

Elections and Social Movements in Honduras in the Central American Context

Elecciones y movimientos sociales en Honduras en el contexto centroamericano

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Abstract:

This article explains the main drivers of the historic 2021 elections in Honduras that brought Xiomara Castro to executive power. In particular, special attention is given to the protest campaigns against perceived electoral fraud in 2017 and the massive mobilizations against health care and education privatization in 2019. The LIBRE party successfully used protest campaigns to get out the vote (GOTV) for the 2021 elections. These processes occurred in the context of growing authoritarianism and repression in neighbouring Central American states. Such obstacles remain in Honduras and the region, as observed in the struggle for women's rights.

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Resumen:

En este artículo se analizan los principales impulsores de las históricas elecciones de 2021 en Honduras, que llevaron al poder ejecutivo a Xiomara Castro. En particular, se presta especial atención a las campañas de protesta contra la percepción de fraude electoral en 2017 y a las movilizaciones masivas contra la privatización de la sanidad y la educación en 2019. El partido Libre utilizó las campañas de protesta para "obtener el voto" para las elecciones de 2021. Estos procesos se presentaron en un contexto de creciente autoritarismo y represión en los estados centroamericanos vecinos. Estos obstáculos siguen existiendo en Honduras y en la región, como se observa en la lucha por los derechos de las mujeres.

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Key Words:

Social movements, state repression, neoliberalism, corruption, women's movements.

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Palabras clave:

Movimientos sociales, represión estatal, neoliberalismo, corrupción, movimientos de mujeres.

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Introduction

The 2021 national elections in Honduras brought into power the first female president in the country's history: Xiomara Castro. Her progressive political party, Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), also dismantled a one-hundred-year long tradition of the two dominant parties (Partido Nacional and Partido Liberal) alternating in the executive branch. In addition, LIBRE won a plurality of seats in the national parliament and the city governments of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, the two megacities of Honduras. This unprecedented electoral success occurred in the backdrop of decades of community organizing and social movement mobilisation against aggressive free-market reforms, a military coup and state-sponsored repression, electoral fraud, and official corruption scandals. Between 2010 and 2021, in the post-coup context, the economy barely grew by an average of 2.46%,¹ households living in poverty and extreme poverty in 2009 reached 58.8% and 36.4%, respectively, and by 2021 they reached 73.6% and 53.7%.²

¹ Data compiled from the Central Bank of Honduras (BCH) statistics for the period 2009-2021.

² Data obtained from the databases of the Permanent Survey of Households and Multiple Purposes (EPHPM) of the National Statistics Institute (INE) from 2009 to 2021.

As in other Latin American cases, the extensive and prolonged social movement mobilization transitioned into eventual electoral success. Given the recent trend of growing authoritarianism in the region, several challenges remain for Honduras in implementing a broad agenda of economic and social reforms, including women's rights. The case of Honduras demonstrates how social movements can overcome obstacles of state repression and aggressive neoliberal reforms to mount successful election victories. At the same time, Xiomara Castro's historic presidency faces many challenges as the larger Central American region slips into greater authoritarianism and fails to protect women's rights.

The study outlines the trajectory of the LIBRE party's road to electoral triumph over the past decade as a case study of a social movement party in Latin America. It also discusses the challenges of forging progressive policies in a region with a growing trend of authoritarian populism. Special attention is given to women's rights and gender inequality as a central issue for Central America and the Castro government to address.

Social movements and political parties

The electoral victory of the LIBRE party once again poses a difficult question to political science and political sociology: How does an outsider oppositional political party with vastly fewer economic and institutional resources than the dominant political parties build enough strength to triumph in national elections? Since the onset of the third wave of global democracy in the late 1970s,³ one pathway to electoral power for excluded groups resides in major protest campaigns and protest waves transitioning into electoral mobilization over similar issues.⁴ There are now over a dozen cases where this pathway to power has occurred in Latin America and southern Europe. The examples include: Venezuela (1998),

³ See John Markoff, *Waves of Democracy: Social Movements and Political Change*, 2nd ed., New York, Routledge, 2015.

