

Freedom in the World 2024



header1 Overview

Institutional weakness, corruption, violence, and impunity undermine the overall stability of Honduras. Journalists, political activists, and women are often the victims of violence, and perpetrators are rarely brought to justice. Honduras holds regular elections; while the 2017 presidential poll prompted concerns over irregularities, the 2021 elections—which ushered in Honduras’s first female president—were more transparent, though they were marred by unprecedented violence.

header2 Key Developments in 2023

- In February, legislators selected 15 Supreme Court justices who will serve until 2030. A nominating body had offered a merit-based list of candidates to the National Congress in January, but legislators selected justices from that list on a partisan basis.
- In March, President Xiomara Castro used executive powers to legalize emergency contraception for women, which had been made illegal in 2009.
- In late October, the government formed a permanent committee to assume legislative powers during the legislature’s recess. In early November, that committee appointed individuals affiliated with the ruling Liberty and Refoundation Party (Libre) to the posts of attorney general and deputy attorney general. Opposition parties denounced the acts of the commission, which was mostly filled with Libre members.

PR Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?

3.003
4.004

The president is the chief of state and head of government and is elected by popular vote to four-year terms. The leading candidate need only win a plurality; there is no runoff.

Following severe irregularities in the 2017 presidential election, the National Congress created two new electoral bodies in 2019: the Electoral Court of Justice (TJE) and the National Electoral Council (CNE).

In November 2021—and in the first presidential contest administered by the TJE and CNE—Xiomara Castro of the left-wing Libre was elected with 51.1 percent of the vote, ending 12 years of National Party (PN) executive control. Castro defeated then Tegucigalpa mayor Nasry Asfura of the PN. European Union election monitors lauded that year's electoral reforms, which allowed for increased transparency and confidence, but noted that severe problems remained. Castro, the nation's first female chief executive, was elected amid high voter turnout and was inaugurated in January 2022.

A2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?

2.002
4.004

Members of the 128-seat unicameral National Congress are elected for four-year terms using proportional representation by department. All seats are renewed in each election.

In the November 2021 polls, Libre won 50 seats, the PN won 44, the Liberal Party (PL) won 22, and the Savior Party of Honduras (PSH) won 10. The Christian Democratic Party (PDCH) and the Anticorruption Party (PAC) each won 1. The legislative and municipal contests were competitive but were also marred by severe political violence; at least 68 candidates were murdered in the run-up to the elections. Voter intimidation and the abuse of state resources were also reported.

A3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?

3.003
4.004

The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) came under heavy criticism for its administration of the 2017 presidential poll, which prompted protests and allegations of TSE incompetence and pro-PN bias. In 2019, the National Congress created the TJE and the CNE to replace it.

The 2021 elections benefited from a new electoral law passed that year, which incorporated several reforms to improve public trust and encourage stability and transparency in the electoral process.

B Political Pluralism and Participation

B1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?

3.003
4.004

Political parties are free to operate. While power has mostly been concentrated in the hands of the PL and the PN since democratization in the early 1980s, party politics in Honduras shifted in the

2010s. In 2013, Libre and the PAC participated in elections for the first time. Six parties won National Congress seats in 2021. In August 2023, the PL, PN, PSH, and the Patriotic Alliance agreed to form a legislative alliance, the Citizens' Opposition Bloc (BOC).

B2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?	3.003
	4.004

Although opposition parties were affected by acts of political violence and electoral irregularities favoring the PN, they remained competitive. In 2021, the PN was ousted from the presidency for the first time in 12 years by President Castro. The PN also lost its congressional majority.

B3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?	1.001
	4.004

Elites have traditionally exerted significant influence over political parties, limiting people's political choices. The military remains politically powerful. Gangs, many with ties to drug trafficking, also sway decisions at the subnational level.

Political violence is widespread and includes harassment, threats, and intimidation directed at candidates, politicians, and voters, especially women. In July 2023, the PL criticized *colectivos* belonging to Libre for attacking activists from A Single Voice for Honduras (USVH), an anticorruption group that held a rally in Tegucigalpa.

