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“Not a single crack where the light can come in” Civil-military relations in contemporary Honduras

Dr. Tyler Shipley



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Civil-military relations in contemporary Honduras

Dr. Tyler Shipley

Department of International Studies, York University,
CERLAC Associate Fellow

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Executive summary

This CMI Working Paper draws from several years of research in Honduras, including a series of interviews in February 2015, to assess the relationship between civilian and military authority in Honduras today. It highlights the military coup of June 2009 as a turning point wherein the trend towards increased democratic civilian governance was reversed, setting into motion a chain of events that have re-asserted the primacy of the military. It concludes with an evaluation of the current mobilizations of civil society, manifest in major ongoing public demonstrations, and the prospects for reversing the slip into authoritarian rule under Juan Orlando Hernández.

Keywords:

Honduras; civil-military relations; democracy; social movements; neoliberalism

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1. Introduction

The structures of democracy at the state level in Honduras have always been fragile. In its first 76 years, between 1824 and 1900, Honduras cycled through 97 governments; most of them gained power by military force backed by one or another of the powerful British/US railroad or fruit companies which dominated the country at the time. Indeed, the role of the United States, and more recently Canada, in undermining democratic possibilities in Honduras has been central to the country's history. During the past six years, that history has culminated in deep crisis caused by the combined effects of a slip towards military dictatorship, infiltration of the state and society by criminal organizations, and neoliberal economic measures that are exacerbating the already unprecedented levels of poverty in the country.

If Honduran democracy was weak in the early 2000s, it was definitely killed by the coup d'état of 2009, led by the Honduran oligarchy¹ and carried out by the military, on the false premise that President Manuel Zelaya was seeking to run for re-election. The coup led to the first period of direct military domination of the state since the 1980s. Ironically, in the immediate aftermath of the coup, with a peaceful Honduran resistance movement mobilizing hundreds of thousands of people to reject the dictatorship and restore the duly elected head of state, there was a legitimate opportunity for democracy and civilian authority to be restored (Cruz 2010). But the resistance was stymied by the de facto government's refusal to budge and the international community's unwillingness to intervene. Indeed, even while the military and police assassinated Hondurans in the streets and in their homes (Human Rights Watch 2010), the governments of the United States and Canada worked to re-integrate the military regime into the international community.

The result was the re-emergence of the armed forces as the principal authorities in Honduran society. Following a period of direct military rule, the de facto regime conducted an electoral process—deemed illegitimate by most international organizations²—which allowed the military government to consolidate its authority under a thin veneer of democratic legitimacy (Joyce 2010). Since that time, distinguishing between civilian and military authority has become an increasingly difficult task. This is made even more complicated by the prominent role played by the three most significant economic networks in the country—the local oligarchy, transnational capital, and organized crime—each of which is intertwined into the fabric of governance reigning in the country.

¹ "Oligarchy" is the term most commonly used in the literature on Honduras to describe the very concentrated group of families that own an overwhelming majority of Honduran businesses and who also exercise significant political power. Unlike the sector of smaller business owners who possess *some* wealth, the oligarchy is composed of between ten and fifteen families—and the networks they control—who possess most of the country's wealth and whose names are known by all Hondurans. They are often described in Honduras as the *diez familias* (ten families) and beginning in the 1990s they have increasingly occupied high political posts. Carlos Flores Facussé, for instance, hails from one of the most powerful families in the oligarchy, and also served a term as President. For a detailed account of the families in question, and the companies that they own, see Meza et al. 2009.

² I was in Honduras at the time and documented the sham process in which all major international election observation organizations, including the United Nations and the Carter Center, refused to participate (Shipley 2009).



Torch march against Juan Orlando Hernández. Photo: Luis Mendez

Concurrently, the armed forces have emerged as being among the principal authorities in Honduran society, albeit in a context where they answer to the technically civilian representatives of the oligarchy. As investigated in an article published in *The Guardian* (December 2013), this situation has intensified since the election—again under fraudulent circumstances—of Juan Orlando Hernández (often just called Juan Orlando or JOH in Honduras) in 2013. Honduras under Juan Orlando is in transition from a regime that ruled on behalf of a military-business coalition to one that rules only for its own faction of the oligarchy. Juan Orlando has successfully pushed a constitutional reform which, ironically, allows him to run for re-election after his term ends (Wilkinson 2015). He has, thus, done precisely what the 2009 coup purportedly blocked Manuel Zelaya from doing. He has, furthermore, created a special military police unit that, unlike the traditional military or the national police, responds directly to him. His preparations for an extended presidency, then, are quite apparent and they are the context for the analysis of civil-military relations in Honduras.

