

The State Department's Selective Indignation to Undemocratic Elections Proliferating Through Latin America

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In the past two months, two different presidential elections plagued by accusations of electoral fraud have occurred in Latin America, raising concerns among purported strategists who staged the elections as well as common citizens who were devastatingly affected by them. The disparate nature of the U.S. State Department's reaction to the election in Honduras and the call for an election in Venezuela reveals that U.S. policy-makers have prioritized political concerns over the preservation of so-called democratic norms in the regime. The result is that the State Department is currently lacking a consistent foreign policy in regard to Latin America and is not up to carry out what could be an important mission, but is now little better than a propaganda-based pretense of a policy.

The United States reaction to Honduras' voting process demonstrates a willingness to ignore blatant undemocratic actions. In the Honduran presidential election, held on November 26, 2017, incumbent president and conservative Juan Orlando Hernandez eked out a narrow victory over challenger Salvador Nasralla, who ran as the candidate of Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship, a coalition which includes the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE). Electoral irregularities were noted by the Organization of American States and the United Nations, and included an embarrassingly delayed vote count that smelled, if anything, of ballot fixing. Nasralla held an early lead but, after a delay in the vote count, the electoral returns dramatically swung in favor of Hernandez. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal attributed this shift to the processing of ballots from parts of Honduras with strong support for Hernandez.

Since the election, thousands of Hondurans have taken to the streets to demonstrate their chagrin at what is happening to their country. The protests have been aggressively suppressed by the police, who have used batons, tear gas, and even live ammunition against their fellow citizens. A Honduran human rights group stated that at least 30 civilians were killed, 232 were wounded, and 1,085 were detained by the police throughout the course of the anti-Hernandez demonstrations.

Beyond election irregularities, many Hondurans have protested against Hernandez due to the fact that the incumbent president was seeking to prime himself for his own

reelection, which is technically not allowed by the Honduran constitution. This posed no problem for Hernandez since he had controversially obtained permission to run for a second term from the Supreme Court in 2015, which he had managed to stack with his own judicial allies during his relatively brief stay in office.

On December 18, 2017, the State Department, in a blatant act of co-conspiracy with the Honduran anti-constitutionalists, recognized Hernandez as the winner of the November 26 Honduran presidential election. In the same congratulatory statement, the State Department called on the Honduran people to restrain themselves from violent protests and seek to resolve differences diplomatically. Washington's response was sardonic in the extreme since it endorsed the Honduran federal election as legitimate despite all the evidence to the contrary. The Honduran government made no effort to address the spate of human rights abuses enacted by security forces in the course of the protests.

The United States was not alone in its unjustified recognition of Hernandez's victory, with Mexico, Canada, and the E.U. all falling in line, rewarding him the electoral win despite the evidence pointing to the contrary. There was some dissent on the American side, as evidenced by the 20 Democratic legislators who sought the signature of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson on a petition calling for a new set of elections in Honduras. However, this minority opinion was overridden by U.S. interests in continuing the status quo in Honduras. Regardless of how many independent countries validated the election, American support for Hernandez counters the verdict of almost all external monitors, such as the pro-Washington Organization for American States (OAS), and threatens to undermine the rectitude of elections in the region. It appears that the United States is supported by the international community in rendering presidential elections a mockery when political necessity wins the day.

State Department Response to Venezuela

On the other hand, on Jan. 24, the State Department resoundingly condemned the Venezuelan government's call for snap elections to be held by end of April, stating that such an election would be "neither free nor fair", nor would it "reflect the will of the Venezuelan people." The State Department memo called for a restoration of "democratic constitutional order" in Venezuela and called upon President Nicolas Maduro to respect the human rights of his people. It should be noted that 72% of Venezuelans, a percentage which in the U.S. would be considered a landslide majority, actually support moving up the presidential elections. Therefore, the State Department's claim that an early election does not reflect the will of the people is completely false. It is ironic that the State Department memo referenced the will of the people in the Venezuelan case (although it was presented in a grossly inaccurate manner) but neglected it in the Honduran case. It appears that the State Department sees the "will of the people" as a malleable variable that it can choose to focus on when convenient to its interests of the day.

Potential Explanations for the Differing Responses

One important variable to consider in this is Washington's past diplomatic relationships with both Honduras and Venezuela, which can help give context to the large discrepancy that is found in the recent State Department responses. Ever since the early 1980's, the United States has seen Honduras as an indispensable regional ally in Central America, and Hernandez has been cooperative with the U.S. regarding efforts to reduce violence and tensions due to the flow of immigration out of the region. The U.S. military also has around 500 troops stationed at Honduran military installations, which makes it in Washington's interest to have a stable and cooperative Honduran regime in power.

In contrast, Nasralla offered a potential interruption of leadership since he had garnered support from anti-imperialist administrations in Bolivia and Venezuela, which could be viewed by the U.S. as contrary to their interests. The prospect of cooperation with Hernandez can explain why the State Department would be prepared to endorse Hernandez's victory despite claims of a lack of constitutionality. Washington has endorsed quite a few problematic Central American leaders before, including a range of military dictators in Panama, Honduras, and Guatemala, when they were seen as strategic geopolitical allies. In these cases, it was always the Central American nations that paid the high price of misguided U.S. policy, and it appears that Washington has not yet learned its lesson.

On the other hand, recent Venezuelan administrations have been hostile to the United States, an attitude famously personified in the later life of Hugo Chavez, who served as president from 1999 to 2013. Chavez infuriated the U.S. by forming alliances with Cuba and Iran, while repeatedly accusing the U.S. of plotting to overthrow him. Since Chavez's death in 2013, the United States continues to be wary of the current Maduro administration and relations have grown super-hot following U.S. sanctions of multiple Venezuelan officials.

In Trump's State of the Union address, he called the Venezuelan government a "socialist dictatorship" and touted the sanctions imposed on Venezuelan officials by U.S. authorities as a diplomatic success. The Trump administration's narrow-minded focus on preventing a series of perceived immigration crises has blinded it to other regional priorities. Trump is willing to tolerate undemocratic figures, such as Hernandez in exchange for support in containing a flow of migrants to the United States. This myopic tunnel vision and hostility towards Central American immigrants has led the U.S. to neglect democratic principles by backing corrupt leaders like Hernandez. If the U.S. is not careful, it will bring to birth a new generation of Latin Americans who refuse to stand for U.S. intrusion into and manipulation of the region.

Opposition presidential candidate Nasralla continues to fight Hernandez's re-election. His supporters have taken to the streets condemning Hernandez's victory as illegal and screaming interventionism from the country's semi-autocratic sectors. Nasralla appears determined to provide some opposition to Hernandez's second term, stating "we remain in the struggle to rescue the country from dictatorship". It seems that Nasralla does not

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have support from policy-makers in Washington, and without allies, it may be too late to salvage the Honduran democracy.

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