

Rights Action
February 19, 2013

HONDURAS: Post-2009 Military Coup Nightmare Continues

The article below – “Charter cities: Neoliberal viagra” – how the repressive military-backed regime in Honduras pushes ahead with efforts to attract global investors and businesses to the “murder capital of the world”, to the most repressive country in the Americas.

Honduras' exceedingly high levels of violence and State repression are rooted directly in the June 2009 military coup that has been legitimized and effectively supported by the United States and Canada, and global investors and businesses including investors in the tourism industry that are partnering with the repressive regime to get control of huge swathes of land along Honduras' northern Caribbean coast. There are no signs that this repression and violence is decreasing in 2013, even as the pro-democracy sectors of Honduras, many grouped under the National Resistance Front, are courageously supporting the LIBRE political party that will participate in the November 2013 presidential elections ... in a hope of putting an end to the corruption, repression, impunity and fundamental lack of democracy.

WHAT TO DO / HOW TO SUPPORT: See below

CHARTER CITIES: NEOLIBERAL VIAGRA

By Belen Fernandez, belengarciabernal@gmail.com
<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/02/20132196563166201.html>
19 Feb 2013

No sooner was the blatantly colonial charter city project in Honduras declared unconstitutional by the Honduran Supreme Court last year than it found itself back on the agenda. The gist of the project is the creation of free-market enclaves on Honduran territory that are unaccountable to national laws and are instead governed by foreign corporate interests.

In a recent edition of Inside Story, Al Jazeera's Shihab Rattansi summarises the magical resurrection of the charter city movement after the court's ruling of unconstitutionality: "Congress, dominated by the ruling party, subsequently voted to sack four of the judges who were against the project, and that has helped clear the legal obstacles."

Given that Honduras is not even accountable to Honduran law - something made especially clear by the illegal coup d'état against President Manuel Zelaya in 2009 that was also facilitated by Congress - it's not immediately clear why legally autonomous city-states must be erected. A promotional video for the "special development regions" promises "more efficient and investment-friendly [rules] than the ones used today in the rest of the country", which disingenuously suggests that Honduras is not already one big free-market enclave in the sweatshop tradition.

Indeed, one of the motives for deposing Zelaya had to do with his less than total obsequiousness to foreign capital. Current President Pepe Lobo, who ascended to power via illegitimate elections held in the aftermath of the coup, obediently set about courting the global elite with an event called "Honduras is Open for Business". Bringing together investors from 55 countries, the conference's distinguished guest list included US officials, the world's

richest person Carlos Slim, Colombia's former president-cum-human rights violation extraordinaire Alvaro Uribe, and Paul Romer - mastermind of the charter city concept.

UTOPIAN ANTI-DEMOCRACY

Economist and political commentator Maricruz Magowan, one of the participants in the Inside Story discussion, argues during the programme that Lobo has embraced the charter city initiative as a means of signalling that Honduras is on the path to democracy following "the problem". Rattansi interjects the literal term: "the coup".

Of course, if Lobo really wanted to promote a democratic image of Honduras, he might refrain from presiding over an illegitimate regime and a system of institutionalised state violence and impunity. As Dana Frank - professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz - noted in a New York Times Op-Ed back in January 2012:

"At least 34 members of the [political] opposition have disappeared or been killed, and more than 300 people have been killed by state security forces since the coup, according to the leading human rights organisation Cofadeh. At least 13 journalists have been killed since Mr Lobo took office, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists."

In her assessment of Lobo's motivations, Magowan ludicrously implies that there is something fundamentally democratic about auctioning off portions of sovereign territory to foreigners without consulting the territory's inhabitants. Romer's calculation that elections in the new cities should not be held from the outset but rather at some as-yet-to-be-determined point in the future underscores the anti-democratic foundations of the initiative, jovially characterised by Magowan as the pursuit of a "utopian economic society".

Romer's selection of Singapore as an inspirational model for the charter city experiment also raises questions about what sort of human rights the residents of economic utopia may have to look forward to. According to a 2004 report by Amnesty International, Singapore's overzealous application of the death penalty often affects "the most marginalised or vulnerable members of society, including drug addicts, the poorly educated, the impoverished or unemployed, and migrant workers".

The boundaries between utopia and non-utopia become even more blurred when we recall that similar demographics in pre-charter city Honduras are regularly targeted in state-sanctioned extrajudicial assassinations.

NEOLIBERAL VIAGRA

Romer unsurprisingly stages numerous appearances in *The World Is Flat*, Thomas Friedman's extended ode to US corporate dominance of the globe, in which the Romerian outlook is presented as follows: "If you come up with the next Windows or Viagra, you can potentially sell one to everyone in the world. So idea-based workers do well in globalisation, and fortunately America as a whole has more idea-driven workers than any country in the world."

