



## Challenges, Lights and Shadows of Xiomara Castro's Government in Honduras

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**Abstract:** After 12 years of social and democratic erosion under previous regimes, Xiomara Castro's government has the chance to make structural transformations in Honduras. It is worth exploring three main axes to analyse what the new government has done and what needs to be done.

*The re-foundation of Honduras begins with the re-establishment of respect for the human being, the inviolability of life, the security of citizens. No more death squads, no more silence in the face of femicides, no more hired killings, no more drug trafficking or organised crime. We want Hondurans to feel the presence of*

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*a state that guarantees their rights, where they can live in peace.* (Xiomara Castro - Inaugural speech)

Dressed in a sober purple suit and the pale blue Honduran presidential sash, in her [inaugural speech](#) on 27 January 2022, Xiomara Castro portrayed the 'social and economic tragedy' inherited by her administration, explained how the previous regimes had turned the Honduran State 'into an oppressor and violator of human rights', and promised a series of measures for the re-foundation of a 'socialist and democratic state'. Two months earlier, she had triumphed in an historic election, ending the long cycle that began with the coup d'état against her husband Mel Zelaya, in 2009. On 28 November 2021, she obtained 51 per cent of the vote, the largest mandate in Honduran electoral history, to become the first woman president. The coming to power of the Libertad y Refundación Party (LIBRE), a political instrument of the Honduran left formed after the coup, initially represented hope and promise of change. The conservative authoritarian governments of Porfirio Lobo and Juan Orlando Hernández left behind, Castro promised to make human rights one of the central axes of government. What has been achieved so far and what challenges remain? Here are three keys to thinking about the lights and shadows of Castro's government as it reaches -by September 2023, at the time this article was written- the halfway point.

### **Violence and regime of exception**

Honduras is the most violent country in Central America and the third most insecure in the region. In 2022, its homicide rate was [35.8 per 100,000](#) inhabitants, the [lowest in 16 years](#). That November, Castro decreed a National Security Emergency in 75 of the country's 298 municipalities, suspending freedom of movement, association and assembly and inviolability of the home, among other rights. A month later, the state of exception came into force, extended five times since - up to July 2023. Despite a drop in homicides, [many voices](#) claim the measures are ineffective in mitigating gang violence inside prisons or reducing extortion.

In its [2022 annual report](#) the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) detailed that the suspension of rights and guarantees constituted 'a provision for extraordinary circumstances and not a means to confront common crime'.

Furthermore, in the Preliminary Observations of an [on-site visit](#) in Honduras in April 2023, the IACHR detailed the receipt of 'complaints about the lack of justification demonstrating the suitability, necessity and proportionality of the extension of these measures, as well as the absence of effective judicial and legislative controls'.

Meanwhile, civil society organisations [denounced](#) improper use of force and lack of effective records in implementation of the policy.

Castro's model is in line with that of her Salvadoran counterpart Nayib Bukele, who in March 2022 decreed a state of exception in El Salvador to confront his country's gangs. By June 2023, 60,000 alleged gang members had been arrested and high crime and homicide rates contained. Among the measures implemented was the construction of the Terrorism Confinement Centre (CECOT), which can house up to 40,000 prisoners. These measures cemented the popularity of Bukele's government. But they have also raised numerous questions about the use of [authoritarian tactics](#) and [human rights violations](#).

Although the Salvadoran case is the most resonant, the model must be viewed on a regional scale. In this regard, the latest report of [Front Line Defenders](#) asserts: 'Invoking states of emergency remained a strategy used by governments in El Salvador, Guatemala and later in the year Honduras, placing defenders at increasing risk with suspensions of key constitutional rights and extraordinary powers given to security forces'.

### **Human rights defenders**

Castro's inaugural speech established a 22-point roadmap, the 12th point an explicit request for justice for Berta Cáceres. Cáceres—founder and leader of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH) involving 200 indigenous communities in Honduras—represented the most resistant environmental movement in her country. She was assassinated in Honduras in 2016 for defending the rights of her community against the construction of a hydroelectric dam. Castro's request as the highest authority of the state that Cáceres' murderers be brought to justice is highly significant. Indeed, Castro's support has already translated into progress in the case. In June, former president of hydroelectric company Desarrollos Energéticos Sociedad Anonima (DESA), David Castillo, was sentenced to 22 years and six months for his role as a co-collaborator in the murder of Cáceres. Nevertheless, considerable challenges remain in ensuring that the intellectual authors of the crime are held accountable, according to the [Front Line Defenders](#) 2022 report. Human rights defenders' concerns do not end with this high-profile case. Latin America is the region with the highest number of incidents of violence recorded against defenders, and Honduras is - together with Colombia, Mexico and Brazil - one of the four countries with the highest number of recorded murders. In 2022, 17 [human rights defenders](#) were murdered in Honduras. From 2018 to 1 May 2023, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) [recorded](#) 62 human rights defenders killed and four disappeared - 66 per cent of the victims were engaged in the defence of land, territory and the environment many were indigenous or Afro-Honduran. Most of these episodes are framed within long-standing territorial conflicts or caused by the installation of development projects.

## Women, gender and sexual and reproductive health

*No more violence against women, I am going with all my strength to close the gap and generate the conditions so that our girls can develop fully and live in a country free of violence. Honduran women, I will not fail you, I will defend your rights, all your rights, count on me.*

Castro's first presidential speech concluded with one of the most controversial promises of her administration: decriminalisation of abortion. Honduras is one of only nine countries in the world that still prohibits abortion under all circumstances. There have been some recent advances in [sexual and reproductive health](#). In December 2022, the government authorised the emergency contraceptive pill for survivors of sexual violence, prohibited since October 2009 - when Zelaya was ousted. In its last [on-site visit](#) the IACHR warned of 'persistence of gender-based violence and the special misogynistic cruelty to the bodies of women, girls and adolescents'. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), by the year 2021, 234 femicides had been registered. One year later, as received by the [IACHR](#) from civil society organisations, at least 250 crimes were reported, 31,810 complaints of domestic violence and 1,615 complaints of sexual violence were filed, the majority (51.6 per cent) for acts committed against children and adolescents. Honduras has the [highest femicide rate](#) in Latin America: 4.6 per 100,000 women. Of these, nine out of ten go unpunished. Finally, a series of initiatives related to the protection of women's rights remain stalled in the National Congress. These include comprehensive legislation prohibiting violence against women, the Purple Alert Law, and the Safe Houses Law, as well as ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Opposition to the Castro government is strong, the majority of political forces support a conservative agenda on gender and sexual and reproductive rights.

### A time of definitions

Twelve years of social decomposition, dismantling of state capabilities and democratic setbacks have passed since the coup. Castro inherited a country with [33 percent](#) of its population in humanitarian need, very [high corruption rates](#) and overwhelming public distrust of its institutions.

Concrete attempts to change the political orientation of the Honduran state include actions to combat corruption, derogation of the ZEDE's Law, reduction of the crime rate and some notable progress for women. Yet, higher levels of achievement in the most vital areas of the life of the Honduran people are still pending. Honduras still suffers much crime and violence and the highest femicide rate in Latin America.

Unrest over land and natural resources persist as do murders of human rights defenders. Before the 2025 elections, Castro has to consolidate her leadership, establish strong alliances with social movements and key actors of the civil society, and intensify a novel and sovereign geopolitical agenda. National structural problems will not be resolved in weeks or months and the patience of Castro's electorate is not infinite. Her half-term mandate may be a critical moment to deepen the politics that sustained her campaign and renew expectations in a government faced with a historic opportunity.