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The end of Honduras' narco-dictatorship

With its new president Xiomara Castro, Hondurans have finally put an end to the narco-dictatorship. But replacing the old order proves to be difficult

Honduras has finally thrown off the shackles of its narco-dictatorship. For 12 years, the country – one of the poorest countries in the world – was governed by the conservative *Partido Nacional* (National Party). The elections at the end of November 2021, however, saw Xiomara Castro Sarmiento of the opposition party *Libertad y Refundación* (Liberty and Refoundation), or *Libre* (Free), emerge victorious. On 27 January, she was sworn in at Tegucigalpa football stadium, in front of thousands of supporters and foreign guests.

In the run-up to the elections, there were widespread fears of electoral fraud and that a narrow election result could be disputed and lead to violent clashes. But far from it, the result was surprisingly clear, with 51 per cent of the popular vote for Xiomara Castro, the wife of former President Manuel Zelaya. The victory wasn't contested, heralding the end of the authoritarian era under Juan Orlando Hernández.

Hernández's reign had begun with a coup against then-President Manuel Zelaya in 2009. It was met with social resistance and protest: an indignant people revolted, torchlight marches took place, a platform for education and health mobilised. At the same time, corruption increasingly flourished. Senior officials were involved in trafficking drugs across borders. The economic elite tried to extract maximum profit, creating oases designated as 'special economic zones', where the state relinquished sovereignty. In January, the then-incumbent president, despised by many citizens, had to go, leaving Xiomara Castro at the helm.

The US's new role in the region

What made this transition possible? On top of the resentment that has been building up amongst the population for more than a decade, the change of US government certainly played a part. Democrat Joe Biden is

taking a clearly different approach to politics with his southern neighbours than his predecessor.

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Biden has entrusted Vice President Kamala Harris with relations with Central America, focusing on migration and the fight against corruption. Harris attended Castro's inauguration in person to support the newly sworn-in Honduran President. As the US Vice President arrived at the stadium, the crowd chanted for her to take corrupt former-President Juan Orlando Hernandez back with her to the US to stand trial for his involvement in the drug trade.

The *Partido Nacional* perhaps wouldn't have been so quick to concede defeat on election day if the US hadn't been keeping a close eye on political developments in Honduras. But the transition of power was still fraught with difficulty. Supporters of *Libre* and members of civil-society organisations and social movements got to work as early as December, drafting initiatives and legislative proposals for the first 100 days of the new government. *Partido Nacional* leaders, however, were too busy trying to get their golden goodbyes. With 50 MPs elected, *Libre* doesn't have a majority in the country's parliament, the National Congress. Even with its smaller coalition partners, it still isn't enough.

Two rivalling presidents

The week before the inauguration then became a showdown: MPs did not elect Luís Redondo of the *Partido Salvador de Honduras* (Saviour Party of Honduras) as President of the National Congress, contrary to what had been previously agreed. Instead, Jorge Cálix of *Libre* was picked, with all 44 votes from the *Partido Nacional* and 20 votes from his own group. This created an uproar in Congress. Cálix and the dissenters were branded traitors and excluded from the party. This was followed by another, also dubious, election that did appoint Redondo as President of the National Congress, though only half of MPs voted.

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Xiomara Castro took office on 27 January, in the midst of a truly systemic crisis, with two men vying for the post President of Congress. The Supreme Court, which is tasked with resolving the crisis, is still filled with judges sympathetic towards the former President Hernández. Now, Castro may begin to rule by

decree, but the parliament is, of course, the heart of the legislature.

The Honduran Congress is also responsible for appointing positions to major institutions such as the Supreme Constitutional Court and the Public Prosecutor's Office. The corrupt elites are building a barricade – they are rumoured to be bribing and extorting MPs to secure immunity. Whether the US has the influence needed to break this blockade remains to be seen.

The US's interest: stopping migration

To stem the flow of refugees sits high on the US's wishlist for the new president. But there is still a lot to do in Honduras to prevent migrant caravans from regularly making their way to the US on foot. Real prospects for economic development and employment are needed, and living conditions must improve drastically. One vital building block is the fight against corruption, which President Castro has put first. She is advocating for a United Nations international mission to combat corruption and immunity to be implemented swiftly – a model already feared by some of the region's most powerful.

In her inaugural speech, the new president announced that the poorest households, which consume less than 150 kW of electricity a month, will not have to pay for electricity from now on.

Hondurans have been leaving the country not just for economic reasons alone. Many have also fled political persecution, as protests following the illegal, rigged re-election of Juan Orlando Hernández in 2017 were violently suppressed. Protesters were threatened and went into exile, fearing for their lives.

Some of them are now returning to Honduras, supporting the country as it builds a new government. Every helping hand is welcome, because the past few years have been marked by personal gain and the plundering of state coffers. When handing over to the new ministers, the outgoing guards even took some of the office equipment with them. Building competent democratic institutions is a mammoth endeavour – especially for as long as corrupt politicians still dominate the system.

For many, it is clear that the economic and social situation, as well the situation for activists in terms of human rights and environmental protection in various parts of the country, will be slow to change. But the mood is still hopeful, because change is in sight. In her inaugural speech, the new president announced that the poorest households, which

consume less than 150 kW of electricity a month, will not have to pay for electricity from now on. While that's not a systemic change, Xiomara Castro has already secured the support of the poorest.



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