

Rights Action

Day 55, Honduran Coup Resistance

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COUP CATALYZES HONDURAN WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/content/view/2066/68/>

By Laura Carlsen, 21 August 2009

On the morning of June 28, women's organizations throughout Honduras were preparing to promote a yes vote on the national survey to hold a Constitutional Assembly. Then the phone lines started buzzing.

In this poor Central American nation, feminists have been organizing for years in defense of women's rights, equality, and against violence. When the democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya was forcibly exiled by the armed forces, women from all over the country spontaneously organized to protect themselves and their families and demand a return to democracy. They called the new umbrella organization "Feminists in Resistance."

On August 18, Feminists in Resistance sat down with women from the international delegation for Women's Human Rights Week, which they organized to monitor and analyze human rights violations and challenges for the organization. One after another they told their stories in a long session that combined group therapy and political analysis—a natural mix at this critical point in Honduran history and the history of their movement.

Miriam Suazo relates the events of the day of the coup. "On the 28th, women began calling each other, saying 'what's happening?'" At first no-one really understood the full extent of the coup, she says, but networks mobilized quickly and women began to gather to share information and plan actions.

Independent feminists and feminists from different organizations immediately identified with each other and with the rising resistance to the coup. They began going out to rescue those who had been beaten and to trace individuals arrested by security forces.

For some, the shock of waking up to a coup d'etat wasn't new.

"This is my third coup," relates Marielena. "I was a girl when the coup in 1963 happened. Then I lived through the coup in 1972. We lived in front of a school and I saw how my mother faced the bullets, we thought they were going to kill her ... Later in the university in the 80s I lived through the repression with many of the women here ... So this has revived the story of my life."

There is a saying in Honduras about the Central American dirty war that "While the United States had its eye on Nicaragua and its hands in El Salvador, it had its boot on Honduras." For the older women who remember the terror of that time when over 200 people were disappeared and hundreds tortured and assassinated, the current coup stirs up deep fears.

Gilda Rivera, director of the Center for Women's Rights in Tegucigalpa, says, "I've had a messed-up life. I knew the victims of Billy Joya in the 80s ... Now I've been to the border twice, I've lived with a curfew over my head. I wake up alone, terrified."

The older women agree that they have grown and their movement has grown since the 80s.

Marielena notes, "Today's not the same as the 80s because there's a popular movement that the coup leaders never imagined ... What Zelaya

has done is symbolize the popular discontent accumulated over the years." She recounts the August 5 battle for the university where she works and the surprising participation of students. Her story is echoed in variations by many of the women present.

Although they battle nightmares and long-buried trauma, these women also see a new hope for the resistance this time around and for their own fight for women's rights. The repression and fear has strengthened their resolve.

"Sure, I'm afraid of dying but I'm not losing hope," Gilda says. "I see hope in the faces of the people at the marches. And the solidarity from women, from all of you, keeps me going."

For Jessica, events this year brought to mind the contra war of the 80s. "I never imagined that my daughters would have to be in a situation like this," she says. As a mother who has lived through the period before Honduras began its incomplete transition to democracy, and the period when democracy was merely a word that belied a much cruder reality in the country, she worries. "I told my daughter not to go to the march. She said, 'Mom, what about my autonomy?'"

"My little girl—she's 18 now, but she's still my little girl—ended up going with me to the march. It was really gratifying for me that we went together." These women know in their bodies and their hearts the costs of resistance. They also know that the costs of not resisting are far greater.

For the new generation of feminists, the catalyst came with the confrontation in front of the National Institute of Women on July 15. The day the coup-appointed head of the Institute was installed, Feminists in Resistance gathered to protest the takeover of "their" institution. Lesly says, "The police used their billy clubs, they grabbed me by the neck. I was filled with so much rage—I was drowning in it."

Many women in the organization experienced a turning point in their lives that day. Adelai explains, "(The Institute) was my turf, something that belonged to me, and they attacked us there. That was a direct assault on our condition as women ... What they did there really affected me personally."

Despite a lot of suffering, the women in the Feminists in Resistance meeting agree that the exhausting dynamic of constant mobilizations and repression has deepened their commitment. Their movement has also come together and developed closer ties to the general movement.

When word got out that the feminists were being attacked at the Women's Institute, demonstrators from the entire demonstration of the National Front against the Coup immediately marched to the Institute to defend the women and show their solidarity.

Although the Front leadership continues to be mostly male, men in the movement have publicly recognized the contributions of the feminist organizations and women in the resistance. From recovering the wounded, to marching day after day, to developing analysis and strategy papers, women's organizations have played a critical role in opposing the coup.

At a meeting between leaders of the Front and Feminists in Resistance earlier in the day, Salvador Zuniga, a leader of the Confederation of Indigenous and Black Peoples of Honduras (COPINH) and the Front, recognized that women have been among the most active and courageous in the resistance movement. He pointed out that the feminist movement is at the center of the rightwing reaction that led to the coup.

"One of the things that provoked the coup d'etat was that the president accepted a petition from the feminist movement regarding the day-after pill. Opus Dei mobilized, the fundamentalist evangelical churches mobilized, along with all the reactionary groups," he explained.

