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The U.S. Must Resolve Honduras's Political Crisis and Support Overdue Electoral Reform

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On Sunday, November 26, Honduras held elections for the presidency and National Congress.

Since then, the country has been locked in a political crisis as the two leading presidential candidates have both declared themselves the winner. Violent demonstrations and a heavy-handed police response have resulted in at least 14 deaths and dozens of injuries.¹

Honduras's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) has found the incumbent, President Juan Orlando Hernandez of the center-right National Party, to have defeated opposition candidate Salvador Nasralla by a 1.6 percent margin.² Yet results remain unofficial as international observer missions from the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU) refuse to certify the outcome due to allegations of electoral fraud.³

Honduras's political stability matters a great deal to the U.S., as Honduras is a leading regional security partner. Honduras is a top narcotics trafficking transit area, as it is located between drug-producing South America and consumers in the U.S. It is in the midst of a dire security and economic crisis, which continues to drive illegal migration to the U.S. The U.S. and international partners must mediate a peaceful solution to the crisis and support Honduras's efforts to reform its flawed electoral system.

Deposed President Mel Zelaya Continues to Play Destabilizing Role

Honduras is no stranger to political turmoil. In 2009, then-president Manuel "Mel" Zelaya followed in the footsteps of his close ally Hugo Chavez and attempted to create an unlawful constituent assembly and rewrite Honduras's constitution. This set the country into a constitutional crisis and resulted in his lawful removal from power.

In 2011, he formed the leftist Liberty and Refoundation (LIBRE) coalition party. While Zelaya was banned from running for the presidency, his wife Xiomara Castro was the LIBRE candidate in the 2013 election that incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernandez won. Even though his wife was defeated, Zelaya was elected to the National Congress. The LIBRE party remains a strong supporter of bringing Venezuela's 21st-century socialist movement to Honduras and rejecting Honduras' close cooperation with the U.S.⁴ Hernandez has been a strong friend and partner to the U.S. on a host of economic and security-related matters. Yet his administration was tainted with corruption scandals, one including government funds being used to finance his first presidential campaign.

In 2015, Hernandez and his party pushed through a controversial constitutional reform that removed presidential term limits. Questions remain about the legality of this alteration, as Zelaya was removed from office for attempting a similar change. Leading into the 2017 elections, Zelaya led a socialist coalition of parties that selected Salvador Nasralla as their candidate.⁵

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at
<http://report.heritage.org/ib4799>

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Honduras' Political Standoff

Going into the Monday following the election, each candidate illegitimately declared himself the winner with barely 50 percent of ballots counted. At the time, Nasralla carried a small lead. He told his supporters to rebel against the government, claiming they were stealing the election. Nasralla's supporters have held organized violent demonstrations throughout the country and set up roadblocks, destroyed cars, and looted stores. The government's heavy-handed response has further inflamed the volatile situation. Antigovernment demonstrations and clashes with opposition groups are still taking place.⁶

Throughout the first week, the TSE delayed counting on various occasions, citing computer issues as well as delays transporting ballots to the government headquarters. From Monday to Tuesday, the TSE stalled on reporting results for 36 hours. It routinely ignored deadlines and press conferences, reinforcing the perception of fraud.

Later that week, both candidates were urged by the Organization of American States (OAS) observer mission to sign a nonbinding accord promising to respect the outcome. Within a few hours of signing the document, Nasralla backed out of the agreement. By late Thursday evening when nearly 95 percent of the ballots had been counted, the president was ahead by an insurmountable amount, yet Nasralla refused to accept the results. With 100 percent of the results reported, Hernandez won the election with 42.98 percent against Nasralla's 41.38 percent.⁷

Whereas he initially wanted a recount of nearly one-third of the 18,000 ballot boxes, Nasralla has sent the TSE a request to annul the elections. The

TSE has 10 days to respond from the date of submission, which was December 8.

International observers from the OAS and the European Union have refused to certify the elections and could potentially call on Honduras to hold new elections. While the OAS and EU mission can only observe and advise, their blessing is necessary for international credibility. There is no mechanism in the Honduran constitution for a re-do in the event of a contested outcome. There is also no precedent in recent Honduran elections, adding an additional layer of complexity to the problem.

