Washington hails victory of Honduran opposition candidate

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1 December 2021

The landslide victory of Xiomara Castro in the presidential election held Sunday in Honduras has brought to an end a dozen years of rule by the right-wing National Party, which consolidated its grip over the Central American country through a US-backed coup in 2009. That coup overthrew Castro's husband, then-president Manuel Zelaya, who was bundled onto a military aircraft in his pajamas and flown out of the country.

While the National Electoral Council (CNE) of Honduras has yet to officially declare Castro the winner, the vote count as of Tuesday showed Castro leading her National Party rival Nasry Asfura by nearly 20 percent, with 53.3 percent of the vote, or 987,670 ballots, compared to 34.2 percent, or 633,885 ballots.

Again, while final results have yet to be confirmed, according a vote analysis by the Honduran daily *El Heraldo*, Castro's Freedom and Refoundation (Libre) Party will have the largest caucus in the new National Congress, with 51 seats, and, together with the Salvador Party of television personality and right-wing populist Salvador Nasralla, Castro's vice president-elect, will hold a majority.

Libre and its allies also won control of city halls in the capital Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and other major cities.

Sunday saw a record turnout at the polls, with over 68 percent of eligible voters casting ballots. As the results confirmed, this turnout was driven by popular hostility to the National Party government, headed for the last eight years by Juan Orlando Hernández (known as JOH).

Characterized by rampant corruption, police state repression and death squad killings, and the descent of ever growing layers of the population into abject poverty, the National Party held onto power thanks only to unrelenting violence and unstinting US support.

Washington's backing of this criminal regime represented only the latest episode in over a century of US imperialist oppression. Washington invaded Honduras seven times between 1903 and 1925 to uphold the interests of the United Fruit Company and the US banks and to suppress strikes and popular revolts.

The country served as a staging ground for both the CIA-orchestrated 1954 coup that overthrew the democratically elected president of Guatemala, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán and the CIA "Contra" war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, a terror campaign that claimed some 30,000 lives.

During the same period, the CIA helped organize death squads, such as the Honduran Army's Battalion 3-16, which assassinated trade unionists, leftists and students.

These crimes were carried out under governments of both Hernández's National Party and the Liberal Party, from which Xiomara Castro's Libre is a split-off.

While routinely described in the corporate media as a "leftist," Castro's victory at the polls has been welcomed by Washington. Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Tuesday, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian Nichols praised the election and declared, "I am hopeful in Honduras we're going to see the kind of change we have been asking."

A week before the vote, Nicholas was dispatched to Tegucigalpa to read the riot act to Hernández, making it clear that Washington would not accept a repeat of 2017, in which he seized a second term by means of wholesale electoral fraud, with US backing.

Chiming in with an editorial Tuesday, the *Washington Post* declared its hope that "A democratic transition in Honduras, followed by moderate rule, would have stabilizing effects that could extend all the way to the Rio Grande. Those must be the United States' objectives."

The shift toward support for Castro signals no sudden democratic awakening in Washington. As vice president in the Obama administration, Joe Biden served as the point man in the US attempt to lend legitimacy to the right-wing regime created by the US-backed coup that overthrew Zelaya.

Zelaya, a wealthy landowner and businessman elected as the candidate of the Liberal Party, was targeted by Washington not for any sweeping attacks on profit interests, but rather because of his opportunistic alignment with the "Pink Tide" and the Venezuelan government of President Hugo Chávez, which provided impoverished Honduras with cheap oil.

After his overthrow, Zelaya worked to subordinate resistance to the coup to continued US dominance of Honduras and to big business interests. He entered into US-sponsored talks on forming a "unity" regime with those who overthrew him and, after these negotiations went nowhere, meekly accepted the

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consolidation of a coup regime through a fraudulent election that installed right-wing National Party leader Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo as president.

Castro and the Libre Party have followed the same political line, immediately entering talks with the Honduran National Business Council (COHEP), the main association representing Honduran sweatshop owners and among the most enthusiastic supporters of the 2009 coup. The council congratulated Castro on her victory before it has been officially announced, making it clear they view her as no threat to profit interests. The talks reportedly centered on means of lowering taxes, paying foreign debt and creating the best conditions for an economy founded on the exploitation of cheap labor.

US establishment observers have noted with approval that Castro has given no indication that she intends to restrict, much less close down, the operations of the Pentagon at its Soto Cano Air Base south of Comayagua. It is the largest US military facility in Latin America, where between 500 and 1,500 US troops remain continuously deployed in a projection of US armed might directed at the entire hemisphere.

Washington’s shift toward Castro is bound up in large measure with the complete discrediting of the Hernández government, which even the US Justice Department described as a “narco-state” in the trial of the president’s brother Tony Hernández, who a New York federal judge sentenced to life in prison earlier this year on drug-trafficking charges. The president himself has been named as a co-conspirator in a vast operation involving the collaboration of every level of the Honduran government and its security forces with the drug cartels.

This collaboration with the cartels is by no means limited to the National Party. The former leader of the Honduran drug cartel Los Cachiros, Davis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, testified in a New York trial earlier this year that he had paid half a million dollars in bribes to Zelaya, while Zelaya’s former chief aide and third-place candidate for the Liberal Party in Sunday’s election, Yani Rosenthal, served a three-year prison sentence in the US after pleading guilty to drug money laundering charges.

Beyond the corruption, which has contributed to the staggering growth of criminal violence, the Honduran people have confronted a social catastrophe during the last dozen years of National Party rule. In July of this year, Honduras’ National Institute of Statistics issued a report showing that 73.6 percent of Honduran households are subsisting under conditions of poverty, without resources to pay for basic needs in terms of food, housing and other essential goods and services. It stated that 53.7 percent of Hondurans are living under conditions of “extreme poverty,” confronting hunger and lack of adequate housing.

Conditions of life for the Honduran masses have been battered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of hurricanes Eta and Iota a year ago and years of drought along the Pacific coast. The last year has seen the official unemployment rate double.

The Biden administration’s most immediate concern in relation to Honduras is stemming the flow of migrants and refugees to the US border. This was crudely expressed in the *Washington Post* editorial, which began by stating that the US has “many reasons … to be interested in the outcome [of the Honduran elections]—309,000 reasons, to be precise.” That is the number of Honduran migrants detained at the US-Mexico border over the course of the past year, the vast majority of them illegally denied the right to apply for asylum and summarily expelled.

Hernández had outlived his usefulness in the context of Washington’s attempts to turn back the migrant flow, while making a pretense of addressing the “root causes” of migration, including corruption. This pretense has been joined with a major increase in funding for security forces of Honduras and the other “Northern Triangle” governments to turn back the tide of refugees with clubs, guns and bullets.

In embracing the electoral victory of Castro, US imperialism hopes to provide a “democratic” facade for its counterrevolutionary and anti-immigrant policies in Central America.

However, the massive social discontent expressed in the landslide repudiation at the polls of the last dozen years of National Party rule will find no resolution in the formation of a new capitalist government under Castro and the Libre Party.

The only way forward lies in the development of an independent political movement of the working class, leading behind it the impoverished masses of Honduras and all of Central America, in the fight to put an end to capitalism in the region and internationally. This requires the building of a new revolutionary leadership, sections of the world Trotskyist movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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