In this report, I will offer a detailed account of the collapse of legitimate civilian government in Honduras since 2009, making the following arguments: 1) When civilian governance has existed in Honduras it has usually been dominated by the oligarchy, which, as noted above, refers to a very specific group of powerful alliances; 2) the reform process, interrupted by the 2009 coup, represented an avenue towards broad-based civilian government, before it was closed off; 3) the reassertion of military dominance in 2009 must be understood also as a re-assertion of the rule of the oligarchy and foreign capital; 4) the constellation of forces that emerged to rule Honduras after the coup was a coalition of the overlapping sectors of the military, the oligarchy, foreign capital, and organized crime; 5) Honduras is now in transition from that coalition to a one-man dictatorship under Juan Orlando Hernández.

I will begin with a historical overview in order to contextualize the current dynamics, followed by a more detailed account of the reform movement of the 2000s and the attempts to strengthen popular civilian governance under Manuel Zelaya. I will then provide a detailed analysis of events since 2009 and the current picture of civil-military relations in Honduras, with an eye to the prospects for civilian authority in the future.

2. The (Short) History of Honduran Democracy

2.1 The Colonial Era

The Central American isthmus knew many forms of government before the arrival of European colonizers. The Maya, Lenca, Pipil, Nahuatl, Jicaque, Paya, Chorotega, and Sumu/Miskitu civilizations all lived at one time or another in the place that Christopher Columbus called “Honduras,” so-named after the watery depths his ships had navigated before nearly wrecking at “Gracias A Dios” (Newson 1986). While many descendants of those civilizations still exist and identify as Indigenous people, their forms of governance, modes of production, and ontological systems were irrevocably broken by Spanish conquest and genocide. The colonial administrations that replaced those Indigenous systems made no attempt to seem democratic, designed as extensions of the absolute rule of the Spanish crown (Becerra 1983).

When Honduras successfully won independence in 1824, it was under the rule of Francisco Morazán, a wealthy landowner who sought to replicate the American Revolution. That is, he sought to create a modern, independent republic, which would better facilitate the needs of the emerging capitalist class that was being stymied by a stagnant Spanish monarchy. Morazán called himself “President,” but he was never elected and he used military force to achieve his goals, including an episode in 1837 in which he marched against peasants and priests who had refused to submit to a poorly organized cholera quarantine (Woodward 1999, 104).

2.2 Banana Republic

For nearly a hundred years after Morazán, Honduras would be governed by a revolving door of *caudillos*; strongmen who were usually officers in one military faction or another, and almost always in the employ of British or US businesses. This was most evident around the beginning of the 20th century, when competing US banana companies hired strongmen to wage war over control of banana plantation territory and used the state as a tool in the effort to extract as much profit as possible from the country (Robinson 2003, 119).

Given the centrality of the military to Honduran governance, it is no surprise that the first successful effort to stabilize Honduran politics came from the ranks of the armed forces. Indeed, it could be argued that the two most important stabilizing periods of Honduran history in the 20th century were the long reign of the *caudillo* Tiburcio Carias (1933-1949), and the military-corporatist regime of Oswaldo López Arellano (1972-1975) both of which were, needless to say, periods in which democracy was subverted by military dictatorship (Dunkerley 1988). Even in periods when elections were held—in which only two political parties ran—the military still maintained effective control over the country. Indeed, military coups took place in 1963 and 1972, when civilian governments strayed too far from the wishes of the top generals, and no chief of the Honduran armed forces retired between 1954-1981 without first serving as Honduran president. The military was professionalized in the 1950s under the direction of the United States, and Honduras’s top generals were often trained by, and always closely linked to, the US military (Holden 2004).

2.3 US Influence Grows

Their interests often reflected those of the United States, be it in using Honduras as a staging ground for the 1954 coup in Guatemala, subverting the emergent Honduran labor movement in the 1960s, or demobilizing and defeating the growing peasant rebellions of the 1970s (Barahona 2005). Throughout this period, the military pursued policies that would satisfy its American sponsors but kept a lid on

social conflict by maintaining a modest degree of economic stability for the masses. For instance, trade unions were permitted, as long as they remained reformist and limited by their connection to the AFL-CIO in the US, and peasant resistance was quelled not just by violence but also by moderate land reform that protected the access to land of Honduran *campesinos* (Scipes 2010).

During the 1980s, Honduras functioned as a US base of operations for the counterrevolutionary war directed at the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the guerrilla movements in Guatemala and El Salvador. Civilian government in the 1980s lost even the limited legitimacy it held in the decades prior, and it was widely understood that the real power in Honduras was held by John Negroponte, the US ambassador, and exercised by the head of the Honduran armed forces (Salomón 1999). Most notoriously, this position was held by Col. Gustavo Alvarez Martínez, who carried out the will of the US ambassador with brutal efficiency. Alvarez Martínez was responsible for the creation of death squads in Honduras, used to eliminate leftist and liberal opposition, including the infamous Battalion 3-16, whose veterans still haunt contemporary Honduran politics (North 1990, 87).

