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Lauren Carasik

Western New England University School of Law, lcarasik@law.wne.edu

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Honduras' political violence threatens to undermine its November elections

by [Lauren Carasik \(/profiles/c/lauren-carasik.html\)](#) - [@ajam](#) (<http://www.twitter.com/ajam>) | November 3, 2013
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Commentary: The US must take a stance against anti-democratic interests using intimidation tactics

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Honduras' presidential candidate for the Libre party Xiomara Castro (C) with her husband and former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya (R) greet supporters during a campaign rally in Gracias, Lempira on Oct. 26, 2013. Orlando Sierra/AFP/Getty Images

On Nov. 24 Honduras will hold a presidential election that could usher in a new era. The country's politics have been long dominated by the conservative National party and the slightly more centrist Liberal party. But a new party, Libre, has put forward a presidential candidate who has led polling

(<http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/are-honduran-election-polls-reliable>) for much of the past several months.

The candidate is Xiomara Castro, the wife of former Liberal party President Mel Zelaya, who was ousted in a military coup in 2009. Despite his affiliation with the Liberal party, Zelaya strayed from the traditional party line and alienated entrenched interests by proposing modest land reforms and wage increases, among other policies. Coup leaders claimed that a planned national referendum on constitutional reform was a veiled attempt to illegally overturn the one-term limit for presidents. Zelaya's unceremonious removal elicited quick condemnation from the Organization of American States and leaders across the hemisphere. In the coup's aftermath, a range of grassroots organizations coalesced into the National Front for Popular Resistance and formed the Libre party.

The newly elected president will take the helm of a country beset not only by poverty and structural inequality, but violence that threatens its social fabric. While Honduras undeniably has an element of drug- and gang-related violence, the climate of fear has heightened for certain key figures in civil society, including journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders, campesinos, community leaders, students and increasingly those associated with the opposition party

(<http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/honduras-elections-violent-attacks-against-opposition-candidates-provoke-increasing-concern>). A recent report by human-rights organization Rights Action (<http://rightsaction.org/sites/default/files/Honduras-Violence-Political-Campaign.pdf>) highlighted the escalating political violence that disproportionately targets those associated with the Libre party, documenting 18 members killed and 15 more victims of armed attacks in the last eighteen months, while noting that the total numbers were likely greater. Candidates from other parties have been targeted as well, although at a significantly lesser rate.

If democracy is to flourish in Honduras, such violence and intimidation must not be tolerated, either by interests within the country or by other nations. Especially given its historical involvement in Honduras, the U.S. government must take a strong stance against those who would threaten the right of all Hondurans to elect their leaders in free and fair elections.

Libre's reform fight

For Hondurans understandably preoccupied with physical safety, one major difference among the parties is their proposed response to the violence. The Honduran police are widely mistrusted, notoriously corrupt and stand accused of widespread human-rights abuses. National party candidate Juan Hernandez supports continuing the policy of current President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo of militarizing internal security. In August, Hernandez proposed a hybrid military force to fight internal crime, which received unanimous approval in Honduras' Congress. Hernandez's stance raises alarm among some analysts and activists who note that military personnel are trained in warfare, not traditional police functions. Moreover, the military has committed grave human-rights abuses, including the recent killing of peaceful protestor Tomas Garcia. While not categorically opposed to the use of the military for policing at the borders to combat drug-trafficking, Castro supports a community-based approach (<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Americas/2013/1022/Honduras-vote-More-parties-new-politics>) to crime. This approach favors neighborhood crime watches and recruiting police officers from local communities; such alternatives have seen great success in Nicaragua (<http://www.ipsnews.net/2011/09/nicaraguas-antidote-to-violent-crime/>).

The violence in Honduras has captured the attention of U.S. legislators. A June 2013 letter signed by 24 Senators (<http://www.cardin.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/cardin-leads-senate-call-for-accountability-in-honduras-for-human-rights-violations>) requested that the State Department assess the efforts of the Honduran government to uphold the rule of law and end impunity for police and military misconduct; to ensure that U.S. assistance does not flow to security forces reasonably suspected of engaging in human-rights violations; and to do what it can to promote elections that are "free, fair and peaceful." The letter closed by urging Secretary of State John Kerry to firmly denounce rights abuses in Honduras, as he did when he chaired the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

“ Castro's victory could threaten the status quo of pervasive social, economic and political inequality and the elites who benefit from it. ”

Last month, with the Honduran elections looming, three members of the House of Representatives also wrote to Kerry to voice their alarm (<http://grijalva.house.gov/news-and-press-releases/ reps-grijalva-honda-hank-johnson-urge-secretary-kerry-to-speak-against-militarization-of-civil-society-ahead-of-honduran-election/>). The congressmen cited a loss of U.S. credibility in the region after the State Department prematurely validated the outcome of the 2009 post-coup election before the votes had even been counted, disregarding the illegitimacy of the regime of interim de facto President Roberto Micheletti and ignoring violent repression. They urged Kerry to avoid a similar mistake this time. The congressmen expressed concern that power has been concentrated in the hands of the ruling National party (in part "through illegal means"), which controls all government institutions — including the military, judiciary and electoral authority — which can make fraud hard to detect and remedy. The lawmakers also questioned the ascension of the military forces in policing functions that may influence the electoral process.

With voters split among three leading parties, making an outright majority unlikely, observers are concerned about potential fallout from the election. Libre's platform supports a more inclusive and egalitarian government; promises anti-poverty measures focused on health, education and infrastructure development; and espouses policies aimed not merely at suppressing violence, but at dismantling the conditions that engender it. The party also supports the creation of a national assembly in which historically excluded groups could take part in reforming the government through the participatory formation of a new constitution.

Castro's victory could threaten the status quo of pervasive social, economic and political inequality and the elites who benefit from it. This is why concerns about fraud are so widespread. Even if Castro wins the election, malfeasance in the less-closely watched legislative and municipal elections could just as effectively thwart reforms as her electoral defeat.

Entrenched interests

Honduras sits at a critical juncture. Conditions for free and fair elections cannot be evaluated by a snapshot view of election day; they must be established well before and endure well after the vote. The campaigns that precede the vote tally, as well as the political organizing that follows it, must be free of intimidation, repression and fraud. Whatever the outcome of the election, it is certain that change will not come easily in Honduras. Entrenched interests are unlikely to yield power without a fight, especially to a coalesced social movement comprised of those traditionally excluded from power that hope to transform the economic and political landscape into something they believe represents the interests of all Hondurans.

Given the stakes for their country's future, Hondurans must be free and secure to cast a vote that best advances their individual and collective interests. The Obama administration must send a strong and unequivocal signal that it is paying close attention to the conditions necessary for true participatory democracy to flourish. A meaningful statement from the administration should go beyond platitudes encouraging free and fair elections by demanding an end to threats and intimidation, insisting that observers will be alert to the possibility of fraud and reassuring Hondurans and the global community that the U.S. government is committed to responding to credible allegations. And if reasonable questions arise about the legitimacy of the election, the U.S. must side with justice and democracy and not repeat its 2009 mistake.

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