

Caravans are the new and tragic identity of the poor in Honduras

By Padre Melo (Father Ismael Moreno), SJ

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/caravans-are-the-new-and-tragic-identity-of-the-poor-in-honduras>

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but not because of the causes that impoverished them.” (Padre Melo)*

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This six-part alliance is Honduras’ Axis of Evil.

They are the ones responsible for Hondurans leaving. They are the explanation for why the caravans attract thousands of our fellow citizens.” (Padre Melo)



In December 2017, Padre Melo joined 100s of 1000s of Hondurans in the streets protesting presidential elections violently and fraudulently stolen by the government of Juan Orlando Hernandez, staunch “democratic allie” of the U.S. and Canada. During the post-electoral fraud protests, over 30 Hondurans were killed by police and military, dozens more jailed as political prisoners, including Edwin Espinal, husband of the Canadian Karen Spring, who has been illegally detained in abusive conditions in a max-security military prison since January 19, 2018, “awaiting trial” on charges related to protesting!

Caravans are the new and tragic identity of the poor in Honduras

By Father Ismael Moreno, SJ (Padre Melo)

Honduras has become the country of the caravans, a reality not explainable by just one factor. Many years went by of small groups of poor Hondurans silently and constantly exiting through the border until what was small grew huge. Today multitudes of people are just waiting for a little push to set out on the highways that will take them North.

Worldwide news

The first of the large caravans left Honduras on October 13, 2018. Another large one left in December and another on January 15, 2019. Many are asking who's encouraging Hondurans to leave their country and join the caravans.

The US Embassy's commercial attaché in Honduras has broadcasted publicity spots promoting the idea that strange agents are manipulating Hondurans to do this in order to make the Honduran and US governments look bad.

So many pro-caravan factors are being argued that the caravans are now surrounded by an air of "mystery." But is a "hairy hand" really organizing them? Whether or not that is the case, and whatever power such a hand may have, the caravans are a social phenomenon that has exceeded all predictions, turning them into worldwide news. Migration from Eastern Europe, Syria and parts of Africa were already international news. Now Central America, Honduras in particular, has been added to the agenda of newscasts around the world.

Never have we seen in our country so many international media that never before reported on Honduras now coming together to cover an "event of the poor" like the January 2019 caravan. Reporters came from Japan, Russia, Norway, Arab countries...

Today Honduras is in the news because of its poor, but not because of the causes that impoverished them.

The caravans are a phenomenon that has overwhelmed churches, NGOs, in fact all civil society organizations and governments. It's a growing and uncontrollable phenomenon. Most of the common folk who watch Hondurans go by respond with simple gestures of generous and spontaneous solidarity. At the other extreme, Trump's government has threatened them with a military response and the Honduran regime tried, unsuccessfully, to create a police barrier at the border between Honduras and Guatemala.

Three hundred people leave every day

The caravans are a social phenomenon with the improvised leadership of rural and urban impoverished people. It has no more organization than is needed to keep them alive and determined to trudge on until they reach the United States.

In April 2017 there was a smaller caravan of about 800 Central Americans, 75% of them Hondurans. With this new caravan, the unorganized movement increased, with about 300 Hondurans crossing the Aguascalientes border between Honduras and Guatemala daily for several years, even if many got off along the way.

Last October, news sprang up in San Pedro Sula, a city on Honduras' Atlantic coast, that a caravan of thousands of people was being organized. San Pedro Sula has the international reputation of being one of the most violent cities in the world; researchers and analysts often call it "Ciudad Juarez of the South." A group of about 200 Hondurans announced that they would be walking in a caravan towards the US. leaving from the local bus terminal on Saturday October 13.

"It was Bartolo"

At first, that caravan was identified with the name of Bartolo Fuentes, a social leader in the city of El Progreso, who simply said in an interview with local media that he would be joining the caravan for a few days.

Bartolo Fuentes had accompanied the previous caravan of April 2017 as a journalist. As he was also a member of Freedom and Refoundation (LIBRE), the Honduran opposition party founded by Mel Zelaya, Bartolo Fuentes was quickly scapegoated, accused of being the "brains" behind the caravan. In a press conference, the minister of foreign affairs, accompanied by the minister of human rights, said "Bartolo Fuentes is to blame for this caravan; claiming he organized and instigated many people to manipulate them and lead them on this dangerous journey." He called on the Public Ministry to proceed with charges against Fuentes. As tends to happen with things in our country, once the caravan was gone on its way north, Bartolo's name was soon discarded in favor of other scapegoats more powerful than he.