Diffusing the Situation and Fixing a Flawed Electoral System

At this point, it is unknown whether the Honduran government will decide to annul and repeat the elections. That is a decision for the Hondurans to make themselves. U.S. policymakers should focus on supporting Hondurans' efforts for a peaceful and democratic solution as well as helping them adopt the necessary reforms to avoid this situation in the future. For the U.S., a commitment to democratic governance is a key pillar of America's foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. Free, fair, and respected elections are a vital component of that. To protect these interests, U.S. policymakers should:

- **Work with the OAS to facilitate a dialogue between the candidates and a peaceful solution.** The U.S. and OAS must quickly come together and act as the arbiters for this political standoff. There are few options that will be palatable to both sides, the most likely of which will be either a full recount or even a reelection.

1 Patrick McDonnell, "Two Weeks After Honduras' Still Unresolved Election, a Sense of Disquiet Broadens," *Los Angeles Times*, December 9, 2017, <http://beta.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-honduras-vote-20171209-story.html> (accessed December 11, 2017).
2 Honduras Supreme Electoral Tribunal, General Elections Results, 2017 (in Spanish), <https://resultadosgenerales2017.tse.hn/> (accessed December 15, 2017).
3 Organization of American States, "Preliminary Report of the OAS Electoral Observation Mission in Honduras," December 4, 2017, <http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/preliminary-report-eom-honduras-2017-4dec-.pdf> (accessed December 15, 2017).
4 Elena Toledo, "21st Century Socialism Continues Lurking with Salvador Nasralla," *PanAm Post*, November 23, 2017, <https://es.panampost.com/elena-toledo/2017/11/23/socialismo-honduras-salvador-nasralla/> (accessed December 11, 2017).
5 Alvaro Mejia, "Opposition Alliance Confirms Salvador Nasralla as Their Candidate and Presents Their Party Platform," *El Heraldito*, September 15, 2017, (in Spanish), <http://www.elheraldo.hn/eleccioneshonduras2017/partidolibre/1072827-508/alianza-de-oposici%C3%B3n-confirma-a-salvador-nasralla-como-presidenciable-y-presenta-sus> (accessed December 11, 2017).
6 Heather Gies, "Hondurans Anxiously Await Election Results," *Al Jazeera*, November 29, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/nasralla-hernandez-honduras-election-171127091015101.html> (accessed December 11, 2017).
7 Ibid.

- **Urge Latin American countries to appeal for calm in Honduras.** Violent street protests will probably only intensify as the uncertainty drags on. The region's democratic leaders should help alleviate the conflict.
- **Conduct an assessment on vulnerabilities in Honduras's electoral process.** The unresolved elections underscore the urgency of electoral reform in Honduras. U.S. policymakers should urge the State Department to work alongside the Honduran government and conduct a post-mortem analysis of what went wrong. The continued flaws and weakness in the Honduran election system must be fixed and confidence must be restored in the election administrators. This must include strengthening campaign-finance oversight.
- **Condition aid on electoral reform if progress is not made.** Much like the U.S. puts democratic governance and human rights restrictions on foreign aid, policymakers must also factor progress on fixing its electoral system. Based on the findings of the State Department electoral report, Congress should set clear benchmarks and time tables for reforms. They should factor Honduras's progress when evaluating aid appropriations.
- **Address the shortage of political appointees at the State Department.** The lack of Western Hemisphere leadership at Foggy Bottom has undermined efforts to alleviate this crisis. Political leadership is necessary to relay the Administration's policy and objectives. While personnel delays have been attributed to the impending reorganization of the State Department, world

events do not abide by bureaucratic calendars. The Secretary of State should quickly nominate key Assistant Secretaries of State.

- **Restate the U.S.'s commitment to Honduran security, economic development, and institutional reforms.** The deep cooperation between the U.S. and Honduras, particularly under the administration of President Hernandez, has resulted in considerable reductions of crime and violence.⁸ Regardless of whoever is elected president, continuing this collaboration is of mutual benefit to both countries.
- **Support Honduras's efforts at advancing economic freedom.** In addition to the U.S. programs aimed at addressing Honduras's security challenges, the U.S. should support Honduras's efforts to liberalize its economy. The country's weak rule-of-law practices in the criminal justice system and judicial branch continue to undermine the country's economic prosperity.

Looking Toward the Future

Promoting political stability in Honduras will lead to better outcomes for the other dimensions of the bilateral relationship. If U.S. policymakers intend to improve the security conditions in Honduras, they must take a lead in ending this political standoff and addressing the flaws in the Honduran electoral system.

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8 Ronna Risquez, "7 Keys to Understanding Honduras' Declining Homicide Rate," *Insight Crime*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/7-keys-understanding-honduras-declining-homicide-rate/> (accessed December 12, 2017).