

Hope Returns to Honduras

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On Sunday, Porfirio Lobo was chosen in a free and fair election as Honduras' next President, allowing the country to breathe a little easier after months of political uncertainty. Lobo, the National Party's presidential candidate, came to power with over fifty percent of the vote, beating out former President Manuel Zelaya's Liberal Party.

[FrumForum](#) investigates what's next for Honduras, its struggling economy, and ousted former President Manuel Zelaya.

What's Next for Manuel Zelaya?

On December 2nd, Congress will decide whether to symbolically reinstate defiant former President Manuel Zelaya. If they choose to do so, he will serve until the end of his original term, which was slated to come to a close in January. However, it is unlikely that the Congress which voted to remove him from power would choose to reinstate him.

"The feeling that I have is that [Congress] will likely reject his restoration to power... basically closing any avenue he has to return [to government]," said Heritage Foundation scholar and international electoral observer Ray Walser.

With that out of the way, Zelaya faces charges of treason, for which he will have to stand trial.

"If he wants to remain free, [an option] is to negotiate political asylum in one of the friendly countries: Nicaragua, Brazil, Venezuela or Cuba," said Cato Institute policy scholar Juan Carlos Hidalgo.

Another possibility is that Lobo would pardon the former Honduran President for the sake of putting the crisis behind them. "I wouldn't rule it out," said Hidalgo. "They're friends – they come from the same region of Honduras, and apparently they have a very good relationship."

Who Is President-elect Porfirio Lobo?

President-elect Porfirio Lobo is a member of the National Party, the party opposite Zelaya's liberals. Lobo campaigned on a vague platform of security from gang violence and a commitment to democratic principles.

"I don't know what his policies will look like," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo. "I'm not sure whether he's going to lean left or whether he's going to lean right... Lobo was quite vague in his message... he talked about the creation of jobs, but he didn't mention specific policies."

In the end, Lobo was a familiar and reassuring figure who inspired confidence. Many Hondurans looked to him as a symbol for long-awaited normalcy: "Lobo was a candidate and near-winner in 2005, and projects an image of fatherly security," said Ray Walser. "He looks like a man of the people. [Honduras] returned to the comfort of Lobo, who represented a different course and a hope for stability."

Of some concern is Lobo's communist past. According to Juan Carlos Hidalgo, he was a "communist sympathizer during the days of the Soviet Union, and even studied in the U.S.S.R. ... Some are even saying that he was the favorite candidate of Hugo Chavez until Chavez approached Zelaya."

Even so, Hidalgo notes that he doesn't think that Lobo will steer in Zelaya's direction: "Lobo has a precedent now that he needs to be aware of, which is that Honduran institutions are strong, and that the President doesn't have a blank check over the country's future... if he starts ignoring the rule of law, court rulings and Congress, then he might end up in a similar situation to Zelaya."

Will Honduras' Economy Recover?

[FrumForum](#) reported in September that the political crisis in Honduras was costing the country \$50 million a day, thanks to the imposition of curfews affecting local businesses, travel advisories affecting tourism and widespread shunning of the country by international investors.

As normalcy returns to Honduras, things can be expected to improve. One source of anxiety, however, is that Honduras may be marred with the stamp of political instability.

"The concern among the business community is that the uncertainty has put a freeze on investment, and that foreign investors may begin thinking about sourcing from other countries if political instability is to be a hallmark of Honduras," said Ray Walser.

Legitimacy of the Election

There's nothing to indicate that there were any irregularities during the election process. It was, as Juan Carlos Hidalgo told [FrumForum](#), "totally clean." In fact, voter participation was significantly higher than the 2005 Presidential election, and is expected to reach sixty percent.

Those who object to the legitimacy of the election, such as Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, will have to resort to accusations about former President Zelaya's removal from power – a crisis which this election was meant to resolve.

International Recognition of the Results

The usual suspects will likely withhold diplomatic recognition for some time. ALBA, the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas, is a group that includes Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua and other countries sympathetic to socialism, and is expected to be quite stubborn about refusing to establish formal ties.

On the other hand, the United States, Canada, and Mexico are all expected to officially recognize the election results.

Remaining on the fence, however, is regional economic powerhouse Brazil, which has objected to Zelaya's removal from power and has housed the former President in its Honduran embassy.

Final Word

After months of political insecurity, curfews and economic suffering, Hondurans may finally be able to look forward to some peace and quiet. Honduras has served as a case study for democratic resilience in Latin America, and the Honduran people have much to be proud of.

In the face of a would-be despot who sought to undermine the country's democratic institutions, the institutions proved to be up to the task of repelling an aspiring autocrat.

"There are reasons to be comforted by [President-elect Lobo's] victory," said Hidalgo. "I don't think that he will

[follow Zelaya's path]...Hondurans are safe from the subversion of democracy – if Lobo is a smart guy, he will have learned a lesson from this political crisis.”



Flashback, August 2009: Tim Mak at George Mason University, on why the crisis in Honduras doesn't constitute a coup.