⁴ Eduardo Silva, *Challenging Neoliberalism in Latin America*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Brazil (2002), Uruguay (2004), Bolivia (2005), Nicaragua (2006), Ecuador (2006), Paraguay (2008), El Salvador (2009), Greece (2015), Mexico (2017), Bolivia (2020), Peru (2021), Honduras (2021), Chile (2021), and Colombia (2022).⁵

While a more exhaustive study of progressive outsider parties coming to power through competitive elections would also include failed cases, analysing the common features of successful electoral challenges by parties with tremendous economic resource deficits provides leverage into understanding the triumph of LIBRE in Honduras. One basic condition for launching an election campaign by a new challenger requires a regime to be in a democratizing phase (though not a completely full-fledged democracy). Excluded social groups and their allies will not invest in electoral mobilization and building a party if the prospects for fair elections are in doubt. The third wave of democratization provided these conditions throughout extensive parts of the global South and southern and eastern Europe. Nonetheless, outsider groups still lacked the conventional political resources to develop national oppositional political parties that could compete with elite parties and classes.

A second condition necessary for mounting an electoral challenge involves a massive and sustained protest campaign. Such protest campaigns that cover the national territory give thousands of ordinary citizens the opportunity to participate in the political process, increase personal political efficacy, and potentially learn organizing skills to mobilize others. These are fungible, people-centred resources created during upsurges in collective action. These same resources can then be converted into electoral campaigns. The same people who previously participated in protest events can join volunteer armies to get out the vote (GOTV) for the periphery party.⁶ In particular times and places, these people-centered resources even out-compete the financial resources and the paid professional campaigners

⁵ One could also include cases from Africa such as the dominance of the African National Conference (ANC) with the dismantlement of Apartheid in South Africa. Argentina also follows this pattern in complicated ways with FREPASO and Kirchnerism (E. Silva, *op. cit.*, pp. 56-102).

⁶ Paul Almeida, Eugenio Sosa, Allen Cordero and Ricardo Argueta, "Protest Waves and Social Movement Fields: The Micro Foundations of Campaigning for Subaltern Political Parties," in *Social Problems*, vol. 68, no. 4, November 2021, pp. 831-851.

of the dominant elite political parties and their clientelist patronage systems.⁷ In the over one dozen cases mentioned above where a progressive party triumphed and won the presidency, a massive protest campaign or protest wave occurred in the years prior to the victory.

Protest campaigns and protest waves that eventuate in electoral success are largely driven by specific neoliberal policies threatening social and economic rights. For Latin America, and more recently in southern Europe, international financial institutions (IFIs) usher in neoliberalism via the global debt crisis. To re-negotiate foreign debt, national governments often enact structural adjustment programs leading to more free-market-oriented economies. Some of the largest protest campaigns that ended with electoral success include mobilizations against privatization (primarily water, electricity, healthcare, and hydrocarbon deposits), free trade, and consumer price hikes. It often took multiple decades for vulnerable populations to experience the transition from state-led development to neoliberalism to develop unifying frames and multi-sectoral alliances to sustain national level campaigns of resistance. These same defensive struggles attempting to turn back market fundamentalism eventually converted into offensive struggles in the electoral arena of institutionalized politics.

Two pressing issues for social movement-type political parties remain. One issue centres on accountable governance. This involves the social movement party, once in power, delivering on anti-neoliberal campaign promises, promoting economic growth, and keeping subaltern groups involved through active democratic participation while simultaneously avoiding caudillo politics and authoritarianism. An equally pressing issue for oppositional parties and marginalized groups outside of power is how to coordinate struggle with growing authoritarianism in a region that restricts competitive elections and increasingly imposes new laws against public protests and represses demonstrations that do occur, especially against women's organizations.

