



Honduras: ‘The conflict triggered by the citizen reaction against fraud may make us lose a year now, but it will earn us 10 in the future’

Protests broke out in Honduras in late 2017 following what many in civil society saw as a



fraudulent election. CIVICUS speaks to Wilfredo Méndez, Executive Director of the Centre for Research and the Promotion of Human Rights (CIPRODEH), a Honduran civil society organisation that advocates changes aimed at building a democratic and fair rule of law and a state that is inclusive, participatory and respectful of human rights and citizens’ freedoms. CIPRODEH carries out research and advocacy work and promotes the human rights of the most vulnerable sectors in alliance with a variety of Honduran, Latin American and

international civic and social actors.

1. The political opposition and numerous Honduran civil society actors denounced fraud in the 26 November elections. Can you describe what the electoral process was like, how the fraud occurred, and what its consequences were?

On 26 November 2017 we faced an electoral process about which we had many concerns. We knew that the situation was going to be complex not only electorally but also in terms of possible human rights violations, given the precedents of persecution, criminalisation and repression that we have witnessed since the 2009 coup against then-President Manuel Zelaya.

The groups that are now in power are the same ones that took part in the coup d’état. The current president, Juan Orlando Hernández, has been accumulating power since 2010, when he assumed the presidency of Congress. He was later elected president for the period 2014-2018, and in November 2017 he ran for re-election. In order to do so, he previously had to manipulate the Supreme Court of Justice to [reverse the constitutional prohibition](#) against consecutive re-election. The constitutional revision mechanism provided for in the Constitution involved the convening of a constituent assembly, so the procedure used was absolutely irregular.

From 2009 on, the government became militarised. It has increasingly distanced itself from its human rights obligations and repression has intensified, with increasing numbers of killings and enforced disappearances.

That is why on 26 November the focus of human rights organisations was on monitoring social conflict and political persecution. What we didn't imagine was that the electoral fraud that many had forecast could be faced with relative success - but as it happened, the Alliance Against Dictatorship, the opposition coalition, implemented a strategy that complicated the manoeuvre. They established mechanisms to combat fraud, which usually takes place not only at polling stations but also in the handling of votes by the Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE). This took the ruling party by surprise.

On the night of the election Sunday, the TSE did not announce the results, contrary to what is customary in Honduras, where at 7 or 8 pm you already know who the president-elect is. Hours later, at 2.45 am on Monday and with 57 per cent of the votes counted, the TSE announced a clear advantage – about 5 percentage points – for the opposition candidate, Salvador Nasralla. That day, the whole country did not talk about anything other than how it had been possible to stop the much-anticipated fraud. And then, on Tuesday, the computing system stopped and we waited all day for data that never came. Finally, around noon on Wednesday we were surprised to find out that the results had changed in favour of Hernández, who several weeks later, on 17 December, was eventually declared the winner with a share of almost 43 per cent of the vote, compared to 41.5 per cent for Nasralla.

The Alliance Against Dictatorship denounced the fraud and the population demonstrated peacefully in the streets to demand electoral transparency and respect for democratic procedures – and suffered severe repression for it.

2. How did the international community react to the fraud allegations, and what was the government's response?

International observers were extremely firm, with the sole exception of a European Union official who said that results should be trusted and who was soon set straight by the Chief of the Observation Mission herself. The Organization of American States (OAS), in particular, played a crucial role. The Chief of the OAS Observation Mission [stated](#) that no certainty could be had regarding the election's results. According to the preliminary report released by the OAS, numerous irregularities, errors and systemic problems reduced confidence in the results, which could only be restored through an agreement between the two candidates to review the electoral records, recount the votes and resolve any discrepancy. The second report ratified these findings, although by then OAS Secretary-General [Luis Almagro](#) had already been saying that a recount of votes would no longer suffice and that it was advisable to hold the elections again with the required guarantees of fairness and transparency. On 4 January 2018, Almagro [urged](#) the Permanent Council of the OAS to approve the electoral observation report. Since the report concludes that the numerous irregularities observed do not allow for the recognition of a winner, its approval would back the organisation's request for a rerun of the elections.

Meanwhile, the opposition [demanded](#) the annulment of the electoral results, but their appeal was [rejected](#). This was foreseeable, given that the Supreme Court, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Electoral Tribunal are all subordinate to the president.

For its part, the government's reaction was to declare immediately a 10 day [state of emergency](#) that restricted the freedom of peaceful assembly. It also imposed the suspension of other constitutional guarantees, not only of the exercise of the freedom of assembly but also of the freedom of expression, among others. The media were warned not to disseminate the opposition's fraud allegations and protests were harshly [repressed](#). This resulted in more

than 30 deaths, dozens of wounded and hundreds of people arbitrarily detained, as well as illegal raids. Several [videos](#) recorded by demonstrators showed security agents chasing and even firing at demonstrators. Three special rapporteurs of the United Nations and the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) [condemned](#) the repression, and the OAS Secretary-General [asked](#) the Honduran government to receive a special delegate from the OAS who would report on the situation of the protests and the state's response.