3. Civilian Governance and the Emergence of the Social Movement

3.1 A New Era

It was not until the 1990s, when the US military occupation had subsided, that civilian governance re-asserted itself in Honduras. This was especially true after the Carlos Roberto Reina government (1994-98) reformed the laws to eliminate obligatory military service and to significantly reduce the military budget (Salomón 2014b). However, whilst the country was still devastated by the violence of the 1980s, the 1990s were also characterized by successive civilian governments in line with Washington.

Under neoliberal economic policy, Honduras was plunged into a catastrophic economic crisis; poverty reached unprecedented levels for all but a small handful of wealthy elite, and the inequality between the many and the few grew exponentially (Woodward 1999, 273). The neoliberal adjustments were particularly painful for the already struggling *campesino* and working classes (Robinson 2003, 130). Violence spiralled as peasant families moved to cities but found no work, and their children were increasingly drawn into street gangs, doing the dangerous frontline work for wealthy narcotraffickers. The danger for poor Honduran youth was magnified by the emergence, in the late 1990s, of vigilante groups who carried out thousands of extra-judicial assassinations of urban youth who appeared to have gang connections (Pine 2008). Hurricane Mitch, which struck in 1998, devastated the already-weakened social and physical infrastructure of Honduras, causing US\$4 billions in damage and leaving some 11,000 Hondurans dead and as many as 2 million people—almost one third of the population—without homes (Booth, Wade, and Walker 2010, 171).

3.2 The Social Movement

But in the midst of this crisis, Honduran civil society was beginning to re-emerge, mobilized by the desperation of Honduras's circumstances and confident again that it could oppose state policies without fear of violent retribution. What began in the late 1990s as a series of disconnected movements across the country—environmentalists in Olancho, *campesinos* in the Aguán Valley, women in garment factories, civic workers' unions in the capital, and many others—coalesced into

a national social movement in the early 2000s and increasingly applied pressure on the Honduran government to roll back the neoliberal dismantling of the state.³ Unlike in the past, the Honduran military did not re-assert its control over the state, even in the face of major nationwide mobilizations.

In 2003, for instance, the newly formed *Coordinadora Nacional de Resistencia Popular* (CNRP) brought people from across the country to Tegucigalpa to effect a blockade of all of the major highways into the city. The CNRP encompassed a wide variety of sectors, ranging from impoverished peasant families to liberal urban professionals. After the successful blockade, the protestors converged on the Presidential palace and demanded an audience with President Maduro, who had little choice but to accommodate many of the CNRP demands.⁴ Among the many victories of Honduran civil society in the early part of the 2000s, the political system itself was opened up to include several new political parties, after decades of a two-party system. The fact that the CNRP was able to mobilize and meaningfully affect public policy was the clearest indication that military domination of Honduran politics had receded; authority was now genuinely exercised by civilian forces.

4. The Zelaya Opening

4.1 Reform

The extension of a space for political agency to Honduran civil society reached its apex during the administration of Manuel Zelaya, elected President in 2005. Though he was later framed—and sometimes self-identified—as a left populist hero, Zelaya was, in fact, a traditional politician from one of the two dominant political parties who was only pulled to the left when he was subjected to strong civilian mobilizations early in his presidency. Indeed, Zelaya faced over 100 major protests during his first year in office and, in 2006 and 2007, began to recognize that he would need to cooperate with the CNRP and its associated organizations in order to govern Honduras functionally (Central American Report 2007).

As such, Zelaya began supporting policies demanded by the social movement. He helped *campesinos* regain legal access to land; he upheld the rights of lawyers pursuing government corruption cases; he cracked down on extra-judicial killing of urban youth; he significantly raised the minimum wage; he maintained a moratorium on the granting of exploitative mining concessions to foreign capital; he even supported feminists' calls for the "morning after pill" and other contraceptive measures, with the effect of increasingly alienating himself from the majority of the Honduran traditional power sectors.⁵

³ Gilberto Rios, interview, 8 May 2012.

⁴ Juan Barahona, interview, 10 May 2012.

⁵ Tomás Andino, interview, 9 May 2012.



Demonstration in Tegucigalpa. Photo: Tyler Shipley.

4.2 Constituyente

But the final straw for Honduras's experiment with civilian governance came when Zelaya agreed to pursue the CNRP's demand for a constituent assembly to re-draft the Honduran constitution. The existing constitution was written in 1982, when the country was under the de facto rule of the US military, and formed the basis for Honduran law and, not surprisingly, reflected most prominently the interests of the economic and political elites. The social movements' demand for a new constitution came out of the recognition that civilian authority was still fragile, and that if the Honduran government was to remain responsive to civil society, this would need to be built more effectively into its foundational legal document, such that it would not be subject to the whims of one president or another (Mejía, Fernández, and Menjívar 2009). In short, the reform movement needed to be larger than Manuel Zelaya.

