

Can Honduras Get Its Democracy in Order in 2025?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Growing mistrust of Honduran institutions could pave the way for electoral violence in 2025.
- This follows a worrying regional trend of democratic disillusionment.
- Hondurans and international partners still have time to ensure credible elections that lead to a stronger democracy.

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Days after accusing the United States of pressuring the Honduran armed forces into removing her from office, Honduran President Xiomara Castro told hundreds of her followers in mid-September that she would **not allow "another coup" to happen in Honduras**. Her husband, Manuel Zelaya, was ousted in a 2009 military coup. The 112-year-old U.S.-Honduran extradition treaty, she said, was the instrument used by the U.S. to coerce the military into such a plot, justifying her decision to **unilaterally end the treaty**.

Castro's charges against the Honduran military are an example of a trend in the country, where growing mistrust in institutions is setting the stage for political violence. As Hondurans head to the polls in 2025, political stagnation and institutional degradation could pave the way for the rise of populist movements and heightened electoral violence. It is vital that Honduras, with help from international partners, channel the energy of the electoral cycle into a peaceful course that can repair trust in the country's institutions and lead to a strengthened democracy.

Growing Mistrust

The Honduran government has accused local organizations — who are tracking corruption and nepotism allegations against the Castro administration — of participating in the destabilizing coup plot due to their working relationship with the U.S. Agency for International Development. Castro has also gone after her opponents in the Honduran Congress, the Liberal and National parties, charging them with conspiring against her government by instrumentalizing electoral institutions to tilt the balance against her party.

Castro's coup allegations came shortly after the [investigative website InSight Crime published a video](#) showing her brother-in-law and Congressman Carlos Zelaya negotiating with drug traffickers a \$650,000 "donation" to her 2013 presidential campaign. The video seemed to confirm what most Hondurans had suspected since the extradition to the U.S. of former president Juan Orlando Hernandez in 2022: corruption is a central feature of Honduran politics. The scandal also struck to the heart of the Castro administration, which came to power promising a purge of the corrupt system and a "refoundation" of the country under the banners of freedom and social justice.

Both the video and the president's coup allegations contribute to a growing mistrust of Honduran institutions and their capacity to provide a space to settle political disputes or to provide justice in a fair process. Castro's charges characterize her political movement, which perceives institutions themselves as **unfair, exclusionary and under the control of "elites."** The video represents evidence of the extent of state capture in the country, where drug trafficking organizations compromise political processes to ensure that local institutions guarantee impunity for their actions and provide a safe space for their operations.

Despite the level of political instability brought by the coup allegations and the video, including the resignation of Carlos Zelaya's son from his position as minister of defense, Hondurans have not taken to the streets or significantly mobilized against the status quo. On the contrary, recent polling shows that **78% of Hondurans have little or no interest at all in politics**. Instead of being worried over corruption, drug trafficking or a coup, citizens are more concerned with the state of the economy and public safety. This level of disconnect between the political discourse at the national level and the actual needs of its population is not unique to Honduras. Across the hemisphere, Latin Americans are **becoming ever more disillusioned** with the state of their democracies, and more open to accepting more authoritarian forms of government if they seem to prove more effective in delivering security

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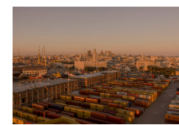
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A ‘Revolution’ in Pause

Castro’s 2021 election [represented](#) a groundbreaking event in Honduran politics, marking a symbolic return to the political project started by her husband. Honduras’ first-ever woman president was expected to rebuild a “socialist and democratic state” that had been degraded during her predecessor’s administration. Her first months in office were defined by a conciliatory tone, of a revolution not caused by pressure from the streets, but rather as a result of a dialogue process between the leftist government and key actors such as the private sector and the opposition in Congress.

“The coalition that brought Castro to power quickly crumbled ... [and] Congress quickly set into a zero-sum game that led to complete legislative gridlock.”

However, the honeymoon was short-lived: the coalition that brought Castro to power quickly crumbled in Congress, leading to the fragmentation of its thin majority and requiring additional votes from the traditional Liberal and National parties to pass key legislation. Instead of advancing on a framework to develop a national agenda, Congress quickly set into a zero-sum game that led to complete legislative gridlock, and an increasingly confrontational relationship with the executive branch. Key elections in Congress for the appointment of a new Supreme Court and a new attorney general were marked by significant irregularities: the magistrates of the Supreme Court were [ultimately elected](#) to resemble the share of seats of each party, and the attorney general was [initially elected](#) by a little-known ad-hoc commission packed by the ruling party Libre.

