduras' exceptionally high levels of criminal violence. Its homicide rate, at 59 murders per 100,000 inhabitants each year, makes it one of the world's most lethal countries.

On Friday 30 November the government declared a state of emergency and a curfew in an effort to contain the unrest, which has claimed at least three lives according to local media. The army has been granted special permission to detain anyone suspected of insurrection.

Why have electoral authorities taken so long to process the results?

The president of the Supreme Electoral Court is a member of the ruling National Party and a close ally of President Hernández, inviting

public speculation as to the latter's influence over the drawn-out count. "Are we going to give them the power? In exchange for what?", said one of Hernández's allies in a WhatsApp audio message sent to his supporters the day after the elections. The opposition's accusations are based on a series of circumstances that they consider to be evidence of fraud: the electoral institution took nine hours to provide the first official results; the swing in favour of President Hernández started on Wednesday 29 after the electronic counting system stopped working; and there was a 20 per cent lower voter turnout in the country's northern regions as compared to various southern regions, President Hernández's heartland.

Although the Supreme Electoral Court will itself need to prove that its handling of the poll has been clean, doubts over the probity of the electoral process reflect broader concerns as to the increasing power of the executive branch. Described by Tegucigalpa diplomats as "a political fox", President Hernández's strategy over the last four years has been to accumulate power across state institutions, including electoral and judicial. His greatest feat in this respect was to quash the constitutional ban on re-election. Paradoxically, former President Manuel Zelaya was ousted in 2009 after trying to hold a referendum on the very same issue.

What has sparked this level of public outrage?

The fraud allegations have rekindled old political hostilities from the June 2009 coup d'état, when the army seized former President Zelaya while still in his pyjamas and sped him into exile. Since then, Honduras "has been on standby for eight years", explains a veteran journalist. One side of the political divide is represented by President Juan Orlando Hernández, who is close to the Honduran military and the economic elites; the other is former President Zelaya, the brain of the opposition Alliance, who aspires to become a special presidential adviser to the political novice Nasralla. Hernández has crafted an impressive public image over his term in office,

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promoting the country's economic growth and reduced murder rate. Opposition supporters, on the other hand, refer to Honduras as "Juan Orlando's dictatorship", and denounce militarised public security, rampant corruption and systematic human rights abuses.

Court cases pointing to high-level corruption and crime have undermined the already scant public trust in national government and institutions. Testimony in March 2017 from an extradited drug lord in the U.S. revealed alleged connections between President Hernández, former President Porfirio Lobo – both from the National Party – and drug trafficking groups. Both have strenuously denied the accusations, although investigations into Lobo are ongoing. A multimillion-dollar embezzlement scandal in the social security system exposed ties to the 2013 presidential campaign of President Hernández, who admitted unwittingly taking money from companies linked to the racket. The scandal sparked huge protests, coinciding with the 2015 anti-corruption rallies in Guatemala.

Over 66 per cent of Hondurans fall beneath the poverty line. The breach between the economic hardship of most Hondurans and scandals of illicit enrichment allegedly involving the political establishment have intensified public disaffection. According to recent surveys from Latinobarómetro and the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), only 34 per cent of Hondurans support democracy and trust elections. In the case of support for democracy, Latinobarómetro finds that Honduras has the lowest rate of all Latin American countries surveyed.

Could the risk of political instability affect criminal violence in Honduras?

The spike of criminal violence following the 2009 coup, after which Honduras became the primary landing zone for drug flights from South America and underwent a rapid

growth in the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, is a bad omen. Honduras' criminal economy has recently been undergoing a change in power and personnel. New drug trafficking forces are allegedly taking over from the most prominent groups – the Atlantic Cartel and The Cachiros – after these were weakened by extradition of several leaders. Gang presence, recruitment and violence in urban areas are matters of huge concern: “we are on the way to ending up like El Salvador”, says one Honduran academic. The toll of death and fear turned the country's second city, San Pedro Sula into “murder capital of the world”, with 169 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants in 2012. According to UNHCR data, there were 174,000 victims of forced displacement between 2004 and 2014, and 8,100 asylum seekers in 2016 alone.

Regardless of who wins, what are the most pressing challenges for the incoming Honduran administration?

If President Hernández gets re-elected, as now seems likely, his opponents would find it hard to forgive him victory in a poll they regard as irrevocably rigged. In the face of street protests and threats to his legitimacy, he may well enhance the coercive approach to security matters that he has already displayed in creating a hybrid police-army force, toughening judicial sentences, and promoting military-oriented education programs. Should opposition candidate Nasralla eventually triumph, his administration would suffer a very different flaw. The political divide between him – a self-proclaimed centre-right candidate – and former President Zelaya, a left-wing, anti-U.S. figurehead who is close ally of the Venezuelan government, would probably spill over into government. According to one academic in Tegucigalpa: “the only thing this opposition alliance has in common is the motto ‘fuera

JOH’ [in Spanish “go away JOH”, the acronym for President Hernández]”.

Whatever the outcome, this crisis has magnified the importance of three issues on the in-tray of the new Honduran government. An urgent political reform will be needed to address the causes of this particular crisis, including legalisation of re-election and guarantees of independence for electoral institutions. Worsening public mistrust in the country's institutions will require more robust anti-corruption efforts, with support from a strengthened Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH), an advisory mission assisting Honduran prosecutors run by the Organization of American States (OAS). In terms of security, police reform should seek to build a system of law enforcement that reduces impunity, works to prevent rather than solely combat criminal violence, and leads to the eventual de-militarisation of public security.

How can the international community mitigate the effects of the current crisis?

The U.S. already provides major political and security support to Honduras, and President Hernández has prioritised good bilateral relations during his term in office. “[Honduras] is the spoiled child of the U.S. in Central America”, states a Tegucigalpa-based diplomat. This good relationship was on show in the recent postponement on 6 November of the termination of Temporary Protected Status for 57,000 Hondurans living in the U.S., the same day the Department of Homeland Security announced the status would not be renewed for Nicaraguans. A close ally of President Hernández and a big donor, the U.S. would be inclined to overlook claims of wrongdoing in the electoral process, but would be loath to see an escalating political crisis causing disruptions to the

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Honduran economy and security conditions, with the risk these entail of larger migrant flows to the U.S.

Electoral observers from the European Union and OAS should extend their in-country presence as much as possible, first in order to make sure the remaining 5 per cent of votes are processed to the satisfaction of electoral authorities, the opposition and the wider public; and second, to provide assurances that

the same flaws in electoral management do not affect a repeat poll if that is deemed to be the best solution to the crisis. These missions remain the only credible mediators in the country given the questionable independence of the Supreme Electoral Court. The holiday season may well bring a fragile respite to Honduras. But by January 2018, the country will be far from the international spotlight, and at risk of sustained and violent political disputes.