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# "Banana Republic" Honduras Open for Business After Tainted Election

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By [Lauren Carasik, Truthout](#) | *Opinion*

Few observers are surprised at widespread allegations of fraud, violence and intimidation in the November 24, 2013, election in Honduras, a country notorious for corruption; stark and longstanding social, political and economic inequality; and extremely fragile democratic institutions. After all, electoral mischief is what we have come to expect from the pejoratively termed "banana republics," countries in the global south characterized by iron-fisted oligarchic rule, the exploitation of resources and labor for international corporations and misery for the masses. But although we may want to distance ourselves from the suffering in Honduras, grinding poverty, inequality and anti-democratic principles do not occur in a vacuum: What happens in contemporary Honduran politics is inseparable from its colonial legacy and present-day economic and geopolitical importance to its powerful neighbors to the north and the interests of transnational companies.

Both Juan Orlando Hernandez of the ruling conservative National Party and Xiomara Castro of the left-leaning LIBRE (Liberty and Refoundation) Party claimed victory shortly after the polls closed. Allegations of fraud and irregularities surfaced during the election and continued to accumulate. On November 29, Castro, wife of democratically elected President Mel Zelaya, who was ousted in a military coup in 2009, denounced fraud and refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the election, demanding a vote-by-vote recount (although there is no clear mechanism for vote review), meticulously [documenting her claim of electoral fraud](#) and encouraging peaceful social protest.

In response to Castro's complaint, the electoral authority announced December 2 that it will recount the vote tally sheets that were transmitted to them. Given the context, it is not clear if this would even address any problems, because one of the allegations is that some tally sheets were altered before being transmitted. And it certainly does not address vote and credential buying, intimidation, etc. So this could make the electoral authority look responsive to complaints about fraud without providing real and meaningful review or redress.

## **Tampering With Democracy**

Some critics allege a brilliantly orchestrated campaign to ensure and legitimize Hernandez's victory. Fraud, intimidation and violence before and during the election have a cumulative impact: dirty elections are stolen one vote at a time, through a variety of tactics that start well in advance of voting day. Hernandez's control over all the apparatus of government power, including the Congress, judiciary, military and electoral authority, facilitated the ease of influencing the outcome. The Honduran elite also control the media and its messaging to the electorate - and command a deep well of financial resources to inundate the airwaves and print media, with no public scrutiny of campaign financing. The poorly resourced LIBRE was vastly outspent by the National Party.

Efforts to influence the outcome included vote buying, discount cards and jobs offered by the National Party, tampering with registered voter rolls to disqualify some voters and include others who could not legally cast a vote, credential buying that compromised multiparty oversight of voting tables, media manipulation, malfeasance in the calculation and transmission of the vote tabulation sheets, and intimidation and violence, including the criminalization of resistance leaders and targeted attacks and killings.

In addition to the inaccuracies outlined by the LIBRE Party, evidence of fraud in the vote count is mounting. After accessing the TSE database, the electronic activist group [Anonymous provided documentation](#) of electoral malfeasance. Allegations of fraud were compounded by concerns previously identified by the Organization of American States about the penetrability and reliability of vote tallying software. Although the TSE remedied some of those vulnerabilities and weaknesses, others remained uncorrected on Election Day.

## **Reports of Fraud, Intimidation and Violence Minimized**

On Election Day, LIBRE and Salvador Nasralla of the newly formed Anti-Corruption Party claimed electoral foul, identifying discrepancies in the transmission of votes. But it was not just those who stand to benefit who questioned the election's legitimacy. A number of delegations, including the National Lawyers Guild (in which I participated), the Honduran Solidarity Network, the International Federation for Human Rights and a litany of respected dignitaries expressed grave concern about the process and cautioned against the premature endorsement of election results, urging a careful review of vote counting, improper influence and the climate of fear and intimidation in which the elections were held. Leo Gabriel, a member of the European Union Electoral observation mission, [claimed serious disagreement](#) existed among delegates about its preliminary statement validating the process, despite irregularities they found troubling. Gabriel claimed certain observers in the European Union mission were concerned about the social and economic

repercussions of impugning the integrity of the results, since the European Union is invested in whitewashing the tarnished image of post-coup Honduras.

