

Elections in Honduras: The Challenge of Ending Twelve Years of Neoliberalism

Honduras is at the most important crossroads of its recent history

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On November 28, more than 5 million Hondurans will be asked to elect the President of the Republic, 128 deputies to the National Congress, 20 to the Central American Parliament, 298 mayors and more than 2 thousand municipal councillors.

As the election date approaches, the political atmosphere has become polarized, conflict has intensified and social tension grown.

No one has forgotten the violent repression of 2017 against those who protested against the gross electoral fraud that prolonged the agony of the current government regime. At that time, more than thirty people lost their lives violently and these crimes have remained in total impunity.

The bloody events of the last few days reawaken the ghosts of that violence and repression.

On November 11, a Liberal Party candidate for councillor, Óscar Moya, was shot several times in Santiago de Puringla (La Paz). Two days later the mayor of Cantarranas (Francisco Morazán) and candidate for reelection for the Liberal Party, Francisco Gaitán, was assassinated.

The following day the leader of the opposition Libertad y Refundación (Libre) Party, Elvir Casaña, and a Liberal Party activist, Luis Gustavo Castellanos, were killed in San Luis (Santa Bárbara) and San Jerónimo (Copán), respectively. Two other activists were wounded in the deadly attack on Castellanos.

On November 15, another attack killed Dario Juarez, a Liberal Party vice-mayor candidate in the municipality of Concordia (Olancho). Two days later, unknown persons made an attempt on the lives of Héctor Estrada, independent candidate for mayor of Campamento (Olancho)

and Juan Carlos Carbajal, candidate for mayor of El Progreso for the Salvador Party of Honduras.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Honduras and the National Violence Observatory (ONV) of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), more than 30 violent deaths have been registered in the context of the current electoral process, which is shaping up to be even more violent than that of 2017.

The Observatory reported at least 64 cases of electoral violence up until October 25, including 27 homicides and 11 attacks. To these must be added the most recent attacks that took the lives of five people in five days (as detailed above) and other non-fatal attacks.

The OHCHR condemned these acts of electoral violence “that affect the right to political participation” and urged the authorities to carry out “prompt, thorough and impartial investigations”.

A legacy of impunity

“These murders of local leaders are a prelude to what could happen during and after the elections. Let us remember that all this is happening after the approval in Congress of reforms and laws that deepen the criminalization of social protest and citizen mobilization,” warned Bertha Oliva, coordinator of the Committee of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (Cofadeh).

“They have been practically legalizing repression against those who demonstrate their discontent and defend human rights. These are the results,” she added.

In 2017, repression against those protesting the electoral fraud orchestrated by the ruling National Party claimed the lives of 37 innocent victims (Cofadeh 2018). Of all these cases only one was successfully prosecuted and the charges against the police officer accused of shooting and killing were dismissed.

“The chain of command was never investigated, nor the context in which these deaths were caused. The dictatorship gave the military police guarantees of impunity to capture, torture and execute opponents in the streets. This only generates the conditions for similar and even more violent events to be repeated”, predicted the human rights defender.

In this sense, Cofadeh will be monitoring and denouncing any electoral crimes committed before and during Election Day, as well as violations against people exercising their right to vote.

Three for the presidency

Of the 16 presidential aspirants, only three have a real chance of winning: Xiomara Castro of the opposition Libre Party, who leads most polls; Nasry “Tito” Asfura Zablah of the National Party, main opponent of the former first lady and Yani Rosenthal of the Liberal Party, representing the other traditional party in Honduras but with little chance of victory.

For Xiomara Castro, this is her second attempt to reach the presidency of the country, after the allegations of fraud around the questionable defeat she suffered in 2013 at the hands of

Juan Orlando Hernandez.

After the public presentation of her “Government Plan to Refound Honduras 2022-2026”, Castro and Salvador Nasralla (of the Salvador Party of Honduras) formed an alliance, joined by the Innovation and Unity Party (Pinu), some sectors of the Liberal Party and an independent candidacy. In order to join efforts and potential votes, Nasralla renounced his presidential candidacy and supported Libre’s candidacy.

Nasralla, an eccentric, well known sports talk show host, was the 2017 presidential candidate of the Opposition Alliance against the Dictatorship, which also included Libre and Pinu and which received the support of a wide range of social, popular and union organizations.

On that occasion, the Alliance denounced the unconstitutionality of a new candidacy of Juan Orlando Hernández, since in Honduras the Constitution prohibited presidential reelection. The Alliance also mobilized for weeks against the electoral fraud that deprived Nasralla of the presidential seat, with the tacit consent of the United States, the European Union and the OAS.

