

The Coming Xiomara Castro Presidency in Honduras: Implications for the US and the Region

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On November 28, 2021, Honduras will elect a new President, a new Congress, and 20 representatives to the Central American Parliament (commonly known as Parlacen). Polls indicate that Libre party candidate Xiomara Castro, whose platform pledges to refound Honduras as a “socialist democratic state”², is likely to beat out her principal rivals (National Party candidate Nazry Asfura, and Liberal Party candidate Yani Rosenthal) to become Honduras' next President³.

Per Honduran law, as of November 21st, the candidates have ended their official campaigns and entered a period of silence until the election. Significant and unperceived shifts in voter intention during this period are possible⁴. Nazry Asfura and the National Party have spent heavily, including billboard advertising, and have arguably benefitted indirectly from their control of the government. The National Party has also appealed strongly to the fear of some Hondurans that a Libre victory would transform Honduras into another Venezuela or Cuba. While the outcome in Honduras is thus by no means predetermined, the election is arguably Castro's to lose.

As in other countries that have elected populist leftist leaders, Castro's likely victory reflects the frustration of Hondurans with pervasive poverty, crime and violence, corruption at all levels of government, and the continuing inability of elected leaders to address these ills. 48% of Hondurans were below the poverty line as of 2019⁵, and 70% were estimated to be underemployed⁶. In the past two years, their hardship has been compounded by the effects of Covid-19⁷ and hurricanes Eta and Iota⁸. The back-to-back storms hit the country hard in November 2020, causing \$1.9 billion in damages and affecting four million Hondurans⁹. Reflecting the combined effect of these blows, Honduras' economy contracted 9% in 2020¹⁰.

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With respect to crime and insecurity, Honduras' homicide rate in 2020 was 37.6 murders per 100,000 people, one of the highest in the region, although improved from prior years¹¹. As an illustration of the pervasiveness of corruption in Honduras and the power of organized crime in Honduras, the nation's current President Juan Orlando Hernandez has been publicly named as a co-conspirator¹² in a narco-trafficking case in a U.S. court that resulted in the conviction of his brother Tony Hernandez¹³. In addition, President Hernandez' predecessor Pepe Lobo, the former President's wife¹⁴ and son¹⁵, as well as current presidential candidate Yani Rosenthal¹⁶, have all been convicted or credibly accused of ties to narco-trafficking or money laundering.

In fairness, US demand for drugs, which caused over 100,000 US overdose deaths in the past year¹⁷, has played an important role in the corruption and dysfunctionality of Honduras' institutions through the corrupting impact of massive flows of drugs and drug money through the country. Yet while the issue of blame is important, it must not detract from recognition that the likely election of Castro and her Libre party in Honduras will significantly impact the dynamics of the region and the strategic position of the US, as part of the broader turn to the left currently underway across Latin America. As such, it is important for decisionmakers and strategic planners across the region to begin now, examining those implications, and anticipating and managing their consequences, and possible opportunities.

Internal Honduran Politics

With respect to the political dynamics inside Honduras, it is likely that the November 28 election will be accompanied by irregularities that will give rise to protests and challenges to the outcome¹⁸, just as occurred in 2017¹⁹. Indeed, political violence in Honduras is already at troubling levels; since the end of 2020, 14 Honduran political candidates have been assassinated²⁰.

Beyond election day, Castro's victory will likely unleash a bitter and public political struggle between conservative forces and the new leftist government. In the short term will likely use the legitimate cause of fighting corruption to try to modify institutions, although the likely inability of her Libre party to win an absolute majority in the Congress will create opportunities for her opponents to create coalitions to block her reforms, particularly where they threaten the personal and institutional interests of the members involved.

In the fight to remake Honduras' institutions, the new government will have a confluence of opportunities in 2023. In that year, it will nominate a new Attorney General when the 5-year term of the current officeholder expires²¹. In 2023 the Administration will also name, and Congress will be called upon to approve, 15 new Supreme Court justices when their 7-year terms expire that year²². Indeed, the August 2020 Appeals Court decision to dismiss charges against 22 Honduran nationals²³ implicated in the high profile Pandora Papers case highlights the importance of judicial selections, as highlighted by Castro's running mate Salvador Nasrallah²⁴.

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If President Castro's Libre party has the votes in Congress, in the name of the fight against corruption, it has pledged to repeal or change numerous laws²⁵. These include those protecting the confidentiality of data on environmental issues, public administration, social programs²⁶, as well as repealing or modifying changes made by the outgoing government that arguably weaken anti-corruption laws²⁷.

