

ABC news: Canadian human rights activist Karen Spring marries political prisoner Edwin Espinal in max-security Honduran military jail
<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/abc-news-canadian-human-rights-activist-karen-spring-marries-political-prisoner-edwin-espinal>

Day #300 of detention: Edwin was jailed by the U.S. and Canadian-backed regime on January 19, 2018, while protesting government repression and corruption, electoral fraud and economic destitution --- the very reasons why 10s of 1000s of Honduras flee every year.

Couple weds in a maximum-security prison to draw attention to repression in Honduras

By Kaeyln Forde, Nov.10, 2018, ABC news

[Original & photos: <https://abcnews.go.com/International/couple-weds-maximum-security-prison-draw-attention-repression/story?id=58743837>]



[Oksana Szostak]

The bride wore red, the color of the resistance movement. The groom wore the gray pants and white T-shirt required of inmates at La Tolva, the maximum-security prison where he has been held since January for protesting against repression in Honduras, the country from which the majority of the migrants in the so-called caravan making its way to the U.S. border have fled.

Karen Spring, 34, and Edwin Espinal, 42, had never dreamed of a [wedding](#) day like this. But on Oct. 18, they tied the knot in front of a few witnesses, including another political prisoner, and armed guards wearing balaclavas over their faces. Instead of being filled with hotel and rehearsal dinner information, the couple's [wedding website](#) shows the prison's stark gray buildings.



[Courtesy Karen Spring. Political prisoner Edwin Espinal married human rights activist Karen Spring in a prison in Honduras, Oct. 18, 2018.]

"We weren't allowed to have a camera. I wasn't allowed to wear any jewelry," Spring told ABC News. "Behind us, there were masked police officers and military. We got married in a hostile [environment](#), but we tried to make the best of it."

In the months before their wedding, Spring and Espinal's visits had been sporadic. The phone service in the prison went down in April after a prison uprising, she said, and Espinal isn't allowed paper, so the couple communicates through notes he is able to scrawl on toilet paper with a contraband pen. Sometimes, their approved visits last just two hours, sometimes as long as four. Spring said she brings Espinal four meals at a time and he eats them as quickly as he can. He has already lost 40 pounds in prison, she said, and is only allowed two hours of sunlight per month.

The couple's plans for starting a family have been put on hold as Espinal languishes in pre-trial detention in a facility usually reserved for violent criminals.

"Edwin's conviction is really strong. If you talk to him, he says, 'I know why I'm here. I'm a political prisoner amongst really dangerous people in this jail. We were fighting for change in this country and going to jail was part of that process,'" Spring said. "He's really clear about it, and that gives me a lot of strength. It makes it easier, almost, because I know he has that strength."

In January, the Public Prosecutor's Office filed charges of arson and other damage to property, aggravated damage and using explosives and homemade incendiary devices against Espinal and fellow human rights defender Raul Ordonez, [according to Amnesty](#)

[International](#), and the two men appeared at an initial hearing on January 20 and 22 at a court that's usually reserved for organized crime cases. A spokesperson for the Public Prosecutor's Office declined to comment on Espinal's case at this time.

Most of the migrants trying to reach the U.S. border are from Honduras, the country with one of the [highest homicide rates in the world](#) outside of a war zone. Nearly two thirds of people live in poverty, [according to the World Bank](#). In 2016, [U.N. experts called it](#) "one of the most hostile and dangerous countries for human rights defenders." Human rights defenders routinely "suffer threats, attacks, and killings," a [2018 Human Rights Watch report](#) found.

In November 2017, the country held a presidential election with [widespread fraud and violence](#). Thousands took to the streets to protest the re-election of Juan Orlando Hernandez, who changed the constitution to allow himself to run again. Espinal, who had previously been targeted for his activism and was [granted precautionary measures in 2010](#) from the Organization of American States, was among them.

The government's "response to the post-electoral protests led to serious human rights violations," [according to the U.N.](#) Dozens were killed and more than a thousand were arrested, according to the U.N., including Espinal and Ordonez.

After being arrested on charges of arson and other damage to property, Espinal and Ordonez appeared at an initial hearing before a court that's usually reserved for organized crime cases, according to [Amnesty International](#). Since then, there has been a lack of transparency about the status of their cases and their lawyers have not been able to review important materials or meet with them regularly, Amnesty International found.

