Honduran vote held amid repression, mass abstention

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Sunday's national elections in Honduras were marked by systematic repression against opponents of the country's coup regime and reports of record abstention. Nonetheless, the Obama administration in Washington hailed the results as a "very important step forward for Honduras" and a "legitimate way out" of the crisis that began with the military overthrow of the country's elected President Manuel Zelaya on June 28.

The election was held just a day after the coup's five-month mark, with Zelaya still trapped in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa, where he sought refuge two months ago after staging a clandestine return to Honduras.

Months of US-backed mediation, which produced first the San Jose Accord and then the Tegucigalpa Accord, failed to restore Zelaya to the presidency. Instead, they have allowed the coup regime headed by the leader of the Honduran congress, Roberto Micheletti, to stall for time until the elections, which were seen as a means of legitimizing the coup.

There is every reason to believe that this was the intention of the Obama administration, which, despite verbal criticisms of Zelaya's overthrow, exerted little real pressure against those responsible for the coup. As for the coup itself, it is highly improbable that a Honduran ruling elite that is totally dependent upon the US for trade and investment and a military that is among the most loyal to the Pentagon (with the US military maintaining its largest Latin American base on Honduran soil) would have acted without first getting a green light from Washington.

Sunday's vote was held under conditions of the virtual militarization of the country, with more than 30,000 troops and police mobilized to intimidate opponents of the regime.

In the northern city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras's second largest and its industrial center, police and soldiers violently broke up a demonstration against the election. Over 1,000 people had marched to the central plaza and the San Pedro Sula Cathedral, where they sang the national anthem and carried crosses memorializing the dozens who have been killed during the last five months of repression.

The security forces responded with a barrage of tear gas grenades, a deluge from a water cannon mounted on a military tank and the clubbing of protesters. After the demonstrators had been dispersed, the soldiers set to work demolishing a truck that had carried sound equipment and posters protesting the illegitimate vote.

This was only the most visible manifestation of the repression that had steadily escalated in the days leading up to the elections.

Towns and villages across the country were occupied by police and troops, with opposition figures arrested or threatened. In the southern island community of Zacate Grande, according to the Venezuelan television network Telesur, residents were herded to the polls by groups of armed gunmen in civilian clothes after local opponents of the regime were hunted down by the army and houses were raided by security forces.

In the capital, the police beat people handing out leaflets urging a boycott of the vote.

"Troops and police have raided organizations' headquarters," the human rights organization Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees (COFADEH) reported. "An intense witch hunt has been mounted since Saturday against organizations and members of the resistance by the army and the National Police." The organization reported that an oppositionist was arrested for walking into the street with a megaphone, and that in a raid of one group's headquarters, computers and other equipment were seized.

"We are talking about approximately 30 people arrested," the coordinator of COFADEH, Bertha Olivia, said. "There were arbitrary raids against the offices and homes of activists supporting the legitimate president [Zelaya], all kinds of intimidating actions and military sieges against union headquarters and poor neighborhoods [colonias] that are the bastion of the resistance."

Pofirio "Pepe" Lobo, 61, the candidate of the right-wing National Party, was declared the winner of this gunpoint election. According to the official tally, he won by a wide margin over his principal rival, former vice president Elvin Santos, who was the candidate of the Liberal Party, in which both Zelaya and Micheletti are leading figures.

Preliminary poll results showed Lobo with 52 percent of the vote, compared to 34 percent for Santos.

Like Micheletti and Zelaya, Lobo and Santos are both wealthy members of the Honduran oligarchy. Lobo is a prominent landowner and cattleman, while Santos heads one of the country's major construction firms.

More important than the supposed margin of victory, however, was the overall turnout. The regime's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) claimed that the abstention rate was 38.7 percent. The opposition, however, insisted that between 65 and 70 percent of Honduran voters stayed away from the polls.

Anecdotal accounts from the capital of Tegucigalpa indicated that, while turnout was strong in the neighborhoods of the wealthy and upper middle class layers that had supported the coup, polling centers were largely empty in the working class *colonias* that ring the city.

There were strong indications of fraud in the elections. While the polls closed at 5 PM local time, there was no report of results until 9 PM, due to what officials described as a "technical problem" in the counting of ballots. Election officials also reported that they had run

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out of the ink used to dye the fingers of voters to prevent them from casting multiple ballots. Opposition sources in the south of the country also reported that supporters of El Salvador's right-wing Arena party were crossing the border and going to the polls in an attempt to swell the ballot count.