The unprecedented role of women in the nation's fight for democracy opens them up as a target for repression. Zuniga concluded in no uncertain terms, "What I can say is that the feminist compañeras are in greater danger than any other organization. This has to be made public."

Besides being at the receiving end of the billy clubs and pistols along with the rest of the movement, women suffer specific forms of repression and violence; their bodies have become part of the battleground. Human rights groups including the Women's Human Rights Week international delegation have documented rapes, beatings, sexual harassment, and discriminatory insults.

Army and police units routinely shout out "whores!" and "Go find a husband!" at the more and more frequent confrontations between the women and the coup security forces.

It's precisely that step out of the private sphere that makes these dangerous times so exciting and energizes the women of the organization. Many report being driven by the adrenaline of knowing that this time they are the ones defining their history. They ride a roller coaster

of emotions, often pitching from euphoria to despair in a single day. But one constant is the satisfaction of binding in a political project with other women who understand the full scope of what they demand and share the contradictory feelings storming inside.

The budding movement has come together in the heat of the coup as Feminists in Resistance faces some major challenges, the first to defeat the coup that now enters Day 54 on the resistance calendar.

As the rightwing consolidates power and its own perverse brand of institutionalism, they feel like they're looking down the barrel of a gun as far as their rights and safety are concerned.

Rumors circulate that the coup will dismantle the Institute for Women.

Congress is about to initiate obligatory military service, meaning that mothers throughout the country will be compelled to protect their children from forced induction.

Their freedom of expression, freedom of transit, freedom of assembly have all been curtailed under the coup, along with everyone else who opposes the regime, except for them the physical enforcement of reduced liberties is accompanied by acts of sexual violence and threats.

Big questions are on the table at the meeting of Honduran and international feminists. How to fight for a necessary return to institutional order at a time when the vulnerability and insufficient nature of those institutions has been exposed? How to avoid relegating women's demands to a lower plane in a period of acute political crisis? How to break through a media black-out that's even more impenetrable if you're against the coup and a woman? And how to simply hold your work and family together while spending hours a day in the streets and in meetings.

Bertha Cáceres is a leader of COPINH, a leader of the Front, and mother of four. In her political work she has integrated her specific demands as a woman and believes that organized women must be front-and-center in the resistance against the coup.

"First, because (our struggle as women) means confronting a dictatorship based on different forms of domination. We've said that it's not just destructive capitalism, not just the racism that has also been strengthened by this dictatorship, but also patriarchy. So we think our resistance as women means going a step further, toward a more strategic vision, a more long-term vision in fighting for our country."

She points to a national constitutional assembly as a fundamental goal for women. "For the first time we would be able to establish a precedent for the emancipation of women, to begin to break these forms of domination. The current constitution never mentions women, not once, so to establish our human rights, our reproductive, sexual, political, social, and economic rights as women would be to really confront this system of domination."

The women of Feminists in Resistance have no illusions that this will be an easy task. In addition to the challenges above, the movement is in transition to a new stage of nationwide local organization and long-term strategizing, at the same time as it faces increasing repression and human rights violations.

The question of the elections slated for November has created another deadline for definitions of September 1, when candidates must be registered and President Zelaya has sworn to return to the country.

Feminists in Resistance has a clear position to boycott any coup-sponsored elections, but some other parts of the movement and the international diplomatic community have been more ambiguous.

What's certain amid these rapidly changing national scenarios is that Honduran women have built a movement that, despite little media attention and the barriers of a male-dominated society, has garnered international support from women around the world and respect from the general resistance movement. Their organization will continue to play a central role in what happens next in Honduras—a key determinant of the course of democracy throughout the Hemisphere.

[Laura Carlsen is director of the Americas Program (www.americaspolicy.org). She is in Tegucigalpa as a member of the international delegation of Women's Human Rights Week in Honduras]

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ESCALATING SEXUAL AGRESSION AGAINST WOMEN IN HONDURAS IGNORED BY GLOBAL & NATIONAL MEDIA

August 17, 2009, By Margaret Thompson (margieratt@yahoo.com), FIRE – Feminist International Radio Endeavour/Radio Internacional Feminista

Tegucigalpa, Honduras -- Global & national media are ignoring the growing intensity of sexual aggression and torture of women

demonstrators in Honduras after the [June 28] military coup d'etat & and violent repression, according to Honduran feminists and activists.

"The media (in Honduras) are manipulating our minds, because we see (in the streets) what is really happening" and they are not reporting the reality of the violent repression by the military and police, declared Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, the first lady of Honduras and wife of Pres. Zelaya, who spoke to a Forum by Feminists in Resistance of Honduras today.

Most of the mainstream media in Honduras are owned by supporters of the military coup, so their reports reflect efforts by the defacto regime to create an image of "normality," that all is well, that there was in fact no military coup, they merely ousted an ex-president who violated the constitution, according to Castro de Zelaya.

The first lady spoke to an audience of about 120 mainly women, including an international delegation from Central America, Mexico, Canada, Spain and the United States participating in a Feminist Transgressional Watch. The group is visiting Honduras for Women's Human Rights Week, and conducting a feminist observatory of violations of women's human rights, and feminist strategies of resistance to the military coup.

