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Honduras

The importance of Xiomara Castro's November 24 presidential election campaign

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Two days after the presidential election in Honduras, with two thirds of the votes counted, the Electoral Court declared the result “irreversible”. Juan Orlando Hernandez of the National Party, the traditional expression of the Honduran oligarchy, was in the lead and would stay there. The powerful, radical, social and political movement that emerged in opposition to the 2009 coup against President Manuel Zelaya, appeared to have been defeated. But that may not be the end of the story. Xiomara de Castro, the candidate of the Free Party (and wife of Zelaya) who had led most of the pre-ballot polls, refused to recognise the results. She accused the electoral authorities of invalidating and hiding tens of thousands of her votes. Her supporters, led by the indigenous and student movements, have already taken to the streets to defend what they see as the victory of their candidate.

The article below was written before the vote, but gives a thorough account of the forces at play and the stakes involved in these elections. Elena Zeledon rightly points to the immense importance the outcome in Honduras would have for the rest of the left in Latin America. The strength of the movement in this small Central American country is a sign that the combination of powerful social mobilizations and progressive, Bolivarian political leaders is far from a finished phenomenon in the region. A popular victory in Honduras could have a hugely positive impact in Venezuela, Bolivia and elsewhere. However, we may also want to disagree with some of the nuances in Zeledon's presentation. She appears to downplay the room for contradiction between the radical social base of the movement in Honduras, and the political leadership of Castro and Zelaya. They have vacillated in the past, and this time they seemed to place ingenuous trust in the same electoral institutions that endorsed the coup of 2009. It is far from clear that they are really ready to fight in the streets to overturn a fraudulent result. By the same token, the article underestimates the unevenness among the progressive governments in the region and contradictions within them. No doubt there have been social gains in Nicaragua. But the fact that the government of Daniel Ortega has just recognised Juan Orlando Hernandez as the victor in Sunday's poll, even before the official result was announced, suggests how unwise it would be for the social and political left in Honduras to put any trust in “revolutionary” allies of such ilk. [*Iain Bruce - IVP*]

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On November 24 the people of Honduras will elect Xiomara Castro Sarmiento de Zelaya as the first woman, and the first avowedly socialist, president of the republic. Her election, if not stolen by fraudulent methods, which is extremely likely given the terror her potential election is causing in the ranks of the ruling oligarchy, will represent the fruits of nearly 20 years of direct and organised mass struggle for social, labour and human rights.

It has been a struggle against various forms of government, from military dictatorships to liberal and more accommodative forms of capitalist rule. It has been a struggle which has produced what could arguably be the most class and social conscious mass movement in the world. It has been a struggle that has produced more than its fair share of martyrs, murdered at the hands of killers hired by the oligarchs, and more than its fair share of sorrow.

There was the massacre of peasants in the Aguan Valley region by the oligarch Miguel Facusse as they resisted his attempt to take their land and use it to increase the size of his African palm oil holdings. There was cold-blooded killing of more than 30 journalists who attempted to speak the truth, to tell the real story of the Honduran people. The selected assassinations of trade union leaders, social activists, LGBTI leaders; assassinations with one political aim:

to frighten the mass movement, to serve as an example of the potential consequences of struggle.

On November 24, these sacrifices will be honoured by the Honduran people by their vote for Xiomara Castro's LIBRE party, by their refusal to be cowed by the oligarchs and their imperialist overseers and by their determination to build a new Honduras.

The election campaign

LIBRE, an acronym for Liberty and Refoundation (and also for Liberals in Resistance) is the political arm of the Front for National Popular Resistance (FNRP). Founded a little more than two years ago, LIBRE is, like the FNRP itself, a coalition of five political tendencies, each regrouping smaller political and social organisations.

The candidates of LIBRE were chosen by internal elections at the local level, and thus represent the relation of forces between the various tendencies. Xiomara Castro is a member of the Popular Resistance Front tendency, the largest of the five groupings, which includes Marxist organisations like the Political Organisation of Troublemakers (OPLN).

While there are political organisations of the left situated outside LIBRE, but who are members of the FNRP, almost all have called for a vote, even if critical, for LIBRE. Its composition and support represent its class make-up: trade unions, peasant unions, human rights and social organisations, small shopkeepers and sections of the radicalised petit bourgeois of the cities and smaller towns. Its candidates represent its class composition as well as its feminist and gender diversity.

LIBRE has consistently led in the polling almost since its founding. The polling itself is suspect as it consistently under-represents the poorest and most rural areas where LIBRE has support unmatched by the bourgeois National and Liberal parties. The last polls reported a more than 10 per cent lead over the right-wing party of the oligarchy, the National Party. The "left" wing of the bourgeois, the Liberal Party, has suffered a series of internal scandals and is being squeezed between LIBRE and the National Party.