⁷ To analyze the political practices of the Peronist Party in contemporary Argentina, see Javier Auyero, *Poor People's Politics. Peronist Survival Networks and the Legacy of Evita*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2001.

The case of Honduras

On November 28, 2021, elections were held to elect the president of the Republic of Honduras, 128 congressmen and 298 municipal councils. Xiomara Castro, wife of former president José Manuel Zelaya Rosales, won the elections by a landslide. She beat the candidate of the ruling Partido Nacional by almost 500 000 votes. Castro obtained 1 716 793 votes, representing 51.12% of the vote, while Nasry Asfura of the ruling party obtained 1 240 260 votes, 36.93%. The centenarian Partido Liberal candidate, Yani Rosenthal, won 335 762 votes.⁸

Ms. Castro was originally nominated by the political party LIBRE, which describes itself as a democratic left-wing organisation. In the final phase of the electoral process, she was joined by the Partido Salvador de Honduras (PSH), which had an estimated 400 000 votes, the minority Partido de Innovación y Unidad Social Demócrata (PINU-SD) and some sectors of the Partido Liberal. Eventually, Castro won the support of other political forces, such as Milton Benítez's Honduras Humana movement, and a wide range of social movements (trade unionists, peasants, teachers, women's groups, environmental and human rights defenders), which made up a resounding vote against the ruling Partido Nacional, an unprecedented experience in the country's political life. Castro is the first woman to become president of the republic, as well as the first representing a political party other than the traditional two-party system that has governed Honduras for more than 130 years.

Xiomara Castro's victory put an end to the regime of Juan Orlando Hernández, who governed the country for 12 years. The first four years 2010-2014, as president of the National Congress, the next four as president of the republic and the last four as the illegal president of the country, because the current Constitution of the Republic does not authorise re-election. During this period there were cases of repression, and between 2009 and 2016 Global Witness reported 120 deaths of land and environmental

⁸ Consejo Nacional Electoral, "Declaratoria de Elecciones Generales 2021 en el nivel electivo Presidencial y Diputados al Parlamento Centroamericano", December 21, 2021, at <https://www.tsc.gob.hn/biblioteca/index.php/varios/1097-declaratoria-de-elecciones-generales-2021-en-el-nivel-electivo-presidencial-y-diputados-al-parlamento-centroamericano> (date of access: July 4, 2022).

defenders.⁹ The report on human rights violations in the context of the 2017 elections in Honduras issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) recorded that at least 23 people were killed in the context of the post-election protests, including 22 civilians and one police officer. At least 60 people were injured, half of them as a result of the use of firearms. Mass arrests took place and at least 1351 people had been detained.¹⁰

Castro's victory also marked the end of the two-party system in Honduras and the collapse of the Partido Liberal. In these general elections, the Partido Liberal obtained the lowest number of presidential votes in its history.

Democracy in crisis and coup d'état

The LIBRE party, Xiomara Castro's main support, emerged after the coup d'état of 28 June 2009, which overthrew the constitutional president of the republic José Manuel Zelaya Rosales, who was expelled from the country and sent to Costa Rica; he returned to Honduras in May 2011 after the signing of the Agreement for National Reconciliation and the Consolidation of the Democratic System in the Republic of Honduras signed by the then president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías, the Colombian president, Juan Manuel Santos, and the Honduran president, Porfirio Lobo Sosa. Upon returning to the country, Zelaya Rosales dedicated himself to founding and building the political party that emerged from the resistance against the coup d'état. In the context of the mobilisations against the coup d'état, Xiomara Castro emerged as the leader of the movements.

When Zelaya Rosales assumed the presidency in 2006, Honduran democracy was going through a process of stagnation and citizen disenchantment. Honduras was in the "risk zone", due to a confluence of factors such

⁹ Global Witness, *Honduras: The Deadliest Place to Defend the Planet*, London, Global Witness, January 2017, p. 8.

