



Navigating the Northern Triangle Pt. 1

Democracy! The Podcast

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Adrienne Ross 0:06

Hi, and welcome to *Democracy! The Podcast* that shines the light on some of the darkest challenges facing the fight for democracy around the globe.

Joe Biden 0:16

Democracy will and must prevail.

Adrienne Ross 0:20

This podcast is brought to you by the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening direct from Washington DC, with support from our friends at the United States Agency for International Development through the Global Elections and Political Transitions Award. I'm your host, Adrienne Ross.

There is so much at stake. Amid a quickly rising number of dictators, challenged elections, deep rooted corruption, not to mention growing disinformation in Latin America, democracy is in crisis. But in this episode of a two-part look, Navigating the Northern Triangle, we'll first hear from two of the Consortium's country directors who offer a silver lining as they prepare to help Hondurans steer their presidential elections towards a victory for democracy. Then former US Assistant Secretary for the Department of State's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, former Ambassador to the OAS, Roger Noriega shares his thoughts on what appears to be a critical and rapid decline of democracy in El Salvador. First, let's get a 360 degree look at the region from Amy Radlinski.

Amy Radlinski 1:33

Exactly 200 years ago, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua declared independence from Spain. Together in 1821, those countries, along with the southern state of Mexico, created the Federal Republic of Central America. In one of the region's first acts of democracy, the Spanish commander, along with the Royal Spanish governors at the time, were absorbed into the Federation. But by 1840, after deep ideological differences and much bloodshed, the Federation was dissolved. Today, unprecedented waves of migration, rampant corruption, violence and struggling economies have focused international attention to the region once again, particularly in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. And once again, as this new political

landscape takes shape, the challenge remains how to best support democracy in the lives of citizens throughout the northern triangle.

Adrienne Ross 2:31

First, let's begin this deep dive on North Central America in Honduras where the lead up to the nation's general elections are in high gear. Deborah Ullmer is the National Democratic Institute's Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean programs. She has spent half of her career living and working across Latin America. Maximo Zaldivar is the Regional Director for the Americas at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. Max, a native Salvadorian, has served all over the region and joins us direct from San Salvador. Max what's at stake in the upcoming Honduran elections?

Maximo Zaldivar 3:09

Well, I think it's the validation of Honduras' democracy, the alternation of power as a sign of maturity of its democracy, but also the solidity of its electoral system. As you remember, after the 2017 elections, which casts a shadow of a doubt on its integrity, with serious accusations of irregularities, the consequent constitutional reform in January 2019, created two new independent bodies, on one side, the National Elections Council to administer the elections, and on the other Electoral Justice Court to deal with the jurisdictional aspects of the elections. These two new entities now have the great responsibility not only to conduct successfully a free, fair, peaceful, transparent and inclusive election, but also to put to the test their institutional capacity, as well as their actions as the leading authorities on electoral matters.

Deborah Ullmer 4:04

Yes, I would say in addition to what Max has spoken to specifically about Honduras, I would say its stability in the Central American region is at stake. We already have Nicaragua that the rest of Central American is concerned about, but we have in the northern part of Central America, three governments in different areas undermining the rule of law, transparency, and freedom of speech, or movement by civil society and journalists.

Adrienne Ross 4:40

What role do we see corruption playing in Honduras in general or the election specifically?

Deborah Ullmer 4:46

Well, unfortunately, there was a lack of political will by the government of Honduras to renew the mandate of the Organization of American States mission to support the fight against corruption

and impunity in Honduras, known as the Maxi. On the heels of the Maxi being shut down, the Honduras courts dismissed the case against two dozen legislators connected to a vast corruption scheme known as Pandora to embezzle public funds for political ends. In terms of the upcoming elections in November, many of the same legislators allegedly involved in corruption are running as candidates again, and Honduran political analysts believe that the current the President is looking to ensure that he is protected from future charges against him through a National Assembly, which will elect a new Attorney General and current reforms that are now undermining an impartial judicial system.