By the time the caravan crossed into Guatemala at Aguascalientes it had already grown to about 4,000 people. They managed to break through the barrier set up at the border post by both Honduran and Guatemalan police. The caravan continued to expand as it crossed through Guatemalan territory and approached the Mexican border.

"Returnees"

The Honduran regime, surely with financing from the US government, conceived a plan to convince migrants to return to Honduras. Each one was promised immediate help and a package of services later. A few hundred accepted. Those who yielded to the plan were transported back by bus or plane. Witnesses say many of the returnees were National Party activists, serving as bait for the regime's publicity campaign.

Many more, however, continued the journey. By the end of October, some two weeks after departing, about 10,000 people had made it to the border state of Chiapas in Mexico.

Positive changes are happening in Mexico

By the time the second wave of caravans started in January 2019, the Mexican political scene

had changed. Andrés Manuel López Obrador's new government had taken office. The discrimination and rejection of the previous government were replaced with welcoming policies of respect for human rights. Humanitarian transit visas were granted to all the migrants.

By the end of January, less than two weeks after this caravan's departure, about 17,000 people, most of them from Honduras, were waiting for their visa.

Who's really to "blame"?

The caravans and their massive sizes are of special concern to the US government. But not only to it. Many from outside, caught up in conspiracy theories, also want to interpret this unstoppable reality. Since President Trump has blamed the Democrats from the onset, some believe that adding their voices will buttress his arguments for building his beloved wall on the border with Mexico.

For its part the Honduran government blames its own opposition and organized crime groups for inciting the caravans with destabilizing political aims. These speculations elude reality.

The caravans of Honduran and other Central American migrants express the desperation level of people for whom it's increasingly risky to live in countries that deny them public security and employment and pushes them to live in a permanent state of bare subsistence.

The explosion of a pressure cooker

The caravans are the explosion of a pressure cooker that the Honduran government, in association with a small business elite and transnational corporations, have been heating up for at least a decade.

Those responsible for this explosion are the governments that have abandoned public social policies, replacing them with public relief programs, while consolidating a development model based on investing in extractive industries and privatizing public assets and services.

More and more people find themselves unable to deal with life in Honduras. Those traveling in the caravans all say the same thing. In the January 2019 caravan, there were dozens of entire families, young and old, all walking.

One family of seven, from parents to grandchildren, said: "It's worse for us to stay in Honduras. We run a greater risk there than on this journey." Another family said, "On the road we risk getting assaulted or killed, but in Honduras we're already condemned to die."

So, there's no reason to look for a scapegoat to blame for organizing anything. People come together and with just a little encouragement head on out, pushed by winds that blow only towards the North.

"Blame me!"

The Honduran government is in the hands of a group of politicians who believe public services are a business and the State is their booty. They are people who have ransacked public institutions such as the Honduran Social Security Institute, the health system, the electricity company and many more. Then, after doing so, they cover it up and protect each other through political control over the judicial system.

The individuals and families leaving have been progressively experiencing helplessness and abandonment. Those feelings were reinforced with the November 2017 elections. When Juan Orlando Hernández was reelected in violation of the Constitution, awarded a victory that some 70% of the population believes resulted from a well-organized fraud.

People have stopped trusting politicians, the government and big business. The caravans express this distrust, but they express even more the desperation and anguish of people who stopped believing that someday they would find solutions in their own country. They're taking justice into their own hands...and feet.

In denying this reality, the Honduran and US governments seem to need someone to blame for the crisis. "Blame me," said a woman in the caravan while being given water from some neighbors in solidarity, "I'm leaving because I no longer can stand this life I live here. I can't pay my electric bill, and can't even pay for my own food."

Those at the top don't believe in those at the bottom

Those at the top are always seeking someone to blame for their problems. These elite despise those at the bottom and never give them credit for their initiatives. Given their classism and racism they assume these people can't think, don't have the capacity to decide, and are simply influenced by external factors manipulating their decisions. Anything that comes from people who aren't like them is seen as a threat. And something as massive or unusual as the caravans is seen not only as a threat, but as a crime.

Obviously, the magnitude of the caravan phenomenon also moves different sectors to seek to benefit from them. Opposition sectors in Honduras, perhaps in the US also, try to benefit from the instability produced by such a massive movement.

But that doesn't change the truth of what's happening, which is that the poor are being moved by their own unbearable daily reality, which is not only one of poverty, but also of violence. "I'm leaving because if I stay my husband will kill me," said a young woman carrying her eight-month-old baby.