Right or wrong, the move certainly drew the attention of the already-displeased elites, who tried, on several occasions, to interrupt the process of pursuing the constituent assembly or *constituyente*. Zelaya, whose power by 2009 was firmly tied to the social movement, continued to pursue the *constituyente*, and initiated a formal process which should have begun with a non-binding poll asking Hondurans whether they would support the addition of a fourth question on the ballot during the following election. That question would have been: "Do you support the striking of a national constituent assembly to re-write the Honduran constitution." Had the referendum passed, any committee undertaking the task would have been struck the next year (Cálix 2010).

None of these steps, however, were taken. On the eve of the initial non-binding poll, Zelaya was abducted during the night in his pajamas and taken by helicopter to the nearby US air force base, Soto Cano, and from there flown to exile in Costa Rica. The non-binding poll was cancelled, the military occupied political offices across the country, protesters were attacked, a resignation letter from President Zelaya was forged (Booth and Forero 2009), and a new President—Roberto Micheletti—was hastily sworn in despite protestation from foreign ministers and heads-of-state across the western hemisphere. Honduras, for the first time since the 1980s, was firmly under military control, despite claiming that it was defending democracy (Orellana 2009).

5. The New Reality in Honduras

5.1 The Coup D'état

Honduran politics were shattered by the June 2009 coup d'état. Not only did the coup usher in a period of direct military governance, but the largest civil society research center in Honduras, *Centro de Documentación de Honduras* (CEDOH or Center for Documentation in Honduras) also described the ongoing process as the “re-militarization” of Honduran society. That is, the 2009 coup was not a brief interruption of democratic civilian government, it was the beginning of a process that has dismantled civilian authority entirely.

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Honduran civil society launched the largest wave of protests in the country's history, with demonstrations taking place every day for over four months, some days reaching as many as 500,000 people—around 1/16 of the country's population (Mencía Gamero 2009). The demonstrators were routinely attacked by police and military units and dozens of people were killed in the clashes. More importantly, hundreds of people were assassinated away from the actual demonstrations. Indeed, the familiar pattern of death squad activity returned to Honduras, as activists, organizers, critical journalists, and others deemed to be key members of the political opposition would find themselves followed by men on motorcycles or jeeps, they would receive threatening text messages or phone calls, and in many cases they would be beaten, raped, or killed.⁶

Civilian NGOs in the country worked tirelessly to document what they described as a “human rights catastrophe” but even members of these organizations came to be targeted (COFADEH 2011). Meanwhile, Reporters Without Borders described Honduras in 2010 as the “most dangerous country in the world to be a journalist,” adding that “not a day has passed since the start of the year 2012, without a journalist, local media owner, or social commentator receiving a phone call to say his or her life is in danger” (Gordon and Webber 2013). Critical radio and TV stations, like Radio Globo or Canal 36, would have their signals interrupted or their equipment destroyed (Committee to Protect Journalists 2009). The journalists themselves were often targeted for violence; in one gruesome case, radio host Enrique Gudiel returned home on February 17, 2010 to find his 17-year-old daughter hanging from a tree (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2010). Reports of the violence in Honduras were no secret; the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights was one of many organizations that published these testimonies.

⁶ This has been reported consistently by organizations within Honduras and international institutions like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Reporters Without Borders (see Human Rights Watch 2014). Also useful is an overview of human rights abuses between 2009-2012 in *Upside Down World* (October 2012).

5.2 The 2009 Elections

In the meantime, in November 2009, the military government held elections, which followed the normal timetable for Honduran elections and proceeded from primaries held before the coup—thus giving them an air of legality—but which Honduran and most international organizations deemed illegitimate. Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo, a coup-supporter and member of the Honduran oligarchy, won the elections (which were boycotted by a majority of Hondurans)⁷ and assumed the presidency in 2010. This process opened the door for some international actors—most notably Canada and the United States—to claim that Honduras was back on the path to democracy. Canada’s Minister of State for the Americas visited with Lobo within a month of his inauguration and congratulated him on “beginning the process of national reconciliation” and “healing the wounds created by the recent political impasse” (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada 2010).

Notably, however, he spent much of his time in Honduras talking trade; the Canadian government recognized in the Honduran military regime a strong trading partner, and with Canada heavily invested in the Honduran mining, garment and tourist sectors, this took priority over human rights.



Election boycott poster. The text says: “No to coup elections! Free men and women of Honduras. They want your help to legalize their coup d’état. Every vote is a blow against your liberty”. Photo: Tyler Shipley.

⁷ It is impossible to provide a precise statistic here, because the only official numbers were proven to be fraudulent. The Honduran Supreme Electoral Tribunal claimed that 62% of the country had voted, but that number was exposed as a fabrication which rested on the exclusion of some 1.2 million Hondurans living outside the country as “ineligible.” Hondurans outside the country are, in fact, eligible to vote and many did vote in the 2009 elections (I personally flew from Miami to Tegucigalpa with a group of Hondurans living in the United States who were flying home for the election). Civil society estimates of the voter turnout ranged between 25-30%, and many of the journalists who were present reported quiet or empty polling stations.