“Tito” Asfura, popularly known as “Papi a la orden”, has been mayor of Tegucigalpa for two terms (2014-2022) for the ruling National party. A businessman with more than 30 years occupying governmental and legislative positions, he was a shareholder of an offshore company in Panama while still a public official. In the end, the said company ended up under the control of Banco Ficohsa, owned by the powerful Atala Faraj family.

In June of this year, the Court of Appeals suspended a pre-trial hearing against Asfura for abuse of authority, use of false documents, embezzlement of public funds, fraud and money laundering. In order to reactivate the hearing, the Superior Court of Accounts will have to carry out a special audit on the funds investigated by the Public Prosecutor’s Office.

According to information published in recent days, the former mayor of Tegucigalpa has also been linked to the notorious “Diamante” corruption case involving the mayor of San José, Costa Rica, Johnny Araya, who is being investigated by Costa Rican authorities for alleged bribes in exchange for public works.

The third candidate is former congressman and banker Yani Rosenthal, who in 2017 was indicted and sentenced to three years in prison in the United States for participating in financial transactions using illicit proceeds (drug money laundering). He voluntarily turned himself in and was held at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York but returned to Honduras in mid-2020.

Both the investigations carried out by US prosecutors and the media Pandora Papers investigation revealed the connection between the Rosenthal family, one of the richest in the region, and several offshore companies that may have been used to launder money.

Programs and proposals

In her government program, Xiomara Castro points out the need to rebuild the democracy broken by the 2009 coup and to re-found the country through a Constituent Assembly that “gathers all sectors to agree on the legal bases of their future coexistence in a new consensual order”, leading the nation towards the construction of a democratic socialist state. While, by contrast, both Asfura and Rosenthal propose the same worn out neoliberal

recipes that have led Honduras to be among the poorest and most unequal countries of the continent.

“Xiomara proposes a government of national reconciliation that includes all sectors of the opposition. A government that aims to overcome these disastrous years that have deepened the neoliberal model, privatizing services, ceding national territory, handing over public goods, expanding extractivism, putting national sovereignty up for sale,” said Gilberto Ríos, candidate for congressman for Libre.

The social movement leader explained that Libre’s government plan proposes to move from a deeply oligarchic State to a democratic socialist one. Among many other points, it intends to repeal all those laws and reforms approved by the dictatorship, which deeply harm the interests and rights of the immense majority of the Honduran population.

Thus, we are talking about, among others, the Hourly Employment Law that deepens labor insecurity and annuls the rights of workers, the Secrecy Law that blocks public auditing of State funds, as well as the Surveillance Law that allows spying on the political opposition and too the Organic Law of the Economic Development Zones (ZEDEs) that violates national sovereignty. It is also expected to reverse reforms made to the Penal Code that criminalize social protest and mobilization.

“It will be a more redistributive government, of social works and projects, that defends human rights, consistent with the needs and security of the population. In this sense – clarified Ríos – we differentiate ourselves from the other candidates and political parties because they are openly neoliberal and represent the interests of the Honduran oligarchy, transnational capital and the old bipartisanship. That is what it is all about: defeating the traditional bipartisanship and neoliberalism”.

How is Honduras now?

The Central American country arrives at these elections in difficult conditions, to put it euphemistically.

Honduras currently ranks among the most unequal countries in Latin America, with 62 percent of the population mired in poverty and almost 40 percent in extreme poverty (EPHPM 2020). According to a recent report by the National Institute of Statistics (INE 2021), removed from the institution’s website twelve hours after its publication, in July 2021 poverty had reached 73.6 percent of the population.

That increase is also the result of disappointing government management in the face of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and the two hurricanes that struck the country last year.

According to figures from the Technical Unit for Food and Nutritional Security (Utsan), 1.3 million Hondurans face food insecurity and almost 350 thousand people are in a “critical situation”. Meanwhile, the unemployment rate has reached 10% of the economically active population (EAP), perhaps the highest in the Latin American region. There are at least 4 million Hondurans with employment problems and more than 700 thousand unemployed workers.

Faced with this scenario, thousands of families have taken irregular migration as their only option, the vast majority of whom are being held up at the borders. It is a portrait of one of

the deepest tragedies of the last 40 years.

“In the last ten years Honduras has had a frank deterioration, not only in the rule of law in general, in democratic institutionalism, in the population’s access to basic services and in the fight against poverty, but also socio-economically. When one looks at all these indicators, one realizes that rather than a failed state, we should speak of a dead state,” said Ismael Zepeda, economist at the Social Forum on Foreign Debt and Development of Honduras (Fosdeh).

Currently Honduras’ public debt exceeds 70% of GDP: the country’s economic growth is concentrated mainly in three sectors: financial, energy and telecommunications.

“These are sectors that do not produce development, nor do they generate redistribution, rather they produce more concentration of wealth. In addition, we have an army of more than 250,000 public employees who absorb almost 50% of the budget, while there is a worrying drop in revenue. The situation is unsustainable and will represent a very heavy burden for whoever wins the elections”, explained Zepeda.