Adrienne Ross 5:41

With USAID help, the consortium has been able to really give the country's fight for democracy of booth, tell us what your teams have been doing.

Maximo Zaldivar 5:49

IFES, as part of the CEPPS team in Honduras, under the USAID funded Elect program has been supporting the National Elections Council, as well as the electoral Justice Court, and even a third organization which is the Unit of Clean Politics responsible for control, oversight and accountability of political financing, and campaign expenses. The support consists of technical assistance and sharing of best practices from the region on various areas like strategic communication, civic and voter education, biosecurity and cyber security aspects, and a small subawards program for civil society organizations to contribute disseminating important messages to the citizens.

Deborah Ullmer 6:33

Because there are concerns about post-election violence for these elections at the same level or worse than in 2017, with USAID support and working very closely with IFES, NDI is working to develop bridges among a network of national election monitors, journalists, corruption watchdogs, the private sector and the electoral authorities to either prevent or mitigate the potential for election related conflict and violence. And with complimentary funding from the State Department, NDI partner red de igualdad democrática en Honduras or the Democratic Equality Network in Honduras, made up of civil society organizations, academia, church and private sector groups that will be conducting long term and Election Day observation, hand in hand with USAID support and conducting election related violence and feeding that information into the electoral authorities, again, working very closely with IFES to ensure that we're doing everything this time around to facilitate dialogue, political dialogue, so that common ground can be found. And hopefully, we avoid the levels of violence that we saw in 2016 and 2007.

Adrienne Ross 7:50

Deborah, you touched on it a little bit, but Max I'm wondering if you can expand a little bit more Why is Honduras election important for the rest of Central America the region?

Maximo Zaldivar 8:00

That's a very good question. I think if we can witness after the election, and undivided inauguration of a legitimate new president, it will certainly be a victory for democracy not only in Honduras, and Central America, but also in Latin America as a whole. It will be very important also to see how the new government of Honduras tackles critical issues currently affecting the region, such as illegal migration, human rights violation, an endemic corruption, drug trafficking and gang related violence.

Adrienne Ross 8:32

Deborah in testimony that you gave to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee earlier this year, you summed up the elections in the region to say that they're contentious, quote, unquote, do you think that that characterization still stands?

Deborah Ullmer 8:45

Well, I would like to clarify, I was referring to the 2016 process for Honduras. These elections I would characterize differently. We have extreme polarization, and the upcoming November 27 elections are going to occur in the context of incomplete electoral reform, as Max had alluded to, and a lack of a legal framework for dealing with electoral justice questions around how the votes will be counted among other serious issues. So really, this is creating an environment of confusion. That could be right for violence if the election authorities and political parties don't find common ground through dialogue. So, I think a lot more is at stake. In the last elections, there were questions by Hondurans about the legitimacy of the process due to the reelections and question around how reelection emerged. This time around, we have multiple candidates at the legislative and at the presidential level that are being questioned for corruption.

Maximo Zaldivar 9:52

I agree completely with Deborah. I think as she said, it's a very polarized environment and there's a lot of uncertainty, however, Honduras has always managed through that dialogue that ever mentioned to those political negotiations to come out of these types of complicated situations and scenarios. Now we have to give the benefit of the doubt to the new elections administrations, even with all the difficulties they have had. And they experienced this before in the primary elections, which happened in March. So, they kind of tested themselves. And we're confident, and as Deborah said, that's why we're here to support them to overcome this hurdle.

Deborah Ullmer 10:27

The Honduran people want the international community to be paying attention to what's happening. And I think, you know, we have as the US had been dealing with the worst-case scenarios of democracy. And too often we don't see sort of the slow-moving signals of erosion. And we're at the point where we do, as Max mentioned, have new authorities, new electoral authorities, who have shown willingness to have dialogue to reach out. And I think there is an opportunity for more transparency and therefore, a more open process for the elections and therefore hope that Honduras can move beyond the current polarization.

Maximo Zaldivar 11:17

We're definitely confident that that the elections will be managed properly and whatever shadow was cast in the past elections in 2017, this time, this will not be the same situation. Honduras needs definitely a transition of power and a new chapter in its democracy. And I want to add that these elections will be highly observed. I think there's a lot of guarantees for observing to make these elections transparent once and we hope for the best.