Unlike the civilian government that preceded it, the coup regime quickly lifted an earlier moratorium that had been placed on foreign mining concessions. It also lowered taxes on foreign capital, and redrafted the legislation around foreign investment to minimize labor and environmental regulation. Indeed, later that year, much of these changes were formally included in the Canada-Honduras Free Trade Agreement, after Canada abandoned talks with the other countries in the region to focus on Honduras (Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada n.d.).

5.3 Honduras Is Open For Business

Gradually, over the next few years and with much support from Canada and the United States, Honduras was re-integrated into the international community—in institutions like the Organization of American States (OAS) for instance—even while the repression of political opposition in the country worsened, the impunity for violence and extortion increased, and the infiltration of organized crime into political space was extended. As the military, the oligarchy and organized crime consolidated its power over society, Honduras quickly came to be known as the most dangerous country in the world, with a homicide rate of over 85 per 100,000 citizens (Sherwell 2013).

Lobo, meanwhile, courted foreign investment, assuring prospective investors that “Honduras Is Open For Business,” also the name of a conference, and promised that foreign capital would be protected from the violence that seemed to be spiralling out of control. Indeed, while civilian organizations were concerned about the violence that was afflicting average citizens and community activists, foreign investors were worried about the effects of militant disruptions around their mines, factories, sweatshops and resorts. “Without security, there can be no investment,” warned Canadian ambassador Cameron Mackay in an article in *La Tribuna* (February 2012), referring to labor and judicial stability for foreign investors. Implicitly, he was referring to ongoing labor struggles; many of them spearheaded by social movements that were also in opposition to the coup. In three prominent cases involving Canadian companies, women in sweatshops owned by Gildan were demanding fair labor practices; families affected by poisonous runoff from Goldcorp’s San Martin mine in Central Honduras were demanding compensation for health crises; and indigenous communities along Honduras’s north coast being illegally displaced by Life Vision Properties were demanding to have their lands returned to them (Shipley 2013).

5.4 The Best Laid Plans

What the Lobo government had not anticipated was the way in which the visible re-assertion of military authority would galvanize public opposition. Indeed, deposed-President Zelaya was more popular in his overthrow than he ever was as president, and the reform process actually gained greater popular legitimacy as a result of the coup. In fact, a wide new stratum of Hondurans joined the social movement, which could mobilize far more massive demonstrations after the coup than before. The new government, then, found itself turning to the armed forces to quell this growing social rebellion; the alternative would have been to give in to popular pressure, acknowledge that they had carried out an illegal coup, and renounce their claim to authority.

Thus, even while the Lobo administration presented itself as the re-established civilian government of Honduras, it was in fact the vehicle by which the armed forces re-asserted their authority in the country, as violence became an indispensable tool of governance. Honduran governance under Pepe Lobo was chaotic, as he attempted to mediate between the different ruling-class factions he represented. Out of that chaos emerged the man who would win the presidency in 2013 and is now consolidating authority around himself for what appears to be a long-term stay in office.

6. The Rise of Juan Orlando Hernández

6.1 Setting the Stage

Honduras under Juan Orlando Hernández is not necessarily less democratic than it was for the four and a half years before he took office, but it is a qualitatively different type of authoritarian rule that JOH is building; the consequences for Honduran governance will be many. He began constructing his dictatorship before he had even won the Presidency; he was appointed by Pepe Lobo to be President of Congress in 2010 and held the powerful position for the length of Lobo's term. During that time, he was the architect of what came to be called the "technical coup" in 2012, during which four Supreme Court judges were illegally deposed in the middle of the night and their replacements appointed the next day (Frank 2015a). Not long after, he was able to similarly replace the Attorney General and, by the time he ran for the presidency in 2013, he had already stacked the key posts in the Honduran state apparatus with loyalists (Frank 2015b). Moreover, he had created a new wing of the armed forces—a special unit of military police—which would emerge after his election as essentially his personal paramilitary force, a point I will elaborate below.

6.2 The 2013 Elections

The electoral process that brought him into office was widely discredited in Honduras. Despite having trailed in opinion polls through most of the campaign, the *Tribunal Supremo Electoral* (TSE or Supreme Electoral Tribunal) was filled with Juan Orlando's supporters. Juan Orlando was declared the victor despite widespread allegations of fraud, vote-buying, and other irregularities, and despite the fact that the largest opposition party salvaged its own tally sheets suggesting an entirely different outcome (Center for Economic and Policy Research 2013). The electoral process was so problematic that it was denounced by Leo Gabriel, an Austrian member of the EU observation delegation:

I can attest to countless inconsistencies in the electoral process. There were people who could not vote because they showed up as being dead, and there were dead people who voted ... the hidden alliance between the small parties and the National Party led to the buying and selling of votes and [electoral worker] credentials.... During the transmission of the results there was no possibility to find out where the tallies were being sent and we received reliable information that at least 20% of the original tally sheets were being diverted to an illegal server. (Weisbrot 2013)

In addition to blatant irregularities surrounding the actual electoral process, there was a climate of violence and intimidation surrounding the elections more generally. As in 2009, many opposition candidates dropped off the ballot. In 2009, it was because they did not trust that they would get a fair chance at winning; in 2013, it was, in several cases, because they were killed. At least four—but perhaps dozens more—candidates from the primary opposition party, LIBRE (*Libertad y Refundación* or Liberty and Refoundation), were assassinated in the lead-up to the elections (ibid.).