Despite the concerns, the press accounts subsequent to the election were largely uncritical, reflecting a biased narrative. Reports recounted that most international observers commended the transparency of the process while noting some anomalies, but they gave short shrift to the credible claims of widespread malfeasance.

The ruling party launched a media campaign to disparage the presence of certain international observers, presumably to discredit future criticisms, and engaged in intimidation tactics such as confrontations by immigration authorities demanding documentation from certain credentialed observers (not surprisingly, those singled out did not hail from the United States, Canada or the European Union). Yet the Hondurans denouncing the meddling of international observers perceived no irony in their simultaneous welcome of transnational corporations and investments that extract and export not only resources but also profits from the country.

Media bias was evident in the post-election spin, domestically and internationally. Misinformation abounded, such as a *Washington Post* [editorial that erroneously claimed](#) that Zelaya was ousted in response to a referendum intended to allow him to circumvent the one-term limit for presidents. In reality, the vote in question was a non-binding poll about constitutional reform that would have been voted on formally months later, at the same time as Zelaya's successor was elected, making it impossible for him to extend his term as president. The article made no mention of Zelaya's modest land reforms, wage increases and other initiatives that did not inure to the benefit of the ruling elite that many argue contributed to his removal. The editorial also cited the unanimous verdict that claims of fraud were not substantiated, despite the concerns raised by numerous election observers.

## **Political and Endemic Violence**

With the highest murder rate in the world, Honduras is plagued by violence and impunity. Much of the mayhem is attributable to drug and gang violence and the crime that often accompanies desperate poverty, but repression against resistance activists has taken an incalculable toll and sent an unmistakably chilling message.

Attacks on journalists make Honduras the most perilous country in Latin America to report in, with journalists critical of the government singled out for persecution, [according to Hector Becerra of C-Libre](#), a journalist's group. The death toll from a bloody land struggle in the Lower Aguan has taken 110 lives, [and 18 Libre activists were killed between May 2012 and late October 2013](#), with four more dead in recent days, including two people assassinated the night

before the election just outside of Tegucigalpa and a beloved LIBRE leader gunned down Saturday. Lawyers, human rights defenders, indigenous activists and members of the LGBT community also have been killed.

The drug-trafficking and gang-related violence occurs in an international context, and current US policies contribute to the escalating disorder. Honduras serves as conduit for drugs destined for US consumers - [the US State Department estimated that 87 percent of the cocaine](#) from South America transits through Honduras, motivating the United States to invest personnel, equipment, logistical support and millions of dollars and in the militarization of counternarcotics efforts. A joint US-Honduran drug interdiction operation gone awry ended with the death of four civilians and the injury of three others in La Moskitia, causing critics to implore the United States to rethink its "war on drugs," where the US consumption of drugs fuels bloodshed south of its border. [Aggressive US deportation efforts fuel gang violence](#), as do the burgeoning unemployment and poverty that reflect Honduras' position in the global economic order.

In response to the violence, Castro supports community policing. In contrast, Hernandez supports the militarization of policing, and he shepherded through congress the authorization for a military police force of 5,000 - 1,000 of whom already have been deployed in Tegucigalpa and Honduras' second-largest city, San Pedro Sula. Hernandez's law-and-order platform garnered support from some weary of the violence, who welcomed an iron-fist approach to crime. But the move provoked consternation among many sectors that point out the perils of employing soldiers trained in combat for the more delicate role of policing, which entails crime prevention, investigation and assistance with prosecution, a particularly important task in a country where impunity reaches above 90 percent. Yet mistrust for the National Police is pervasive. Compounding concern about corruption within its ranks, a story by The Associated Press in 2013 claimed that the US-funded National Police, under the command of Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla, were engaging in social cleansing against gangs, despite the Leahy Law that prohibits US funding of forces involved with human rights abuses.

