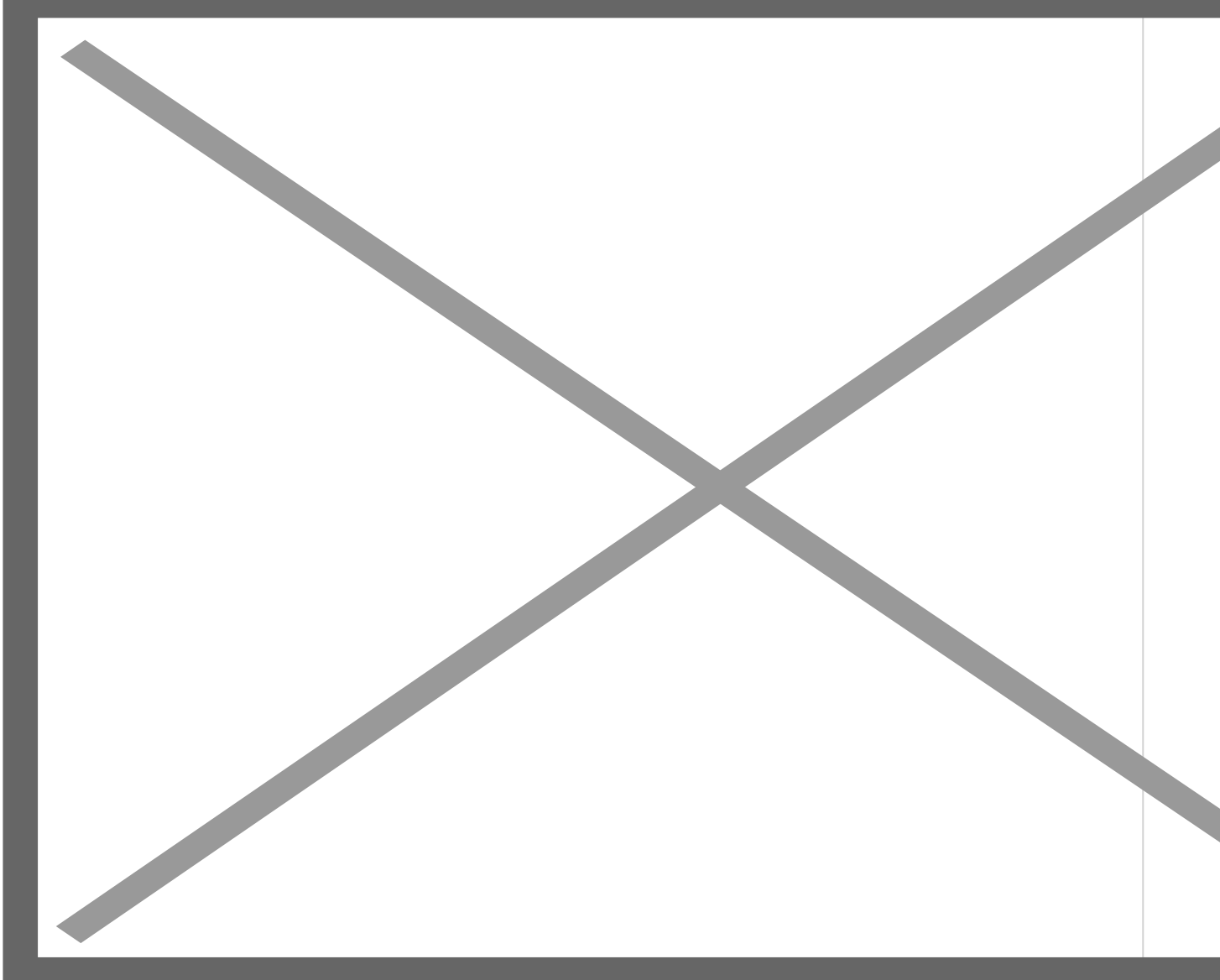


Honduras set for first female president as Xiomara Castro holds wide lead

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While Honduras's electoral council has yet to release official results from Sunday's vote, a victory for Xiomara Castro would end the ruling National Party's 12 years in power [Orlando Sierra/AFP]?

Tegucigalpa, November 29 (RHC)-- Former Honduran first lady and leftist opposition candidate Xiomara Castro appears set to become the country's first female president, a result that would put the left back in power 12 years after her husband was overthrown in a coup.

With more than half the votes counted, Xiomara Castro had at least 53 percent support and held a commanding lead of almost 20 percentage points over the ruling National Party's Nasry Asfura, according to a live count from Honduras's National Electoral Council (CNE) on Monday.

Xiomara Castro, whose husband Manuel Zelaya was deposed from the presidency in a 2009 coup backed by the U.S., business interests and military elites, claimed victory late on Sunday, even as the CNE said no result would be announced until the last vote is counted.

With more than 1.8 million votes counted, Castro held a margin of at least 350,000 votes. Despite warnings from the CNE to wait for official results, major Honduran news outlets have called the race as a victory for Xiomara.

Jubilant celebrations broke out at Castro's campaign headquarters as the vote count progressed and her lead held, with supporters chanting "JOH out" in reference to two-term President Juan Orlando Hernandez of the National Party.

Hernandez is deeply unpopular and has been implicated in a drug trafficking case in a United States federal court. He denies wrongdoing, but could face an indictment when he leaves office.

Castro, who would be the Central American nation's first female president, has promised big changes, including a constitutional overhaul, United Nations support in the fight against corruption, and looser abortion restrictions.

She has also floated the idea of dropping diplomatic support for Taiwan in favour of China, a policy proposal keenly watched in Washington, Beijing and Taipei.

In her speech Sunday evening, Xiomara Castro promised to strengthen direct democracy by holding referendums on key policies. Elsewhere in Latin America, that tool has sometimes in fact strengthened presidential power.

The election took place against a backdrop of deep socioeconomic problems and poverty exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, which helped push record numbers of Hondurans to leave for the United States.

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