

Honduras Again in the Balance

The initial Honduran election returns looked promising for the progressive challenger but the vote count has since stalled and the authoritarian incumbent sent troops into the streets to stop protests, as Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

The future of Honduras hangs in the balance as the vote count from presidential election drags on. The challenger, Salvador Nasralla, a former sportscaster running at the head of a progressive left-leaning alliance, initially held the lead over incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández but that was reversed amid allegations of ballot manipulation and the imposition of a military curfew to prevent protests.

A win by Nasralla would represent an across-the-board rejection of Hernández's iron-fisted rule.

Dana Frank, professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said, "The Honduran elections, especially President Juan Orlando Hernández's criminal candidacy in violation of the Honduran Constitution, continue to underscore the utter breakdown of the rule of law in Honduras since the 2009 coup – with the blessing of the U.S. government, which continues to celebrate a regime thoroughly marked by corruption and the vicious repression of basic civil liberties. Reports from the Honduran government claiming that the crime rate is down or that the police have been cleaned up should not be believed for a minute."

I spoke to Assistant Professor Suyapa Portillo of Pitzer College on Nov. 27. Portillo and her students were international observers in San Pedro Sula in Honduras and visited over 13 voting centers throughout the most marginalized sectors of the city.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you just remind us who the candidates are in this latest election in Honduras? There does seem to be a big difference between them.

Suyapa Portillo: The candidates are Salvador Nasralla, who is running for the Opposition Alliance, and Juan Orlando Hernández, the current president.

Actually, it is illegal for Hernández to run for reelection in Honduras. After the coup d'état, bipartisanship was partly broken and there were actually ten parties running in the north where I was an observer.

It was a very heated race but the electoral college reported around 1:40 am that about 45% of the electorate had voted for Nasralla and 40% for Hernández. But because the current president controls the entire system, including the electoral college, he hasn't conceded the election to Nasralla, which would be typical by this point. It still is not clear whether Hernández is going to respect the constitution.

Dennis Bernstein: Talk a little about the stark differences between the candidates. We have heard a lot about the violence in Honduras after the coup, which was supported by the United States government.

Suyapa Portillo: The National Alliance has been in power since the coup d'état in 2009. Since then, the crime rate has risen to an extreme degree. Over 200 environmental activists have been killed and about that many LGBT activists. Journalists and human rights defenders are facing threats if they stand up against the government. A lot of the improvements in Honduras after the peace accords in the 1980's are being rolled back by the National Alliance. People in Honduras consider Hernández a dictator. Even though he claims that crime has been reduced, what has really happened is that it is less reported on. Hernández's brother is one of the first high profile people to be linked to narco-trafficking.

Dennis Bernstein: We know that the US government, led by Hillary Clinton [as Secretary of State], sustained the coup that drove [former President] Zelaya out of the country [in 2009]. Clinton bragged about this in the first edition of her autobiography.

Suyapa Portillo: In Honduras narco-traffickers and gangs are taking over. The levels of violence are through the roof. We are seeing attacks against human rights defenders, organizers, feminists. Honduras deserves a different form of government. When Hillary Clinton bragged about the coup d'état and when the Obama administration refused to call this a coup d'état, they really set in motion all these murders.

Dennis Bernstein: Was this an important election? Did people really want to get out and vote? You take a risk when you vote in Honduras, particularly if you are a grassroots activist, a teacher, etc.

Suyapa Portillo: The entire country was militarized, particularly the city centers. We visited thirteen voting centers in San Pedro Sula, in some of the most marginalized sections of the city where people expected the most violence. There was a lot of energy and enthusiasm despite all the militarization. People voted early, went home and then came back for the vote count. This participation by the citizenry is new, emerging after the coup d'état. Every

ballot box had its own count.

We did see quite a few discrepancies: people showing up to learn that they had already voted, people coming to vote to find that their pictures were not available. We saw a lot of tension between the ballot box people and the electoral college controlled by the government and the citizens. Some of the neighborhoods we visited are controlled by gangs, but the people still came out.

In almost all of the thirteen voting centers we visited, Nasralla clearly had the lead.

Dennis Bernstein: How do you account for this enthusiasm? You talked a little about the violence in the country which ensued after the coup. But talk about some of the grassroots struggles that have gotten people out in numbers to vote.

Suyapa Portillo: 2014 saw the formation of the military police, a body that had not existed since the eighties. This puts military-grade weapons in the urban centers. When Hernández came into power, he granted 300 mining concessions to local elites and foreign companies and people felt he was giving away the country. These land concessions came into direct conflict with indigenous communities. You started to see incredible numbers of murders of human rights defenders and land rights defenders.

Dennis Bernstein: Some feel he is trying to turn the country into a free trade zone.

Suyapa Portillo: The Nationalist Party vision is just to get rich off of the people. There are no increases in minimum wage, there is no way out for people. In fact, in 2014 we saw an exodus of unaccompanied minors. There is really no future for young people in Honduras. Education is impossible to access without money. The military police have attacked university students organizing for reform.

And Hernández has put his entire family in office. All the ministers are his brothers, sisters, cousins—which is again something that hadn't happened since the 1980's in Honduras. Most importantly, there are no jobs. The economy is not growing.

Dennis Bernstein: The US government would know about the trafficking in Honduras because the United States has an extensive presence there. So there is nothing that would be a secret to the US.

Suyapa Portillo: The United States knows that there is impunity, that no human rights charges will ever see the light of day. Oftentimes, plaintiffs are either killed or leave before cases are resolved. Remember that Honduras was under military rule from 1963 to 1980. For most Hondurans this is recent

history and they don't want to return to that.

The young people want a president who will represent them and the issues that they care about. Libre and the New Alliance have a proposal that makes sense to them. The activists we saw were remarkably young people.

Dennis Bernstein: This disastrous policy initiated by Obama and Clinton and intensified under Trump has led to a surge of people leaving the country. It is sort of a cynical policy because you have got various politicians in the US lecturing mothers in Honduras and El Salvador how dangerous it is to send their kids up north and yet we are creating the circumstances for extreme suffering and very little choice.

Suyapa Portillo: If people cannot make ends meet, they will migrate. We have to also remember the history of corporations in Honduras. The United Fruit Company and Dole used to provide jobs for people along the north coast and then when the hurricanes hit factories were closed and unions were lost.

New, non-union, exploitative corporations are now coming in, which is also pushing people out. Along the north coast, just about every family has someone living in the United States. The government has to have a plan for dealing with immigration. What kind of policies will make people want to stay, rather than risk the very dangerous journey through Mexico?

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.
