

Governing with the People



A JASS Report Weighs the Achievements, Opportunities and Limitations for Women's Rights in Honduras

Xiomara Castro's presidency in Honduras on November 28, 2021 marked a series of firsts for Honduras. She's the first woman to become president. As the candidate of the Liberty and Refoundation Party (LIBRE), she broke the two-party monopoly on power held by the Liberal and National parties for the first time since democracy was restored in 1982. She also won with more votes than any candidate has ever received before.

Grassroots movements worked to get the vote out, many after years of distancing themselves from electoral politics following the 2009 coup d'état that destroyed their faith in the country's institutions, and a string of post-coup authoritarian regimes that eroded democratic governance.

But Xiomara Castro is well-known to them--she marched alongside movements to demand democracy after the military coup kidnapped and exiled her husband, then-president Manuel Zelaya, and took up the banner of feminist and leftwing demands as a political leader in her own right, running twice for the presidency before clinching victory on November 28, 2021. After years of rightwing repression--and a draconian pandemic lockdown enforced by the military--tens of thousands of Hondurans filled the streets dancing, shouting and celebrating her victory.

Now comes the hard part. A year in, with the honeymoon long over, what are the opportunities and limitations the president faces, and what is the role of the grassroots movements that elected her?

To measure the seismic political movements taking place in Honduras and collectively analyze the possibilities and limitations for both the new government and women's movements, Just Associates, an international women's organization with an active presence in Honduras, published a report entitled: "The Honduran Political System and Women's Demands for Their Political Rights", researched and written by Maria Elena Mendez, Delmy Martinez and Laura Carlsen.

The report examines the evolution of women's political participation, beginning with their first vote in 1957, through the period of dictatorships of 1963-1981, the flawed democratic transition under a two-party, male-dominated system, the enormous setbacks wrought by the 2009 coup d'état, to the rise of a woman president with the active participation of feminist and women's movements in the elections of 2021. The exercise of women's political rights has not shown linear progress and even now, the process is fraught with risks and obstacles.

We found that as Honduras seeks to dismantle the narco-dictatorship of former president Juan Orlando Hernandez (2014-2022), women play a key role, both within the new government where feminists have taken on important government posts, and outside in autonomous movements. The country has become a litmus test for how far democratic change can advance from above, with critical—in both senses of the word—support from the people’s organizations that brought the leftist government to power.

The report traces women’s struggle for political rights, following changes in formal laws and practices—including the right to vote and affirmative action quotas—and also efforts to reduce the invisible barriers that inhibit the free exercise of rights. Political violence against women candidates, derogative stereotypes in media and culture, militarization and militarism, the persistence of elements of the old regime in the judicial and legislative branches, and resistance to change in the patriarchal system at lower levels of government all comprise barriers that remain high even after the presidency changed hands.

A commitment to dialogue on gender equality

As a presidential candidate, Xiomara Castro signed a pact on Aug. 19, 2021 with the women’s organizations of the November 25 Platform that committed her government to a series of core demands. These include legalizing access to the morning-after contraceptive pill, and abortion in the case of danger to the woman’s life, rape and severe congenital malformations. They also call for sex education in schools, to work for the eradication of violence against women, and reverse the feminization of poverty by granting women access to land, credit and technology. The pact commits her government to launch economic recovery based on the strategic inclusion and participation of women in the economy, including recognition of unpaid care labor, providing agroecology productive projects in rural communities that generate income for women, a specific program for reinsertion of returning women migrants, and the derogation of the Economic Development Zones (ZEDES) that ceded national territory and resources to transnational corporations.

As a result of formal dialogues with social movements, President Castro’s Plan of Government also includes a commitment to generate conditions for a new social pact through a call for a National Constitutional Assembly, respect for human rights, including international conventions on women’s rights, government transparency and access to health, education and security. One important criticism of this plan noted in our report is that, although gender issues are addressed in various points, there is no mechanism to include a gender perspective in all government programs. The plan also mandates progressive policies for the elderly, those who have a disability, children and youth, indigenous peoples and the LGBTQ+ community.

After analyzing Xiomara Castro’s Plan of government, the report documents the dialogue that continues to take place between the new president and women’s movements. Following the election, women’s organizations established the National Women’s

Roundtable, which immediately began formulating proposals by sector. They presented some 40 proposals, and continue to hold grassroots consultations on the drafting and implementation of laws that directly affect them.