As popular resistance to the military coup continues with massive daily street marches, military and police officials are becoming more aggressive with both female and male demonstrators, beating them with clubs, shooting into crowds with (rubber or real) bullets, conducting large scale arrests or detentions, torture, and assassinations, little of which is covered in many media reports, said Indira Mendoza of Catrachas.

Mendoza has videotaped some of these incidents directly or has testimony of witnesses. Hospitals and clinics are filled with young people in particular, with broken arm or leg bones, head injuries, and (rubber) bullet wounds.

Women's and human rights groups are receiving reports of escalating sexual aggression against women both in the demonstrations and in detentions, ranging from verbal obscenities and threats, to women being grabbed or beaten with batons on their buttocks, to torture and rape in detentions, noted Adela Coria of the Center for Women's Studies (CEM).

In today's Forum in Tegucigalpa, Yadida Minero reported that she had just taken a young woman to a radio station to denounce her torture and rape with a rifle while in detention at a police station.

Likewise, in the United States, the diminishing number of media reports on Honduras reflect how Pres. Obama, led by Secretary State Hillary Clinton, is backing away from his originally strong condemnation of the coup which ousted the legally elected President Zelaya, according to Breny Mendoza, a Honduran living in the US, and professor at California State University in Northridge.

The intensive US news coverage and outrage in the US mainstream media about the controversial presidential elections in Iran is a stark contrast to the minimal coverage of the military coup in Honduras which ousted a democratically elected president.

And the front and center role of women including feminists in the massive demonstrations, and the increasingly aggressive reaction of military and police to the women are also absent in media reports.

Despite the growing sexual aggression against women in Honduras, they are not filing complaints with the police for a number of reasons. Sara Rosales, a human rights lawyer with CEM, noted that women are afraid to report any violence since it is the police and military who are in part responsible for the violent repression, and the women also figure that such efforts are futile, because nothing will come of it.

After years of national and global campaigns about domestic violence, complaints filed by women had been increasing in recent years, says Rosales, also a member of Feminists in Resistance in Honduras.

There were 12,000 complaints filed with police in Honduras denouncing violence against women in 2007, and 20,000 reports last year, noted Rosales. But since the coup there have been very few complaints filed, which clearly demonstrates the connection between domestic violence and violence against women in armed conflict, both of which have increased in recent weeks.

Also, feminists and women's activists are very disheartened that the defacto coup government kicked out the Minister of Women under Pres. Zelaya, Selma Estrada de Uclés, and installed María Martha Díaz, a member of the ultra conservative Catholic group Opus Dei.

Díaz has refused to process any complaints filed regarding violations of women's human rights since the coup.

When feminists rallied outside the Institute of Women (INAM) to protest the policies of Díaz as defacto minister, she called in the military, who beat the protestors with batons.

Women are well aware of the irony of this assault. Years of struggle by feminists and other women is now lost, said Rosales. "It all changed in one day," noted Breny Mendoza, a professor at California State University in Northridge and originally from Honduras.

Honduran feminists and investigators have received a vast number of complaints about violations of women's human rights by the current coup regime in the past six weeks, and have conducted interviews for testimonies of 18 women.

As part of the feminist observatory, human rights lawyers and activists are working with Honduran feminists to prepare a report on these 18 cases, which were presented to the InterAmerican Commission on Human Rights, which is also visiting Honduras during the week of August 17th.

In the meantime, women including Feminists in Resistance are continuing to be front and center in the marches. "No more coups (golpes), and no more golpes (beatings) of women!" shout the women as they take to the streets. "Quien somos? Somos Feministas en Resistencia!"

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US Secretary of States Hillary Clinton has refused to declare the siege a coup d'etat. Some say that this is because it would mean cutting all military and economic aid, beyond the small amount frozen in early July. And Clinton, along with US Sen. John McCain recently met with defacto coup Pres. Michelleti in Washington, who had come to meet with members of Congress as well to convince them that all is well in Honduras.

Clinton is also on the board of the Millenium Development Corporation, which has continued to distribute millions of dollars to Honduras since the coup, according to Bill Conroy, as published in The Narcosphere on August 9, 2009.

FOR INFO ABOUT THIS FEMINIST DELEGATION, contact Margaret Thompson (margieratt@yahoo.com)

WHAT TO DO

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AMERICANS AND CANADIANS SHOULD CONTACT YOUR OWN MEDIA, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, SENATORS & MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT - EVERY DAY, DAY AFTER DAY - TO DEMAND:

- an end to police, army and para-military repression and respect for safety and human rights of all Hondurans
- unequivocal denunciation of the military coup
- no recognition of this military coup and the ‘de facto’ government of Roberto Micheletti
- no recognition of the November 2009 elections, that candidates are campaigning for, even as the country is militarized and repression is widespread
- unconditional return of the entire constitutional government of President Zelaya
- concrete and targeted economic, military and diplomatic sanctions against the coup plotters and perpetrators
- application of international and national justice against the coup plotters
- reparations for the illegal actions and rights violations committed during this illegal coup

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