B4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, racial, religious, gender, LGBT+, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?	2.002
	4.004

Adult citizens have the right to vote. Ethnic minorities, the LGBT+ population, and women, however, remain politically underrepresented, though political parties must abide by a 40 percent gender quota for their slates of congressional candidates. Some 27.3 percent of the National Congress's seats are held by women, the highest figure the country has seen in the 21st century.

C Functioning of Government

C1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?	2.002
	4.004

Power was consolidated in the executive branch under measures adopted since 2014. The military, which has traditionally maintained substantial autonomy from civilian oversight, has played an increasing role in both internal security and programs unrelated to security.

Concerns persist over the political influence that President Castro's husband, former president José Manuel Zelaya Rosales, and other members of the Zelaya family wield. In a May 2023 report, the National Anticorruption Council (CNA) said that relatives of President Castro had received posts within the cabinet, National Congress, and Supreme Court.

The government moved to limit legislators' ability to determine policy in 2023, as the National Congress was deadlocked over the appointment of a new attorney general and deputy attorney general. Libre was unable to secure two-thirds majorities to fill those positions by October 31, when the congressional session ended. On that day, the government created a nine-member permanent committee that was mostly filled by Libre legislators to function during the recess. On November 1, that committee appointed Johel Zelaya, a Libre municipal official, as interim attorney general. Mario Morazán, who served in the Zelaya administration, was named interim deputy attorney general. Two commission members—one belonging to the PAC and the other a PSH member—resigned over the appointments, while opposition parties denounced the commission's acts.

C2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? | 1.001 4.004

Corruption was rampant under the PN. An anticorruption body established in 2016 was shut down in 2020 despite public support for that body.

President Castro's immediate predecessor, Juan Orlando Hernández, was directly implicated in corruption in 2019 when US prosecutors identified him and former president Porfirio Lobo as coconspirators in a drug-smuggling operation run by Hernández's brother. Hernández was arrested by police in Honduras in 2022 and was extradited to face drug-trafficking and arms charges in the United States that year. In October 2023, Honduran prosecutors indicted Hernández, Lobo, and six others for allegedly diverting public funds.

In 2022, the National Congress passed a law providing amnesty to Zelaya-era officials, including those targeted or prosecuted for opposing the 2009 coup d'état against Zelaya. Critics called the law an "impunity pact."

In late 2022, the Castro administration and the United Nations agreed to a memorandum of understanding on the restoration of the UN-backed International Commission against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (CICIH). The National Congress has since passed some reforms specified in that memorandum, though some legislative measures remained pending as of the end of 2023.

C3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? | 2.002 4.004

Government operations are generally opaque. Journalists and interest groups have difficulty obtaining information from the government. A secrecy law passed in 2014 allowed authorities to withhold information on security and national defense for up to 25 years. Civil society representatives criticized the 2020 creation of a Ministry of Transparency as an effort to undermine existing transparency mechanisms.

The Castro administration has taken some steps to foster greater openness and transparency. The Hernández-era secrecy law, which was perceived as a vehicle for official corruption, was repealed in 2022. Also in 2022, legislators passed a law to improve transparency in the nomination of Supreme Court justices, although it was criticized for favoring the interests of political parties.

Legislators additionally repealed a law that created Areas of Employment and Economic Development (ZEDEs), which were meant to attract investment but prompted fears that they would facilitate corrupt activities, in 2022. However, a related decree that would have repealed constitutional articles related to ZEDEs did not receive the necessary two-thirds support in the legislature and existing ZEDEs continue to operate.

CL Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media?		1.001 4.004
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Authorities systematically violate the constitution's press freedom guarantees. Reporters and outlets covering sensitive topics or who are perceived as critical of the authorities risk assaults, threats, blocked transmissions, and harassment. Journalists have access to a protection mechanism that also supports human rights defenders and justice officials, but that mechanism is ineffective.