Visible, hidden and invisible power

To understand the deeper powers involved in the transition to democracy, we applied the power analysis developed by Just Associates (JASS). The [framework](#) defines power as “the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources wielded by different sectors of society.”

It divides power into three groups: Visible (formal) power, which is state and formal political power exercised through laws, rules, courts, institutions, policies, decision-making and the enforcement of rules; hidden power exercised by organized interests, legal and illicit, that work behind the scenes to influence and control decisions, resources, media, and policing to advance and protect their interests; and invisible power, wielded through the internalized power of beliefs, social norms, and culture to shape people’s worldview and sense of what is ‘right’ or ‘normal’, together with the strategic manipulation of those beliefs to legitimize certain political ideas and actions, including violence.

The 2021 Honduran elections broke with two-party monopoly on power in the executive branch. As the report states, “the coalition between the parties Salvador de Honduras, Innovation y Unity (PINU), the Social Democrat Party and Liberty and Refoundation (LIBRE), changed the correlation of forces in formal power and the relationship with social movements seeking real democracy, including the feminist and women’s movements. The coalition took up many of the demands for the social welfare, social justice and gender equality.”

The report found that although opposition forces achieved an important change in visible power through victories at the polls in the 2021 elections, progress has not been equal in all spheres. For example, although a woman was elected president in the 2021 elections, 94.3% of mayor positions went to men. Women won for mayor in only 17 municipal elections, down from 28 in 2001.

With quotas, women still make up only 28.91% of the congress. Powerful elements of the former ruling elite remain in place and still control bastions of visible power, particularly in the judicial branch that was corrupted by the Juan Orlando Hernandez (JOH) regime. The obstinacy of patriarchal politics at the local level reflects the continued cultural bias toward male leaders and a lack of firm commitment within the parties to support women candidates.

Hidden and invisible powers form barriers to women’s participation that are even harder to bring down. An entire chapter of the report is dedicated to the visible and hidden power of the U.S. government. The U.S. has historically dictated political realities in Honduras, from

the occupation of Honduras as a base for supporting counterinsurgency movements during the 80s dirty wars, to support for the coup regime and for the narco-dictatorship of JOH. The U.S. has a large military base, Soto Cano, in Honduras and the Pentagon has trained many of the nation's worst rights abusers. U.S. politicians, corporations and investors have openly stated opposition to policy reforms including ending the Zedes--the congress rescinded the ZEDES law on April 22, 2022--, and have pressured the government on issues such as recognition of the Venezuelan government, immigration and megaprojects that pit the interests of local communities against the greed of extractivist transnationals.

Another "invisible power" cited in the report that exercises heavy influence in politics and society is the church. In this realm, the Catholic and the fundamentalist churches have allied with conservative politicians to block women's rights. For example, to this date, the movement has not been able to legalize the "morning-after pill" to prevent conception, although they were able to lift the prohibition for rape victims. Honduras is the only country in the world that prohibits its use, due to church opposition and in spite of coordinated decades-long campaigns by women's organizations and reproductive rights activists.

All these forces and many more pose serious limitations to carrying out a democratic and feminist agenda.

Intentions, opportunities and realities

The presentation of the report on July 29 in Tegucigalpa opened up a new phase of discussion on the relationship between women's and feminist movements and the progressive government. Six months into Xiomara Castro's presidency, the dilemmas and limitations, as well as the possibilities, were coming into sharp focus. Women's Affairs has been elevated to cabinet level. The report notes that with the current composition of government, "women's and feminist organizations have the historic opportunity to establish strategic alliances with political actors with decision-making power at the executive and legislative level."

The feminist agenda includes: approval of the Law against Harassment and Political Violence toward Women, the Integral Law against Violence against Women, the application of gender parity rules, and compliance with the Law of Equal Opportunities for Women and signing international conventions on women's rights.

The president also agreed to major reforms in security policy, although there is considerable evidence of resistance among security forces, trained in the militarized war on drugs by the U.S. government and infiltrated by criminal forces and elements of the former ruling elite. The report asserts that "The militarization of the country has served as a patriarchal instrument of social control". To date, the new government has not moved toward dismantling the military police and even declared states of emergency in certain zones, giving greater powers to security forces.

The Plan of Government promises to eliminate the Defense and National Security Act that concentrated the power of the former dictatorship, limit the functions of the Military Police, and demilitarize society. Advances have been slow. Her party has the relative majority in the lower chamber, but not an absolute majority, meaning that alliances must be formed that will affect the president's agenda. The power and violence of criminal groups creates pressure from some sectors to crack down.

