

Apparent Election Theft in Honduras

In 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton excused a coup in Honduras to stop a possible second term by a progressive president, but the U.S. now sits by as a right-wing president steals a second term, says Rick Sterling.

By Rick Sterling

Honduras is in crisis, again. The national election took place on Nov. 26 with results posted that night showing the challenger Salvador Nasralla with a 5 percentage-point lead with 57 percent of the votes tallied. Then strange things began to happen.

After midnight on election night, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) stopped posting updates and effectively shut down for the next 36 hours. The TSE's president, David Matamoros Batson, said the TSE had received 13,000 tally sheets but was missing 6,000 from the total. With just over 18,000 total, this does not quite add up. Then two hours later, Matamoros increased the number of missing tally sheets to 7,500. When updates resumed, mid-day last Tuesday, the results consistently favored the incumbent right-wing President Juan Orlando Hernandez. The opposition lead steadily diminished then disappeared.

The leader of the Opposition Coalition against the Dictatorship, Salvador Nasralla, denounced the apparent malfeasance and protests commenced across the country. Police and military have sometimes responded violently. Numerous unarmed Hondurans have been killed over the past five days.

On Monday, more than a week after the election, the TSE announced results giving a narrow victory to the incumbent National Party President Juan Orlando Hernandez. As mass protests continue, the opposition has demanded a recount of all the tally sheets received after the TSE shutdown.

The current National Party government derives from the 2009 military coup, which overthrew the moderately progressive President Manuel Zelaya supposedly because he simply considered the possibility of seeking a second term. When Zelaya was kidnapped in the 2009 coup, he was flown directly from Tegucigalpa to the U.S. government's Palmerola Air Base just 48 miles from the capital.

After time on the ground there, with the coup leaders presumably consulting with Washington, the kidnapped president was taken to Costa Rica. Five months later an election was held to replace Zelaya. The election was widely boycotted within Honduras but given the seal of approval by Washington. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said the election made the coup a "moot point."

Four years later, in 2013, there was another presidential election, which included a new party: the Liberation and Refoundation Party known as LIBRE. This party represented popular forces, which supported Zelaya and his progressive policies – and emerged from the popular resistance to the coup. The party quickly surpassed the traditional Liberal Party and presented a serious challenge to Hernandez’s National Party even as international observers documented voter intimidation and other irregularities. Hernandez assumed the presidency on Jan. 27, 2014.

(Ironically, despite the justification for ousting Zelaya – because he allegedly considered seeking a second term in defiance of the constitution – Hernandez’s path for reelection was cleared away by a contentious 2016 court ruling.

Ahead of the 2017 election, LIBRE forged a broader coalition with two smaller parties to support Salvador Nasralla as their candidate. This political alliance took the name the Coalition Against the Dictatorship and former President Zelaya was head coordinator.

Days before the recent Honduras election The Economist published a blockbuster article titled “Is Honduras Ruling Party Planning to Rig an Election?” reporting: “The Economist has obtained a recording that, if authentic, suggests the ruling party has plans to distort results in the upcoming election.” The two-hour recording is from a National Party training session. It details five tactics used to influence election results: buy the credentials of small party delegates who supervise the local polling place, surreptitiously allow National Party voters to vote more than once, spoil the votes for other candidates, damage the tally sheet which favors the opponent so it cannot be transmitted electronically to election headquarters – and expedite tally sheets favoring their party.

Thumb on the Scales

Besides the reported rigging schemes in the field, the election referees were far from neutral. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) is led by president David Matamoros Batson, who was previously Secretary General and a member of Congress for the National Party.

Following is evidence of TSE misconduct and bias:

1 – TSE delayed posting results that favored the opposition candidate.

In the 2013 election, TSE started posting the election results at 6:13 p.m. when just 24 percent of the total votes had been received. Those returns gave the National Party candidate Juan Orlando Hernandez a 5 percentage point lead.

This election, TSE acted differently. At 7:55 p.m., TSE President Matamoros tweeted “We have received 40% of the results.” But they did not post this. They delayed posting the data until near midnight. Then they reported that with 57.2 % of total votes counted the results were:

- Salvador Nasralla (Opposition Coalition Against the Dictatorship) with 855,847 votes = 45.17% of total.
- Juan Orlando Hernandez (National Party) with 761,892 votes = 40.22%
- Luis Zelaya (Liberal Party, no relation to ousted Manuel Zelaya) with 260,994 votes = 13.77% of total.
- Several other candidates had less than 1%.