For years, the National Party has maintained a supernumerary staff, mainly composed of party activists. In practice, it has plundered the State so as to employ its political leaders and create client networks so as to stay in power.

State reengineering

For the Fosdeh economist, an immediate reengineering of the government, a reconversion of the productive system, a fiscal pact to dynamize the economy and efforts towards progressive taxation are necessary. Likewise, it is imperative to guarantee transparency, accountability and the fight against corruption, while promoting a strategy of internal and external debt reduction.

Finally, the generation of decent jobs, the creation of programs that prevent the deepening of poverty, more equitable management and redistributive policies to reduce social inequality, are also key elements the new government must implement.

“When a country is mired in a multiple crisis and has badly deteriorated, it is easy, so to speak, for a candidate to make promises. The most important thing, then, is not so much what is offered, but the way in which things eventually get done”, concluded Zepeda.

Labor insecurity

The 2009 coup d’état in Honduras not only broke the institutional framework and strengthened the oligarchy and elite power groups, but also allowed the governments that followed the coup to deepen the neoliberal extractivist model, encouraging the plundering of national territory and public wealth and increasingly deregulating the labor market.

For Joel Almeyda, secretary general of the United Confederation of Honduran Workers (CUTH), the impacts of these policies on labor and union rights have been devastating for the vast majority of the population.

“There has been a growing deregulation of labor, coupled with the deepening of labor flexibilization and insecurity. One of the most nefarious laws has undoubtedly been the

Hourly Employment Law: rights have been lost and permanent jobs have been made precarious,” said Almeyda.

“There were also companies or institutions that simply changed their name or corporate name and did away with unions. Others created parallel unions to counteract a genuine organizing process,” he added.

Regression

All of these anti-worker measures have negatively impacted the safeguarding of rights.

“There are clear setbacks in the right to free unionization and collective bargaining. The programs to generate employment have been a mockery, tailored to the interests of large transnationals. Juan Orlando Hernández has definitely been a disaster for the labor and union sector”, stated the CUTH general secretary.

Another factor contributing to the deepening of the crisis has been the behavior of the government’s labor authorities.

“Shielding themselves behind the need to generate employment and supposed development, they have been biased and have systematically protected the interests of big national and transnational capital. They have done so at the expense of the rights of workers, abandoning them and allowing the violation of their rights. They have not protected them, and have been their executioners instead,” he lamented.

In view of this situation, the CUTH presented the Libre candidate with the political proposal of the union sector where, among other points, it calls for the immediate repeal of the above mentioned laws, to put a stop to outsourcing and labor insecurity, and to guarantee respect for the Teachers’ Statute and the ILO conventions[1].

The cancer of corruption

On November 17, the feature film “At the edge of the shadows” ([you can see it here](#)) was released in a movie theater in Tegucigalpa, a documentary that reflects the web of corruption, impunity, territorial dispossession and violence experienced by the Honduran people, forced to confront perverse plans that operate from the shadows.

Luís Méndez, member of the collective ‘La Cofradía’ that made the documentary, explained that the objective of the work is precisely to show citizens how corruption networks are formed and how they are articulated to involve politicians, public officials, national and transnational economic groups in a way cutting across all society.

The documentary addresses four crucial areas: the looting of Social Security and the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the dispossession of territories and public wealth, the co-optation of the justice system and its collusion with corruption, organized crime and the criminalization of protest. The fourth area has to do with the concept of democracy in a context as broken as the Honduran one.

Through key characters and experts, and with the participation of the current head of the Specialized Prosecutor Unit against Corruption Networks (Uferco), Luis Javier Santos, to tie up loose ends, the film rocks the country’s foundations, shaking up the conscience of the people, showing how Honduras is controlled by a criminal network that has ruled since the

2009 coup, and has become entrenched in the state apparatus.

“The documentary provokes disappointment, anger and rage, but also leaves the feeling that we are not defeated, that it is possible to fight, as many organizations and people do from the territories and cities.

In the midst of so much State violence, in the midst of a State held hostage – continued Méndez – there is resistance and struggle. As Berta Cáceres said, our peoples know how to do justice and they do it following their own trajectory, from their resistance, from their struggle for emancipation”.

Enough is enough!

A few days before the elections, the Convergence against Continuity, a platform made up of several organizations and personalities, made a public statement and recalled that these elections “are being held in a context of narco-dictatorship, whose creators came to control the State by violent and unconstitutional means and are not willing to hand over power by democratic political means”.

In this sense, the Convergence ratified its repudiation of “the mafia led by Juan Orlando Hernandez” and warned of the possibility that, in view of an imminent defeat, “he may orchestrate a new and violent electoral fraud by manipulating the voting process and vote counting”.