Adrienne Ross 11:48

Well, we all hope for the best there's so many things to pay attention to coming up in the next several weeks. Deborah Ullmer, Max Zaldivar, thank you so much for joining us today.

In El Salvador, democracy seems to be crumbling before our eyes. Earlier this year, President Bukele's New Ideas Party won the congressional majority, immediately after the National Assembly convened, he then appointed five new justices to the Salvadorian Supreme Court and remove the independent Attorney General in a way the United States says was unconstitutional. Then the magistrates overrode a long-standing interpretation of a constitutional ban on consecutive presidential re-elections, which in turn landed them on the United States undemocratic and corrupt actors list. So, what does all this mean? Well, in short, it sets the stage for Bukele to potentially seek a second five-year term in 2024. And it's grabbed the attention of democracy supporters everywhere. Meanwhile, Bukele says it's quote, pure politics and the lowest kind of interference. The former US Ambassador to the Organization of American States, and former Assistant Secretary for the Western Hemisphere, Roger Noriega joins us now to try to help us make sense of what it is we're seeing. When President Bukele was elected to office in 2019, it was seen as a huge victory for democracy in Latin America. But now the country seems to be suffering an evident decline of its democracy. From your perspective, what is your reaction to what we're seeing in El Salvador today?

Roger Noriega 13:28

Well, President Bukele, won in a democratically elected process, he won fair and square in a landslide, when he came in after 10 or 15 years of institutional challenges, of corruption, of political parties that lost their credibility across the political spectrum. So, he came in at a time when a lot of Salvadorans themselves had lost interest or lost faith in a democratic process. What we've seen is really a young man in hurry, who has done in 18 months what Hugo Chávez didn't do that for his first four or five years in his long period in power, running roughshod over other institutions, physically going in with armed soldiers into the Legislative Assembly, in a way that caught a lot of people's attention, that this person had no respect for institutions. And what you see really is his using this immense political popularity, that he has had to decimate the checks and balances of a normal democracy. Even at its worst in the previous decade, there was a certain semblance of the division of power, and the last holdout was the courts. And he did away with that in June by replacing supreme court justices that he did in an unlawful way, and just as importantly, firing an Attorney General Prosecutor General who is looking into criminality and corruption his own regime.

Adrienne Ross 15:11

You don't sound surprised?

Roger Noriega 15:14

No, not at all. I quite frankly, I'd heard of Bukele when he was mayor of San Salvador, I know that he was a person who was estranged from the party, the FMLN party, and someone with a very personalized agenda and very close ties to China, that he tried to obscure, and very close ties to a man named Jose Luis Merino, who is a former FLMN chieftain, who is known not only for his record as a gorilla, but as a kidnapper and a someone who made common cause with the FARC guerrillas in Colombia, and laundered hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars for them. So, you can't have those kinds of relationships and you don't have those people deeply in your inner circle as he does now as President and expect people to believe that you're an agent of change.

Adrienne Ross 16:16

President Bukele's decision to remove the five judges from El Salvador Supreme Court sure seems like a blatant move to commandeer the courts. What do you think might that indicate for the future of the country?

Roger Noriega 16:28

Well, it indicates to me that this is a president who has no respect for institutions. And this is very troubling, obviously, if you want to have a functioning democracy, you have to have the so-called guardrails. In this case, the court in El Salvador was one of the few institutions left that had a certain level of independence. Immediately after winning an extraordinary majority in the Legislative Assembly, the very first day, he fired the prosecutor who was looking at corruption in his circle, and

fired the supreme court now, this was done by vote in the Legislative Assembly, which apparently was totally unlawful. And this is the same legislative assembly that has now pronounced itself, in a laughable way I should say, is the same Supreme Court now, that has pronounced that he is eligible for re-election, which people simple reading the constitution of El Salvador says that's not the case.

