

Is the Honduran Election Being Stolen Eight Years after U.S.-Backed Coup?

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Eight years after [a U.S.-backed coup](#) overthrew the democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras, a new election, held Sunday, offered hope for a fresh political chapter. According to early results released by the Honduran [electoral tribunal](#) on Monday, former sportscaster and television reporter Salvador Nasralla had, surprisingly, taken the lead in the presidential vote. With about 60 percent of the votes counted at the time, Nasralla hovered five points above incumbent Juan Orlando Hernández of the right-wing National Party. This lead has disappeared, according to the [latest results](#), but Nasralla's stunning showing nonetheless demonstrates that Hondurans are ready to rise up against an era marked by corruption, violence and dictatorship in the post-coup years.

Zelaya, who has remained firmly in the public eye, backs Nasralla and his broad coalition, called the Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship. But, with incumbent Hernández now in the lead, many worry that Hondurans are facing yet another coup, this time at the ballot box.

Just a day after she returned from the Honduran city of San Pedro Sula as an official election observer, Honduras expert and Pitzer College assistant professor Suyapa Portillo told me in [an interview](#) that there was great enthusiasm among Hondurans who had voted Sunday.

"This election was really important, people felt that they needed to show up and vote," she said. "The voting centers were historically packed," she continued, because "it was critical for the nation to repair what happened in 2009."

When the National Party's Porfirio Lobo Sosa [won the first post-coup election](#) in late 2009, the United States wholeheartedly backed him. The Obama administration, [according to Dana Frank in The New York Times](#), "quickly recognized Mr. Lobo's victory, even when most of Latin America would not." Frank labels Lobo's government "a child of the coup," asserting that "the coup was what threw open the doors to a huge increase in drug trafficking and violence, and ... unleashed a continuing wave of state-sponsored repression." In 2016, Lobo's son Fabio, along with half a dozen Honduran national police officers, were [charged with narco trafficking](#) when they were found to be smuggling cocaine into the U.S. This September, the younger Lobo [was sentenced](#) to 24 years in a U.S. prison. According to [a recent investigation](#), also led by The New York Times, there is evidence to suggest that the "former president, Porfirio Lobo, took bribes to protect traffickers, and that drug money may have helped finance the rise of the country's current president, Juan Orlando Hernández."

Hillary Clinton, who was U.S. secretary of state at the time of the Honduras coup, last year [defended the military's removal](#) of President Zelaya during her presidential campaign.

"The national legislature in Honduras and the national judiciary actually followed the law in removing President Zelaya," Clinton said, going on to reaffirm her position of allowing U.S. aid to flow to the post-coup regime—a regime that was [marked by rampant violence](#) against human rights activists, journalists and others.

The most high-profile victim of the U.S.-backed post-coup government in Honduras is Berta Cáceres, the famed prize-winning indigenous environmental activist who was brutally murdered in March 2016. [New evidence emerged](#) last month linking Cáceres' murder to agents of the Honduran government and executives of Desarrollos Energéticos, or Desa, the company whose dam project she was leading a movement against. Cáceres' daughter Olivia [ran for a seat](#) in the National Congress to keep her mother's legacy alive (the results of her district election, also held Sunday, are still being counted). Her party, Libre (or the Liberty and Refoundation party), is also backing Nasralla's coalition. According to Portillo, indigenous communities in Honduras remain "skeptical" of elections, but in this race, "the vote was about getting this pseudo-dictator [Hernández] out," because it is his government that is actively trying to kick many indigenous communities [off their lands](#) to make way for development.

Portillo went on to tell me that, in many Hondurans' eyes, Hernández has acted like a "pseudo-dictator" and a " 'yes-man' to the United States." It is tragically ironic that the U.S.-backed leadership in Honduras is the one [directly linked](#) to drug smuggling, repression and violence, while the Trump administration targets [ordinary Honduran immigrants and refugees](#) fleeing the post-coup regime, even [unfairly labeling](#) them as narcotraffickers and murderous gang members.

Also ironic is the fact that Hernández decided to run for a second term, even though Zelaya's attempt to legalize running for a second term in office via a national referendum was used, in part, to justify the 2009 coup against him. The Honduran Constitution forbade an incumbent from seeking re-election—until 2015, when the nation's Supreme Court [overturned that law](#). Portillo contextualized that decision, telling me that Hernández has engaged in rampant nepotism. "He has his entire family in his cabinet, very similar to what Trump is doing in the United States," she said. "We call that an 'oligarchy' in Latin America, by the way." Hernández's government has faced so many accusations of corruption that the [Organization of American States eventually forced him](#) to give in to oversight via an anti-corruption panel made up of non-Honduran prosecutors.

But Hernández is Washington's guy in Central America, and, [according to Foreign Policy](#), "Washington has invested significant money in Central America to help turn the security and economic situation around ... with bad interlocutors in Guatemala and El Salvador, losing Hernández would be a real setback." Educated in the U.S., [Hernández reportedly](#) has a close relationship with White House chief of staff John Kelly. Two State Department officials speaking to Reuters explained that his second "victory would be cheered in Washington" because the "United States had few steadfast allies among Central America's current crop of leaders." It is precisely because of this that a Nasralla victory over Hernández would be critical.

Portillo and others worry that with the stakes so high, the incumbent president and his allies may attempt to steal the election. “Regular citizens are scared; they’re saying, ‘They’re going to steal this [election] from us, they’re going to try to rig the election in some way,’ ” Portillo said. While the presence of thousands of international election observers at the electoral tribunal could protect that body from committing fraud, the fear of tampering arises when the marked ballots are shipped by military envoy to the capital Tegucigalpa, given that the military is aligned with President Hernández. Hernández showed great reluctance to accept defeat, [citing exit poll results](#) as proof that he was the winner.

With latest results having reversed Hernández’s loss even though Nasralla had maintained a five-point lead with 58 percent of votes counted, Hondurans’ fears may be coming true. On Thursday, protesters angry about potential election fraud [were tear-gassed by police](#) in Tegucigalpa. What happens in the next few days is not just a measure of how much influence the U.S. continues to wield in Latin America, but a test of the strength of Honduran democracy.

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