

Rights Action
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Honduras: Huge Political Crisis As Right Steals Elections

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Large-scale electoral fraud affected every aspect of the November 24 general elections in the Central American country of Honduras. This has sparked a huge political crisis, which matches and possibly surpasses the crises produced by the coup d'état that overthrew president Manuel Zelaya in 2009. The fraud has denied victory to Liberty and Refoundation (LIBRE) party presidential candidate Xiomara Castro, the wife of Zelaya. LIBRE was formed National Front of Popular Resistance (FNRP), which united many sectors that took part in the resistance to the coup.

In Honduras, one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere and occupying an area about the size of Queensland, two decades of struggle has helped develop one of the most social and class conscious movements in the world.

It has been governed for decades by a series of revolving door governments headed by either the National or Liberal parties. When the level of social struggles or political impasses reached a crises point, the army stepped in. Military dictatorships would end these “democratic interludes”, and then step back into the shadows allowing the two parties to play out its game of charades.

Fraud Revealed

This “two-party” cycle was ended on November 24 with the result for LIBRE. Castro is the legitimate president. There is no doubt in the minds of any independent observer that LIBRE won the vote. There is also no doubt that the ruling National Party and its presidential candidate Juan Orlando Hernandez, the self-proclaimed winner, engaged in huge electoral fraud. This took place on in the run-up to the vote, as well as on election day.

This judgement comes from a wide array of political forces in Honduras, as well as a slew of international observers. Those who have pointed to fraud range from Salvador Nasralla, a right-wing media millionaire and presidential candidate of Anti-Corruption Party (PAC), through international

observer Baltasar Garzon, the Spanish judge who indicted Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet, and the Mission Sindical, a large group of trade union observers from throughout Latin America.

Nasralla, who was placed fourth in the balloting (still not completed as of November 27) told the El Herald newspaper: “We do not recognize this process nor do we recognize the results”.

He said: “They [the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, TSE] stole this election. They set aside the votes of the opposition and announced only the vote totals of the nationalists. “They have hidden 20 percent of the results of the polling stations and claim that they haven’t received them. They have only shown partial results from some polling stations, and then from only where the nationalists are ahead.”

This scale of fraud was confirmed by LIBRE representative to the TSE, Rixy Moncada. El Libertador reported Moncada said: “They are refusing to count the 400,000 votes in areas where we are far ahead. They are hiding the results of 20 percent of the polling places in departments where we have won massively.”

Four days after the election, the TSE had still failed to count these votes. Up to 31% are still to be wholly or partially recorded.

But this was not the only method of fraud uncovered. Garzon, one of the most notable of the international observers, said: “It will all be in our report. There was massive fraud. They switched election credentials. They misallocated votes. They bought votes and voter identification. “They militarized the media. They militarised the polling places. They intimidated voters.”

Even TSE head David Matamoros complained that results from 20% of the polling stations “missing”. The transmission of vote totals from polling stations to TSE headquarters was privately contracted to known supporters of the National Party.

The Electoral Coalition of Parties, formed by all parties except the National Party, raised this issue with the TSE and Public Prosecutors office on November 21. The TSE assured the parties their concerns were “unfounded” and the operation of election machinery was overseen by “honorable Hondurans”.

Legitimation Strategy

How did the right believe it could get away with such blatant fraud? The answer is to be found in the importance of Honduras as a forward base of US imperialism, and the impotence of the international left to delegitimise the election.

Honduras has been the lynchpin, along with Panama, of the US's strategy of containing the growth of revolutionary and left movements in Central America. During the war against the Sandinista National Liberation Front, which overthrew dictator Anastasio Somoza in 1979, Honduras was used as a base by the US-backed and financed Contras.

The US has used the military base at Soto Cano and the established seven forward operating bases, ostensibly in the "war on drugs". US forces have been involved in attacks directed against the popular movement in Honduras — for example, the helicopter gunship murder by US Drug Enforcement Administration agents and US soldiers of innocent women and children in Honduras last year.

There is no way the imperialists and their local oligarchic allies are going to allow the left in Honduras to come to office in a peaceful manner.

The strategy of the oligarchs, the 12 families who control 60% of the Honduran economy, is to establish a vicious, repressive state of siege. This strategy is co-ordinated by the US embassy with figures such as Alvaro Uribe, Colombian ex-president, and Robert Carmona-Borjas, the Venezuelan terrorist who helped mastermind the coup against Zelaya.

To implement this strategy, all instruments of the state must be in the hands of the oligarchs, via their preferred political instrument, the National Party. Thus it is absolutely essential to deny LIBRE an electoral victory.