Castro administration will also likely seek to revive some form of counter-corruption commission to replace the OAS-affiliated body MACCIH²⁸, which was eliminated by her predecessor, although this will also likely require the support of the new Congress. Castro has talked about introducing a new United Nations-led body²⁹ along the lines of Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). While a Castro anti-corruption campaign would be likely viewed with cautious optimism by the Biden Administration, it would also likely serve a strategic purpose for Castro and Libre in discrediting and/or eliminating rival politicians, business leaders, and both institutional and economic bases of resistance.

As Castro's consolidation and the dismantling of the former institutional order proceeds, as also occurred in Venezuela³⁰, Ecuador³¹ and Bolivia³², the Castro government will likely carry out its pledge to rewrite the Honduran constitution through a Constituent Assembly³³. While the Constitution allows such a body to be launched by a 2/3 vote of the national Congress, the opportunities for rival parties to band together to block such an assembly may tempt Castro and Libre to do an end run around Congress by calling for a plebiscite, where their ability to mobilize sentiment in the streets gives them an advantage.

The actions taken by Castro and Libre, and the reaction to them by affected forces in Honduras are likely to increase political mobilization and violence. As the political power, economic interests and legal protections of established interests come under assault, they will likely seek to use their connections in the press, the United States and international business to call attention to activities of concern, particularly where they involve possible Libre collaboration with external leftist actors, such as Cuba, Venezuela, and the Sao Paulo forum.

At the same time, indications that Castro is consolidating power in undemocratic ways, or engaging in corruption, as credible evidence suggests³⁴ was the case with Castro's husband Mel Zelaya, will likely create tension between Castro and Salvador Nasrallah and their factions within the Congress and among their supporters.

Recognition of the PRC

Xiomara Castro has promised to recognize PRC within the first 100 days of her assumption of the Presidency³⁵. For the Taiwanese, assessing the risk of such a change, how to prepare for it, and frank discussions about whether a Castro government could be persuaded not to change recognition was likely at the center of President Juan Orlando Hernandez November 2021 visit to Taiwan³⁶.

Empirically, in other recent cases of diplomatic recognition of the PRC³⁷, such as those by the governments of Costa Rica³⁸ (2007), Panama³⁹ (2017), the Dominican Republic⁴⁰ (2018) and El Salvador⁴¹ (2018), the switch has led to the signing of multiple, often non-transparent MOUs⁴² that open up the recognizing country to the activities of Chinese companies, including infrastructure projects, permanent commercial operations in the country in both extractive sectors and strategic markets, the expanded presence of Chinese businesspersons and associated influence. Other changes typically accompanying recognition that may be expected in the Honduran case include the almost obligatory visit to the PRC by a delegation from the recognizing country. Typically such delegations include not only government personnel, but also businesspersons with special ties to the government⁴³. Their inclusion in the group affords them exclusive opportunities to discuss special deals with their Chinese counterparts that benefit their companies and business interests. In Honduras that may include businesspersons with connections to Mel Zelaya as well as Libre, although the longstanding alignment of Honduran businesses to the country's establishment National and Liberal parties may give some maneuvering following a Libre victory by those seeking to position themselves as allies of the new government.

As with the other cases of diplomatic change, the Castro government will likely commit Honduras to the PRC "Belt and Road" initiative⁴⁴, and possibly apply for membership in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). Honduras' agriculture is one sector likely to be privileged by the new MOUs and negotiations. Based on past practice, the PRC will likely follow-up initial agricultural cooperation MOUs and discussions with Honduran agrobusiness representatives in the delegation with the sending of Chinese technical teams to Honduras to facilitate the certification of the country's agricultural processing facilities and associated phytosanitary agreements for the export of coffee and fruit to the PRC.

Initial MOUs with Honduras will also likely include the telecommunications sector, possibly involving the Honduran telecommunications organ Hondutel, as well as PRC-based entities already operating in the country such as Huawei, which set up an office in Tegucigalpa in 2018⁴⁵. Other areas likely to be included in the coming wave of MOUs include work for Chinese companies in the electricity generation, transmission and distribution sector, where the Chinese firm China Harbour has already established a foothold with work on the Patucha III⁴⁶ and Aqua Zarca⁴⁷ hydroelectric projects.

