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Honduras’ Presidential Election Demands an Investigation

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Honduras' contested results from its Nov. 24 election threaten to unleash civil unrest and repression that could further destabilize the country. Amid widespread allegations of fraud, vote buying and voting irregularities, the Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE) — Honduras' electoral authority — announced on Nov. 26 that conservative National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernandez had an irreversible lead. Both Hernandez and left-leaning LIBRE party candidate Xiomara Castro claimed victory on election night.
Castro based her claim on LIBRE's exit polls that showed a substantial lead. Her husband and former president Mel Zelaya — who was ousted in a 2009 coup — also contested the results, noting that the vote tally from 20 percent of the polling stations announced by the TSE contradicted the actual vote count from polling stations. Anti-Corruption party candidate Salvador Nasralla has also impugned the accuracy of the vote counting process.

In the cloud of election violence and suspicions, outside pressure from the international community, especially the United States, is critical to ensure that democracy prevails in Honduras and to protect those vulnerable to state sponsored repression. However, the signals from the U.S. so far suggests that it is pleased with the results, even if they are tainted by fraud and intimidation.

**Procedural concerns**

The presidential campaign and vote were marred by allegations of fraud, intimidation and violence. Prior to the election, observers questioned the lack of a conducive political environment, given the ruling National Party's control over all branches of government, including the Public Ministry (the office charged with investigating and prosecuting crimes), the judiciary, the military, the electoral authority and congress.

In some cases, voter rolls listed registered voters as deceased, listed dead voters as registered, and inexplicably assigned some voters' polling sites to more distant locations. To ensure the transparency and integrity of the voting and counting process, TSE proposed staffing individual voting tables by representatives of all nine political parties. Given their limited capacity, however, it was unlikely for smaller parties to cover all 5,000 voting centers, some of which had more than 20 voting tables. A TSE official confirmed to a team of international observers allegations that the National party was buying credentials from smaller parties, enabling a dominant presence at individual voting tables and raising the possibility of fraud. LIBRE party representatives reported receiving death threats for their refusal to sell party credentials. After the election, the International Federation for Human Rights expressed its concern for the vulnerability of opposition activists and denounced conditions that may have slanted the vote illegitimately in advance of election day, such as the complete lack of transparency in campaign financing, and Hernandez's open financial inducements to support the party, including job offers and the widespread distribution of discount cards to party members.

Additionally, for a country still living under the cloud of the 2009 military coup, the militarization of the election process was disturbing. The presence of heavily armed soldiers at the doors of each voting center, conducting searches of some voters and making periodic patrols through the centers, could reasonably be seen as intimidation. The Honduran National Police, long plagued by accusations of pervasive corruption and brutality, were present outside many centers as well. The military was charged with delivering blank ballots to voting sites and transporting counted votes to the electoral nerve center.

**Violence and intimidation**

Most media reports on the elections attribute the violence to endemic gang and drug problems — which are partially responsible for Honduras' murder rate of 20 victims per day. Yet, such reports give scant attention to the mayhem created by politically targeted violence: the deaths of 110 campesinos in the
Lower Aguan region, who were subjected to systematic repression for defending their land against powerful oligarchs; the murder of 20 LIBRE activists since May 2012; and the death of journalists, lawyers, judges, artists, human rights defenders and members of the LGBT community.

Opposition leaders also faced myriad intimidation tactics, including spurious criminal charges. Berta Caceres, an activist against a hydroelectric dam project that threatens her community, was charged with crimes against the state and weapons possession. Edwin Espinal, an anti-coup activist, was tortured and his house was damaged during a police raid, likely for his political activism rather than alleged criminal activity. In this regard, Hernandez’s promise of a soldier on every corner provides little comfort for those who oppose the government.

"U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske congratulated the Honduran people on a peaceful and transparent election."

Election day was also marred by violent repression. Two LIBRE activists, who previously received death threats for their involvement in land disputes as members of the Carbon Cooperative of the National Council of Rural Workers, were killed on Nov. 23 just outside Tegucigalpa, Honduras’s capital. Earlier in the day, an attack in the eastern part of the country near the La Moskitia polling station left two people dead.

The pre-poll intimidation was not limited to Hondurans. In the weeks preceding the election, the ruling party launched a campaign against international observers to discredit and preempt their conclusions about the integrity of the electoral process but international observers refused to be cowed.

 Castro led in polls for most of the year (http://www.cepr.net/index.php/blogs/the-americas-blog/are-honduran-election-polls-reliable) leading up to the election. Hernandez saw an unexplained surge with a month left to the election just prior to the moratorium on polling. Observers warned that the surge was orchestrated to lay the groundwork for a Hernandez victory, noting that the polling company was closely associated with the National Party–controlled Congress. Many voters were also reluctant to answer poll survey questions, making the art of prediction even more tenuous.

The TSE also imposed a gag order, asking the press to sign a pact agreeing to refrain from predicting the election’s outcome or contradicting official announcements. On election day, the military surrounded media houses that refused to sign the pact, including Radio Global, Globo TV and Channel 11. Radio Globo, a source of opposition news, was shut down for almost a month by the military following the 2009 coup.

On Nov. 25, a day after the election, workers at the Public Ministry tasked with handling complaints of electoral wrongdoing were sent home and the office was surrounded by the military, according to the Honduran Accompaniment Project (PROAH) and the La Tribuna newspaper.

U.S. government’s reaction

Although the U.S. should advocate for Honduran democracy through fair elections, it has so far
squandered its potential role as a neutral observer.

In 2009, just months after the coup, the U.S. State Department erroneously congratulated President Porfirio Lobo even before polls closed in a widely discredited election that was boycotted by political parties, voters and international observers. At a meeting last week, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Lisa Kubiske told our delegation of credentialed international observers from the National Lawyers Guild that the embassy would be cautious in issuing statements in the days after the election. However, on Monday Kubiske complimented the transparency of the process and congratulated the Honduran people on what she described as a peaceful election.

In response to concerns about political intimidation, Ambassador Kubiske indicated that it is extremely difficult to distinguish between targeted and "common" violence in Honduras in order to achieve redress. She also noted that the U.S. is providing support for a special unit within the public ministry charged with addressing crimes and political persecution of the LGBT community. The ambassador's concession of targeted violence against the LGBT community, however, seemed inconsistent with her skepticism about identifying ongoing brutal repression against other groups. Kubiske's assessment also disregarded the fact that many of the murders of civil society leaders, activists and human rights defenders were preceded by death threats.

Despite its professed support for Honduran democracy, the U.S. would likely prefer a government that could counterbalance the left-leaning governments in Central and South America—including Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador—that challenge U.S. hegemony in the region and threaten its economic and geopolitical interests.

But in this election, the Obama administration has two stark choices: to affirm its commitment to human rights, democracy and the rule of law and insist on a full investigation into allegations of a disputed electoral process and pervasive repression, or endorse the findings of the TSE and ignore alarming signs that the will of the Honduran people is being trampled once again.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.