Violence against women is another burden added to their difficult economic situation and lack of public safety.

Shameful individual exoduses and dignifying caravans

For those who can see, the caravans have shown a bright light on the harsh reality of most of our population. But the caravans are only part of the phenomenon. There are also daily

migrations of individuals, families or small groups. Surely as many people leave Honduras individually in a month as do in masse in one day. The daily exodus over time have been silent, discreet, invisible... even shameful. Now, with the departures happening in large numbers, the caravan has become loud, public, visible...and even dignifying.

This phenomenon has a dose of dignity because it has unveiled the fake discourse of prosperity and safety in our country, making evident the failure of official policies. It has eroded the triumphalism that claims Honduras is improving. It has shown that the social relief programs not only solve nothing, but actually deepen the precarious state of most of society. And it has uncovered that a society that only includes 35% of its population in its formal economy isn't sustainable.

Hondurans have gained dignity because through the large caravans they can express the massive rejection of a cruel model of social exclusion. It's not so much that they want an alternate model to capitalism. In fact, the caravans don't have so much as a hint of being an anti-system movement. It's more a massive protest against the high levels of exclusion by "Honduran-style" capitalism. People are abandoning the capitalism that abandoned them in their own country and are deciding to seek another capitalism that they believe will offer them jobs and opportunities.

A reality they can't control

The October 2018 caravan that opened the doors to those that followed startled the political sectors and business elites awake. They were used to having control over everything that happens in the country to avoid undesirable surprises. Experts in dealing with unrest, protests and complaints from the poorer sectors, they were left without explanations when these social sectors pulled up stakes and quietly left.

The elites have forever enjoyed the privileges given them by the State and only react when their large profits are threatened by consistent opposition as is happening in communities where people are organized against extractivist projects and concessions granted to national and transnational companies.

That's why they reacted by killing Berta Cáceres in March of 2016.

Their self-aggrandizement has taken a big hit

The elites' self-love has also taken a hit after so long living the good life and justifying the enjoyment of their privileges. The reality of the excluded has ripped off their masks. Doing so wasn't an intent of the caravans, it was just collateral benefit.

The elites and Juan Orlando Hernández's regime have invested millions to advertise a country heading down the right path, one whose economy is healthy and whose social programs are making people happy. Then suddenly thousands of citizens appear fleeing the country they've been promoting, taking on a huge risk in the search for another country, another economy ...

Neither the elites nor the regime can react any other way than by accusing the opposition, seeking scapegoats for this media and reality failure.

The American dream

The caravans didn't only unmask an unjust model. They also revealed traits of the collective self-identity of the part of Honduran society buttressed by the injustice lived and borne by the others.

The first trait is an historical and extreme dependence on the exterior. Seeking outside the country solutions to needs and problems originating within is a mentality that has been accentuated in Honduran society ever since the banana enclave was implanted in our country at the beginning of the 20th century.

The US is the Promised Land as much for these elites as for the migrants, as much for the rich bosses as for their poor laborers. It's the authentic "land that brings forth bread" as Honduran poet Rafael Heliodoro Valle once described it. Looking north with expectations and taking on the journey to the US is a dramatic mental routine for a society that has configured its own dream around the "American dream," wanting to be or at least be like a US citizen, to have their dollars to buy what they buy, earn what they earn... It's the fantasy they cling to in the face of the nightmare they live in Honduras.

It's an intra-system avalanche of the dispossessed who continue stubbornly looking up to the North, for what they don't have in their land. These starving migrants don't know that their initiative is shaking the system, but even not knowing it, they're making it happen.

The logic of surviving

A second and contradictory trait of the Honduran collective self-identity is the mindset brought about by living trapped in the logic of pure and harsh survival. Barely eking out a few crumbs from the system every day, searching on one's own, without questioning that system, tends to forge a particular way of thinking and acting and deciding.

Each person individually rummaging for solutions joins others doing the same. They may be traveling together, but aren't organized. A caravan is a mass of thousands of individuals who only come together to journey along the same route, each of them carrying their own personal project in their knapsack. That route is the only thing that unites them. Each migrant, each family individually draws up its own plans.

This trait of Honduran society's mentality and behavior, which encloses people within their own problems, is a political disease. Everyone's searching and rummaging, engrossed in their own world, maybe convinced of the truth of that popular saying that "a lonely ox can lick itself fine" or another that says "everyone only saves their own skin."

