

Honduras' rebellion against a fixed election - Democracy and U.S. imperialism in Central America

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The protests in the streets of Honduras are the latest chapter in the struggle for democracy and against U.S. imperialism in Central America, writes Arturo Rivera.

THE EXPLOSION of protest in response to Honduras' fraudulent presidential election and the right-wing government's use of police repression to try to squash dissent has focused the world's attention on this Central American country.

The November 26 presidential election pitted Juan Orlando Hernández of the National Party—the current president who ran for re-election despite the fact that the constitution doesn't allow it—against Salvador Nasralla, a popular TV presenter who represented the center-left Alianza de Oposición contra la Dictadura (Alliance to Oppose the Dictatorship).

The Alianza included LIBRE, the party led by former President Manuel Zelaya, who was driven out of office by a coup in 2009. Elements of its political program include economic reforms that challenge neoliberalism, opposition to the coup, expansion of democracy, respect for human rights, and anti-imperialism and international solidarity.

When results of the election were first reported by the country's Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE), Nasralla was leading by a 5 percent margin with more than half of the votes tallied. Then the TSE's computer went down. When it came back up 36 hours later, Hernández was ahead by 1.6 percent.

Election monitors from the Organization of American States (OAS) are reporting signs of deliberate manipulation of the computer system [1], along with other irregularities.

The Alianza denounced the actions of the TSE—directed by an former member of the National Party—as fraud. This led to people taking to the streets in protest in a repeat of demonstrations following the disputed 2013 elections.

Since late November, large demonstrations, including road blockades, have taken place in every major city of Honduras and across the countryside.

In response, the government declared a state of emergency and put a curfew in place. Mainstream news outlets report 14 protesters have been killed and 800 arrested [2]. There are also reports of activists being “disappeared.”

Over the weekend, the regime declared Hernández the official winner, defying calls for a rerun of the vote. This led to renewed mobilizations and more violence from police.

But after years of organizing and confronting the violence of the military and ruling oligarchy,

people in Honduras aren't backing down in the face of repression. One popular slogan is: "They have taken everything from us, including the fear."

The regime may think the election is settled, but the protests aren't over. According to reports, sections of the police have refused to repress protesters, and a special unit of the military reportedly returned to its headquarters in defiance to orders to crack down on demonstrations [3].

But the Alianza itself—with Zelaya as its leading figure—has shown that it doesn't want to rely on mass mobilization [4]. Rather than urge its political base to get organized and confront repression on a mass basis, the Alianza continues to put its hopes in institutions of the regime, like the TSE—or in international institutions such as the Organization of American States.

THE IMMEDIATE backdrop of this election and the crisis that followed is the 2009 coup against Manuel Zelaya—which was carried out by the country's elites and backed by the U.S. government under Barack Obama, out of fear that Zelaya might follow the example of Venezuela's left-wing government under Hugo Chávez,

But there is a longer history of violence and repression carried out by Honduras' ruling oligarchy and their backers in the U.S.

Honduras is one of the poorer countries in the Western Hemisphere, with an annual per capita income of only \$600. Its homicide rate is 75 per 100,000 inhabitants—the rate in the U.S. is 4.7.

For much of the 20th century, Honduras was governed through a pact between the oligarchs and the United Fruit Company—an American corporation with deep ties to the U.S. state. It was from Honduras that the CIA launched the operation to overthrow the democratically elected government of Jacobo Árbenz in Guatemala in 1954. In many ways, this operation inaugurated the U.S. policy of regime change around the world.

Despite the fact that Honduras officially does not allow formal foreign military bases on its soil, the U.S. effectively maintains such facilities, such as Palmerola and Caratasca.

From Palmerola, the U.S. government supplied, trained and directed the paramilitary forces that attacked the left-wing Sandinista government in Nicaragua throughout the 1980s. A very similar military installation in Tegucigalpa, the country's capital, was the site from which Zelaya was escorted out of the country after the 2009 coup.