Adrienne Ross 17:30

We've had many people say that this is just the Latin America playbook, that he's just reading right out of Chavez's plans directly. What do you think about that?

Roger Noriega 17:40

Well, I think it's a fair assessment. El Salvador has its own history. Remember that the traditional political parties, the establishment political parties, they have to prepare the foundation for these kinds of authoritarian regimes because they lose their accountability to the people, and they lose their own credibility. And they essentially indicate to people that if you need someone who wants to bust up the establishment was changing the rules in order for it to for the government to care about your interests. So, you see, what I will say is remarkable, as I said before, that Bukele has moved at a breakneck pace to consolidate himself in power. He has his own clear agenda that he's following, and it's very personalized. And I think that he really will not tolerate anybody or any institutions getting in his way.

Adrienne Ross 18:38

Well, what do you make of him changing his Twitter profile to the coolest dictator in the world?

Roger Noriega 18:43

Well, I think it's a cynicism that is disturbing. I don't think it's very funny or clever to refer to yourself as a dictator. And in a country where 10s of 1000s of people have lost their lives over the decades, establishing a democracy, just fighting a military dictatorship in the late 70s and 80s, fighting civil wars, and those hard-earned achievements of the Salvadoran people who've been washed away by this cynical young man. And I think that's very disturbing. He is someone who certainly caught the attention by demonstration, and they are doing their best to try to put some barriers and roadblocks but until Bukele loses certain popularity in the country, till he pays a price in the country, I think he will see very few obstacles to him going forward with this authoritarian agenda.

Adrienne Ross 19:48

You mentioned roadblocks and in trying to manage the situation, but what options does the United States have to halt this kind of trajectory in El Salvador?

Roger Noriega 19:56

Well, we have to be pretty transparent about our concerns, about the narco trafficking within his regime, about the pacts that he has made with gangs, about the fact that he's put leading gangsters in his government and acting within his party. These are very serious issues that have to be addressed, I think, is to a certain extent, this is a law enforcement problem. There should be accountability on that. But as I said, I don't think that he's necessarily going to lose altitude politically, until the people of El Salvador see a cost for this behavior. And part of that is economic. If I were looking to invest in El Salvador, I would think twice, he probably thinks he has that wired up with the Chinese probably but at the same time and pressing issue is what will the International Monetary Fund do. Will the United States sit by while the IMF cuts a check for hundreds of millions of dollars, another checks for hundreds of millions of dollars, to that government? Which is going through all of the preconditions for previous IMF support, pretty sure that the State Department folks are taking a very serious look at that and considering their options.

Adrienne Ross 21:18

You mentioned the economy, we've seen El Salvador roll into being the first country in the world to adopt Bitcoin just a couple of weeks ago, really? Why is it so important, El Salvador in the global community, and how do you think that rollout of legal tender is going?

Roger Noriega 21:32

Well, I think it's been a big debacle, essentially, for the Bukele administration. He was riding very high politically, whether he admits it or not, there are some polls that indicate that he has paid quite a price in terms of popularity, because Bitcoin still fairly popular, but people really rejected it across the board. And so, you have to wonder, what's he up to? As I see, analysts who looked at look at this whole cryptocurrency and Bitcoin and that cyber currency, I should say, world, they say, you know, surely it makes no sense for people to consider this Bitcoin to be a normal currency. What is the currency of the El Salvador today? Well, there's a dollarized economy. And a lot of what the economic progress in El Salvador managed to make, while other countries are slightly behind was because it was a dollarized economy. There are some of them are saying that the introduction of Bitcoin in a dollarized economy is a gift essentially, to people who are shady business, including narco traffickers who want to find a way laundering the US dollars and move them around.

Adrienne Ross 22:46

The instability that's growing in El Salvador, how does that affect the rest of the region?