The failure of collective responses

The logic of survival is that everyone seeks to solve things alone, making commitments with anyone who can help move that individual project forward. Beyond that, other people only get in the way; joining together to search for common solutions is only a hindrance. Everybody rants and raves about what's happening, about the rising prices of fuel, water, and electricity, for example, but when it comes to looking for solutions together...they leave that to others.

The massive exodus towards the North reveals how people don't trust each other, the community, collective or social organization. That mistrust is also expressed by their rejection of organizing.

Paradoxically, collective migration is the failure of a collective response. It is instead a triumph of individual scavenging. The caravans, however collective they may appear on the outside, are the extreme expression of individual responses to a structural and systemic problem with no solution. In an environment like that, whatever comes from above or outside is accepted and received.

This mentality also explains why people vote for those who crush them when they are in power, and promise them "solidarity" handouts when they are outside. In a society trapped in a hand-to-mouth personal economy, clientelist charity programs are very successful while the structural problems remain intact and the privatization policies and concessions for large corporations deepen. Thus, life continues to get worse and ends up exploding into caravans of desperate people.

The search for caudillos

A third trait of Honduran society's collective self-identity revealed by the caravans is the repeated option for top-down relationships.

Those who join the caravans walk looking both upward and at the road taking them out of the country. They quit looking at those traveling at their side. This is the result of the "banana republic" syndrome sown by the US, which left many waiting enthralled for the return of the banana companies. In the caravan are thousands who take the same steps and travel the same route, but when they reach the finish line they disperse. They were born into individualism. It's what they learned and how they were raised And it's how they've suffered and continue suffering.

Social relationships in Honduras are based on rigid verticality. We are taught to depend on those on top. It's the paradigm of power: the patriarch in the family and the caudillo in politics. The one on top is the one who can solve my problems if I in return offer submission, unconditional loyalty.

The US is the maximum "caudillo" in this collective vision, the total patriarch, Uncle Sam. The option for top-down relationships is bolstered by weakening horizontal relationships, those of equals among equals. The horizontal becomes so faint it's almost invisible. At most we look at each other to see who's achieving more from those on top. It's hard to see each other as equals

because everyone is looking for someone they can follow. When they get tired of being deceived, one frequently hears people say; “What we need here is a strong leader who can resolve things, who can tell us what to do.”

Top-down relationships

The top-down mentality has strongly permeated social organizations, community organizations, NGOs and their respective leaderships. And of course it’s enthroned in the political parties, with their illustrious examples of verticality and their inexhaustible source of caudillos.

Vertical mentality is also found in international cooperation. Bilateral relationships tend to be top-down, but even with the best intentions they are inherently unequal power relations based on a dependence by those who receive the resources, usually grassroots organizations, and those who dispense them. This top-down mentality has distanced the NGOs from the people and limited their influence in the promotion of horizontal relationships.

This verticality is even more enthroned in churches, where people find greater justification, because God is after all the Almighty, above everything and everyone. People see God represented in the powerful leaders of the churches. This deified verticality is very far from the promotion of a culture of hospitality among peoples, far from the good Samaritan ministering to those who are traveling, tending to them, listening, healing them and informing them of their rights, the dangers of the journey and the mirages of a dream goal.

The real “axis of evil”

The “axis of evil” that US politicians speak about so much is not outside of Honduras, it’s inside. It’s made up of alliances between a small group of both oligarchic business elites and political elites entrenched in the State who use public resources as if their own. The country’s politics and its economy are managed through this alliance, as minor partners of transnational capital.

This threesome, which excludes most of the population, is the real Honduran government. And it is backed by three other powerful actors: the US embassy, the armed forces and well-known people from organized crime, some public, others in the shadows.

This six-part alliance is Honduras’ Axis of Evil. They are the ones responsible for Hondurans leaving. They are the explanation for why the caravans attract thousands of our fellow citizens.

Ismael Moreno, SJ, is the envío correspondent in Honduras.

Why Hondurans and Guatemalans Flee

The U.S. and Canadian governments, the U.S. military, and North American businesses and investors (hydro-electric dams, mining, African palm, tourism, cattle, fruit, etc.) maintain profitable relations with corrupt, repressive governments in Honduras and Guatemala, turning a blind eye to and benefitting from repression, environmental devastation, human rights violations, corruption and impunity.

Once in a while, the mainstream media reports on the plight of tens of thousands of Guatemalans and Hondurans fleeing, year after year, ignoring why they flee.

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