Unfortunately for the billions of people in the world who are not in a position to sell false but heavily remunerated ideas concerning global flatness, Friedman also paraphrases Romer's acknowledgement that "if you are selling manual labour - or a piece of lumber or a slab of steel - the value of what you have to sell does not necessarily increase when the market expands, and it may decrease".

Areas with high concentrations of non-idea-based workers are, it seems, particularly susceptible to Romer's post-*World Is Flat* brainchild, and in a 2009 speech he exhorted the

African continent to convert its "immense stretches of land" into charter cities. After witnessing Romer deftly euphemise the practice of colonialism into "some arrangement that's a little bit like an escrow account, where you [ie, Africa] put land in the escrow account and [a] partner nation takes responsibility for it", one is left wondering whether the economist might rehabilitate other relevant archaic practices, such as the slave trade.

As for the planned conversion of Honduras into a cluster of neoliberal city-states, Romer withdrew from the process last September when the Honduran government failed to play by his rules. Shortly after his departure in search of other conquerable lands, charter cities were pronounced unconstitutional but then swiftly resuscitated.

With thoroughly apparent skepticism, Inside Story's Rattansi remarks that the charter city movement conveniently "solves a number of problems" for the domestic oligarchy: "It makes Honduras look like it's forward-thinking, while sorting out various land conflicts that have been going on for decades" and that pit peasant-farmers and Afro-indigenous communities against elite interests.

According to propaganda emitted by the Honduran regime and its allies in The New York Times, The Economist, The Wall Street Journal, Foreign Policy magazine and other venues, the splicing of national territory into enclaves governed by international investors - who by definition are concerned with maximising profit rather than human rights - constitutes the epitome of innovation and humanitarian justice.

All the more reason not to associate the future with progress.

[Belen Fernandez is the author of The Imperial Messenger: Thomas Friedman at Work, released by Verso in 2011. Follow her on Twitter: @MariaBelen_Fdez. The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial policy.]

BACKGROUND ARTICLES: Honduras As Murder Capital Of The World, Repression Capital Of The Americas

Murder Capital Of The World

- McClatchy Newspapers, January 20, 2012: <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/2012/01/20/136474/crime-booms-as-central-americans.html>
- NACLA, January 21, 2012: <http://nacla.org/news/graft-greed-mayhem-turn-honduras-murder-capital-world>
- New York Times, January 27, 2012: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/opinion/in-honduras-a-mess-helped-by-the-us.html?_r=2
- NPR Radio, February 11, 2012: <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/11/146668852/in-honduras-police-accused-of-corruption-killings>

Journalist Killing Capital:

- Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. Congress, Testimony of Rev. Ismael Moreno Coto, July 26, 2012: <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2012/moreno260712.html>

LGBT Killing Capital:

- Miami Herald, January 17, 2012:
<http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/17/2593984/honduras-is-test-of-new-us-policy.html>

Inmate Killing Capital:

- BBC World News, February 15, 2012: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17038259?print=true>
- The Real News, February 24, 2012:
http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=7979

Lawyer Killing Capital:

- United Nations, April 11, 2012:
<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41745&Cr=latin+america&Cr1>

Honduran people Under A Permanent Coup D'etat

- The Nation, October 12, 2012, "How Low Can Honduras Go?":
<http://www.thenation.com/article/170543/how-low-can-honduras-go>
- OFRANEH (Garifuna People's Organization), December 13, 2012, "Honduran People Under A Permanent Coup D'etat": <http://rightsaction.org/action-content/honduran-people-under-permanent-coup-detat>
- CBS News, December 31, 2012, "Inside The World's Deadliest Country: Honduras":
http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57561301/inside-the-worlds-deadliest-country-honduras/

Honduras: The War On Peasants

- February 12, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/honduras-the-war-on-peasa_b_2632033.html

WHAT TO DO:

Please send copies of this information, and your own letters, to your Canadian and American politicians (MPs, Congress members and Senators) and to your own media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the democratically elected government of President Zelaya, Honduras has become the 'Murder Capital of the world'. State repression has again reached the levels of the worst years of the 1980s. Since the coup, the U.S. and Canadian governments have 'legitimized the illegitimate' post-coup regime. North American companies and investors have increased their business activities in Honduras since the coup. In no small part, this regime remains in power due to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada.

TO MAKE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATIONS (in Canada and the U.S.)

In support of pro-democracy, community based organizations in Honduras, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- CANADA: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

CREDIT-CARD DONATIONS can be made (in Canada and U.S.):
<http://www.rightsaction.org/tax-deductible-donations>

- be a monthly credit card donor (Canada and U.S.)
- to donate stock, contact: info@rightsaction.org

MORE INFO: info@rightsaction.org

- Get on/off Rights Action's listserv: www.rightsaction.org
- Follow Rights Action on facebook: www.facebook.com/RightsAction.org

Please re-post and re-publish this information