

National Democratic Institute
The Honduran Presidential Election
Woodrow Wilson Center Panel

“Prospects for the 2013 Honduran Elections”

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I'd like to talk today briefly about the stakes in the upcoming election, NDI's engagement in Honduras, strengths and challenges that Honduras has going into this election, flag some issues on what to look for on election day, and then very quickly identify some issues for the day after.

This is first real electoral test since the 2009 coup in which the full political spectrum of Honduras will participate. The political crisis which preceded the 2009 coup continued past Pepe Lobo's election and inauguration as president and only subsided with the Cartegena Agreement of May 2011 that brought deposed President Mel Zelaya back to Honduras and pledged to respecting the newly revised constitution and working out disagreements through the political system. A new division of power is at stake as all elected offices are in play: executive, legislative, municipal.

Some see this as a zero sum game. Should the simmering political confrontation between Xiomara Castro, former President Zelaya and their supporters with the traditional parties escalate, there will obviously be a negative impact on governance. A political crisis would set back Honduras' ability to grapple with severe fiscal and security challenges. Even if the political confrontation stays at a simmer, the next president will govern with less than majority popular support and lack a majority in congress. The most recent polls published show four strong candidates – with no one likely to pull much over 30 percent of the vote. This is a first past the post system: no run-off, so political power is likely to be further fragmented after the election. According to the latest published polls, National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernandez was in a technical tie with Xiomara Castro.

Many observers see the two party dominance of Honduran politics as coming to an end, after this election. Besides the Libre Party of Xiomara Castro and former President Mel Zelaya, three more new parties joined the mix. Of these the most important is Salvador Nasralla's Anti-Corruption Party, PAC. Polls have shown Nasralla running strong, as he tapped into disaffection of the young and widespread discontent with the Honduran political class. Were it not for the split within the Liberal Party that gave rise to Libre, Liberal Party candidate Mauricio Villeda would appear a strong bet to win. Regardless, Honduras' era of two-party dominance appears at an end.

Whoever wins will have to deal with declining confidence in Honduran institutions and Honduran democracy. The conduct of the elections will no doubt have a salient impact. The latest Latinobarometro poll shows Honduras near the bottom in Latin America on support for democracy. Election participation rates have been dropping, beginning with Mel Zelaya's election in 2005, and are among the lowest in the region. Last year's primaries showed a rebound over 2008 party primaries—we'll see if the broad menu of choices in November 24 attracts a bigger turnout.

Before analyzing conditions for the November 24, let me give you a sense of NDI engagement in Honduras.

First, NDI's program in Honduras began in 2008, as NDI worked to support Honduran civil society efforts to promote election transparency through the country's first independent quick count and systematic election observation. For those of you not familiar with the term, a quick count is a parallel vote tabulation using statistical projections based on a random sample of individual polling stations' official election results. It is not based on exit polls. A quick count provides an independent check or verification of the official election count and when carried out by election monitors can be a strong deterrent to fraud.

As the Cartagena Agreement was coming into effect, NDI opened an office in Tegucigalpa and began facilitating democracy dialogue with coup opponents and coup supporters throughout the country. Since then we expanded our work to political party strengthening working across the political spectrum with the emerging new parties, including Libre and PAC, as well as with established parties. Areas of focus have been promoting women's political participation, youth academies, inclusion of underrepresented groups and improving citizen participation in development of public policies that respond to the deterioration in security and escalation of violence.

The work on fostering greater dialogue on citizen security continues, but for the past year we have also focused a great deal on elections. With the same civic partner that did the 2009 quick count, Hagamos Democracia, last year we supported the first independent audit of the voter registry to identify shortcomings and recommend improvements. A number of those recommendations have been implemented.

We have also been supporting civil society efforts to monitor the election campaign—focusing on key problem areas such as violence, lack of regulation on campaign financing, vote buying and low representation by women. We've sought to support more substantive campaigns and debate over public policy alternatives through candidate forums at national and municipal levels. To encourage new voters to participate, we're supporting a non-partisan youth get-out-the-vote effort modeled on successful Mexican GOTV work.

Along with the Netherlands Multi-party Institute for Democracy, NDI has acted as a technical secretariat for representatives of the all the political parties to discuss implementation of an agreement on Minimum Guarantees for elections signed by all

eight presidential candidates. Once again, we will be providing technical assistance to support election day observation and quick count by the non-partisan Hagamos Democracia (HD). HD is consortium of four civil society groups representative of the diversity of Honduran opinion: the Catholic Church social action organization Caritas, the Evangelical Church Co-Fraternity, FOPRIDEH a grouping of more than 80 civil society groups, and Universidad Metropolitana, a private university. They will deploy more than 1000 observers on election day.