Declaring Hernandez The 'Winner'

The strategy on polling day was to declare their candidate was ahead, until it appeared irreversible. Next, seek international recognition for the victory — and repress any attempt to challenge the results. It is telling that soon after the polls closed, the right-wing presidents of Guatemala, Colombia and Panama all called within minutes to congratulate Hernandez. At the same time, the US ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske told Hondurans

to wait until the TSE had announced results before making any statements about who won.

Only time will tell whether this strategy of legitimisation will work. So far, the first three steps have been implemented, but less than successfully. The reason is found in the way representatives of the mass movements have responded.

Resisting The Fraud

Just after the polls closed, LIBRE claimed victory. Castro proclaimed herself the next president of Honduras, based pre-election polling that showed that the LIBRE would get 29% of the vote (the presidential election is first-past-the-post).

Castro also used exit polling numbers that showed the National party trailing with 26% of the vote. She also revealed the results from the first results, which gave the LIBRE the lead. By announcing these initial results, Castro stopped the TSE manipulating the data. LIBRE said it would refuse to recognise any result that denied Castro the presidency. It was joined by PAC and the Liberal party.

This refusal to accept a fraud or recognise Hernandez as president has opened a political crisis. It remains unclear what the results of the crisis will be, but the key lies with the actions of LIBRE and its base, the FNRP.

Mass Resistance

For the past several decades, under the hammer blows of imperialist-pushed neoliberalism, the Honduran people have become more impoverished. Poverty and hunger have become widespread, human and indigenous rights have been trampled underfoot, political activists have been frequently assassinated.

The country has fallen under the sway of the narco-gangs moving south from Mexico. Honduras has become a major hub for transporting cocaine from Columbia to the US.

In response to this suffering, the Honduran poor, indigenous, workers and radicalised sections of the middle class, have fought great battles against the privatisation of education, for campesino (small farmer) land rights,

against cuts to health and social services slashed, and for an end to the human rights abuses and corruption endemic at all levels of the state.

In 2008, as part of seeking to change the structure of the Honduran state and deal with some of these issues, then-president Zelaya floated the idea of a non-binding referendum on the establishing a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution.

Elected as a representative of the Liberal Party, Zelaya had moved in a mildly reformist direction after months of mass protests by trade union and social movements against neoliberalism.

Among other steps, Zelaya joined the anti-imperialist bloc set up by Cuba and Venezuela, the Bolivarian Alliance of the Peoples of our America, as a counterweight to the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which was devastating the Honduran economy.

The thought of a Constituent Assembly, which might limit the powers of the oligarchy, was too much for the ruling class. The Supreme Court ruled that Zelaya had exceeded. The National Assembly, including many Liberal party members, then voted to impeach Zelaya. The president was kidnapped by the military in the middle of the night and taken to Costa Rica.

But the Honduran oligarchy and the US Embassy, which sanctioned the coup as nothing important happens in Honduras without US approval, underestimated the Honduran social and political movements. Within a day of the coup, mass resistance broke out that occupied the streets for 100 days. Protesters fought police and then the army in pitched battles around the country, demanding the coup plotters be removed and Zelaya be restored.

Zelaya then electrified the country by returning to Honduras, via Nicaragua, and sought refuge in the Brazilian embassy. From there, Zelaya was able to play an increasingly prominent role in the anti-dictatorship mass movement. He was able to help structure the FGRP, a coalition of trade union, social and political groups that were organising throughout the country.

One of the key demands of the FGRP was the proclaiming of a Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution and refound a more democratic, popular and social Honduras. The military dictatorship refused to allow

Zelaya to leave the embassy or guarantee his safety. Instead, it issued an arrest warrant for him.

As the standoff continued, the most class conscious and militant groups in the resistance began organising locally based Constituent Assembly committees. These were tasked with starting to write a new constitution and develop structures of popular power to re-found the country.

This and other forms of self-organisation, including neighbourhood self defense committees, convinced the imperialists that things were started to get out of hand — and an immediate political solution was needed.

Colombia President Juan Manuel Santos called then-Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez to seek a way to resolve the crisis. This led to the Cartagena Accord. The accord guaranteed Zelaya's right of return to Honduras and his safety, plus the safety of members of his family and other government officials who had gone into exile with him. However, the arrest warrant was not rescinded and still stands.

The accord also provided guarantees for the FNRP's right to political participation. This has had profound implications leading to the present crisis.

LIBRE Founded

With the signing of the Cartagena Accord, the FNRP began a process of forming a political party whose aim was to win the next elections — and to break up the two-party system.

