Vote count in Honduras grinds to a halt

Andrea Lobo
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Two days after Sunday's presidential elections in Honduras, the electoral board has announced less than 60 percent of the votes. Following its first installment on Monday, which showed the candidate of the Opposition Alliance against Corruption, Salvador Nasralla, five points ahead of the current president and National Party candidate, Juan Orlando Hernández, the announcements virtually stopped, and the country has been left in suspense.

While the international corporate press has described the opposition coalition as "left-right", there is little doubt that the Alliance would continue to head a staunchly militarist, pro-business and pro-imperialist government. Such characterizations, like the description of Hernández as "authoritarian" by media sources like the *New York Times*, also express the willingness by sectors of the US establishment to back a Nasralla victory, amid fears that a reelection of Hernandez--proscribed by the country's Constitution--would undermine the image of the Honduran state and feed domestic social opposition.

The Alliance's *de facto* leader, Manuel Zelaya, was the president of a right-wing administration at the head of the oligarchic Liberal Party, but was deposed in a 2009 US-backed military coup because he was becoming too close to the Chavista government in Venezuela for the liking of Washington and the dominant sectors of the Honduran ruling elite.

On Sunday, all voting booths closed sharply at 4 p.m., amid complaints that the electoral board had promised to extend voting one more hour. The announcement of the results, with an 85 percent installment scheduled for 8 p.m that day, has not been so timely. Aside from the president, 298 mayors, 128 deputies to the unicameral National Congress and 20 to the Central American Parliament were also elected.

Late Sunday night, the polling company Ingeniería Gerencial announced that exit polls showed Hernandez ahead by 9 percentage points (with a 2 percent margin of error), leading Hernández to declare victory.

A few moments later, Nasralla, a TV host and former CEO of Pepsi Honduras, declared himself the winner, indicating that he had the official results for one-third of the voting centers, giving him a clear victory. At 10 p.m. the chief magistrate of the electoral board, David Matamoros, explained that there were delays in the results because the board had to check with technicians "to guarantee that the data is truly representatives of the voter register of the country." By Tuesday, his excuse had changed, indicating that the problem was that the ballots had simply not arrived in the capital.

The electoral board has now established that it will not declare a winner before the last vote is processed, possibly not until Thursday.

Tuesday morning, Eduardo Facussé, the last president of the main business chamber COHEP, suggested on the TV channel Televicentro that electoral officials are virtually saying, "One moment; we have to consult the president because the situation is getting delicate." With clear desperation and representing a growing layer of the ruling elite, he reminded the host that polls had shown almost 70 percent of Hondurans opposing an unconstitutional reelection. "The people are mad," he warned.

On Monday, the third-placed candidate, Luis Zelaya of the Liberal Party, called on President Hernández to acknowledge his defeat in order to prevent violence. One of the four electoral magistrates, Marcos Ramiro Lobo, commented to the media that technical experts believed it was an irreversible result.

Referring to the post-electoral turmoil, the historian of the Catholic think-tank ERIC, Marvin Barahona, said that Hernández's run "has a high dose of illegality, which turns the results into a catalyst for confrontations." Suffering a sudden collapse in their optimist outlook, based on the support of Wall Street and the polls that showed the National Party comfortably in the lead, the Hernández-led ruling clique now fears a loss of their hold on power in the midst of numerous investigations and leaks regarding corruption.

In March, a former leader of one of the largest drug cartels in Honduras, Denis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, testified in a New York City court that the post-2009 regime, including the ex-President Porfirio Lobo, his son, and countless police and military officers were providing the cartels protection in exchange for hundreds of thousands of dollars in kickbacks. Maradiaga gave US authorities recordings of bribes that allegedly included Hernández himself, with his chief of staff denying the charges, but warning last month that if the truth comes out about politicians bought by organized crime, "hold on to your seats, because we're talking about all colors here."

The National Party governments since 2009 have pursued an agenda of antidemocratic and repressive measures seeking to consolidate a grip on power by the military and dictatorial rule.

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The coup regime, for instance, approved a Special Law of the National Defense and Security Council, granting the executive power centralized control over all branches of government. Hernández also formed the Military Police for Public Order.

