

Rights Action
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Honduras: The Thugocracy Next Door
by Dana Frank, POLITICO Magazine

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Politico Commentary re: Honduras

http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/americas-most-awkward-allies-103889_Page3.html#.Uw9PMY27mjE

16. Honduras: There are few places you'd rather end up than a Honduran prison, where the conditions are miserable and vicious street gangs call the shots. Since the United States controversially recognized Porfirio Lobo, the president who came to power after Honduras's 2009 coup, Lobo and his successor have unleashed a repressive police state—and yet managed to remain the world's murder capital. Honduran officials, particularly the military-controlled police, have deep ties to organized crime and drug traffickers, and have been accused of a range of human rights abuses, allegedly targeting political opponents for imprisonment or even assassination. But the United States, which used Honduras as a staging ground for the "dirty wars" of the 1980s and still hosts an air base there, remains the country's largest donor, with tens of millions of dollars in annual aid, including to the military—no small figure in a place where the entire police budget is just \$151 million.

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<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/honduras-the-thugocracy-ext-door-103883.html#.Uw9MT427mjE>

Early on the morning of Oct. 23, more than 50 members of Honduras's new military police force surrounded Edwin Espinal's house in the capital, Tegucigalpa, using trucks and police cars to block off access to his home.

The officers were clad in riot gear, with black balaclavas pulled over their faces and assault rifles at the ready. Supposedly looking for arms or other contraband, they searched and trashed Espinal's house, breaking at least 15 doors inside and out. They found no arms. They found no drugs. Espinal went into hiding.

Espinal, a Honduran opposition activist, had been captured once before and tortured by the police in 2010, targeted for his ongoing opposition to the June 2009 military coup that deposed Manuel Zelaya, Honduras's democratically elected president. At the request of the Organization of American States' human rights commission, Espinal had for a time received protective security from the Honduran government. But he remained active in the opposition, and the police kept harassing him. After the raid, the chilling effect was clear.

This is daily life for Hondurans since the coup, as their government runs roughshod over the rule of law and terrorizes the opposition, all the while apparently allowing drug traffickers to insinuate themselves into the highest levels of the national congress and even the presidential administration.

In the months after Zelaya's overthrow, Porfirio Lobo, a former lawmaker from the country's conservative National Party, assumed the presidency through an election that was boycotted by almost all the Honduran opposition and dismissed as illegitimate by major international observers. He then swiftly reappointed to top government positions military figures who had carried out the coup in the first place.

Over the objections of much of the rest of Latin America, the United States [recognized](#) the election as legitimate even before the polls had closed, appearing to push back against the Zelaya administration's alliances with left-leaning Latin American governments that had come to power in the previous decade.

Since then, Washington has continued to legitimize and support the coup-regime government, which has been a spectacular human rights disaster: The United Nations has said Honduras has the [highest murder rate](#) in the world, and Reporters Without Borders has [named](#) the country one of the most dangerous for journalists.

Even the Honduran government acknowledges that its police and military have ties to drug traffickers and organized crime. But U.S. funding for the forces, under the auspices of fighting crime and drug trafficking, has nonetheless increased annually since a brief, partial hiatus in 2009—reaching approximately \$27 million in 2012, and at least that in 2013. (The United States also has an air base in the country, at Soto Cano, for which it paid \$25 million in 2011 to upgrade the facilities, on top of \$89 million for military operations in the country.)

The Committee for the Defense of Human Rights of Honduras, an NGO, announced that it had received [5,000 reports](#) of human rights violations last year in the country's northern region alone. Last August, a Honduran government commission charged with cleaning up the security forces admitted that 70 percent of the country's police are beyond saving. Impunity for crimes of all sorts is now the norm.

Police Chief “El Tigre” Bonilla, A Known Death Squad Leader

The most egregious example is perhaps Juan Carlos “El Tigre” Bonilla, the man tapped as national director of Honduran police to lead the cleanup. Immediately after Bonilla was appointed in May 2012, a former police inspector released the findings of an investigation documenting that Bonilla had been a death squad leader overseeing assassinations of alleged gang members in the late 1990s and early 2000s. He continued to serve as police director even after the Associated Press reported last year that the Honduran police under Bonilla's control were responsible for at least six new death squad “social cleansing” murders of alleged gang members.

Members of the U.S. Congress have challenged the Obama administration loud and clear about its Honduras policy. Although the United States has tepidly [acknowledged](#) Honduran abuses, it has continued to back funding for Honduras's repressive security forces.

Ninety-four lawmakers wrote to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in March 2012 asking that the United States suspend police and military aid to Honduras, and the 2012 appropriations bill attached human rights conditions to a large portion of the security aid to Honduras. The State Department then withheld funds for Bonilla and those under his direct supervision.