This was not a smooth process, to be sure. At first, most of the FNRP rejected this perspective, and sent the documents outlining this switch back to be rewritten, both in terms of the nature of the political project and its program.

A fairly substantial minority of FNRP still disagreed with the perspective pushed by Zelaya and Castro, and other leaders such as Juan Barahona, the trade unionist sub-coordinator of the Front.

The minority, while agreeing on the need for a political project, argued it was more important to engage in building self-organised structures at the grassroots to contest for power, and empower the workers and the poor to be protagonists of change.

One compromise that resulted was the inclusion in the FNRP and LIBRE's program of support for creating an extra state institution — Communal Power, based on grassroots the communal councils modeled on the Venezuelan experience.

LIBRE is a multi-class electoral front, composed of five tendencies grouping different social and political organisations. It describes itself as socialist, with the aim of re-founding Honduras based on a new constitution to wrest power from the oligarchy and place it in the hands of the people. The party is representative of the social vanguard produced from the decades of intense struggle, and contains within it all the tensions produced by differing political analysis and strategies.

It has engaged in mass actions and electoral campaigns, and is now facing the biggest challenge to its very existence, both political and physical.

A Brief History Of Murder

The coup against Zelaya also ended any semblance of citizen security. Impunity is the watchword, assassinations the norm. The vast amounts of money flowing through Honduras as a consequence of drug trafficking has led to greater corruption in the state.

Extra-judicial killings have become a way of life. During the actual election campaign, 18 activists of the LIBRE were assassinated. More than 300 leaders of the FNRP have been murdered in the past four years. More than 30 journalists have been killed since the coup. Impunity for the assassins is a fact. Not one has been charged or convicted of the murders.

Honduras has become the murder capital of the world. There are more than 3000 murders a year, most related to disputes between drugs. Many are committed by the corrupt national police.

Into this mix, the National Party has created a special military police force. It is made up of 30,000 ex-soldiers whose task was touted as "bringing security to Hondurans", but whose real role is to bring security to the oligarchs and their minions.

Some international election observers received a taste of this when hooded and armed groups held them hostage for a day and threatened them if they “interfered with” the election.

The threat of physically exterminating resistance, along the lines of a Colombia, forms the framework of a major debate that has broken out in the FNRR and LIBRE.

Is Armed Struggle On The Agenda?

On the morning of November 24, Castro issued a message on the Facebook page of the FNRP: “We do not need fire arms to take out this garbage.” The message reflected a response to the conversations in some quarters of the FNRP about the aftermath of a victory denied by fraud.

This discussion has been carried out in muted and oblique form for the past several years. It has been fuelled by the huge rise in political assassinations directed at FNRP activists. More often, you can find on the websites of components of the FNRP pictures of the Cuban revolution heroine Tania, rifle in hand, or of a group of armed young Sandinistas defending a barricade.

Among revolutionary Marxist groups, discussion on how to implement self-defense for its cadres is now on their agenda. Campaigns against impunity, and the role of the police and the National Party politicians, have been central to the work of the human rights groups. However, the killings have continued unabated, and the repression grows.

The question of what to do next, and how to respond to the electoral fraud, is the question of the continued existence of the FNRP. The door to a bourgeois democratic resolution to the social crisis has been slammed shut. The murderous intentions of the National Party are clear. As Nasralla said: “Honduras stands at the door of a Juan Hernandez dictatorship.”

The choices before the FNRP are stark. The leaders have said they refuse to recognise the electoral results. This is a statement that a Hernandez presidency has no legitimacy, nor the new National Assembly. This means it is a government that can be overthrown and replaced by one which has popular legitimacy. This is the logic of the FNRP’s leaders.

The left, militant and revolutionary forces in the FNRP add the following: We have two choices. Make some protests that die down in the end, then

console ourselves with the thought of elections four years from now. But in four years, many of us will be dead.

Or prepare the masses to organise and take power, giving the resistance the chance to defend the mass movement against the oligarchy's plans. This will involve measures of self-defence against the military police and the army.

Street protests have already begun against the fraud. Zelaya has called for FNRP activists to protect ballot boxes to stop plans destroy them. In the coming days, the front's plans to resist the fraud should become clearer.

WHAT TO DO ~ Americans / Canadians:

Keep on sending this and other information to your MPs, Congressional Reps & Senators. Keep on denouncing the repression and corruption in Honduras, now including the fraud and repression associated with the November 24 elections. Since the military coup of 2009, the governments of Canada and the USA – and many North American businesses – have maintained strong political, military and economic relations with the regime in power, empowering and 'legitimizing' the repressive, military-backed government.

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