The PRC and the Castro government are further likely to work toward MOUs that encompass expanded work by Chinese construction companies in transportation infrastructure, including highway projects along the corridor from the Gulf of Fonseca in the Pacific coast, to San Pedro Sula to Puerto Cortes on the Atlantic, where they have shown previous interest⁴⁸. The discussions and MOUs may also encompass port projects on both the Atlantic and Pacific ends of the corridor, and in the vicinity of the new Palmerola International Airport, which shares a runway with Soto-Cano airbase, where the

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U.S. currently maintains its Joint Task Force Bravo⁴⁹ (JTF-B) regional Forward Operating Location (FOL).

To the extent that the Castro government opens up Honduras to port, assembly and distribution operations, the Chinese may seek to be granted to operate under a special legal jurisdiction, as they have sought to do in El Salvador, Costa Rica and elsewhere. In particular, they might seek to establish an enclave with exemptions from not only taxes, but labor and other laws, under Honduras' law for special administrative zones (Zedes⁵⁰). Obtaining such an Zedes enclave from a Castro government would be ironic, insofar as the Zedes enclaves were established by the current National Party government, and strongly opposed by Libre.

It is likely that, as in other countries extending recognition, the PRC will open up a new Confucius Institute in one of Honduras' principal, left-friendly public universities, such as Honduras' National Autonomous University (UNAH) in Tegucigalpa. Indeed, based on how rapidly Confucius Institutes have been opened in other countries following other diplomatic changes⁵¹, it is likely that behind-the-scenes discussions about setting up a Confucius Institute at UNAH or elsewhere in Honduras is probably already underway.

As a compliment to the new Confucius Institute, the Honduran government will likely negotiate with the PRC to provide scholarships for Hondurans to study in the PRC at the Chinese' government's expense. The experience of other countries changing recognition suggest that Hanban might provide 8 to 20 such scholarships⁵², as well as possible offers to train members of the Honduran Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Commerce in the PRC, in support of Honduras' establishment of an embassy and commercial representation in the PRC, just as the PRC provided such support to the Dominican Republic when that country's government recognized it in 2018⁵³.

Honduras' Other Relationships and Multilateral Dynamics

A Castro Presidency will substantially impact Honduras' bilateral relationships and the dynamics of the multilateral institutions in which it has a role. The incoming Castro government will likely strengthen relations with the leftist populist regimes⁵⁴ of Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) in Mexico, Miguel Diaz Canel regime in Cuba, Daniel Ortega regime in Nicaragua, and Nicolas Maduro regime in Venezuela. Indeed, the incoming Castro government may move more quickly to change Honduras' foreign policy than pursue domestic reforms, since it will be less dependent on its control of Congress to do so. Indeed, the Castro government may seek to use financial and other support from its new friends to support its achievement of domestic objectives, as others such as Venezuela have arguably done. Nonetheless, Castro will also likely seek to balance such maneuvering initially with the maintenance of positive relations with the US and European Union.

In the short term, Castro is likely to re-establish diplomatic relations with the Maduro regime in Venezuela, terminated by her predecessor, and expel the representative of

Venezuela's de jure President Juan Guaido from the country. To the extent that Venezuela succeeds in bringing its oil production back on line with the help of China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), as is currently occurring⁵⁵, the Maduro regime might extend assistance to an ideologically sympathetic Castro through a resurrected Petrocaribe, or possibly the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA), as previously occurred in 2008 when Castro's husband Mel Zelaya was President⁵⁶. Both would arguably create opportunities for Maduro to involve Castro and her supporters in Venezuela's web of corruption.

Honduras relationship with the Ortega regime in Nicaragua would arguably become warmer and deeper under a Castro government. The relationship was already positive under the Hernandez administration. Its strengthening under a Castro government would likely reflect both ideological sympathies and the common interest of both in developing the Gulf of Fonseca, previously complicated by territorial disputes between Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua there. Castro's husband Mel Zelaya in 2007 sought to negotiate special economic zones in the Gulf⁵⁷, while President Hernandez signed an agreement with his counterpart Daniel Ortega in November 2021⁵⁸ to address the Honduras-Nicaragua boundary in the Gulf, and its relationship to Salvadoran claims. Further exploration of common interest in the area could be expected under Castro, particularly in conjunction with El Salvador also developing its part of the Gulf with Chinese money. A Castro government, like her predecessor, would also probably refrain from criticizing the Ortegas and taking positions against the regime in international forums such as the OAS.