3. What are the chances that the government will respond to street pressures and international demands?

International pressures motivated the government to start talking about a '[great national dialogue](#)' to find a solution to the situation. However, in the governmental discourse the focus of attention was not placed on the electoral irregularities or the human rights violations that were taking place, but rather on the fact that the initially peaceful demonstrations had allegedly become violent as a result of actions by gangs and organised crime groups. In my experience, this kind of government call for dialogue is aimed at calming the waters, reorienting efforts and maintaining control. If the underlying issues are not addressed, dialogue will not make sense and, worse, it will only serve to legitimise fraud.

On the other hand, it is important to note that the Honduran people have changed, and nowadays we have an experience of mobilisation that we did not have in the past. Not long ago, we were a rather apathetic and indifferent people, but since 2009 a new consciousness has been forged in the heat of resistance against the coup d'état. Thus, in 2015, when revelations surfaced of embezzlement in the Honduran Social Security Institute - it became known that gigantic sums had been diverted towards spurious ends, including financing the incumbent president's campaign, as he himself recognised - people mobilised massively for months, in what became known as the [March of the Torches](#). This was an unprecedented mobilisation, which eventually succeeded in prompting the establishment of the OAS Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras ([MACCIH](#)).

Hundreds of thousands of people have mobilised in the country against electoral fraud, and not even the most brutal repression has stopped them. Nor did they demobilise when the candidate whose election they were defending disappointed them, at least temporarily, as he announced - although he later backtracked - that he would dissociate himself from the Alliance Against Dictatorship in order to form a broader front. Of course this discouraged the mobilised citizenry, but it did not cause them to abandon the streets, because people had mobilised against corruption much more than in favour of a specific candidate. If there was something that Nasralla embodied for them, it was precisely the value of honesty.

At the beginning of January 2018, however, Nasralla [announced](#) that on Saturday 6 January mobilisations would resume, and that starting on 27 January, the date set for the presidential inauguration, he would act as the legitimate president of Honduras. A [general strike](#) was also called to take place between 20 and 27 January to demand President Hernández's resignation. So the population has returned to the streets: on 6 January a [protest](#) took place in San Pedro Sula in which more than 80,000 people participated. In sum, I think there is a good chance for pressure exerted at the national level to lead to an agreement to revise the electoral fraud. In conjunction with OAS pressures for the rerun of elections, it is possible that pressure from mobilised citizens will have an effect.

4. Do you think repression will likely intensify?

Yes, I think the situation is getting more complicated by the day, because people are taking to the streets, opposition political leaders are standing firm in their demands, and social leaders are not backing down either. Human rights organisations have argued that citizens have a legitimate right to protest - we have even said that people have to go out to protest to prevent the consummation of this violation of their political rights, which in turn will undoubtedly affect the actual enforcement of other human rights.

Faced with all of this, the government's response has been even more militarisation. In early December, the National Police [rebelled](#) against the president, arguing that they would not obey illegal orders to repress people who were mobilised as a result of a political problem that had been created by the government. After a day-long strike and having reached a favourable salary agreement with the government, the National Police [returned](#) to the streets, supposedly to guard rather than repress the demonstrations. But police behaviour has been atrocious; in addition to the death toll, we have seen a strategy in place to generate a climate of fear in the streets, with surveillance of demonstrators, persecution of political and social leaders and smear campaigns against human rights defenders.

However, fear has not stopped the citizenry, and we are very worried about what could happen if a concerted exit to this crisis is not reached. These days we are having meetings within our organisation and with the social movements network and the National Human Rights Roundtable in order to decide how we are going to face the human rights challenge that's coming for us, because the repressive reaction we have seen so far does not bode well.

We also hope that the IACHR can expedite its visit to our country. The presence of international observers and the international press has so far been very important to bring out the truth by breaking through the internal media siege, and is now more necessary than ever.

In the coming weeks the role of the OAS will be crucial. If the report that the OAS has issued, which does not recognise the electoral results, is not ratified by the organisation's Permanent Council, it would no longer make sense for the OAS to make a single electoral observation anymore. The Inter-American Democratic Charter would no longer make sense either if the OAS ended up recognising a government whose election has denounced as fraudulent. For their part, OAS member states, including the USA, should act in the same direction. It is inconceivable for a country that invokes democratic principles and values to grant recognition to a government that has emerged from fraud, violence and human rights violations. However, the USA, along with other countries in the region, has so far not shown great reservations in recognising Hernández's fraudulent re-election.

Before 26 November, time seemed to be divided into before and after the election; we never imagined that we would have such a long gap without a president-elect. Our horizon then moved to January 27, when an illegitimate government was [inaugurated](#) amid [renewed protests](#). The president did not take possession in an open space, because big protests were expected. He did so in the National Stadium, with militarised security and the population protesting outside. This marked the beginning of a period of political and social conflict that will prevent the country from moving forward on other important issues.

Nevertheless, we are clear that what's most important is that the population is now aware and not willing to allow electoral fraud and corruption to happen. This can make us lose a year now, but it will earn us 10 in the future as a result of the fight against corruption and impunity. The Honduran people deserve our applause, because they have shown that they are not longer willing to allow these kind of politicians to continue to rule our country.

- Civic space in Honduras is rated as 'obstructed' by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#), indicating considerable restrictions in the freedoms of association, peaceful assembly and expression.
- Get in touch with CIPRODEH through their [website](#) or [Facebook](#) page, or follow [@ciprodeh1](#) on Twitter