And in March of last year, William Brownfield, assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs, [insisted](#) that the United States had “no contact” with Bonilla and did not “work with” or “have any relations” with him.

In August 2013, however, a spokesman for the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa admitted that the United States was still talking with Bonilla, who himself said he was meeting regularly with the embassy—and once even called the U.S. government his “[best ally and support](#).”

Bonilla was finally fired in December—but not before the Honduran military had received an estimated \$20 million in U.S. funds in 2013, along with a loan of \$60 million the year before from the Inter-American Development Bank.

The new 2014 appropriations bill, passed in January, contains even stronger human rights restrictions on U.S. aid to Honduran security forces, but in the past the State Department has consistently certified that such conditions have been met, to keep the spigot of security aid open.

More Militarization, More Violence

Meanwhile, rather than cleaning up the police, Lobo and the Honduran congress have now enlisted the military to perform police functions, including creating a new 5,000-strong military police force. In so doing, the government is promising that militarization will protect citizens from the very security problems it has countenanced and even helped create.

The results have been terrifying: Roving bands of soldiers now routinely menace neighborhoods of all classes in the country’s big cities, setting up random checkpoints and harassing people. In May 2012, soldiers chased down a 15-year-old boy, Ebed Yanes, who had passed a checkpoint on his motorcycle, and shot him to death in an alley. According to the [Associated Press](#), the soldiers responsible for the killing turned out to be U.S.-trained and vetted, their equipment was U.S.-donated and the commanding officer who subsequently ordered a coverup had been trained in the United States.

Political Repression

In this already menacing climate, the Honduran government has deliberately targeted the opposition, in effect criminalizing much social

protest. On July 15, for example, the engineers' battalion of the Honduran armed forces shot and killed Tomás García, an indigenous activist who was protesting a hydroelectric dam in Intibuca.

Last summer, Bertha Cáceres, the leader of one of the most prominent indigenous rights groups in the country, was charged along with two other activists for organizing a blockade to protect indigenous land from being usurped for a dam project.

In Honduras's Aguán Valley, the NGO Rights Action has [documented](#) widespread human rights abuses by the U.S.-funded 15th battalion of the Honduran armed forces against campesinos defending their land rights, nearly 100 of whom have been killed by state and private actors since the coup.

The case of Héctor Iván Mejía, currently director of Honduras's Police Academy, underscores just how out of control the situation is. Mejía has been under criminal prosecution for more than two years for allegedly repressing an opposition demonstration in September 2010, while he was chief of police in San Pedro Sula, the country's second-largest city; his forces reportedly tear-gassed protesters and raided an opposition radio station. All the while, Mejía has remained on the job. In fact, since the case began, he was promoted twice to very top positions (though he was recently demoted).

No Light At End Of Tunnel

Prospects for any change in the near future appear dim, given the new president inaugurated last month, Juan Orlando Hernández, a member of Lobo's party. Hernández may or may not have actually won the November presidential election, which was widely tainted by fraud, vote buying and military intimidation.

Moreover, he takes office with his own impressive track record of subverting the rule of law: Not only was he an enthusiastic supporter of the 2009 coup, but as president of the congress he led the illegal 2012 ouster of four members of the Supreme Court. And last year he backed the illegal naming of a new attorney general to a five-year term.

Hernández has also been the country's most vocal supporter of the new military police, having built his presidential campaign on the promise of "a

soldier on every corner.” Leading up to Hernández’s election, at least 18 activists in LIBRE, the new opposition party, were assassinated. The victims were often just ordinary people—like Maria Amparo Pineda Duarte and Julio Ramon Maradiaga. They were driving home from a training session for election observers on Nov. 23, the night before voters headed to the polls, when masked gunmen with high-caliber weapons ambushed and killed them.

The next day, the State Department issued a public [statement](#) about the election: “The United States congratulates the Honduran people for their peaceful participation.”

[Dana Frank is professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz.]

What to do/ Quoi faire/ Que hacer

In Honduras, Repression, Violence, Impunity And Corruption Are Policy

Americans / Canadians: Keep on, keep on, keep on ... sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your politicians (MPs, Congress members and Senators) and media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the last democratically elected government, Honduras has become the ‘Murder Capital of the world’. Repression has reached the levels of the worst years of the 1980s.

Since 2009, the U.S. and Canadian governments have legitimized a succession of illegitimate and repressive regimes. North American companies and investors, and “development” banks (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank) have increased business activities in African palm production, sweatshops, “model cities”, tourism and mining. The Honduran regime remains in power due in large part to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada and the “development” banks. Across Honduras, community based organizations in the pro-democracy movement need considerably more human rights accompaniment, funding, media attention on the harms and violations and education and activism in Canada and the U.S.

Contact:

- Member Of Parliament:
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- Congress: <http://www.house.gov/> to get info for your member of Congress, and call: 202-224-3121
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