In the last electoral campaign, he infamously said, "I will become the new Carías," referring to the National Party dictator who governed for 16 years starting in 1933, defending fiercely the interests of the US fruit companies and brutally suppressing all social opposition.

Given the country's history, perhaps the most telling images of the elections were of the 35,000 heavily-armed soldiers who were in charge of transporting and guarding the ballots. The country's military is notorious for its history of bloody dictatorships, coups and the well-documented participation in fascistic death squads that work closely with gangs and corporations to terrorize any social opposition.

Determined to maintain firm control over the Honduran state while maintaining a democratic façade, Washington has sought to pressure the ruling elite to clean up its act. Its main method has been tying military and other aid to the compliance with a US-sponsored "anti-impunity" agency, MACCIH.

On top of pursuing selective investigations to keep pressure on the government, it promoted the 2016 "Clean Politics Act", making these the first elections with a limit on campaign financing, established at about $20 million per presidential candidate. At the same time, presumably aimed at blocking campaign contributions from criminal organizations, candidates had to present financial statements listing all transactions.

The 2009 coup and decades of austerity have fatally discredited all factions of the ruling elite. The Hernández administration imposed deep austerity as part of a three-year IMF plan initiated in 2014, making Honduran dollar bonds the most profitable in the world, according to Bloomberg, with returns of 78 percent since October 2013.

But, during the two previous decades, it was the Liberal Party that headed the imposition of the IMF "adjustment" programs. The Carlos Flores Facussé administration even continued the austerity packages after Hurricane Mitch ravaged the country in 1998, killing 6,000 and leaving 8,000 disappeared.

Such reactionary measures and the 2009 coup, which also included key Liberal protagonists, have produced a deep crisis of bourgeois rule. In response, the US State Department and regional elites, with the collaboration of Honduran rights groups and the pseudo-left organized behind the Popular Resistance National Front (FNRP), put into motion policies designed to demobilize growing opposition and prevent the emergence of an independent movement of the working class.

In May 2011, the OAS, the Honduran regime, Hugo Chávez from Venezuela and the Santos administration in Colombia signed the Cartagena Accord, which called for canceling "the judicial processes against the ex-President José Manuel Zelaya", and assuring that the "FNRP… participates democratically in the electoral processes." With the increasing likelihood of a government headed by the Opposition Alliance, which incorporates the FNRP's political arm, LIBRE, this plan seems to have ripened.

While the Morenoite group LIT-CI remained part of the "grassroots" of the FNRP, the so-called Revolutionary Left, which consists of Socialism or Barbarism, the Central American Socialist Party (PSOCA) and other organizations, have worked around its periphery. The latter have sought to use nationalist calls for greater "independence" from imperialism and a "worker-peasant and popular democracy" to channel social opposition behind the FNRP and, ultimately, the Opposition Alliance.

Nonetheless, the current global economic crisis, the US-led militarization of the region and the attacks against immigrants in the United States, including the threat by the Trump administration to deport the 85,000 Honduran Temporary Protected Status (TPS) holders, have continued destabilizing the country socially and politically.

Nasralla sought to exploit these circumstances, especially the broad opposition to Hernández's unconstitutional bid for reelection, insisting that he would only stay in power for a maximum of four years. He also promised to pursue corruption cases against politicians and business figures and to close down some of the country's new maximum-security prisons. Economically, he promised to raise corporate taxes, cut the regressive added-value tax, and invest in health and education—the latter as a response to a tumultuous year of strikes and demonstrations by university students and public health workers.

In reality, no change should be expected with the coming to power of an Alliance government.

"The five families"—Atala, Rosenthal, Faraj, Facussé-Nasser, and Larch—who control about 40 percent of GDP and constitute the top administrators of foreign financial capital in the country, will continue to exercise control. Meanwhile, some of the most powerful business-people have come to back the opposition. For instance, Adolfo Facussé, former president of the main business chambers COHEP and ANDI, and one of the top supporters of the 2009 coup and the military regime that followed, promoted the "business plan" of the Opposition Alliance this year.

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