Roger Noriega 22:52

Well, the rest of the region is troubled, quite frankly and El Salvador was kind of falling right in line, which is a bit of shame. This is a country that managed economic growth in the middle of support. These are industrious people, they're hardworking people, anybody that knows itself knows this to be fact. You know, it's a shame to see the lawlessness that really settled 25 years ago, decimate the institutions in Central America, in several countries, where weak institutions and corruptible politicians gave in to the very serious, violent pressure of narco traffic. And you see what's happened in Venezuela which came into this very dangerous confluence, criminality, theft, and a lack of accountability to where they lost their country. And you have now a narco regime there that is making common cause with countries in the region with criminal organizations in reach to attack democracy in a sustained way. The Biden administration has a vision for El Salvador, there are serious doubts about where Bukele is headed. There is a bipartisan concern in Congress for Bukele has had it. They have been using essentially sanctions against individuals in the country. And I think that we need to have a tougher position vis-a-vis the IMF to indicate them very serious that we don't really want International Monetary Fund to throw a lifeline to an autocrat, but there has to be some accountability.

Adrienne Ross 24:42

Well, thank you, Roger Noriega so much to pay attention to going forward. We really appreciate you helping us thread the needle on El Salvador.

The Consortium's partner at the International republican Institute has a secret weapon they haven't rolled out in a while. Jorge Ceballos is IRI's resident program director for El Salvador and the consortium's country director for El Salvador joins me direct from San Salvador with more. Thank you so much for being here, Jorge.

Jorge Ceballos 25:15

Hey Adrienne, thank you for inviting me. It's a pleasure.

Adrienne Ross 25:18

What can you tell us about the Vota Bus?

Jorge Ceballos 25:21

The Vota Bus was born in the 2018 electoral process, as part of the IRI activities to support the TSC in citizen participation. The Vota Bus is a platform that comes to the streets or squares in El Salvador and brings the citizens in a way that they can learn about the ways that they can vote. Here in El Salvador, they can vote for a face of a person or a party flag or cross vote, a vote for two different people in the same ballot. So, the idea to bring the Vota Bus is that people can understand and

they can use technology, but sometimes they don't have access. So, the Vota Bus comes to them and give them the tools to learn about the electoral process.

Adrienne Ross 26:13

So how does it really work? The Vota Bus comes into town, and the citizens can walk on board and ask questions?

Jorge Ceballos 26:20

Yes, the idea is that the Vota Bus stays in one part of the municipalities. And the citizens can come to the bus and a team can show them in our computer, the different ways to vote, they can learn about their electorate law. So, the idea is can citizens create confidence with the TSC and with the electronic process.

Adrienne Ross 26:46

Why is a tool like the Vota Bus important in a place like El Salvador or other places in Central America?

Jorge Ceballos 26:52

The idea of this tool is to create more citizen participation and obviously, create community bonds. Because when a team from the TSC and IRI talk to the people and demonstrate that it's easy to vote and learn about the electoral law and processes, they feel part of that.

Adrienne Ross 27:17

I know Facebook is extraordinarily popular in El Salvador, how does social media play into something like the Vota Bus? Does it at all?

Jorge Ceballos 27:25

Well, it's part of the way we did in 2018 and 2019 electoral process, because some citizens posted in their accounts that they were in the Vota Bus. So, in the next town, they know, what the Vota Bus is and they want to participate. So, it's important, obviously, we have to understand that social media, right now it's important for good things, but we have to be careful about bad things. So, the Vota Bus has always had some popularity on Facebook because that people know when we arrived in any town.

Adrienne Ross 27:42

Do you have any statistics on where all you've been in El Salvador?

Jorge Ceballos 28:11

We have seen more than 10,000 people participating in that scene. So it's a good number for the exercise. So, the idea is to teach and learn from the citizens and try to improve the classroom from the TSC.

Adrienne Ross 28:28

Do you think we'll see the Vota Bus back in action anytime soon?

Jorge Ceballos 28:32

Well, we're working towards the 2024 election process, and we hope that the Vota Bus can again visit squares on the streets of El Salvador and especially to create more community with the citizens and try that they improve their the way good to see the electoral process.

Adrienne Ross 28:54

Jorge Ceballos in San Salvador, thank you so much for joining us today.

Jorge Ceballos 28:59

Thank you, have a good day.

Adrienne Ross 29:05

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