Prior to the election, TSE expected to post the results from 70 percent of the electorate on election night, raising the question of whether the TSE was holding back more results.

2 – TSE changed the election procedure.

Honduras’ election procedure is to count and tally the paper ballots at each of the voting stations around the country. The tally sheet (‘acta’) is signed off by representatives from each party, then scanned and transmitted electronically to TSE headquarters where they are added to national totals and posted.

Following the posting of results showing the opposition candidate with a significant lead, at about midnight on election day, the TSE changed the procedure and stopped posting results for the next 36 hours. TSE President Matamoros arbitrarily changed the procedures.

The explanation was given by Matamoros at 1:39 p.m. on Nov. 27: “Today we are going to start opening the ballot boxes coming in from across the country to understand the ballots and results.” Five minutes later, at 1:44 p.m., he added “We cannot give results until all the missing tally sheets come in.”

The situation was questioned by Spanish election observer Ramon Jauregui who noted “There is no technical reason that explains the delay, because the tallies from all 18000 polling places were transmitted electronically to the @tsehonduras on the day of the election.”

3 – TSE falsely reported the number of missing tally sheets.

At 1:56 p.m., Matamoros announced that the TSE had received 13,000 of the total but are still missing 6,000 tally sheets (“actas”). “We have received 13,000 tallies from across the country we are missing 6,000”. With a total of

18,100 tallies, the actual number missing should have been about 5,100.

At 4:17 p.m., the number of missing tally sheets mysteriously increased by 25 percent to 7,500. TSE's Matamoros announced "We are missing 7500 actas."

4 – TSE officials gave contradictory results.

While Matamoros was issuing conflicting information about the number of missing "actas," another election official was saying something very different. As reported in this Reuters story:

"Election official Marcos Ramiro Lobo told Reuters on Monday afternoon that Nasralla was leading by a margin of five points, with about 70 percent of ballots counted. Lobo said Nasralla appeared certain to win, signaling that experts at the electoral body regarded his lead as irreversible."

The third-place Liberal Party candidate also recognized Nasralla as the winner and urged the National Party leader to concede defeat.

About noon on Nov. 28, the TSE resumed posting election results after the 36-hour interruption. The new data showed Nasralla's lead steadily declining and soon the National Party candidate and current President Juan Orlando Hernandez was edging ahead. The Center for Economic and Policy Research has analyzed the data and determined the abrupt swing in elections results was "next to impossible."

Where Things Stand

TSE has announced results showing Juan Orlando Hernandez winning the election. The Opposition Coalition candidate Nasralla has called for a new election under international observation and control. The Opposition Coordinator and former president, Manuel Zelaya, has issued a statement calling for the investigation and verification of the election procedures and results.

Honduras is important to U.S. foreign policy and the White House is closely following events. In mid-November Foreign Policy magazine ran an article titled The United States has a lot Riding on the Honduras Election" The article says "losing Hernandez would be a real setback."

Clearly the Honduran people have even more riding on the Honduras election. The coup of 2009 led to increased crime and violence along with massive repression of landless campesinos, environmental and indigenous communities. From the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Ocean, the domestic policies of Honduras have been skewed to benefit foreign corporations, plantations, the local oligarchy and neighbor to the north.

The current situation calls into question the objectivity of the U.S. and Organization of American States (OAS). Will the U.S. and OAS issue token criticisms but ultimately rubber stamp this Honduras election despite the glaring problems? If so, it will highlight the double-standard as the U.S. and OAS have aggressively criticized Venezuelan elections and refused to acknowledge the results even after full recounts and verification.

The Honduras election process offers the potential of verification but only if the data from each and every polling place is compared with the data recorded at the TSE headquarters. The secret National Party training described by The Economist specifically called for disruption of the transmission of unfavorable “actas” (tally sheets) to the headquarters.

If opposition demands for a thorough examination of election procedures and voting tallies are not met, protests and repression may explode in Honduras. The majority of the Honduran people evidently want new leadership and voted for it. It appears that the voters’ desires were thwarted through a manipulated election process and transparent theft.

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