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Human rights violations in the context of the 2017 elections in Honduras*, Geneva, OHCHR, March 2018.

as citizen disenchantment with democracy and its consequent low support, high levels of poverty, inequality and exclusion, the concentration of the economy without the possibility of generating opportunities, and a young majority population with demands and expectations for which society fails to offer options.

Why has Honduras not experienced a political crisis like those that have taken place in South American countries with similar characteristics? The answer focuses on two factors: the capacity of the bipartisan political elites to produce political agreements, and the stabilising effect of remittances from Honduran migrants abroad, especially from the United States. President Zelaya Rosales tried to expand the bipartisanship with some popular measures, such as the 60 per cent increase in the minimum wage and the citizen consultation on the convening of a national constituent assembly, which was aborted by the coup d'état.¹¹ But the conservative power groups did not tolerate Zelaya Rosales' slight shift to the left and overthrew him.

LIBRE, a party that emerged from popular mobilisation, became a key factor in Castro's triumph

On June 28, 2009, a broad and widespread popular citizens' movement erupted in rejection of the coup d'état and in demand of a return to democracy. The main actors in this movement were social organisations, activists and sympathisers of the Honduran Partido Liberal, to which former president Zelaya Rosales belonged, and sectors of the citizenry mobilised around micro-mobilisation structures¹².

As presidential re-election is prohibited in the Honduran Constitution, Castro assumed the presidential candidacy in the November 2013 general elections, in the 2017 elections she ceded the candidacy to television

¹¹ E. Sosa, "Transformaciones en las élites económicas, Estado y el proceso de democratización y desdemocratización: el caso de Honduras, 1990-2017," in *Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos*, vol. 43, January-December 2017, pp. 125-148.

¹² By *micro-mobilisation structures*, we mean groups of friends, family members, work or study colleagues, and other groups that function in everyday life.

entertainer Salvador Nasralla and in the 2021 elections she ran again for the presidency, becoming the president of the Republic of Honduras. In the 2013 elections LIBRE received 896 498 votes, in 2017 it received 1 360 442 votes and in 2021 it received 1 716 793 votes.¹³ Castro won the presidential house with the highest number of votes in Honduras' recent democratic history, gaining her solid legitimacy. In the 2021 general elections, LIBRE obtained 356 351 more votes than in 2017 (a growth of 26.2%) and 820 295 more votes than in 2013 (a growth of 91.5%).¹⁴

Several factors explain the electoral triumph of LIBRE and Castro. But one of them is the closeness of this political party to social movements. In the last 20 years, the first two decades of the 21st century, the Honduran people protested and mobilised against neoliberal policies, democratic setbacks, extractivism, corruption, impunity and in defence of labour rights. Between 2001 and 2015, teachers mobilised intensely in defence of the Teachers' Statute, the environmental movement in defence of the forest emerged with greater force at the national level, and the National Coordination of Popular Resistance (CNRP), a coalition of organisations from different popular sectors and citizens, came into being.¹⁵

The most significant aspect of the 2009 coup d'état was the widespread and intense popular mobilisation, which lasted for more than 150 days. The most relevant political consequences of the coup were twofold: the rupture of the two-party political system and the politicisation of the citizenry, especially among the youth. The coup and the popular mobilisation opened a critical, long-lasting political juncture that ended with the electoral triumph and the rise to power of Castro and the Zelaya family, which is the juncture of the coup and the post-coup period.

Without the political accumulation of popular mobilisations, it is impossible to explain the essence of this long-lasting critical juncture, or the electoral

¹³ The 2017 data could be higher, due to the manipulation of official figures. It is also important to consider that the 2017 and 2021 data are from the LIBRE party and other allied political forces.

¹⁴ According to Tribunal Supremo Electoral (2013-2017) and Consejo Nacional Electoral (2021).