The Honduran people, however, have not remained passive about their fate. Instead, they have a proud history of resistance.

In the 1950s, for example, workers' struggle against United Fruit [5], culminating in a general strike in 1954, won the right to unionize. This remains one of the high points of working class self-organization in the history of Central America.

SINCE THE 2009 coup, the people of Honduras have lived under a regime that is formally unconstitutional—the democratic order sanctioned by the constitution has not yet been reestablished.

Naturally, for the Honduran ruling class and the U.S. government, this is merely a legal formality. Both have worked together to legitimize the present state of affairs, starting during the Obama administration, with Hillary Clinton as the Secretary of State. For Washington and Tegucigalpa, the situation in Honduras is business as usual.

It has been very different for the Honduran people.

The coup was, in reality, a ruling class reaction to a popular movement led by Zelaya—who was perceived as dangerous, though he came into office as a fairly conventional center-left politician.

Zelaya promised to call a constitutional assembly with the intention of rewriting the present constitution and therefore making substantial changes to the state. He was clearly moving into the orbit of the left-wing governments that came to power in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador at the beginning of the century.

After Zelaya's removal from power, the Honduran ruling class established an authoritarian regime, using U.S.-supplied and -trained military and police to crack down on the popular movement from below that was Zelaya's social base.

The repression has been especially violent against the campesino movement, which led the resistance by recovering land from the landowners in a country with a predominantly agricultural economy.

The most famous victim of this wave of repression was Berta Cáceres, leader of the Indigenous resistance coalition COPINH. Berta was a political prisoner after the coup and was assassinated in a plot involving the government and paramilitary forces, which work hand-in-hand. Political assassination of campesino and social movement leaders has been a matter of everyday life.

In an effort to win international legitimacy, the Honduran regime has called two general elections since the coup—in 2013 and just last month. But in both, the same military that orchestrated Zelaya's ouster was put in charge of securing the process.

One consequence of the coup has been a reshaping of Honduras' party system, which was dominated for many years by two forces representing the interests of the ruling class: the Liberal Party and the National Party.

Zelaya was originally a member of the Liberal Party. But with that organization in crisis since the coup, the National Party has held power in the government.

In the aftermath of the coup there has been a debate within the Honduran resistance about the best strategy to move forward, particularly on the question of participation in the elections and whether the political process could be "free and fair."

With the return of Zelaya to Honduras after two years in exile in 2011 and the founding of a new political party called LIBRE, important sectors of the left have joined Zelaya in this effort to battle for power within the existing institutions of the regime.

AS A small and poor Central American country with a high level of violence, Honduras is often overlooked on the world stage.

But the struggle of the Honduran people for democracy and social and economic justice is an example for all of us who struggle for the same causes here in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Socialists and activists must stand in solidarity with the Honduran people as they fight in the streets, workplaces and communities against a government that cannot be called anything other than a dictatorship. We also can't remain silent about the complicity and support of the U.S. government for an authoritarian regime that is exercising state violence against its people.

The hope for democracy in Honduras lies in the capacity of ordinary people to organize struggles from below powerful enough to challenge the authority and the violence of the ruling class—and to create a society anew. The Honduran people are showing us the way forward.

Arturo Rivera

P.S.

* December 21, 2017:

<https://socialistworker.org/2017/12/21/honduras-rebellion-against-a-fixed-election>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/18/571735611/in-honduras-protests-erupt-in-wake-of-presidential-election-results>

[2] https://elpais.com/internacional/2017/12/14/america/1513284567_394341.html

[3] <https://litci.org/es/menu/mundo/latinoamerica/honduras/policias-se-rebelan-joh-se-niegan-reprimir-las-protestas-honduras/>

[4] <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/amp/noticias-america-latina-42296540>

[5] <http://guaymuras.hn/el-silencio-queda-atras-testimonios-de-la-huelga-bananera-de-1954-marvin-barahona/>