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## FEATURED Q&A

# Will Honduras' Disputed Vote Taint Hernández's Term?



Following multiple delays in the vote count and allegations of fraud, incumbent Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández was declared the winner of the country's November presidential election. // File Photo: Honduran Government.

**Q** Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was declared the winner of the country's disputed presidential election in November, is to be sworn in for his second term on Jan. 27. His opponents have taken to the streets in deadly protests, asserting that he won the election fraudulently, following multiple delays in the count and a process that the Organization of American States said was riddled with irregularities. Will the controversy blow over after Hernández is sworn in, or will it hinder his government and lead to a new election? To what extent will the opposition undermine Hernández's agenda in his second term? Will Hondurans come to accept presidential re-election, the issue that led to a coup against then-President Manuel Zelaya nearly a decade ago?

**A** Enrique Rodríguez Burchard, former member of Honduras' Congress and former general secretary of the Liberal Party: "Honduras' population is realizing that Hernández's mischief has started to become a real problem. Violent street protests, blockades of roads, police indiscipline, burning of businesses have combined to produce a general state of concern, leading to disenchantment and pessimism about the future. The president has called for a national dialogue, but it is unlikely that the opposition will agree to participate if this implies recognizing his dubious victory, and the debut of presidential re-election, which violates the constitutional procedures that were implemented precisely to avoid the chaos created after Zelaya' ouster in 2009. Hernández has built a state apparatus to please his whims. Judges, prosecutors, military and electoral authorities are all in service of the ruler. His

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## TODAY'S NEWS

### POLITICAL

## Mexico's Murder Rate Hits Highest Level in Decades

The government reported more than 29,000 homicides in 2017, a 27 percent increase from the previous year. The New Generation Jalisco drug cartel is blamed for much of the rise in violence.

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### POLITICAL

## Wikileaks' Assange an 'Inherited Problem': Moreno

Wikileaks' Julian Assange, who has been holed up in Ecuador's embassy in London since 2012, is an "inherited problem," said President Lenín Moreno.

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### ECONOMIC

## Brazil Pension Reform Remains on Agenda: Temer

Even though some analysts and politicians have said passing a controversial pension reform will be all but impossible ahead of this year's presidential election, President Michel Temer said the reform is still on his administration's agenda.

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Temer // File Photo: Brazilian Government.

## POLITICAL NEWS

## Mexico's Murder Rate Soars 27%, Highest Level in Decades

Mexico had 29,168 reported homicides last year, a 27 percent increase over 2016 and the highest level in decades, the government announced Sunday, the Associated Press reported. The total number of homicides in 2017 was the highest since comparable records started being kept in 1997. Last year's total also was higher than in 2011, the peak year of the country's drug war, when there were 27,213 reported killings. Mexico's homicide rate was 20.5 per 100,000 inhabitants last year, as compared to 19.4 in 2011, the country's Interior Department said. The country's homicide rate is likely to be even higher because the government tallies the per 100,000 count based on the number of homicide investigations, not the number of victims, and an investigation may involve multiple victims, Mexican security analyst Alejandro Hope told the wire service. Mexico's actual homicide rate is likely to be closer to 24 per 100,000, said Hope. In comparison, other countries in Latin America have reported higher homicide rates. Last year, per 100,000 inhabitants, Brazil and Colombia had approximately 27 homicides, Venezuela had about 57 and El Salvador had about 60.8, according to a report by the World Bank. Some Mexican states had particularly high homicide rates last year. Per 100,000 inhabitants, Colima had a homicide rate of 93.6, Baja California Sur recorded 69.1 and Guerrero had 64.2. Mexico's fastest-growing drug gang, the New Generation Jalisco Cartel, is responsible for much of the violence that Mexico has experienced since 2015, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing Mexican security officials. "It is becoming Mexico's most-powerful and united cartel, and in the process, is causing bloodshed across all Mexico," Carlos Flores, a security expert at Mexico's Ciesas research center, told the newspaper. The cartel, known as CJNG, is quickly displacing the Sinaloa cartel from many parts of the country. The Sinaloa cartel has lost

influence as its leader, Joaquín "El Chapo" Guzmán was arrested for the third time in 2016. He is currently jailed in New York where he is awaiting trial on drug trafficking charges.