With respect to Mexico, which has long had a special relationship with Honduras over matters of immigration and development, indeed, even before taking office, AMLO's then Foreign Minister designate Miguel Ebrard illustrated Mexico's special interest in Honduras and other Northern Triangle countries during the former's visit to Tegucigalpa in 2018⁵⁹, including AMLO's proposed "plan for sustainable growth" of the South of Mexico and the Northern Triangle. AMLO's government continued that demonstration of interest with the signing a free trade agreement with Honduras in November 2018. With the ideological alignment of a Castro government with the AMLO administration, the relationship would likely not only deepen, but expand into new areas of cooperation, and evolve in tone and style.

With respect to Honduras' relationship with El Salvador, despite the ideological differences between Castro and El Salvador's President Najib Bukele, a President Castro may seek common cause with Bukele, as well as Alejandro Giametti in Guatemala pushing back against alleged interference by the US and multilateral organizations such as the Interamerican Development Bank, the BCIE and the International Monetary Fund⁶⁰(IMF) in the "internal affairs" of countries.

While El Salvador and Honduras' competing claim over Isla Conejo in the Gulf of Fonseca may be more difficult to resolve than Honduras' coordination of claims with Nicaragua, the common interest of both El Salvador⁶¹ and Honduras⁶² in using Chinese money and

companies to develop their respective parts of the area into a regional logistics hub, including El Salvador's interest in access to the Atlantic through Honduras' "dry canal" corridor may create new opportunities to reach agreement.

Beyond the hemisphere and the PRC, it is likely that a Castro government would also court Russia and Iran, cautiously at first, but with increasing boldness as relations sour with the United States. Indeed, the Honduran government's intercept of four Iranians attempting to enter the country illegally in January 2020 suggest that the country is already on the radar of Iran for some illicit activity⁶³. With respect to Russia, due to the latter's relative lack of resources, such engagements would likely be initially limited, possibly advancing through donations of food, transport equipment, and material for Honduras' police and security forces, as Russia did in rebuilding its relationship with the Ortega regime in Nicaragua after 2007.

Whatever the Castro government's its posture toward extra-hemispheric actors and populist states in the region, it will likely maintain good relations with European Union. It will likely seek to continue to benefit from EU development assistance, while leveraging European sympathy with its advocacy for indigenous and marginalized populations and its fight against corruption, offsetting to some degree European discomfort if Libre government begins to depart from the country's legal and constitutional democratic framework.

In terms of broader currents of multilateralism in the region, Honduras will likely cease support positions critical of leftist authoritarian regimes such as Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba in forums such as the Organization of American States (OAS). It will also likely become much less cooperative with US-advocated and pro-market positions in the Central American Integration System (SICA⁶⁴).

On the other hand, a Castro regime may be expected to take on a more active, anti-US role in CELAC, to include participating in China-CELAC activities. Indeed, the previously mentioned development of a corridor from the Gulf of Fonseca to Puerto Cortes on the Atlantic could possibly become the signature China-CELAC "Belt and Road" infrastructure project in Central America.

Security Challenges and Relationships

The security policies of a Castro government are likely to unfold in a manner initially positive from the perspective of the Biden administration in the US. With time, however, they are likely to become more troubling.

President Castro's Libre party has pledged to remove the military from its public security role⁶⁵, and increase focus on community policing. Libre's platform calls for phasing out⁶⁶ the military police (PMOP) which was a key initiative⁶⁷ of her predecessor Juan Orlando Hernandez. In addition, in the name of the fight against corruption, the Libre platform

proclaims its intent to repeal the laws governing the National Defense and Security Council and the law on the protection of national security documents⁶⁸.

Beyond such specific promises, Castro will face strong incentives to significantly reduce the role of the Honduran military in the country's security affairs more broadly, while simultaneously working through military promotions and institutional changes to ensure that the generally conservative institution does not challenge Castro's power as she works to move the country in a new direction. Indeed, Castro is likely to be especially sensitive to the role of the military as a challenge to her administration, given its role in the June 2009 removal of her husband⁶⁹, Manuel Zelaya from the Presidency, following a decision by Honduras' Supreme Court to do so⁷⁰.

Despite such concerns, it is likely that Castro will proceed cautiously in her relationship with the military, at least at first. This caution might even include providing additional resources to the military as Hugo Chavez did in Venezuela, or promising respect for the military's institutional autonomy, even while gradually working to replace the military leadership with Libre loyalists through promotions, restructure its doctrine, foment conflict within its ranks, or creating create parallel citizen forces under Libre's control, Hugo Chavez did in establishing the "collectivos" in Venezuela.

