



Extract of International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine

<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article5235>

Honduras

Honduras Since the 2009 Coup

- IV Online magazine - 2017 - IV514 - November 2017 -

Publication date: Thursday 9 November 2017

Description:

On November 26, 2017 national and local elections are scheduled in Honduras. This will be the third election since the U.S.-supported coup of June 28, 2009. Although more than eight years have passed, both resistance and repression continue. In fact the current coup regime led by President Juan Orlando Hernandez has hardened and tried to institutionalize dictatorship.

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As this is being written, news arrives of arrests and serious charges filed against 14 community members of a poor area of Choluteca for opposing land grabs to build a solar energy plant; 28 small farmers in the northern Agujón Valley criminalized for trying to keep and work their land; and 31 university students and three human rights defenders facing jail after government attacks on student protests in Tegucigalpa.

This is not unusual, as repression and even violence including assassinations are a weekly if not daily occurrence.

Honduras has long been one of the unfortunate countries to have a "special relationship" with the United States that has meant military coups, death squads and support for dictatorships and use as a military staging ground for the U.S. Southern Command. This doesn't change much, no matter who the president is in Washington, District of Columbia.

The 2009 coup overthrew President Manuel Zelaya, who was implementing a reform program influenced by the Bolivarian governments in Venezuela and Bolivia. Despite the fact that even the U.S. ambassador in Honduras at the time, Hugo Llorens, cabled Hillary Clinton's Department of State (as revealed by Wikileaks) that the coup was illegal, the Obama administration supported and worked to make legitimize the coup regime. The United States continues to provide military and police aid and training and to refuse to recognize the human rights crisis in Honduras.

Since the coup the question of whether or not to participate in elections has challenged the unity of a resistance movement that has astonished the Honduran oligarchy and coup supporters, including the U.S. government).

Starting only hours after President Zelaya was detained, many thousands of people defiantly protested in the streets and villages across the whole country every day for months, and organized the National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP). The FNRP brought together the established left organizations, trade unions, peasant unions, indigenous and student organizations with the newer movements of LGBT, feminist, youth and religious groups, and with thousands of people who had not previously belonged to any organization.

All but a tiny sector of the resistance movement agreed to boycott the November 2009 elections. These took place right after the coup despite the fact that an illegal, violent coup was occurring. Election Boycott Debates

In 2011 Zelaya, back in the country after an agreement was negotiated in Venezuela, proposed that the FNRP should form a party and participate in the elections of November 2013. His argument was that the mass demonstrations had not been able to reverse the coup and could not be sustained. He and the Zelayista groups who had joined the resistance were anxious to return to an electoral struggle.

There was strong opposition to this proposal from some important resistance organizations including the Lenca indigenous organization COPINH led by Berta Cáceres who was assassinated in March 2016 and the Fraternal Black Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH) whose leader Miriam Miranda is right now under death threats.

They argued that it is impossible to have even vaguely fair elections with so much power in the hands of the dictators, and that the electoral organizing would debilitate the mass resistance movement. After heated debate the proposal to participate was approved by a majority vote in the FNRP assembly, and the LIBRE (Liberty and Refoundation) Party was formed.

Although organizations remained united in opposition to the dictatorship, the FNRP lost momentum as it turned to organizing the political party while other organizations focused energy on their sectoral demands and struggles rather than on the FNRP.

The 2013 elections were heavily monitored by international and local human rights and electoral observers, including the author of this article. We reported hundreds of irregularities, acts of intimidation and of vote buying, as well as violence including political assassinations, but the elections were declared a big success by the Organization of American States (OAS) and the European Union (EU), although a minority from the EU group denounced the fraud.

The Obama administration praised the election process – in fact the U.S. ambassador at that time, Lisa Kubiske, was so happy with the elections that she called the right wing National Party the winner in the press even before the official count was announced.

Elections this coming November have high stakes. The coup regime led by President Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) of the National Party has tightened control now over the presidency, the congress and the judiciary and is heavy-handedly supported by the military. Although the Honduran Constitution does not allow presidential reelection, Hernandez has authorization from the Supreme Court to run again.

The goal is to formalize a permanent dictatorship. The Penal Code has been revised to criminalize protest and resistance, and the military have taken on the role of policing. Highly armed, masked military police are commonly seen on the streets. JOH and his supporters in the oligarchy are protecting an ambitious neoliberal program of mining, hydroelectric projects (35% of the country has been handed in concessions to corporations for these projects) and agribusiness land grabs. What Comes Next?

The LIBRE Party believes that it can only overcome the fraud and repression by building a much bigger majority than it had in 2013, and so has created an alliance with members of the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC) and other smaller groups. The PAC leader, Salvador Nasralla, is the presidential candidate of this new formation, the Opposition Alliance (Alianza), and LIBRE's presidential candidate in 2013, Xiomara Castro Zelaya, the wife of Manuel Zelaya, is a vice presidential candidate.

The Alianza is raising alarms about the danger of fraud again in the upcoming election. They have analyzed the national voter registry that is the responsibility of the central government to maintain and found large numbers of duplicate names, dead people still on the list, and other errors that set the stage for vote fraud. This is in addition to the anticipated intimidations, obstacles at the polling places and vote buying. There continues to be skepticism about the Alianza and the electoral process from organizations like COPINH, OFRANEH and others that have been subjected to so much violence from the government, but there is also support from mass organizations in the peasant movement and trade unions.

There have been recent moves towards strengthening unity, including a non-electoral coalition against the legalization of Hernandez's re-election called *Convergencia Contra el Continuismo* (Convergence Against Continuism), which includes support from a broader grouping of human rights and activist organizations including COPINH as well as groups that support LIBRE and Alianza.

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There are fears that the JOH regime will intensify repression and violence around the elections to prevent any electoral threat from the opposition alliance, and to continue trying to destroy all the movements that fight for social and economic justice. Many solidarity and human rights groups in the United States, Canada and Europe are responding to requests from all the Honduran social movements to go to Honduras and provide human rights accompaniment as well as to demand that the United States stop aiding the dictatorship.

This effort includes the Honduras Solidarity Network (HSN) in North America. HSN member organizations are working to get the House of Representatives to cancel all U.S. aid, through the Berta Cáceres Human Rights in Honduras Act. HSN organizations are also taking human rights solidarity observers to Honduras in November.

PS:

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