## At Least One Killed in Clash Over Honduras Election

At least one protester was killed and another was wounded Saturday in a clash between police and demonstrators disputing the result of last November's presidential election in Honduras, BBC News reported. The 60-year-old protester was killed in the northern town of Sabá when police opened fire on a roadblock that demonstrators had set up, Reuters reported. Thousands of people have taken to the streets in violent protests since the election, in which incumbent President Juan Orlando Hernández was declared the winner amid allegations of fraud.

## Wikileaks' Assange an 'Inherited Problem': Ecuador's Moreno

Ecuadorean President Lenín Moreno in a television interview on Sunday described Wikileaks founder Julian Assange as an "inherited problem" that has been "more than a nuisance" for his government, Agence France-Presse reported. Assange was granted political asylum by the Ecuadorean government under Moreno's predecessor, Rafael Correa, in June 2012, when Assange had been wanted in Sweden on sexual assault allegations. The charges have since been dropped, but Assange does not want to leave the Ecuadorean embassy in Britain, out of fear that he would be extradited to the United States, where he is wanted for leaking classified U.S. government documents in 2010. Moreno's government has said that it will maintain Assange's asylum, but it has also been looking for ways to have him leave the embassy without risking extradition. He was granted Ecuadorean citizenship earlier this month, and

## NEWS BRIEFS

## At Least 13 Killed as Landslide Hits Bus in Colombia

A landslide in Colombia in the Nariño area, which borders Ecuador, on Sunday killed at least 13 people, including two minors, after torrential rain led to a landslide that hit a small bus traveling on the Tumaco-Pasto highway, according to government officials, the Indo-Asian News Service reported, citing EFE. Torrential rains have been causing frequent landslides in that part of the country. Ten bodies have already been recovered, and search and rescue efforts are to resume today.

## Brazil's Minas Gerais State Declares State Emergency Over Yellow Fever

The government of Brazil's southeastern Minas Gerais State on Saturday decreed a state of emergency over a yellow fever outbreak in 94 of its 853 cities, the Associated Press reported Saturday. The decree allows the government to contract health providers without going through the usual bidding process. Since July, there have been 35 reported cases of the virus in Brazil, and 20 people have died from it, according to the health ministry. Earlier last week, the World Health Organization declared all of São Paulo State at risk of yellow fever.

## Pope Concludes South America Trip With Mass Before 1.3 Million in Lima

Pope Francis on Sunday concluded his two-nation trip to South America, celebrating Mass before some 1.3 million faithful at an air field in Lima, the Associated Press reported. The pope sparked outrage earlier in the trip, in Chile, where he accused victims of slandering a bishop who is accused of knowing about sexual abuse by a priest and doing nothing to stop it. The pope earlier met with victims of sexual abuse by priests.

Ecuadorian Foreign Minister María Fernanda Espinosa asked the British government to recognize Assange as a diplomatic agent, which would have provided him with immunity to leave the country, BBC News reported. The British government denied the request, saying that Assange should leave the embassy and “face justice.” Moreno on Sunday said he was disappointed by the British government’s response. “This would have been a good result, unfortunately, things did not turn out as the foreign ministry planned and so the problem still exists.” He added he would seek help from “important people” to solve the problem.

## BUSINESS NEWS

### YPF, Statoil Finish Negotiations on Vaca Muerta Deal

Argentine state-run oil company YPF on Thursday said it had finalized negotiations on a deal with Norwegian oil company Statoil to jointly explore and develop a block on Vaca Muerta, the country’s largest shale play, Platts reported. Statoil will have a 50 percent stake in Bajo del Toro, a 38,800-acre block in Neuquén province, where most of the Vaca Muerta formation is located, according to a filing by YPF with the Buenos Aires Stock Exchange. YPF must now obtain approval from the Neuquén province government in order to sell the 50 percent stake in the exploration and development activity to Statoil. Once the government grants approval, Statoil will pay \$30 million to YPF for the stake and will handle the \$270 million in capital expenditures. The first phase of the project calls for drilling two horizontal wells and six more in the second phase, in addition to building the necessary on-site infrastructure. The project is Statoil’s first onshore project in Argentina and its second partnership with YPF. The state oil company produces 45 percent of the country’s 478,000 barrels per day of oil, and one-third of Argentina’s 122 million cubic meters per day of gas, according to the Argentina Oil and Gas Institute.