In May 2022, the National Commissioner for Human Rights in Honduras (CONADEH) reported that 92 individuals linked to journalism were killed since 2001. In May 2023, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented at least 53 aggressions against journalists and media workers over the year to date. In December, Francisco Ramírez Amador of the Canal 24 news outlet was shot and killed in the city of Danlí. A police officer assigned to protect him was injured.

D2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?		4.004
		4.004

Religious freedom is generally respected in Honduras.

D3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?		2.002
		4.004

Criminal groups undermine academic freedom, as they control all or parts of schools in some areas and subject staff to extortion schemes. Authorities sometimes move to suppress student demonstrations by arresting participants and dispersing the events, and violent clashes between police and student protesters sometimes occur.

D4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?		2.002
		4.004

Under the 2011 Special Law on Interception of Private Communications, the government can intercept online and telephone messages. Violence, threats, and intimidation by state and nonstate actors curtail open and free private discussion among the general population.

E Associational and Organizational Rights

E1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?		2.002 4.004
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Freedom of assembly is constitutionally protected. In the past, PN governments used force to disperse rallies. Amnesty International reported that authorities regularly employed tear gas and live ammunition during protests or government reprisals. In late 2022, the Castro administration enacted a state of exception in response to gang-related violence. The state of exception, which was still in effect in 2023, restricted the right to assemble in some areas.

Major rallies nevertheless occurred in 2023. In March, hundreds of women rallied in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula over reproductive rights and gender-based violence. In July, USVH held a protest near the presidential palace in Tegucigalpa; members of Libre-affiliated colectivos were filmed attacking the USVH's founder and another member of the group. In November, the BOC held a large antigovernment rally in the capital, while Libre supporters held a counterprotest elsewhere in Tegucigalpa. The PSH accused a government agency of blocking buses carrying protesters. Thousands participated in a BOC-organized protest in San Pedro Sula in December.

E2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights— and governance-related work?

1.001
4.004

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their staff, especially in the human rights and environmental fields, often faced significant threats, including harassment, surveillance, smear campaigns aimed at undermining their work, and violence under PN governments.

In June 2023, Gabriela Castellanos, who spearheads the CNA, fled Honduras with her family; Castellanos received threats after the CNA published a report on nepotism within the Castro administration in May. She returned to Honduras in July.

E3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?

2.002 4.004

Labor unions are well organized and can strike. In the past, labor actions have resulted in clashes with security forces. The government does not always honor formal agreements entered with public-sector unions. Union leaders and labor activists in public and private sectors have faced harassment, dismissal, and violence for their activities. The change in government temporarily decreased tensions with unions since many have ties with the ruling Libre.

F Rule of Law

F1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?

1.001 4.004

Political and business elites exert excessive influence over the judiciary, including the Supreme Court. Judicial appointments are made with little transparency, judges have been removed from their posts for political motivations, and several lawyers have been killed in recent years.

While legislators limited prosecutorial access to financial information in cases of corruption in 2021, the National Congress has since legislated to increase prosecutorial powers in line with a 2022 memorandum of understanding on the creation of the CICIH. Legislators annulled three laws that had limited prosecutors' access to documents and restricted their ability to pursue cases involving financial impropriety in 2023.

A law establishing new guidelines for the Nominating Board for the Supreme Court (JNCS) and limiting its discretionary power was passed in 2022. In January 2023, the JNCS produced a list of candidates based on merit. Legislators selected a 15-member bench from that list in February but

selected them on a partisan basis; six came from Libre, five from the PN, and four from the PL. The new justices' terms will end in 2030.

F2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	1.001 4.004
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The lack of due process is a serious issue in Honduras. The judiciary and law enforcement agencies are often compromised and underfunded. As such, they are corrupt, targets of influence peddling and undue influence, and often engage in criminal activities.

PN governments utilized the armed forces to combat crime and violence. Arbitrary arrests and detentions were common, as was lengthy pretrial detention. The prison system remained overcrowded in 2023, and half of the prison population was in pretrial detention as of September.