LIBRE, it seems very evident, would have won the elections had they been held in a fair manner. The party was formed out of the social movement in opposition, and was conceived and created by the movement's most prominent leaders, including former-President Manuel Zelaya and his wife, Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, who ran as LIBRE's presidential candidate. It is worth noting that the creation of the LIBRE party was a contentious matter within the social movement; many viewed it as a flawed strategy that would siphon the opposition's energy into an electoral process that the regime

controlled (Gordon and Webber 2011). Others, however, felt it was the only way to proceed in the face of violent repression of activists and journalists across the country.

What is uncontested is that the vast majority of people in Honduras support the social movement—as evidenced by the number of supporters attending a wide variety of demonstrations and events—and the fact that they lost the election, itself, raises doubts about the process. In fact, Xiomara led the polls for almost the entire campaign period (Arce 2013; Leiva 2013)—from May–October 2013—and only in the final poll before the vote did Juan Orlando appear to have caught up (Sabo and Cota 2013). In the meantime, Juan Orlando’s campaign received US\$11 million in financing from Washington and, as it later turned out, millions of dollars stolen from Honduran public institutions, a point I will elaborate on later in this report (Weisbrot 2013). Some of LIBRE’s potential supporters were likely drawn towards another new party, PAC (*Partido Anticorrupción* or Anti-Corruption Party), whose leader was a well-known television celebrity, Salvador Nasralla. Nevertheless, this cannot account for the massive discrepancy between Xiomara’s long-term polling numbers and the end result. As a whole, it appears that it took significant fraudulent measures to declare Juan Orlando the winner of the 2013 elections (Wallach 2013).

6.3 After the Elections

Indeed, many in the social movement insist that the game was rigged from the start and that an electoral process controlled by the dictatorship would never be the road back to civilian rule. Bertha Cáceres, a coordinator of the *Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras* (COPINH or Civic Council of Popular Indigenous Organizations in Honduras) explained that “people got excited by the prospect of the elections, but it got us into a mess... [COPINH has] always said that we must ‘refund’ the country... [the rest of the FNRP] is beginning to recognize that we were right.”⁸ Even those duly elected *diputados* (members of Congress) from the LIBRE party have faced violence since the elections. On 13 May 2014, the President of Congress ordered LIBRE members to be ejected from the building, after they had opened the doors of congress to protestors fleeing police violence. Over 200 members of Juan Orlando’s military police descended on the legislative building and violently ejected both the protestors and the LIBRE *diputados*.

In the ensuing melee, several people were injured, and two LIBRE *diputados* were hospitalized, Claudia Garmendia and Audelia Rodríguez (Trucchi 2014). After her recovery, Garmendia gave an interview to the Argentinean national radio station, where she described “the massive concentration of power around the figure of the President” and detailed the assassinations of 37 journalists critical of his work in the months prior (Radio Nacional Argentina 2014). Jari Dixon, another LIBRE *diputado* who was among those attacked by the police that day, described the ruling government as “military men disguised as civilians.” He noted that, though they wear civilian clothes, they have worked diligently since 2009 to increase the power of the military; for instance, key state institutions (telecommunications and immigration) have been placed under the control of the military. In both of these cases, according to Jari Dixon, the military officers who were given these positions are staunch allies of Juan Orlando.⁹

⁸ Bertha Cáceres, interview, 18 February 2015.

⁹ Jari Dixon, interview, 16 February 2015.



Bertha Oliva in COFADEH's office. Photo: Tyler Shipley.

6.4 Formal Authority and Informal Power

Indeed, the distinction between formal civilian authority and informal power relations is one that needs to be emphasized in contemporary Honduras. After all, on the surface, it could appear as though Honduras has a more vibrant democratic system than ever before; for the first time in a century, congress has a significant number of members who do not come from the traditional National and Liberal Parties. LIBRE has 36 *diputados* which some—like Jari Dixon—still see as a significant victory. Nevertheless, the violence, intimidation and fraud that took place around the 2013 elections left little doubt that Honduras was ruled by a dictatorship. Dixon adds:

Yes, we have been given some space inside the government. But it is not real power. We can complain, but it goes nowhere. They can approve anything they want and sometimes we aren't even allowed to speak against it.¹⁰

In addition to being shut out from most decision-making processes, Dixon asserts that LIBRE members are routinely threatened, told that they are on death lists and so on, as a means of dissuading them from pushing too hard against the ruling party.