## **International Political and Financial Interests**

After the 2009 military coup, the Lobo regime announced that Honduras was "Open for Business," and ushered a package of laws through Congress with little public debate that were designed to generate and guarantee profits for transnational corporations and the economic elite - but not the desperately poor, who make up the majority of the Honduran population. These laws made Honduras friendlier to resource extraction, biofuel production, "eco-tourism" developments and hydroelectric dam projects that are dispossessing *campesinos* and indigenous peoples and engendering repression against those defending their land, their livelihood and their lives. Legislation

creating "model cities" - unregulated free enterprise enclaves that opponents claim abridge a host of protections for workers, the environment and Honduras' sovereignty - initially was found unconstitutional before the illegal removal of four of the Supreme Court judges who invalidated the law. This initiative most certainly will be pushed forward under Hernandez.

While the Lobo administration's adherence to the neoliberal agenda has provided a windfall to the interests of the country's elites and transnational corporations, his tenure has been a disaster for ordinary Hondurans. [A report by the Center for Economic and Policy Research](#) documented the deterioration of economic conditions for ordinary Hondurans under the Lobo administration's policies. Adding to its distinction as the world's murder capital, Honduras now claims the title of being the most economically unequal country in Latin America and the second-poorest country in the hemisphere. Even a member of one of Honduras' elite ruling families, [Adolfo Facusse, lamented the country's deterioration](#) under Lobo's leadership.

Castro's opponents cast her as a militantly anti-business socialist bent on imposing Venezuelan-model reforms. But Castro has made it clear that she supports business development, although her economic plan aims to benefit more than just the elite and interests of transnational capital. Observers expect that Hernandez will continue Lobo's neoliberal economic policies and rush through [unpopular austerity measures](#) aimed at satisfying the concerns of international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that Honduras is safe for investments.

After the United States and Canada prematurely gave their imprimatur to the widely discredited November 2009 election, won by Lobo, even before the polls closed, various organizations and members of the US Congress urged the Obama administration to exercise caution this time. Yet while waiting for an official declaration from the Honduran electoral authority before formally recognizing Hernandez's victory, US Ambassador Lisa Kubiske lauded the transparency, peacefulness and fairness of the process. Other governments, including Colombia, Guatemala and Panama congratulated Hernandez very early in the vote-counting process.

The United States has a vested interest in the election's outcome. Honduras has long been strategically important to the United States, including serving as a staging ground for the coup against democratically elected Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954 and in support of the Nicaraguan contras in the 1980s. Waning US influence in the region has heightened the perceived importance of supporting governments friendly to its geopolitical and economic interests that serve as a bulwark against the rising independence of more left-leaning nations.

### **Anxiety About Election's Aftermath**



Palpable foreboding permeates Honduras as many questions remain about the election's aftermath. The social movement that mobilized in response to the 2009 coup was not initially monolithic in its support of forming LIBRE - some favored organizing grass-roots resistance to participating in the electoral process. It is unclear whether the movement will fragment or unify in its support of the next steps, such as whether to focus on forming a viable opposition block in Congress or mounting massive social resistance.

Despite official results that bitterly disappointed many rooting for a more democratic and egalitarian civil society, Castro has not conceded defeat, and some hope can be salvaged from this contested process. The emergence of the LIBRE Party as a political contender helped break the longstanding stranglehold of the conservative National and Liberal parties. With the TSE giving Hernandez just less than 36 percent of the vote, he commands a weak mandate at best. Without a majority of seats in Congress, the National Party will have to cobble together a coalition to govern, presumably with the center-right Liberal Party. Voter participation of over 60 percent was a significant increase from 2009, an indication that the post-coup disillusionment with the electoral process is fading.

But Honduras is at grave risk of spiraling into even-more-brutal repression. Peaceful student protests on November 26 were met with a violent crackdown. Exacerbating fears of escalating repression against resistance protagonists is the news from human rights groups and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) that a hit list is circulating, containing the names of prominent human rights defenders, lawyers, union leaders, indigenous rights activists, teachers and opposition party members targeted for death, reminiscent of the 1980s, when death squads were lethally employed to silence dissent. Those reaping the economic and geopolitical benefits of Honduras' status quo will not cede ground easily. In the oft-cited words of Frederick Douglass, "Power concedes nothing without a demand." And so courageous Hondurans fighting for a more just, equitable and democratic society march on, with the winds of history blowing at their backs.

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