

2021 Elections in Honduras

November 8, 2021

Honduras is scheduled to hold presidential, congressional, and municipal elections on November 28, 2021. The elections come at a difficult moment for Honduras, as many Hondurans have [lost confidence in their democratic institutions](#) and the country faces a protracted recovery from the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, two hurricanes, and a deep recession. Depending on their perceived legitimacy, the elections could help foster stability in Honduras or could exacerbate the country's challenges. The elections also will determine whether the U.S. government will have credible Honduran partners, with whom it can work to address migration, drug trafficking, and other policy concerns, and may influence congressional foreign assistance decisions.

Domestic Context

President Juan Orlando Hernández (2014-present) of the conservative National Party (PN) is nearing the end of his second term and is not seeking a third. Many Hondurans maintain his [2017 reelection](#) was unconstitutional and the result of electoral fraud. Over the past eight years, Hernández and the PN-controlled congress have enacted business-friendly [economic policies](#) and a series of [security- and justice-sector reforms](#) while consolidating their influence over the supreme court and other nominally independent institutions.

In September 2021, [74% of Hondurans](#) surveyed thought the country was on the wrong track. They identified corruption as the principal problem facing Honduras and unemployment, COVID-19, and crime as top concerns for their families.

- **Corruption.** [Perceptions of corruption](#) in Honduras have increased as President Hernández, members of his family, and other current and former government officials have been implicated in various [corrupt activities](#), including [drug trafficking](#). Although the Honduran government enacted some anti-corruption measures during Hernández's first term, it has [rolled them back](#) over the past two years as prosecutors have investigated the president and his congressional allies.
- **Unemployment.** The Honduran economy contracted by an [estimated 9%](#) in 2020 due to a pandemic-driven recession and the damage wrought by two hurricanes. From 2019 to 2020, the unemployment rate increased from [5.7%](#) to [10.9%](#) and the underemployment

Congressional Research Service

<https://crsreports.congress.gov>

IN11795

rate increased from 60.6% to 70.7%. In September 2021, an estimated 3.3 million people (a third of Hondurans) were contending with acute food insecurity.

- **COVID-19.** As of November 8, 2021, Honduras had recorded more than 376,000 cases and 10,300 deaths from COVID-19, though some analysts argue there may be significant underreporting. The country's vaccine rollout has been slower than the global average, with 35% of the population fully vaccinated as of November 8.
- **Crime.** Homicide and crime victimization rates have declined over the past decade but remain high by regional standards and have increased over the past year.

Election Dynamics

Although polls suggest most Hondurans are ready for change after 12 consecutive years of PN rule, they also suggest the PN remains the country's most popular party. The political opposition has splintered since a 2009 coup split the center-right Liberal Party (PL) and spurred the creation of the leftist Liberty and Re-foundation (LIBRE) party. The launch of the Savior of Honduras Party (PSH)—a personality-driven and anti-corruption-focused party led by 2017 presidential runner-up Salvador Nasralla—further fractured the opposition.

Given those divisions, the PN's candidate, Tegucigalpa mayor Nasry "Tito" Asfura, was widely favored to win the presidency. In October 2021, however, Nasralla forged a coalition with LIBRE's Xiomara Castro, withdrawing from the presidential race to serve as her running mate. A poll conducted afterward found Castro leading the race with 38% support, followed by Asfura at 21%, and the PL's Yani Rosenthal at 3%; most of the remainder were undecided. Whereas Asfura would likely maintain the status quo, Castro has called for extensive policy changes, including the creation of a U.N.-backed anti-corruption commission, the establishment of diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, the legalization of abortion under certain circumstances, and the convocation of a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution.

The high level of uncertainty, combined with Hondurans' lack of confidence in their electoral institutions, could undermine the legitimacy of the results and could spur a cycle of social unrest and repression similar to what occurred in the aftermath of 2017 elections. The U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has already documented at least 45 serious incidents of political violence since October 2020, including 23 deaths. The Organization of American States and the European Union have dispatched electoral observation missions to Honduras to strengthen the credibility and transparency of the process.

Implications for the United States

Difficult living conditions and periodic instability in Honduras have contributed to relatively high levels of displacement and emigration. In FY2021, U.S. authorities at the Southwest border encountered more than 319,000 Hondurans, or 3.2% of the Honduran population. Systemic corruption and weak rule of law also contribute to Honduras's status as a major drug transit country.

The Biden Administration has sought to collaborate with Honduras and other Central American countries to [manage migration flows](#) and [address the underlying conditions](#) that spur migration and facilitate transnational crime. The Administration proposed allocating \$4 billion of assistance to the region over four years and requested [\\$861 million](#)—including at least [\\$95.8 million](#) for Honduras—for FY2022. Some Members of Congress are skeptical of funding such efforts, [arguing](#) that corruption is deeply entrenched and the United States lacks credible government partners in the region.

In July 2021, the Biden Administration imposed visa sanctions on [21 current and former Honduran officials](#) who allegedly have engaged in corruption or undemocratic actions, pursuant to the United States-Northern Triangle Enhanced Engagement Act (P.L. 116-260). President Hernández was not among those identified, despite U.S. Department of Justice [allegations](#) that he accepted bribes to protect drug traffickers. The targeted sanctions do not appear to have not resulted in greater cooperation from the Honduran congress, which has continued to [impede anti-corruption efforts](#).

If Honduran officials elected in November 2021 prove unwilling to address corruption and other deep-seated challenges, U.S. policymakers could opt to scale back support to the Honduran government and/or redirect U.S. assistance to civil society. More broadly, U.S. policymakers may reevaluate whether and how they can achieve their objectives in Central America.

Author Information

Peter J. Meyer
Specialist in Latin American and Canadian Affairs

Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.