Spring, a human rights defender from Canada who has lived in Honduras for years, said her husband's plight highlights the stark reality at home that has led many Hondurans to turn to their last resort -- fleeing north -- after trying to change their country through the ballot box. "People are fleeing in the caravan because they know there is a significant cost here internally to protesting, so that's why they're fleeing to the U.S. border as an alternative to protest," Spring said. "If they stay in Honduras and protest, they face the same conditions that Edwin and the 13 other political prisoners face, which is harsh conditions and basically no due process."

Spring spoke with ABC News from the couple's home in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, about her hopes for their future and why she understands the migrants' journey.

What made you decide to get married now?

Spring: Edwin and I have been together for almost nine years and we had never gotten married because it was never something that was important to me. Not the level of commitment to him but the actual act of signing a paper. Mostly, it was a demonstration

of my commitment to him and getting him out and to keep fighting for his freedom and that of Raul Alvarez and the other political prisoners in the country.

For me, it was a commitment to continue fighting for him and to take care of things that he can't do for himself because he is in prison, and the accompaniment of the other families of political prisoners. So it was a commitment to him as my partner and a commitment to the bonds of how we met, the way that our relationship has grown and developed over time largely because of our *compañerismo* in the struggle in Honduras.

How has your relationship mirrored or coincided with some of the big human rights struggles in the country since the 2009 coup?

Spring: I hope I don't cry. I met Edwin shortly after his partner, Wendy Avila, was killed during a big eviction and repression outside of the Brazilian embassy when overthrown President Manuel Zelaya snuck back into the country shortly after the coup and had to seek refuge inside the embassy. So I met Edwin a couple of months after he buried Wendy. She died of respiratory problems after the gassing and repression outside of the embassy.

Then through the almost nine years that we have been together, we have worked together in the movement. He did a lot of work in an urban neighborhood where he grew up, which is considered one of the most dangerous and gang-controlled neighborhoods in Tegucigalpa. I accompanied him in a lot of his struggles to stop privatization of public spaces for youth in his neighborhood, especially recreational spaces where kids went and played basketball and soccer.

Edwin was a very close friend of [murdered environmental activist] [Berta Caceres](#). We both rushed to La Esperanza as a response to her assassination. Edwin was constantly by her side, especially when she was concerned for her security.

The ups and downs of our relationship and his personal life have really been entwined with the major moments of the struggles of the social movements in Honduras. Him being arrested almost two months after the 2017 elections where there was widespread fraud is just another way that our relationship has become more strengthened through his struggles and our struggles. But it also shows how much political persecution he faces as a result of his longtime activism in Honduras and demand for change here.

What were the circumstances surrounding his arrest?

Spring: Edwin has faced nine years of persecution, so he was one of the targets of the government and has been for a really long time. When there were widespread reports of fraud after the elections in November 2017, they were met with widespread protests all around the country, maybe even more than after the 2009 coup. The country was literally shut down and it was the way the people were expressing their deep discontent with the policies of the current government of Juan Orlando Hernandez, but also the policies he implemented, which dramatically changed the practical, everyday lives of

Hondurans. Privatization meant higher prices of electricity, there was no medication in hospitals, people associated with the government robbed a lot of money in the healthcare system.

So thousands and thousands took to the streets and Edwin was one of them to protest allegations of fraud. There was a belief that the votes of Honduran people were not being respected. There was a military curfew imposed, hundreds of people arrested and then released. Edwin was arrested on allegations of being part of a protest on January 12 that was called by the opposition, who were demanding respect for their votes, and that Juan Orlando Hernandez step down because his re-election was illegal.

They planned a big protest in Tegucigalpa. During that protest, there were several incidences of property damage. So Edwin was one of two people who were arrested and thrown in a maximum security prison on charges of property damage. It was very clear how much the government had targeted him throughout the whole process of the elections to arrest him and put him in jail. The disproportionate use of force against protesters and the harsh punishment used on people arrested for protesting was very clear when you look at the fact that there were only 30 people killed in those protests and only one police officer charged with killing.

The caravan has brought some of these longstanding issues in Honduras to the forefront. Why are people fleeing now?

Spring: Hondurans saw protesting during the 2017 electoral crisis as a way to address poverty, corruption, drug trafficking, the mafia state, impunity, and the murders of environmentalists, lawyers and journalists. When the U.S. government and Canada and came out shortly before Christmas recognizing the election and ignoring the protests, ignoring the murders in the street, ignoring the severe crackdown on Hondurans who were demanding real democracy and respect for their votes, Hondurans have basically used the caravan as their potentially last option to raise serious concerns that they cannot live in Honduras anymore.