These important justice institutions were elected amid political confrontations aimed at cancelling out any influence of the adversary in these bodies. But these efforts eventually achieved the opposite, transposing polarized politics to other branches of government and reinforcing the politicization of the justice sector. The opposition argues that the appointment of an attorney general, seen as controlled by Libre, exemplifies the misuse of justice. Conversely, the government contends that the predominance of Liberal and National party magistrates in the highest courts and the electoral commission demonstrates institutional bias against it. This has resulted in a vicious cycle where neither the government nor the opposition view the institutions they established as legitimate for dispute resolution, prompting them to seek extra-democratic means to pursue their goals.

Gloves Off

Political confrontation, on the rise since 2021, will enter a new stage in 2025 as Honduras enters an electoral megacycle, electing a new president, a Congress, 298 mayors, and 20 members of the Central American Parliament. In the current state of the play, political actors perceive the elections as the most important tool to strengthen their foothold on the levers of power, and to weaken their opponents as much as possible. In the last general elections of 2021, similar confrontational dynamics led to heightened political violence and voter intimidation, with the National University of Honduras documenting 64 cases of electoral violence — [including 27 killings](#) — between October 2020 and November 2021.

Dis- and [misinformation](#) on social media, the spread of violent messages in traditional outlets and the increase of personal attacks on opponents contributed to the rise of violence in the run-up to election day. Fake social media accounts [shared content](#) from websites with names resembling those of legitimate news outlets, such as the Central American Post or Universal Noticias. Local factchecker Honduras Verifica [found](#) 180 Facebook accounts spreading 400 disinformation messages daily in 2021.

Four years ago, electoral observation missions [recommended](#) a series of electoral reforms, including strengthening the independence and transparency of electoral institutions, improving the voter registry and ensuring [fair result transmission](#). They also emphasized the need for increased participation of women and marginalized groups, better communication by electoral authorities and enhanced training for electoral staff. However, the gridlock in Congress also meant that none of these reforms were implemented, and the same structural conditions that led to violence in 2021 will most likely catalyze a harsh confrontation between Castro’s Libre party and the opposition. Castro’s own movement may also see turmoil, as dissident groups have begun to form in recent months.

A Window of Opportunity

Still, Honduran political actors, local institutions and international allies have a window of opportunity to mitigate the nefarious effects of such confrontational and polarized politics and set a peaceful, democratic path for the country. International partners could support organizations tracking disinformation and hate messages to strengthen local capacity to timely identify and counter violent narratives. Additional support from social media companies such as Meta — owner of Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram — TikTok and X will be necessary for Honduran civil society and its electoral authorities to prevent misinformation from spiraling into actual violence on the ground.

Under existing legislation, polling stations are managed by representatives of participating political parties. However, these positions are ultimately dominated by the three main parties, as smaller



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participation, these patterns are ultimately determined by the individual parties, as smaller parties often relinquish their roles due to coalition agreements or their limited capacity to deploy staff. In some cases during the 2021 elections, this resulted in [a single party controlling certain polling stations](#). Electoral observation from trusted local Honduran NGO's and international partners, such as the Organization of American States and the European Union, will be key to potentially deter overrepresented stations from misrepresenting the results and assuage smaller and opposition parties' fears of voter manipulation.

“While electoral violence is a significant threat, and democratic degradation is indeed a concerning trend in the region, these challenges are by no means insurmountable.”

Additional efforts to track potential electoral and political violence will need to be made at the municipal level, where it's most likely that transnational criminal organizations will try to capture the process, making it more difficult for the national government to overcome the historic and structural challenges to deliver security and justice to these communities. The departments with the highest reports of politically related homicides during the last elections [included Cortés, Olancho, Yoro and Francisco Morazán](#), regions where competitive districts overlapped with intense criminal presence, high economic activity and weak state presence in rural areas. Local and national authorities, supported by international and civil society partners, have time to prepare data-informed targeted violence prevention strategies in such regions.

While electoral violence is a significant threat, and democratic degradation is indeed a concerning trend in the region, these challenges are by no means insurmountable. Central American neighbor [Guatemala rose from its contentious 2023 elections](#) with a citizenry hopeful of a renewed democratic spring capable of strengthening justice while delivering social dividends for its society. Hondurans still have time to make next year's elections their watershed moment to building a stronger, more inclusive and responsive democracy.

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PHOTO: President Xiomara Castro of Honduras during her inauguration ceremony in Tegucigalpa, Jan. 27, 2022. (Erin Schaff/The New York Times)

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