¹⁵ E. Sosa, *Dinámica de la protesta social en Honduras*, Tegucigalpa, Guaymuras, 2013.

triumph of Xiomara Castro de Zelaya. After the coup d'état, the most relevant mobilisations were the student mobilisations from 2012 onwards, demanding participation in the academic life of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), the mobilisations of indigenous peoples and peasant communities against concessions and extractivism in mining and rivers for the production of electricity.

In 2015, student and territorial struggles in defence of nature were articulated with different urban actors who mobilised in no less than 70 cities across the country against the corruption scandal in the Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS). As a result of these mobilisations, the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) was set up in Honduras through an agreement between the government and the Organisation of American States (OAS), which investigated and uncovered the depth of corruption in the Partido Nacional governments after the coup d'état.¹⁶ This anti-corruption movement, known as the 'march of the torches' or the 'indignant citizenry', placed the issue of corruption at the centre of the national debate as the main or one of the main problems of Honduran society. In the campaign of LIBRE and allied political forces, anti-corruption ideas became a central theme in their electoral mobilisation.

In 2017, Juan Orlando Hernández stood for presidential re-election, following a manipulated ruling by the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice. The elections were held on November 25, and Hernández managed to retain the presidency of the republic with irregular electoral results that were questioned by broad sectors of Honduran society. Faced with the election results, various sectors of the citizenry took to the streets, resulting in a social uprising in which the brave protesters clashed with the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP), the repressive arm that sustained Hernández's political regime. According to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras (OHCHR), the clashes between the demonstrators and the police and military left more than two dozen

¹⁶ E. Sosa, *Democracia y movimientos sociales en Honduras: de la transición política a la ciudadanía indignada*, Tegucigalpa, Guaymuras, 2016.

dead.¹⁷ In all the popular and citizen mobilisations, the illegal, illegitimate and dictatorial character of President Hernández was denounced, which further eroded the already precarious legitimacy of Hernández and the Partido Nacional. The punishment vote for the Partido Nacional is another factor that explains Castro's overwhelming victory.

In 2019, there was a new cycle of mobilisations against privatisation in the health and education sectors, organised by the Platform against the Privatisation of Health and Education, a coalition that brought together teachers' unions, health workers and other popular sectors. The mobilisations succeeded in stopping the legislative decrees that the government intended to impose, which would have opened the door to job layoffs in the health and education sectors, and to the outsourcing (privatisation) of some of the services in these sectors.¹⁸ This struggle also dealt a heavy blow to the political regime headed by Hernández.

In all these protest cycles, a significant part of the participants were made up of LIBRE party sympathisers and activists. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, protests continued in rejection of the government's management throughout 2020 and 2021, although in a more dispersed manner. From March 2020, the month in which the pandemic began in Honduras, to October 2021, 1106 protest actions were reported, which once again demonstrated the crisis in Honduran society, amplified in the context of the pandemic.

The main issue that generated the largest number of mobilisations during the pandemic was the fight against the Employment and Economic Development Zones (ZEDE), zones that are excluded from national laws in order to attract international investment. Multiple actors in Honduran society rejected the Organic Law on Employment and Economic Development Zones and its implications. Academics from the UNAH, trade unions and even the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise (COHEP) have spoken out against the ZEDes. But the central actors in the struggle against

¹⁷ E. Sosa, "El alzamiento popular contra el fraude electoral en Honduras," in *Tareas*, no. 59, May-August 2018, pp. 41-65, at <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=535055632003> (date of access: June 9, 2022).

¹⁸ E. Sosa and P. Almeida, "Honduras: A Decade of Popular Resistance," in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 51, no. 4, Winter 2019, pp. 323-327.

the ZEDES were the rural communities and indigenous peoples, especially those threatened and affected by the territorial concessions. It should also be added that a broad public opinion was built up that rejected the ZEDE Organic Law.