¹⁰ Jari Dixon, interview, 16 February 2015.

7. Corruption and Criminality

7.1 The State and Organized Crime

Perhaps the most troubling feature of Juan Orlando's regime is its deep-rooted connection to organized crime. It is sometimes difficult to make these connections explicit, because in a corrupt system with corrupt policing, such connections are never investigated. But Honduras is a small country; the capital city of Tegucigalpa has just 850,000 people (about the same as Winnipeg, Canada, or double the size of Bergen, Norway) and as anyone from either of those places can likely attest, it isn't easy for public figures to keep a secret. As US historian Dana Frank describes it:

There are reasons to believe that many top officials in his administration are intimately tied to the illicit drug trade. Honduran Defense Minister Marlon Pascua has spoken of the "narco judges" and "narco congressmen" who run cartels. (Frank 2012a)

Thus, it is well-understood, if rarely openly stated, that Juan Orlando and his closest allies have direct connections to organized crime. CEDOH research concluded in 2014 that "there is no doubt that money from the narcotics trade has completely infiltrated the political system" (Meza 2014b, 132). Over several years of interviews, Nectali Rodezno, a lawyer who works in Tegucigalpa, has often talked about this unspoken awareness of the presence of criminal connections in the political system. Most recently, he explained that "the criminal gangs fund politicians in all of the parties, in order to control them later. This is very similar and follows the model of organized crime in Colombia."¹¹

Huge sections of the national police in the country are bought off; one anonymous former police officer said that the going rate per officer is L10,000.¹² Even despite that fact, Honduran newspapers routinely report high-profile cases of politicians' links to organized crime being exposed. These cases do not necessarily reflect honest police work, as the speculation is usually that those busted ran afoul of the criminal gangs they were working with. As detailed in an *El Heraldo* article from 27 July 2014 (El Heraldo 2014a), the mayor of Yoro, Arnaldo Urbina Soto, was arrested and imprisoned for leading a local drug trafficking syndicate that also engaged in robbery and extortion. *El Heraldo* noted on 28 July 2014 that his sister, Diana Patricia Urbina, remains in Congress as a *diputada* for the Yoro department and issued the standard denials of any wrongdoing (El Heraldo 2014b). Nectali Rodezno laughed at the situation noting that "it is all well-known, it is in the open for us all to see, we know they are criminals, and we know that nothing will be done about it."¹³

7.2 The Armed Forces and Organized Crime

In fact, the complex network of corruption that had come to engulf all levels of Honduran politics creates a very difficult puzzle for outsiders to solve, especially since it is difficult to present categorical evidence of the various connections. Indeed, one of Juan Orlando's most significant actions—the creation of a new military police unit—was justified precisely on the grounds that Honduran institutions are riddled with corruption. The police *are* corrupt, so Juan Orlando appears to be offering a plausible solution to a real problem. However, as corrupt as the Honduran police are,

¹¹ Nectali Rodezno, interview, 16 February 2015.

¹² The figure given is for the Honduran currency, the Lempira, equivalent to around US\$450.00.

¹³ Nectali Rodezno, interview, 16 February 2015.

many Hondurans have come to believe that the military—and especially the new military police—may be worse. I spoke at length with Maria Luisa Borjas, who was embedded in the Honduran National Police for 25 years, and at one point held the second highest rank in the Ministry of Security. She is now a *regidora* (city councillor) in Tegucigalpa, after having been fired from her post for pursuing corruption cases. She is one of many who believe they have been systematically removed from the police for trying to do honest work. As she stated, “[the government says] it wants to deal with criminality, but they punish those police who do.”¹⁴



Soldiers on patrol. Photo: Tyler Shipley.

She points to the example of former head of the national police Ramón Antonio Sabillón Pineda. Sabillón Pineda was removed from his post in November 2014, after having developed a reputation as a police director who was willing to take on corruption inside the system. He had been named to the position in the wake of a scandal that gripped Honduras in late 2011; police murdered the son of Julieta Castellanos, rector of the *Universidad Nacional Autonomía de Honduras* (UNAH or Autonomous University of Honduras). Murder of Honduran youth is nothing new—thousands of young Hondurans were killed by vigilante squads in the mid-2000s (Samayoa 2009), and that violence resurfaced after the 2009 coup—but Castellanos was a high-profile figure who had supported the coup, and her outcry made the case into a major national spectacle. Supporting her public denunciation of the Honduran National Police was Alfredo Landaverde, who had served as both a *diputado* and as the police commissioner, and described the system as “rotten to its core”; he was promptly assassinated by men on motorcycles at a traffic light in Tegucigalpa (Frank 2012b).

¹⁴ Maria Luisa Borjas, interview, 19 February 2015.