The massive support for LIBRE is shown by the election campaign rallies themselves. They are like the music video of Natalie Cardone's version of "Hasta Siempre", the homage to Che Gueverra. By ones and twos, then by the tens and then by the thousands, the Honduran people fill town and city plazas. Dressed in their white shirts, their red shirts and red handkerchiefs, their white hats and shiny shoes, with music blaring from the giant speakers set beside the speakers' platform around which the crowds gather, the heat and the smell of the country, the surreal beauty which is Honduras forms the backdrop of the event. The masses have come to see the next president, their president, the woman who embodies their hopes and dreams for their country, for their society and for their families.

Her message is simple, straight forward and filled with hope:

Together WE will refound our country. Together WE will build the Honduras which includes all, not just a country for the rich. YOU the people are the ones who make history. YOU the people have struggled to bring us to this point. YOU are Honduras. YOU are our future.

Our program is the program of democracy and of socialism. Socialism is democracy and a new Honduras will be a socialist and democratic one. It will be your democracy. It will be your socialism.

This is Xiomara Castro's message. One might say, "... another Castro, another revolution."

Response of the oligarchs

This message is not going down well with the oligarchs, the 12 families, who own and control most of the productive land, the financial institutions, the infrastructure, the media outlets and the Congress.

They, because of their ties with North American imperialism, ties which bind in hundreds of ways large and small, not only the richest oligarchs but the primary institutions of the state, the police and the army, are extremely worried by these developments.

They first removed judges from the Supreme Court who might, I say might, show some judicial independence in interpreting the events to come, and replaced them with craven creatures without dignity, whose only loyalty is to the bank accounts of the oligarchs.

Next, they tried to change the election rules. Honduras has a first past the post presidential system, like the United States. The candidate with the most votes becomes president. The oligarchs, while shortsighted, are not stupid. They can read the polls like anyone else. They know Xiomara Castro will receive the most votes.

A proposal to change to a run-off system between the top two finishers was proposed to Congress. This was met with mass action and a call to mobilise by LIBRE. The message from LIBRE was clear. Any attempt to change the election rules within the nominated election period would be seen as a coup, and would be met with mass actions whose aim would be to bring down the government.

The Congress backed down. The fall-back position is the old electoral fraud game of stuffing the ballot boxes and using the repressive forces of the state to keep the political partisans away from the polling places. In the week leading up to the election, international observers have been detained by the new military police and have been refused entry to some of the polling stations.

LIBRE's response has been to call on its supporters to flood the polling stations and observe the voting and vote counting using what media they have to record the proceedings. Whether this is enough to reduce the fraud will remain to be seen.

However, the real response of the oligarchs and imperialists has been to create a new repressive arm of the state, the military police. Now numbering about 30,000 and established with funding aid from the US government, this force has ostensibly been established to protect citizens against the violence rampant throughout the country. Honduras is the murder capital of the world, with gang-on-gang violence surpassing that of Mexico on a per-capita basis.

With its appearance as a method of crowd and anti-riot control and training, the real purpose of the force is clear to most Hondurans. Partly the creation of the military police is in response to what appears to the oligarchs as a lessening of loyalty by the regular police to the ruling-class political projects. A sign of this is the candidature, for LIBRE, of a former regional police commander. The pressure of the mass movement has not been without its effects in the lower ranks of the army, though to what extent this has been generalised is not really known. Perhaps the inevitable coup attempt against a Castro administration will reveal it.

Geopolitics and the limits of the new government

Imperialism will not let Honduras escape its direct grasp. This has been the fate of Honduras since its founding after the break-up of the Republic of Central America in the 19th century. Coup regime has followed coup regime. A controlled democratic regime replaced by a naked repressive regime. Such has been the lot of the Honduran people.

The last coup, that which four years ago overthrew the mildly reformist regime of Manuel Zelaya, the husband of Xiomara Castro, was supported by the imperialist governments of Canada and the United States and was a depressingly anticipated event, symbolic of Honduran history.

Honduras is the forward base of US imperialism in Central America. Situated between Guatemala and Nicaragua, Honduras was the rear base for the Contras in their counter-revolutionary war against the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (FSLN) in Nicaragua, and against the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) of El Salvador.

The United States has trained a great deal of the core army leadership at its notorious "School of the Americas"; maintains a battalion of "military advisors" at its former base in northern Honduras; has established seven "forward operating bases" – including three secret ones – throughout the countryside, with a concentration on the Caribbean coast; and its embassy gives direct orders to the Honduran government.