## ECONOMIC NEWS

### Brazil Pension Reform Remains on Agenda: Temer

Reforms to Brazil’s pension system are still on the government’s agenda, President Michel Temer said in an interview published Saturday. Winning congressional approval for the controversial reform, which raises the retirement

age, is still a priority for his administration, Temer told Folha de S.Paulo. “I want to say that the possibility to approve the reform is very strong,” he said, adding that the legislation has gained support. “Several congressmen have changed their views.” Some analysts and politicians have said the reform’s passage will be all but impossible in this presidential election year, Reuters reported. The pension reform is seen as a critical step toward reducing the government’s budget deficit and also guaranteeing payments to beneficiaries in the country, which has an aging population.

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party will be the majority in Congress, and all combined will empower him to exercise even broader control. This is an ideal scenario for someone with a weakness for breaking the law and violating the Constitution that he swore to respect. Meanwhile, doors are closing for the opposition to pursue its claims under the law. Instead of opening democratic options, we are closing political spaces for the opposition. This is a sad portrait of a dying democracy. The Honduran bishops’ conference recently said current problems are rooted in ‘deep and old tensions, increased by the decision to allow a presidential re-election without the required clarity or a majority acceptance.’ If re-election was so bad, perverse and unconstitutional as to justify the overthrow of Zelaya, how can it be justified now?”

**A** **Maria Velez de Berliner, president of Latin Intelligence Corporation:** “Whether President Hernández leaves office under an institutional coup like the one that deposed ex-president Manuel Zelaya depends on the success or failure of the anti-Hernández demonstrations by the Opposition Alliance Against the Dictatorship. A coup by Honduras’ military is improbable at this time, given the Trump administration’s declared support of Hernández in exchange for his promise to curtail illegal migration

from Honduras into the United States. And the U.S. government is a strong supporter of Honduras’ military, considering the tactical importance of the Soto Cano Air Base to U.S. security interests in Central America. The internationally recognized ‘irregularities’ that

“**The followers of Salvador Nasralla, and Nasralla himself, will continue to undermine Hernández...**”

— **Maria Velez de Berliner**

enabled Hernández’s re-election prove the benefits accrue to Latin American presidents who pack supreme courts and electoral bodies with their cronies, allies and supporters, who, when necessary, give payback for their appointments by legalizing violations of basic democratic, electoral rules. Based on the recent demonstrations against Hernández in San Pedro Sula, the followers of Salvador Nasralla, and Nasralla himself, will continue to undermine Hernández, which will undercut the president’s credibility and, consequently, his agenda. Whether presidential re-election continues on the books in Honduras will depend on whether he’s still in office in 2021, the next presidential election year. If

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he is, it is highly probable Hernández will seek a third term and win, given the control he has over Honduras' electoral and legal institutions. If he isn't, another president will probably give up on re-election if he or she is unable to retain the support of the military, the Supreme Court and the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, which Hernández has today. It seems the United States and Latin America's governments are more comfortable with 'irregularly elected' presidents of the right, such as Hernández, than with presidential candidates of the left."

**A** Ray Walser, retired U.S. Foreign Service officer and former Latin American policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation:

"The sentiments and animosities mobilized in the aftermath of the November election in Honduras will inevitably dissipate, just as they did in 2009 following the removal of president Manuel Zelaya. Yet, one cannot help but anticipate a further deterioration in the quality of democratic governance that began in 2015 with the judicial ruling striking down the norm of no presidential re-election. The reality of a flawed electoral process and a questionable popular mandate will be reflected in President Hernández's ability to govern effectively. In the case of Honduras, the resources available to the executive and

the magnitude of the continued challenges—poverty, drug trafficking, crime, corruption and weak institutions—are simply staggering. A sense of impaired legitimacy will eat away like acid at confidence and trust in the executive's authority. As others have pointed out, the tepid acceptance of the electoral outcome by the Trump administration and the endorsement of Hernández, despite major misgivings by the OAS and European Union's observer missions, smacks of a double standard linked to where the victor stands on the political spectrum rather than the integrity of the electoral process. Also critical to the future of the Hernández presidency will be sustained U.S. backing. Without an ambassador in Tegucigalpa, without an assistant secretary for the Western Hemisphere, with reduced assistance and the likely revocation Temporary Protected Status for an estimated 60,000 Hondurans residing in the United States, one can anticipate stormy days ahead."

*Editor's note: The Advisor requested a commentary for this issue from the Honduran Embassy in Washington, but did not receive one before our deadline. A representative of the embassy did send the Advisor a prior statement from President Juan Orlando Hernández in which he invited Salvador Nasralla to discuss peace in Honduras.*

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