The Castro administration has taken some steps to address due process and law enforcement problems. However, the government's announcement of a "war against extortion" in 2022 and the resulting state of exception led to a suspension of constitutionally protected rights.

F3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies?	1.001 4.004
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The homicide rate has declined in recent years, but violent crime and gang violence remain serious problems and have prompted large-scale internal displacement and migration. In response to widespread violence, the Hernández administration empowered the Military Police of Public Order (PMOP) and other security forces to combat security threats, and that policy has continued under President Castro. However, these units often employ excessive force when conducting operations. According to a December 2023 report released by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), fighting between government forces and armed groups rose by 45 percent from the first 11 months of 2022 to the same period in 2023.

Prison violence remains rampant due primarily to gang activity. In June 2023, 46 female prisoners in the National Women's Penitentiary for Social Adaptation were killed by gang members. Members of the Barrio 18 criminal gang were allegedly responsible, while most of the victims were kept at a section of the prison designated for MS-13 members. Later that month, at least 13 people were killed at a local establishment in the municipality of Choloma; authorities were investigating the possibility that the two incidents were linked. In July, President Castro announced that the PMOP would bear more responsibility for prison security.

F4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?	1.001 4.004
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Lands inhabited by Indigenous and Afro-Honduran people are particularly vulnerable to expropriation for development projects without adequate prior consultation. Communities that contest such projects are unable to effectively assert their rights. Violence and discrimination against LGBT+ people and Indigenous and Garifuna populations persist at high levels.

In December 2023, the CONADEH reported that 1,239 people suffered displacement due to violence in Honduras in 2022, based on complaints it received that year. A majority of displaced people who communicated with the CONADEH said they received death threats.

According to the OHCHR, at least 13 human rights defenders were killed in the first eight months of 2023, 90 percent of them land-rights or environmental activists. In September, Soraya Álvarez

Portillo, a transgender activist, was murdered. Catrachas, a local NGO, said Álvarez was the 40th LGBT+ person to be murdered in Honduras in 2023.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?	2.002
	4.004

Ongoing violence and impunity have reduced personal autonomy and freedom of movement in Honduras. Those living in gang-controlled territories face extortion, and dangerous conditions limit free movement and options for education and employment. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees reported that 247,000 people were internally displaced between 2004 and 2018. Hondurans have sought asylum or refuge in Mexico and the United States in large numbers in recent years. Some 42,000 Hondurans requested asylum in Mexico in 2023, while the US Border Patrol reported encounters with 181,000 Hondurans at the American southwest border in its 2023 fiscal year.

The 2022 state of exception continues curtailing constitutional rights, allowing authorities to restrict movement in parts of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula.

G2 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?	2.002
	4.004

Corruption, crime, and gang activity inhibit the ability to conduct business activities freely and dissuade entrepreneurs from establishing new businesses. Taxi and bus drivers are notable targets of gangs. ACLED's December 2023 report noted that transportation workers faced fewer violent attacks in the first 11 months of the year when compared to the same period in 2022.

G3 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?	2.002
	4.004

Same-sex marriage remains illegal in Honduras, despite ongoing calls for reform from LGBT+ activists. A 2019 law banned same-sex couples from adopting children despite the objection of activists, who called the bill excessive and discriminatory.

Abortion is illegal in Honduras, including in cases of rape or incest, with criminal sanctions including imprisonment for those accused of terminating their pregnancies. In March 2023, Castro used executive powers to legalize the use of emergency contraception for women.

Gender-based violence remains widespread and largely goes unpunished. Honduras has one of the world's highest femicide rates, and these murders are rarely investigated. Some 317 femicides occurred in the first nine months of 2023 according to the Women's Rights Center, a Honduran NGO.

G4 1.00-4.00 pts0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?	2.002
	4.004

Lack of socioeconomic opportunities combined with high levels of crime and violence limit social mobility for most Hondurans and exacerbate income inequality. Human trafficking remains a significant issue. Honduras is a source country for women and children forced into prostitution. Adults and children are also vulnerable to forced labor in agriculture, mining, and other sectors, and as domestic servants.