According to complaints from civil society movements and organisations, 23 ZEDE were planned to be installed, a situation that has led to a democratic exercise called *cabildos abiertos* (Open Town Halls) to declare the municipalities free of ZEDE. This instance of citizen participation involves listening to and complying with the will of the people through the participation of the local governments of various municipalities in the country.¹⁹ At present, the socio-territorial movements of peasant communities and indigenous peoples have the greatest potential for disruptive mobilisation.

A resounding punishment vote

This accumulation of popular mobilisations over the last two decades, but above all over the last 12 years, against neoliberal and extractive policies, and in favour of the fight against corruption, impunity and authoritarianism, and the weariness with democratic setbacks and bad governance, have been shaping an asset: generalised discontent, without which the punishment vote that ousted Hernández from government cannot be understood.

How many of the voters who voted for Castro were LIBRE activists? It is difficult to say. Optimistically, less than a million votes. However, there is one asset that is difficult to quantify, but which was decisive: the large number of young or adult voters, who do not generally vote in national elections. When the vast majority of these so-called independent voters perceived that by concentrating their vote on Xiomara Castro it was possible to remove the Partido Nacional from government, the wave became unstoppable.

When this perception began to be socialised among small family and neighbourhood nuclei, the catastrophic defeat of the ruling Partido

¹⁹ “Nueve meses de protesta social,” in *Observatorio de protesta social*, July-September 2022, p. [2], at http://www.dlibrehonduras.com/cl/images/Doc/boletin_3_trimestre_2021.pdf (date of access: June 23, 2022).

Nacional's presidential candidate became irreversible. All the money invested in vote buying, the creation of collective fear to keep voters at home and the Partido Nacional's outdated anti-communist campaign were insufficient to prevent the defeat. The timely intervention of the U.S. government was the last link in the chain to prevent the Partido Nacional's last resort: the manipulation of the election results. Between November 21-23, 2021, before the elections, Brian Nichols, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, visited Honduras and sent a clear message to the party elites, demanding respect for the election results.

Xiomara Castro has recognised the great contribution of the social movements to her victory. For this reason, high-level commissions met with the different social movements to integrate their most urgent demands into the government's plan for the first 100 days.

The future of Honduras in the context of growing authoritarianism and the struggle for women's rights in Central America

The progressive government of Xiomara Castro faces many challenges in the larger Central American isthmus. Today's rise of authoritarianism in the region—Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua—differs from the past. The face of authoritarianism in Central America is not that of decorated generals or officers in olive-green fatigues sporting dark sunglasses. In the current wave of authoritarianism, leaders initially came to power via elections (even though, depending on the country, their re-elections were highly questionable by the standards of a democratic electoral system). Today, Central American leaders may sport a guayabera shirt and jeans or have the youthful face of a millennial wearing a leather jacket and a baseball cap backward. They can have the light demeanour of a former comedian-actor or exceptional skill for social media messaging. These leaders and their governments share similar goals and strategies, such as the use of force and militarization strategies to quiet their critics, being ensnared in drug trafficking and corruption schemes, and a populist approach to how they do politics. Also, when the leaders leave office, many face prison time or extradition for crimes in office.

Although the face of authoritarianism is different today in terms of large-scale massacres of civilians that characterized regimes in the 1970s (and 1980s in El Salvador and Guatemala),²⁰ its deep roots and connections to the military are strong. The four governments of the region have expanded military spending and training, created militarized police units, and merged operations between the armed forces and the police so that internal groups are constructed (and treated) as threats to the nation. Striking visual representations serve as reminders that the military remains embedded in these governments, such as Jimmy Morales, the comedian-turned-president in Guatemala, appearing flanked by military officers at press conferences, which Juan Orlando Hernandez of Honduras also did. Or take Nayib Bukele, who changed his Twitter bio to the “coolest dictator in the world” and proclaims to be the “CEO of El Salvador”, ordering a military unit in combat fatigues to the National Assembly to ensure the passing of his security plan.