On the other hand, representatives of women's organizations noted that Xiomara Castro has fulfilled some important promises, including eliminating the ZEDES, the "economic development zones" that granted free rein to extractive industries, directly affecting the safety and livelihoods of rural land defenders. The infamous "Law of Official Secrets" that gave cover to corrupt politicians has also been rescinded.

Many other promises remain blocked, whether shelved in congress or reserved to avoid political backlash. The executive branch faces numerous obstacles in furthering the feminist agenda. But the report points out that there is another powerful agent to push forward that agenda in what is now a more favorable context. Delmy Martínez, then-director of JASS Honduras, stated:

"For twelve years our indignation, our rage, our pain and our grief have been accumulating. Until the citizenry began to organize, and built up the force that became clear in the elections of November 2021. This too is power, although often not seen or recognized, but it's the power that we have to act, to confront power, to move forward. It's the power of unity among all of us who seek a better world".

How do these movements that lent their force to the candidate, realign under a president who champions many of their demands? The first task is to understand the limitations, given the very real powers still aligned against women's rights.

"We have to be clear that we won the presidency, but we have not disarmed the state, the groups of power are still there, the patriarchal state is still there..." stated Wendy Cruz, leader of Via Campesina and a commentator at the presentation of the report. She emphasized supporting feminists when possible while realizing that they are working within a patriarchal state.

Take back the streets

For leaders of many women's organizations and even for the feminists in now holding government posts, that means "taking back the streets."

Paula Durán of Socialist Women of Honduras, called for a broad definition of feminism as women seek to build a new society. "We can't get stuck with a reductionist view of feminism—it is feminism that moves us to transform all of society, for the benefit of everyone."

Carmen Castro, also a commentator at the event, stated “With the 2021 presidential election in Honduras, a feminist government did not become the reality--it became the challenge, a challenge taken on by the president and feminist and women’s organizations. The opposition forces are many and enormously powerful: Businessmen, drug traffickers, the old regime that is still encrusted in the structures of government and de facto power, part of the security forces, and the capitalist international context.”

A participant who now works in the ministry of planning said, “we have lost a fundamental form of struggle. We abandoned the streets and I think that it is time to take them back, to rethink [our strategies] to support our sisters and the government.”

Gilda Rivera, director of the Center for Women’s Rights noted, “From the feminist and women’s movements, we still have not determined the boundary between what is our autonomy as movements, as women’s organizations, and what is the party or government.

“We need a popular social movement that is questioning, critical, that presents its views to the government, that doesn’t automatically align ideologically with the government, that instead puts forward our dreams, our demands as social movements that we know cannot be fully met in these pseudo-democracies. The force and the contribution that we can make to what we are experiencing now in Honduras is to have clarity about our role as a social movement and a feminist movement... Let’s not convert the feminist movement into a group within the party. Let’s recognize our own strength and act and take the opportunities that present themselves.”

Opportunities for a feminist agenda

The report and the presentation noted several major opportunities, in an atmosphere of hope following 12 years of repressive, authoritarian governments. The first opportunity is the presence of feminists with solid political and movement experience in important government posts. The second is the advance in democracy and inclusion reflected in the election and the low abstention rate. As one participant noted, “the atmosphere now encourages us to be participants, to make proposals, discuss and plan.”

A third advantage in the current context is the anticipation of reduced repression of social movements. “We no longer have to worry about persecution, the stigma of criminalization and the torture that we experienced the past 12 years,” Martinez noted.

After the dark ages of the dictatorship, Honduran feminist and women’s movements expressed enthusiasm and renewed hope under a government made up of many feminists who they can talk to, to map strategies together. But there are many challenges and unanswered questions.

Lilian Pereira, of Social Women of Honduras, asked some of the big questions that go beyond the borders of Honduras and reverberate in many of the countries of Latin America

that have recently election left or center-left governments: “Is ‘progressivism’ an alternative to neoliberalism as a result of social pressure, or is it an alternative for contention within the structure of the system itself?” She affirmed the need to continue to build social movements beyond the electoral sphere when progressive governments come into power to avoid a return of the right.

Maria Elena Mendez, a co-author of the report, agreed. “We have to continue building utopias based on ethics and hope-- and that’s basically what feminism has been doing all along.”