The entire process was organized under Washington's sponsorship. An estimated 800 US personnel were present in the country to oversee the election. Both the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) sent observers in a bid to legitimize the vote. These outfits, sponsored by the two major US parties, are funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, which was created in the 1980s to assume political functions abroad that had previously been carried out under the aegis of the Central Intelligence Agency.

None of the other agencies that normally monitor elections in the Americas—the United Nations, Organization of American States, the Carter Foundation—sent observers. Others who were present included a group of anti-Castro Cuban exiles from Miami. The few critics of the regime who came to observe the election were subjected to searches by security forces and threatened with physical violence by supporters of the country's right-wing parties.

The majority of the governments meeting in Portugal Monday at the Iberia-America summit, which included Spain, Portugal and most Latin American countries, indicated that they would not recognize the election as legitimate.

Brazil, Latin America's major power, has been the most emphatic on this score. Its position reflects the growing tensions between Brasilia and Washington as Brazil emerges as a regional power and rival for influence in a part of the globe that US imperialism has long regarded as its own "backyard." US officials sharply criticized the Brazilian government's collaboration in Zelaya's return to Honduras before reaching a US-brokered settlement with the coup leaders.

Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva views the election "as an attempt to whitewash a coup," the Brazilian president's advisor, Marco Aurelio Garcia told the media in Portugal. In an indication that Brasilia is softening its position, however, he added, "for now we have to wait" and "discuss with the international community."

The Spanish government was even more equivocal. Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos said that his government "does not recognize the elections" in Honduras, adding, "but it doesn't ignore them either." The vote, he indicated, had created "new political actors" interested in reaching "a solution of national reconciliation."

El Salvador's President Mauricio Funes, who was elected recently with the backing of the former guerrilla front, the FMLN, also called for "national dialogue," declaring, "It is not a matter of recognizing the elections or not, but of stimulating processes that allow the strengthening of democracy."

Among the Latin American countries, only Washington's closest allies—Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama and Peru—openly backed Sunday's vote.

In Washington, Arturo Valenzuela, the US assistant secretary of state for the Western Hemisphere, offered the Obama administration's congratulations to Lobo, declaring, "He will be the next president of Honduras … we recognize those results."

While declaring the vote a "very important step forward for Honduras," Valenzuela insisted that it was "not the last step."

He said that the Honduran regime must comply with provisions of the US-brokered accord reached between the Micheletti and Zelaya camps in Tegucigalpa in October. This agreement calls for the formation of a government of "national unity and reconciliation" and a vote by the Honduran congress on whether Zelaya should be restored to the presidency for the less than two months that remain before a new administration is scheduled to take power.

Zelaya accepted this reactionary deal, while protesting later as Micheletti set up a "national unity" regime that included none of the ousted president's supporters, and the congress announced that it would not reconvene to consider reinstating the ousted president until December 2—after the elections.

The deal also called for the Honduran Supreme Court, which provided legal sanction for the June 28 coup, to issue an advisory ruling to the congress on Zelaya's reinstatement. Last Thursday, the court released its finding that Zelaya cannot be returned to office before he is arrested and placed on trial for a supposed breach of the Honduran constitution.

The coup was triggered by Zelaya's attempt to hold a consultative vote to determine if the Honduran people supported a referendum on a constituent assembly to alter the country's constitution, a reactionary charter imposed upon Honduras by a former military dictatorship and the US Embassy in 1983.

Zelaya had already antagonized the native oligarchy and Washington by implementing a modest increase in the minimum wage and cementing an alliance greased by cheap oil with Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez.

Since the coup, Zelaya has distanced himself from Chavez, while the Venezuelan president has taken a back seat to Brazil in dealing with the Honduran crisis. Over the past five months, both have expressed the hope that President Barack Obama would intervene to resolve the crisis and force the coup regime to relinquish power.

There could be no more damning exposure of the political bankruptcy of all sections of the Latin American national bourgeoisie, no matter what their "left" pretensions. Just as in Iraq and Afghanistan, while giving lip service to "change" and improved international relations, the Obama administration has pursued US imperialist interests in Latin America as ruthlessly as its predecessor.

In Zelaya's case, this reliance on a White House intervention was translated into his attempt (and that of the trade union bureaucrats and left nationalists in the leadership of the Front of National Resistance-FNR) to subordinate the increasingly militant struggles of Honduran workers, peasants and students to the US-sponsored negotiations that have provided political cover for the coup regime.

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