The “millennial authoritarianism”²¹ of Nayib Bukele includes direct, regular engagement with the public and his constituents through social media platforms to announce policies and plans, tweeting on average 16 times per day to his 4 million followers. The use of social media has allowed him to connect with disaffected voters and garner popular support. A similar deep-seated distrust of the political elites among most Guatemalans got the popular TV comedian Jimmy Morales elected.

The authoritarian expansion in the region and world (including the United States)²² manifests in the institutionalized direct and indirect assaults on women’s rights, crystalized in the criminalization of abortion, the inadequate response to gender-based violence against women, and persecution of women’s rights organizations and their leaders. Attacks on women’s rights, especially the right to reproductive health and safe abortions

²⁰ Edelberto Torres-Rivas, *Centroamérica: Entre revoluciones y democracia*, Buenos Aires, CLACSO/Siglo XXI, 2015.

²¹ Manuel Meléndez-Sánchez, “Latin America Erupts: Millennial Authoritarianism in El Salvador”, in *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 32, no. 2, July 2021, pp. 19-32, at <https://journalofdemocracy.org/articles/latin-america-erupts-millennial-authoritarianism-in-el-salvador/> (date of access: June 9, 2022).

²² International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), *The Global State of Democracy 2021: Building Resilience in a Pandemic Era*, Stockholm, International IDEA, 2021.

and of a life free of violence, couched in a framework of familyism ideology, have swept the region, taking root even in Nicaragua, where more progressive laws had been in place since revolutionary times.²³ Indeed, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua have been shown to have dozens of violence against women laws, yet violence against women, in various manifestations, continues unabated.²⁴ Rather than protecting women from violence, these governments either ignore them and redirect efforts to fight “more serious crimes”²⁵ or directly attack individual women and women’s rights groups as they fight to keep attention on these issues.

As authoritarianism and militarization commingle in the region, the few gains in women’s rights have been progressively eroded. Governments have focused on limiting or altogether eradicating women’s rights groups through direct actions, indirectly through attacks on leaders, and formally by altering legal systems. For instance, on abortion rights, Nicaragua and El Salvador have had total bans on abortion without exception for over a decade; El Salvador prosecutes women who are suspected of having one.²⁶ In 2021, Honduras passed a bill to forbid abortion under any circumstance and another one that would require three-quarters of Congress

²³ Pamela Neumann, “Women’s Rights in Retrograde: Understanding the Contentious Politics of Gender Violence Law in Nicaragua,” in LSE Human Rights, March 24, 2017, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/humanrights/2017/03/24/womens-rights-in-retrograde-understanding-the-contentious-politics-of-gender-violence-law-in-nicaragua/> (date of access: June 9, 2022).

²⁴ Cecilia Menjívar and Leydy Diossa-Jiménez, “Blocking the Law from Within: Familyism Ideologies as Obstacles in VAW Laws in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua,” in *Latin American Research Review* (forthcoming).

²⁵ C. Menjívar and Shannon Drysdale Walsh, “The Architecture of Femicide: The State, Inequalities, and Everyday Gender Violence in Honduras,” in *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 52, no. 2, August 2017, pp. 221-240, at <https://larrilasa.org/articles/10.25222/larr.73/> (date of access: June 17 2022).

²⁶ L. Diossa-Jiménez and C. Menjívar, “Devaluing Women’s Lives Through Law: Familyism Ideologies in Abortion and Violence Against Women Laws in El Salvador,” in *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, December 24, 2021, at <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab049> (date of access: June 23, 2022); Michelle Oberman, *Her Body, Our Laws: On the Front Lines of the Abortion War, from El Salvador to Oklahoma*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2018.

to vote to modify the law.²⁷ Furthermore, more recently, Guatemala passed a sweeping bill that mandates up to ten years of prison time for women who have abortions.²⁸

Women's rights organizations have been pivotal in advancing legal avenues to protect women's lives and rights and pushing for reforms; it is essentially through their efforts, in collaboration with the international community, that these countries have violence against women laws. Women's rights organizations continue to push against multiple assaults on women's rights across various spheres of life, including the conservative onslaught against abortion rights in the region, campaigning for the decriminalization of abortion in Honduras²⁹ as well as in the rest of the region.

