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CENTRAL AMERICA: Elections expose democracy challenges

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Abstract

Elections and democracy in Central America.

Between November 2013 and May 2014, there will be elections in four Central American countries. Overall, these are expected to be free and fair, although there is a risk of fraud in Honduras. Electoral processes demonstrate that democracy is relatively consolidated in the region. However, they also shed light onto many of the weaknesses of the institutional system.

Full Text

SUBJECT: Elections and democracy in Central America.

SIGNIFICANCE: Between November 2013 and May 2014, there will be elections in four Central American countries. Overall, these are expected to be free and fair, although there is a risk of fraud in Honduras. Electoral processes demonstrate that democracy is relatively consolidated in the region. However, they also shed light onto many of the weaknesses of the institutional system.

ANALYSIS: Impacts.

Discontent with democracy in general and with congress and political parties in particular is unlikely to improve any time soon.

Central America highlights the gap between democratic consolidation and enhancement of the quality of democracy.

Institutional weaknesses will continue reducing policy effectiveness.

Four out of nine presidential elections in Latin America in the next 14 months will take place in Central America:

On November 24, Honduras will hold presidential, legislative and municipal elections.

On February 2, El Salvador and Costa Rica will both hold presidential elections. Legislative elections will take place in Costa Rica on the same day.

On May 4, Panama will hold presidential and legislative elections.

Results are hard to call in three of the four countries, but in all cases the candidate of the ruling party could win:

Honduras. Xiomara Castro, candidate of the recently created opposition party Freedom and Refoundation (LIBRE) and wife of former President Manuel Zelaya, and Juan Orlando Hernandez from the ruling National Party, are tied according to recent polls (see HONDURAS: Politics faces new polarisation after vote - October 17, 2013). Given the opposition to Zelaya's new party from large segments of the economic, military and political elite, electoral fraud is still a possibility. A close result could lead to social tensions, with street protests and further involvement of the military in politics. The fact that Honduras does not have a second round will also have a weakening effect on the winning candidate -- who is likely to be elected with a small plurality.

Costa Rica. Electoral results may be less close in Costa Rica than in the other three countries: Johnny Araya from the ruling Partido de Liberacion Nacional (PLN) has a sizeable advantage in the polls and more resources at his disposal (see COSTA RICA: Vote does not anticipate policy shift - October 9, 2013). Yet a second round is still likely and no party will win a majority in the Legislative Assembly, thus making the implementation of much-needed reforms in the tax and health systems rather difficult.

El Salvador. Vice-President Salvador Sanchez Ceran, from the ruling left-wing Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional (FMLN), has a small advantage over the two right-wing opposition candidates, former President Antonio Saca and Norman Quijano from Arena. However, they all have a similar share of the vote and a second round is expected. This will likely lead to victory for one of the two conservative candidates.

Panama. The incoming president will likely be one of three candidates: Jose Domingo Arias, from the ruling Cambio Democratico (CD) party; Juan Carlos Navarro, from the main opposition Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRD); or Juan Carlos Varela, a former ally of President Ricardo Martinelli and leader of the Partido Panamenista (PP).

Quality of democracy.

Four years after the coup in Honduras, democracy seems consolidated in Central America, with most groups in civil society regarding it as 'the only game in town'. Nevertheless, the quality of democracy is still low.

Citizens' trust .

Opinion polls suggest that institutions that shape democracy are poorly valued; more authoritarian/less participatory institutions receive higher support:

In all countries, the army and the Catholic Church are the most trusted institutions. The army's popularity results from its involvement in the war against drugs and the fact that it is perceived as less corrupt than the police.

Although less popular, the executive tends to receive a 'pass' mark in all cases. The popularity of current Central American presidents is uneven: Panama's Ricardo Martinelli, Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega and El Salvador's Mauricio Funes are among the five most popular presidents in Latin America. On the other hand, Honduras's Porfirio Lobo and, in particular, Costa Rica's Laura Chinchilla have some of the lowest approval ratings in the region.

Political parties are the least-trusted institutions in Central America. Congress, the Supreme Court and the police are also unpopular, although there is more variance among countries and they have improved their marks slowly in recent years.

Institutional weakness .

Weak political institutions, including political parties, hamper the quality of democracy and explain ongoing difficulties in consolidating more dynamic and equitable societies:

Independence and stable tenure is low among public servants. This leads to excessive politicisation of the bureaucracy and reduces policy continuity and effectiveness. As a result, democratically elected governments struggle to implement new programmes effectively and, especially, to secure stability in those already created.

There are vast parts of Central America where the presence of the state is weak. Lack of infrastructure, for instance, has a negative effect on economic development and the delivery of social services.

Political parties have built limited connections with society and have neither become more professional nor programmatic. In Panama, for example, the ruling CD is funded by the president's business ventures. Martinelli has used his business network to build clientelistic support and political alliances. More established parties like Costa Rica's PLN or El Salvador's Arena face growing problems. The PLN is relatively successful at winning elections but is no longer capable of leading a coherent programmatic platform or national project. Arena's split in recent years shows the difficulty that former governing parties face after losing elections.

State legitimacy and democratic governance also face the threat of growing violence and the increasing power of drug-traffickers. Illegal actors are embedded in the state apparatus of all Central American countries, creating partnerships with some political leaders and military officials, and contributing to high levels of corruption (see CENTRAL AMERICA: Violence signals Mexican influence - October 24, 2013).

Judicial expenditure in Central America is extremely low by international standards. High courts have become more independent in some countries (Costa Rica and El Salvador) than in others (Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua). Yet the quality and consistency of their rulings is uneven and the influence of the elite in judicial decisions excessive.

Outlook.

Of the countries that will have elections in coming months, the situation is particularly grave in Honduras. The 2009 coup increased the influence of traditional business groups, reduced social participation in policy debate and strengthened the political influence and repressive power of the army. The 2013 elections could reverse some of these trends, but could also further increase social polarisation and military influence. In all other countries, elections are unlikely to result in dramatic changes in key policies or ground-breaking improvements in the quality of institutions.

CONCLUSION: Electoral outcomes are likely to be close in at least three of the four cases. Although protests may follow, results are likely to be recognised relatively fast. Problems will come later as governments find themselves without clear majorities in congress and confront social demands and weak institutions. They will also face high levels of corruption, little capacity to design and implement policies, and excessive elite

influence.

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