

KEY FINDINGS ON ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION:

Honduras: 2013 Election



Targeted peacebuilding efforts are frequently used to prevent election violence (PEV). Practitioners can draw on a variety of programming options or interventions, including peace messaging campaigns, preventive diplomacy, dedicated youth programs, or monitoring missions. The choice among preventive measures is often made intuitively or impulsively, rather than based on empirical evidence or risk assessments. In order to further professionalize the field, and help establish evidence-based practice, USIP recently concluded an ambitious study to assess whether prevention efforts demonstrate a measurable impact on election violence levels. The risk of election violence surrounding the 2013 elections in Honduras was high. However, the country did not descend into mass violence. The pattern of uninvestigated homicides in Honduras complicates efforts to measure election-related violence, and gauge the effectiveness of prevention tools in Honduras. Despite these hurdles, it appears security sector engagement and preventive diplomacy contributed to the prevention of mass violence and the management of risk during the 2013 elections.

On November 24, 2013, nearly two thirds of Hondurans cast their vote for the president, legislative representatives, and mayors. The National Party candidate, Juan Orlando Hernández, emerged as a clear winner before the official announcement on December 11th, which provoked the two largest rival parties, LIBRE and the Anti-Corruption Party (PAC), to take to the streets. The largest protest occurred on December 2, when over 1,000 LIBRE supporters demanded a recount. International and domestic observers expected protests to escalate into widespread violence; this fear ultimately did not materialize.

Election violence, and other forms of political violence, is not commonly recognized as a challenge that is distinct from the rampant criminal violence in Honduras. The 2013 election cycle saw no overall increase in murders, and few violent incidents could be directly linked to the elections, except for poll workers being locked in their rooms and the blockade of a mayor's office. However, dozens of candidates and political workers were assassinated under poorly investigated circumstances, killings that were plausibly political in nature. Despite these difficulties in determining the link between violence and the electoral process, several initiatives helped prevent the anticipated mass violence during the 2013 Honduras elections.



PREVENTION MODEL & ELECTION VIOLENCE CODING, HONDURAS CASE ANALYSIS

PREVENTION MODEL & ELECTION VIOLENCE CODING, HONDURAS CASE ANALYSIS²

	PEV MODEL	ELECTION MGMT. & ADMINISTRATION	PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY	SECURITY SECTOR ENGAGEMENT	PEACE MESSAGING	CIVIC & VOTER EDUCATION	YOUTH PROGRAMMING	VOTER CONSULTATIONS	MONITORING & MAPPING	ELECTION VIOLENCE (DV)
CODING		.50	.75	.50	.25	.50	.75	.25	.75	.50

CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITIES

Contextual vulnerabilities are potential social, political, or economic drivers of election violence that shape the environment in which prevention efforts operate. The primary vulnerabilities for Honduras in 2013 are its unconsolidated democratic system, uncertainty regarding the election outcome, and widespread insecurity. The two party system that endured for nearly half a century fell after the coup in 2009, creating space for new political parties to compete. The country was destabilized, and Honduras' democracy remained weak four years later.

PREVENTION TOOLS

- The visible engagement of security forces deterred violence on election day, even though the police is unable to consistently enforce the law and curb violence in Honduras.
- Youth programming focused on criminal violence may indirectly mitigate election-related violence.

During the 2013 elections the Government of Honduras engaged in several prevention activities. Security forces demonstrated their ability to prevent overt violence in the immediate lead-up to the elections and on election day, but failed to address or investigate the targeted political assassinations that characterized the entire 2013 electoral cycle. The Honduran security sector, particularly the police, generally suffers from low capacity, corruption, and poor governance. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) succeeded admirably in the technical administration of the election through effective party registration, and the creation of a political party and journalists' ethics pacts. However, the TSE structure did not adjust to the new multi-party system, eliciting legitimate accusations of bias from the unrepresented parties. The TSE also failed to manage campaign financing in order to curb political contributions from illicit actors, and maintained a poor system of certifying poll workers through political party nomination, a system widely regarded as an invitation to fraud. At least one incident of polling station violence, in Copan, could have been averted if the TSE had properly ensured the impartiality of poll workers.

Government-sponsored peace messages were delivered through religious networks, but failed to influence much of the electorate due to unsophisticated targeting and limited geographic reach. The government also initiated civic education campaigns to encourage voter turnout, though many citizens reported that the parties' overt political messaging overshadowed these efforts. Youth programming is a common practice in Honduras. While this work did not necessarily engage on election violence, youth are primary perpetrators of violence in Honduras; anti-crime activities targeting youth may plausibly reduce the levels of election violence as well.

The 2013 elections in Honduras yield little conclusive data on the effectiveness of prevention tools. The country's specific efforts to mitigate or prevent election violence generally failed to affect normally high levels of violence. Preventive diplomacy was widespread due to the strong international desire for peaceful elections following the 2009 coup. Youth programming did not target election violence, but demonstrated impact in reducing youth participation in criminal activity. Security forces, deployed in increased numbers on election day, may have mitigated widespread violence around election day but failed to curb targeted assassinations throughout the election cycle. Other prevention measures were absent, or failed to make any significant impact. Honduras' 2013 elections continued the nation's history of relatively peaceful elections tainted by constant criminal violence.

ABOUT THE CENTER

Through evaluative research and field experiments, USIP's Center for Applied Research on Conflict (ARC) will continue to facilitate the transition from intuitive programming towards sustained election support grounded on empirical research and rigorously evaluated for impact.

Project Team:

- Jonas Claes,
Project Lead: jclaes@usip.org
- Elizabeth Murray,
Honduras Case Lead: emurray@usip.org