However, the rise in the new form of authoritarianism in the region has focused attention on the activities of women's organizations, framing them as anti-family, as promoting ideologies that undermine family values and unity.³⁰ Peaceful protests of women's organizations are met with militarized responses and even arrests. In El Salvador, the offices of organizations such as Las Dignas and ORMUSA (Organización de la Mujer Salvadoreña) have been vandalized, their leaders (and their family members) have received death threats, and their activities are constantly surveilled, so they do their work in fear. In Nicaragua, women's rights organizations have been decimated, and many of their leaders are now living in exile. In addition, a common strategy across the four countries to subvert women's organizations' activities is to cut their budgets and reduce spending in social programming to protect women from violence.

²⁷ Tatiana Arias, "How Lawmakers Made it Nearly Impossible to Legalize Abortion in Honduras," in CNN World, January 31, 2021, at <https://www.cnn.com/2021/01/31/americas/honduras-abortion-ban-ratified-intl/index.html> (date of access: June 23, 2022).

²⁸ Natalie Kitroeff, Oscar López and Jody García, "Guatemalan Women Face Up to 10 Years in Prison Under New Abortion Law," *The New York Times*, March 9, 2022, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/09/world/americas/guatemala-abortion-prison.html> (date of access: June 23, 2022).

²⁹ Natalie Alcoba, "Honduras Hardened its Abortion Ban: These Women Remain Undeterred," in Aljazeera, February 7, 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/7/honduras-hardened-abortion-ban-these-women-remain-undeterred> (date of access: June 23, 2022).

³⁰ L. Diossa-Jiménez and C. Menjivar, *op. cit.*

In this challenging regional context of assaults on women's rights, Xiomara Castro, the first woman president of Honduras, will lead her country. She has promised to revert some of the most harmful laws for women that her predecessor left in place, among other plans she has for advancing women's wellbeing. On the one hand, the tasks to create any meaningful change to protect women's rights in Honduras are formidable; on the other hand, this is perhaps the most opportune moment in the country's history to have at the helm a woman who acknowledges and has been close to feminist struggles.

Conclusion

The above analysis presented the processes of how social movements grow into electorally successful political parties. The repressive threats of a military coup and ongoing state violence provided one mechanism for mobilizing the citizenry. Equally important were the neoliberal policies of privatization and free trade zones that served as economic threats motivating popular mobilization throughout the 2010s. The LIBRE party in Honduras successfully captured the discontent and people centred resources of social movements to triumph in the 2021 national elections.

Once social movement parties take power they face several impediments, including fulfilling the promises of the campaign and the demands of the social movements that brought the party to power. In the context of Central America, a growing obstacle for democratic governments is the reverse trend of growing authoritarianism in the region. The new millennial authoritarianism uses new strategies, including populist charisma and an inundation of one-way messaging on social media platforms. One of the targets of the new authoritarianism involves women's rights and women-based organizations in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

The triumph of LIBRE and Xiomara Castro presents new hopes and challenges in Central America. The Honduran case exemplifies the social movement pathway to achieving executive power despite the enormous barriers of official corruption, state violence, and aggressive neoliberal policies that exclude large sectors of the population. Nonetheless, many enduring challenges remain with profound inequalities, insecure employment, extreme

poverty, vulnerabilities to climate change, public safety, and overcoming impediments to expanding women's rights. In a region and world characterized by growing authoritarianism, the Castro government presents a unique opportunity to forge a democratic and more just path forward while promoting economic and social equity, especially for women and low-income populations. If successful, the LIBRE government may provide an inspiring governance model to challenge democratic reversals in the global South.