Finally, they made a vehement call to the Honduran people to “mobilize massively to the polls” and defend their vote “from these anti-democratic machinations”.

They also urged them to punish with their vote “the criminal group that has hijacked the State” and to vote for those candidates “who have shown firm signs of being against the narco-dictatorship, of fighting against corruption and for the defense of national sovereignty”.

Violence against human rights defenders

Several international reports, including “[Last Line of Defense](#)” published this year by the British organization Global Witness, point to Honduras as one of the most dangerous places in the world for human rights defenders, especially for those who defend land and common wealth.

The emblematic cases of the murder of [Berta Cáceres](#), the disappearance of the [Garífuna activists of Triunfo de la Cruz](#) and the illegal imprisonment of the eight [water and life defenders of Guapinol](#) are a clear example of what is happening in the country.

The use and abuse of the justice system and the collusion of the State with extractive companies are two of the elements that characterize the systematic violation of human rights in Honduras.

According to Global Witness, in 2020 at least 129 Garifuna and indigenous people suffered attacks for opposing extractive projects and 153 defenders have been murdered in the last decade. In addition, the Center for Information on Business and Human Rights (Ciedh) points to Honduras as the country with the most judicial harassment against human rights defenders.

The situation of women and LGBTI people is also dramatic.

The Women's Human Rights Observatory of the Women's Rights Center (CDM) reports that in the first five months of the year, the Public Ministry registered a total of 1,423 complaints of sexual crimes (9.5 per day). Of these, 1,238 were attacks against women (8.1 per day) and 63.4 percent (785) were against minors. These data confirm that in Honduras a woman or girl is sexually assaulted every 3 hours.

In the last ten years, 4,707 women have been murdered in Honduras. 710 were killed in the last two years (2019-2020) and 301 women were victims of femicide up until November 15 of this year. Impunity is practically absolute.

According to the Observatory of Violent Deaths of the Catrachas Lesbian Network, in just over 12 years 390 LGBTI people have been murdered, 17 so far this year. Ninety-one percent of the cases remain in complete oblivion and impunity. Only 9 percent of perpetrators are convicted.

In recent months, a large and representative group of women's and feminist organizations held a discussion with Xiomara Castro to present their demands and proposals. The activity led to the signing of a 'State Pact', the content of which will be implemented if Xiomara is elected as the first woman president of Honduras.

Similarly, in her government plan, Xiomara pledged to implement public policies safeguarding the existence and guaranteed access to fundamental human rights for LGBTI people (p.64).

Voting against the dictatorship

The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Copinh) added its voice "in moments of the battle for survival in the face of the maximum expression of dispossession, fear and violence in the history of our country under a de facto and authoritarian government."

Although the ballot box will not change Honduras - [explains the Copinh communiqué](#) - voting against the dictatorship that governs us will be a step. The Honduran people, for the most part, will cast a vote of rejection in the face of all the accumulated suffering.

The organization co-founded by Berta Cáceres alerted the population that "the conditions for fraud are in place" and expressed that as citizens "we are preparing to reject the electoral fraud at grass roots".

Finally, Copinh urged the immediate convocation of a Popular and Democratic Constituent Assembly "that will give rise to the reconstruction of our country, assuming the historical demands of the indigenous, black and peasant communities, women, migrant communities, workers, LGBTI community, church sectors, among others, to repeal all legislation that exposes the peoples to the surrender of their territories and the violation of their rights".

"We call on the peoples - concludes the communiqué - to activate the organizational, articulation and debate processes to achieve Berta Cáceres' urgent dream of re-founding Honduras. The people of Honduras need a people's government to confront the economic sectors that have enriched themselves unjustly in these 12 years of attacks on indigenous, black and peasant peoples and the majority of the population".

The challenge of putting an end to neoliberalism

Undoubtedly, next Sunday's elections represent a very important move on the Honduran political and social chessboard.

"The citizenry has an enormous desire for change. They want to have an alternative to what they have had to live through during these years. They expect a process to begin of recovery of lost rights. They want to have opportunities, that their territories and national sovereignty be respected," explained sociologist and political analyst Eugenio Sosa.

"Honduras is at a crossroads. It must choose between the continuity of a regime and its failed model or the beginning of a process of openness and change", added the analyst.

Will the regime respect an eventual defeat or will it seek, as in 2017, an illegal way to retain power, asks Sosa.

"People have not forgotten what happened four years ago. There is a lot of uncertainty around how the electoral authorities will behave, the vote count, the transmission of results, the identification of poll station personnel to avoid the purchase of credentials. At the same time there is a determination never seen before and Xiomara (Castro) has been able to rescue and bring together a consensus of wide and diverse sectors of Honduran society", he concluded.

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