There are about 300 people who leave the country quietly per day in Honduras, and it's not something that hits the media, but it's something that's been going on a long time. But they see the caravan as a way of saying, 'Well, if the U.S. wants to keep propping up a government that doesn't work for us, that we don't want, then our only option is to flee to the border, and we'll do it in mass numbers.' So that's what the caravan is doing ... It's another strategy, planned or not, to raise the issue that they can't live in their own country anymore.

Do you hope to have another wedding ceremony when Edwin is released?

Spring: Definitely. That was one of the things we decided: we were going to really wait to celebrate our marriage until he is free and he's out and we want to celebrate it on our own terms, not on the terms imposed on us by the Honduran government and the maximum security prison. We will definitely have a celebration. It's difficult for us to talk

about it because we have very little communication -- there are no phones in the prison -- but we want to celebrate with people in the movement and the people who have kept the issue of political prisoners as a relevant national theme. The people who have been next to us since the 2009 coup. We will definitely celebrate. We are hoping that all of the political prisoners will be freed.

What will you do when he is released?

Spring: This has been one of the hardest and most difficult experiences of my life. As I have been fighting for his freedom, I have faced persecution from the government as well. They have tried very hard to silence me and the campaign. And it's so hard to imagine what it will be like to have him free. But one of the things we want to do is just spend time together. To have an opportunity to talk and spend time together in a warm environment that isn't cement walls and handcuffs and locked doors. So I think I just look forward to him being able to be outside, for us to spend time together, have him at home, the everyday stuff. Just to have him around, that's what I want.

Write (pester) U.S. & Cdn politicians

Keep on sending info to your elected politicians in the U.S. and Canada, holding them to account for maintaining full economic and military relations with Honduras. Keep on supporting community groups in Honduras, struggling to defend human rights, restore democracy and to put an end to the undemocratic Cdn & U.S. backed regime in power – a dangerous struggle.

United States: Contact your Senators (<https://whoismyrepresentative.com/>) and Congress members (<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>).

Canada: Contact your Member of Parliament (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>), and:

- Ambassador James Hill, Embassy of Canada in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua, James.Hill@international.gc.ca, tgipa@international.gc.ca
- Minister Chrystia Freeland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, 1-613-992-5234, 1-343-203-1851; chrystia.freeland@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland.c1d@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland@international.gc.ca

Honduran Ambassador to Canada, Sofia Cerrato Rodriguez: ambassador@embassyhonduras.hn, 1-613-233-8900

Demands - short term

The U.S. and Canadian governments must:

- Rescind their “legitimization” of the Nov. 26, 2017 elections;
- Condemn the multiple acts of electoral fraud carried out by the illegitimate regime headed by Juan Orlando Hernandez;

- Condemn government repression, including the killing of over 40 pro-democracy protesters, and the illegal detentions of dozens of political prisoners, including Edwin Espinal;
- Suspend business and military-police-security relations with the government of Honduras, until the political / electoral crisis has been resolved and impartial justice processes are proceeded against the intellectual and material authors of the electoral fraud and stolen elections, and killings and illegal jailings.

Demands - medium term

There must be legislative inquiries in the U.S. and Canada into the causes of Honduras' now endemic repression and exploitation, corruption and impunity, with specific focus on the role played by the U.S. and Canadian governments:

- In support of the 2009 military coup
- In support and legitimization of fraudulent and violent elections in 2009, 2013 and 2017
- In support (in the case of Canada) of the promoting and signing of the potentially illegitimate "Free Trade Agreement" with the government of Honduras;
- In support of the expansion of corporate investments in Honduras (mining, garment "sweatshop" industry, bananas, hydro-electric dams, tourism, African palm, etc.), while turning a blind eye to and – in effect – benefitting from repression, fraud, corruption and impunity.

More information

- Karen Spring, Honduras Solidarity Network, spring.kj@gmail.com / <https://www.facebook.com/freeEDWINESPINALibertad/> / <https://twitter.com/EdwinLibertad> / <http://freedwinespinallibertad.blogspot.com/> / freedwinespinal@gmail.com
- Janet Spring (Karen's mom, Edwin's mom-in-law), Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor <https://simcoecountyhondurasrightsmonitor.wordpress.com/> / janet.spring@utoronto.ca
- Grahame Russell, Rights Action, grahame@rightsaction.org

Tax-Deductible Donations (Canada & U.S.)

To support community groups in Honduras, responding to the permanent human rights and repression crisis, including the political prisoners, make check payable to "Rights Action" and mail to:

- U.S.: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
- Canada: (Box 552) 351 Queen St. E, Toronto ON, M5A-1T8

Credit-Card Donations: <http://rightsaction.org/donate/>

Donations of stock? Write to: info@rightsaction.org

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