Based on the experience of other countries that have moved in a leftist populist direction, it is likely that the policies described in the previous paragraphs, while increasing the number of anti-corruption cases against elites affiliated with the political opposition, will also eventually nurture new criminal activities and decrease the effectiveness of politicized government security institutions in combatting them. Such policies could also create opportunities for entrenched gangs such as Mara Salvatrucha and Barrio 18 to expand their presence in areas where they currently operate⁷¹, including Tegucigalpa-Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula, as well as to continue to expand their role in narco-trafficking⁷². Given the political demand to reduce the perception of insecurity, the Castro regime may be tempted to seek "deals" with the gangs, effectively ceding control over neighborhoods, in exchange for their collaboration in lowering observed violence.

Relationship with the US and Associated Challenges

If Xiomara Castro is elected, the direction her administration could take will present both challenges and opportunities for the Biden Administration. The most critical moment for the US relationship with the new Castro government will likely be the initial period following her election. Multiple factors will likely dispose President Castro to initially seek good relations with Washington. These include the goodwill the Biden administration has generated by maintaining distance⁷³ from Juan Orlando Hernandez and his National Party government, including US Assistant Secretary of State Brian Nichols not meeting with him during his visit to Honduras⁷⁴ the week before the election to emphasize Washington's interest in the outcome⁷⁵.

Castro's interest in working with the US will also include her government's interest in the \$4 billion pledged by Biden to the region⁷⁶, as well as the importance of Hondurans living in

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the US and the remittances they send back to the country. It also includes her interest in the regularization of status for immigrants President Biden has promised for immigrants from Honduras among other countries⁷⁷. Despite such initial good will, competing interests of Castro and her Libre movement, and the pressures of her foreign and domestic constituencies, will likely increasingly diverge from the United States over time.

The presence of the US Forward Operating Location JTF-Bravo at the Palmerola airport, which will begin operating as an international airport just as Castro comes into office, is likely to be an early test of the relationship. The new commercial use of the site already creates challenges for continued US use of the facility. President Castro's balancing act between those in Libre who wish the expulsion of the US FOL from the country, versus Castro's desire to maintain good relations with the US, will be an early indication of her orientation, and the configuration of forces within Libre.

It is likely that President Castro could move to limit security cooperation with the US, including reducing or constraining engagements on counternarcotics⁷⁸ and counter-crime issues⁷⁹. Honduras' continued extradition of criminals to the United States will be an important test in this regard.

The incentives of a Castro government to limit cooperation with the US may become even stronger if the alleged ties⁸⁰ between Castro's husband Mel Zelaya and the Cachiros criminal organization in Honduras lead to US interest in pursuing criminal cases against members of Castro's government. Indeed, to hobble the ability of the US to uncover legally actionable evidence of such matters, Castro's Libre government could be driven to impose legal limits on US freedom to operate in the country, the protection of US personnel, and the flexibility with which Honduran entities can interact with their US counterparts. Doing so would resemble actions taken by Mexico's President Lopez Obrador in limiting the US ability to operate in that country, through Mexico's 2020 National Security Law⁸¹.

Beyond the US FOL and other security cooperation issues with the US, Castro's recognition of the PRC, and the deepening commercial and security relationships which are likely to rapidly follow, will also likely raise concerns in Washington. Other sources of tension potentially include Castro government's possible moves against US companies and other private sector interests in the country as she implements her economic agenda, as well as her government's likely reluctance to help the Biden Administration in multilateral and other domains to constrain undemocratic actors in the region such as Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela. A Castro government's possible engagement with Russia and Iran will compound friction from other sources.

The ability of the Biden administration to overlook such troubling activities will decrease if the Republicans manage to retake control of the US House of Representatives in 2022⁸², and with it, the US Republicans' ability to block Biden administration legislation, and focus public attention on troublesome Castro administration behavior through public hearings.

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In short, the Biden administration will have a fleeting window of opportunity with the new Castro administration to leverage initial goodwill and areas of policy congruence to find a path that prevents it from drifting into the orbit of the region's authoritarian populist states and extra-hemispheric US rivals. Taking full advantage of that opportunity is strongly in the interest of both Honduras and the United States.

Endnotes

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