Honduras goes into the November election with a number of improvements over past elections.

- Unlike 2009, where candidates selected in the 2008 primaries withdrew in protest over the coup, this election offers a full range of choices.
- Civil society is mobilized and active in many ways to promote transparency in the electoral process and accountability by current and future authorities. While there have been no candidate debates as we understand them, multiple candidate forums have taken place on different priority issues, offering voters genuine opportunities to compare and evaluate the candidates and their proposals.
- Reforms adopted by the National Registry of Persons, responsible for the issuance of identity cards required for voting among other things, ensured delivery of several hundred thousand new identity cards. The reforms de-politicized issuance of the cards, which political parties previously delivered.
- Experienced election authorities—the TSE have embraced a strong presence of both international and national election observers, notably the EU and OAS. The TSE has also established a consultative mechanism to give a voice to all political parties regarding TSE decisions.

Despite openness to observation, the TSE generates scant confidence, according to public opinion surveys. Particularly after last year's primary elections, in which losing candidates for the National and Liberal parties refused to concede claiming fraud, the public has been conditioned to expect the worse.

The Honduran electoral system is not an independent and autonomous branch of government, as in many countries, but rather a hybrid system, run by political parties and dominated by the National and Liberal parties. As one TSE insider put it, Honduran elections are like a centaur—the TSE is the head and body is the parties.

The TSE and its bureaucracy organize and prepare the elections, oversee delivery of election material, then hand them over to representatives of the parties who run the individual voting tables, adjudicate the count (in the presence of all competing parties), and then return the materials to TSE control for the final tallying and announcement of results.

Each party representative at the voting tables must police the other parties. Should one party cry foul, how does one adjudicate when all parties are pursuing their own self-interest? Election reforms in 2004 dictated that TSE magistrates would not be party representatives, but ask any Honduran and they will tell you the party affiliation of each of the current TSE magistrates. Libre and PAC complain that the TSE ignores their complaints, and of a double standard favoring the traditional parties in TSE decisions.

On top of such systemic challenges, Honduras is inflicted by epidemic levels of criminal violence, impunity, corruption, and continued human rights concerns, at a time of increasing influence by organized crime. Twenty homicides occur a day. NDI's civic partner IUDPAS is seeking to track and analyze political electoral violence, exceedingly difficult in such an environment. No effective controls are in place for reporting on campaign financing. We can discuss the impact of these issues more in the Q and A.

In this environment, technical election administration shortcomings can take on political significance. At least two technical issues could seriously complicate November 24.

First, the ability of the voting table election administrators – all party representatives—to work together is untested. As there are nine parties and each party is entitled to two representatives, there will be 18 people at each voting station.

Second, the TSE reporting system for preliminary presidential election results is complicated, technically challenging, questioned by Libre and PAC as open to manipulation, and many independent observers believe it will not work on election night, leading to a dearth of information and rumors of fraud.

So what should one look for on election day to understand how the process is unfolding?

Here are a number of key indicators:

- What happens on the voting stations? Are all parties represented? All allowed to work?
- Are there crowds? Does the TSE extend voting hours to cover those in line? Most observers believe a large turn out helps the new parties, maybe the Liberals.
- Are observers and media allowed to stay for the count, as provided for under Honduran electoral law?
- What information is released election night by the TSE? How do parties react? Does one or more contender claim victory prior to release of official results?

During the question and answer period we may want to discuss day after scenarios. Suffice it to say for now, that in the event there are no preliminary official results on election night, either because the election is very close or because the TSE early reporting system confronts technical difficulties as has happened before, it will be important that

the political parties and their supports be patient while the counting process is completed, At the same time, it will be critical that the TSE comply scrupulously with measures to ensure the transparency of the transmission of results and the counting process and that elections observers, both international and domestic, continue to be provided access to all parts of that process along with representatives of all the parties in contention.

All actors need to keep in mind that this is not a zero sum game, the next president is likely to need support from one or more other political parties in the congress in order to advance the government's program, and needs to broaden its base to successfully govern.

To avoid facing similar issues during the next election cycle in four years, a concerted effort needs to be made to adopt electoral and political reforms in 2014-15. Even with all the other challenges Honduras faces, this is an urgent priority.