This knowledge of the subservient nature of the Honduran oligarchs is courtesy of Wikileaks cables released after the overthrow of Zelaya.

A Xiomara Castro government, particularly one with a partially hostile Congress, will face major political hurdles to implement the major plank of LIBRE's platform: the calling of a constituent assembly and the writing of a new constitution which will place political and legal powers in the hands of the Honduran people.

From the point of view of the most politically conscious sections of the mass movement, a constituent assembly and a new constitution means replacing the present institutions of the state with those of popular power, similar too but rather more advanced than the process which opened the way forward for the Venezuelan popular movement. It means a more direct form of democracy. It means wresting control of the future of the country from the hands of the oligarchs and imperialism. It means reversing the savagery of the decades of neoliberalism and placing the economy under worker and popular control. It means land to the tillers. It means free education to the youth. It means a legal and social framework ensuring the rights of gay, lesbian and transgendered people.

This is the social content that the politically conscious elements of the mass movement have poured into the cup of the call for a refounding of their country. But it is this social content that the imperialists and the oligarchs cannot allow. On the one hand it means the reduction and destruction of the power and the wealth of the oligarchs. On the other, it means that a process of radicalisation of the mass movement, including its eventual arming, will be set afoot with consequences spilling far beyond Honduras's borders.

Nicaragua

First and foremost, its effect will be felt most acutely in Nicaragua. Despite the fact that most of the international left has written off the Sandinista government of Daniel Ortega, the facts on the ground are quite different to those

perceived by the “jilted lovers”.

Without developing a long analysis of the structural changes in Nicaragua over the past decade, suffice it to say that the Sandinistas have been able to increase their support throughout the country, and especially on the Mosquito Coast among Indigenous former opponents of the revolution.

The programs of health and education, touching especially the women in rural areas, has had an effect of increasing citizen self-confidence in the aims of the revolution. Similarly, among the burgeoning youth population (half of Nicaraguans are under 25), the Sandinistas are seen as the political organisation that best represents their aspirations. It is among these young people that revolutionary Marxist ideas are being spread, as a result of the combined processes underway in Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador and Cuba. It was the Nicaraguan youth participation in last year's May Day celebration, swelling the expected attendance from 100,000 to 300,000 in Managua, and raising revolutionary slogans of solidarity, that signalled this growing politicisation.

A victory for LIBRE will provide an impulse to the cadres of the FMLN in El Salvador, who are facing difficult times due to the nature of the government. A president who is implementing a neoliberal agenda with the help and ideological cover of a leadership adrift, caught in the Stalinist morass of a history of two-stage revolutions and so-called “progressive bourgeoisies”, provides little in the way of promoting the revolutionary zeal and organisation needed to overturn Salvadorean social relations.

In Panama, the form of the LIBRE electoral front, one which while multi-class makes no concessions to a non-existent national progressive ruling class, can provide a model for the Unified Popular Movement (MPU) and others to find ways to represent the Panamanian people as they struggle to refound their country.

Of course, a Xiomara Castro victory and government would bring Honduras back into the fold of ALBA, thereby strengthening Latin American unity in the face of imperialism, and provide an expanded network of solidarity among the peoples of the Southern Hemisphere.

The need for solidarity

The potential of a victory of the people of Honduras on November 24 is a large step forward in the struggle to liberate “Our America”, as Jose Marti called it. It has the potential to set off a dynamic in which the attempts to overturn a democratically elected government will be met with mass resistance, not only in Honduras, but throughout Central and South America. The world caught a glimpse of that dynamic by the solidarity shown by the Brazilian, Venezuelan and other governments towards Manuel Zelaya inside the Brazilian embassy.

A few weeks ago, legislators from across Latin America met in Tegucigalpa to show their solidarity with Xiomara Castro. They came from parties that, in whatever way they were able, represented the peoples of Latin America “from Mexico to Argentina. They understood the stakes involved in this election. It was an historic display of solidarity for a potential presidential candidate. Their display of solidarity was a way of showing imperialism that an attempt to deny a victory of the people of Honduras will have consequences far beyond that which they can be prepared for.

If legislators can show this kind of solidarity, can the international left show less?

The Honduran election might not have the cachet of the storming of the Winter Palace. It might not have the political form of “classical Leninism” (whatever that might be these days). It might not have the impact of the fall of Havana or

Saigon.

What it will have is the strength of a class-conscious mass movement finding its way to burst onto the stage of history, to write a new and exciting chapter in the text of social revolution. In order for this history to be written with an outcome favourable to the workers of the world, the broadest possible solidarity movement must be organised to defeat the attempts of US imperialism to overturn the victory of the Honduran people.

In the words of the FNRP; "We will resist! And we will win!"