7.3 Police Reform

The crisis could not be mitigated without some appearance of action by the Lobo government, and so he rushed to create a police reform commission. Victor Meza, one of Honduras's most widely published scholars and the director of CEDOH, was the chair of the police reform commission. Before the commission began, he was cautiously optimistic that it might be able to reign in rampant violence and impunity. Nevertheless, he recognized that it would be difficult to gain any traction: "Once, I believed the police could help solve the problem. Soon, I realized they were part of the problem. Now I see that they are the problem."¹⁵ But despite acknowledging the difficulty of reforming the police, Meza believed the commission could push the police back in the right direction.

When I met him again, more than two years later, he acknowledged that the commission had been utterly unable to change the dynamics in Honduras. Meza concluded that, "to truly change this situation, the police need to be converted into a community network,"¹⁶ but the likelihood of something like that happening in the current moment in Honduras is very slim. Indeed, the commission brought twelve recommendations to the Honduran Congress in order to clean up the police; none of them were implemented and, instead, the Juan Orlando government subsequently used the commission's findings to justify the creation of his special military police unit.

8. The Policia Militar: Juan Orlando's Private Army

8.1 The Policia Militar

The establishment of the military police is one of the most significant developments in Honduras since the coup. This special unit of the armed forces was created by Juan Orlando Hernández and answers directly to his office; they are better funded and equipped than the police and even the rest of the military, and they are widely believed to be a central piece of JOH's plan to establish himself permanently in office. As Maria Luisa Borjas described, "Juan Orlando has not hidden his intention to run for re-election and he knows this will spark conflict with the armed forces, so he is preparing."¹⁷

It is, indeed, a significant fact that the structure of the military police is such that they do not fit into the established chain of command (a hierarchy that culminates with the heads of the army, navy and air force) and instead answer directly to the president. They were initiated under the guise of being a temporary measure to help "clean up" the rampant corruption in the armed forces, but Juan Orlando sought, in early 2015, to have the military police enshrined in the constitution as a permanent force, as reported in *La Tribuna* (January 2015). Opposition parties rallied to defeat this, but it is still on Juan Orlando's agenda; he has already reformed the constitution to allow himself to run for re-election, and he likely anticipates that this may cause friction with other factions of the oligarchy.

¹⁵ Victor Meza, interview, 10 May 2012.

¹⁶ Victor Meza, interview, 18 February 2015.

¹⁷ Maria Luisa Borjas, interview, 19 February 2015.



Military Police. Photo: Tyler Shipley.

8.2 The Shifting Balance of Forces

Considering the various actors, interests and processes at play, it is a delicate position Juan Orlando is trying to maintain. He needs to cultivate the support of the Honduran elite, but he is also trying to protect himself from the prospect of a revolt. In particular, some observers are predicting that the armed forces will turn on Juan Orlando if he seeks re-election. As Leticia Salomón, one of Honduras's most renowned scholars, described: "The armed forces believe they are the defenders of the constitution, so a coup against Juan Orlando is entirely possible."¹⁸ Nevertheless, JOH comes out of the *Partido Nacional* (PN or National Party), traditionally connected to the military, and Juan Orlando himself still has family and friends in the military. But the military has clearly indicated a preference for a dictatorship within which it has a prominent role, and JOH's preparations for a dictatorship that replaces the traditional military with a new paramilitary force set the stage for possible conflict. The military has 10,000 soldiers, but the military police is catching up with about 5,000 of Juan Orlando's loyalists and is increasingly well-equipped.¹⁹ While what would happen in the event that these tensions came to a head is unclear, it is certain that neither the military nor the military police are a civilian force that reflect popular democratic will.

¹⁸ Leticia Salomón, interview, 20 February 2015.

¹⁹ Victor Meza, interview, 18 February 2015.

This is an important point to keep in mind. In my most recent visit to Honduras, it was clear to me that different factions of the armed forces were insisting that *they* were the true protectors of the constitution and rule of law. The very existence of the military police is premised on the corruption in the police and military, and this corruption is not imaginary. According to the director of Honduras's largest human rights documentation organization, homicide rates are going up (despite statistical re-categorizations that make it appear otherwise) and somewhere around 95% of assassinations go largely un-investigated.²⁰ This is not for lack of resources—the armed forces are among the few public institutions that are not getting hammered by a new wave of austerity measures (Spring 2015b).

Meanwhile, both the military and Juan Orlando's military police are just as corrupt. Fernando Anduray, a lawyer and prominent member of the National Party (the closest to the military), admitted recently that the zones in Honduras where drugs are most heavily and freely trafficked are those under military—not police—control.²¹ In a high profile case in early 2015, four officers in the military police were busted for kidnapping a small business owner in the capital city, Luis Portillo, on behalf of one of the criminal gangs. They were busted by the police, as detailed by *El Tiempo* (February 2015).

A few months earlier, again covered by *El Tiempo* (November 2014), eight members of the military police raped a woman who worked at a garment factory in San Pedro Sula. The military police have also been responsible for shooting at a public bus, raiding the homes of several members of the LIBRE party, beating and arresting a human rights defender, and turning a blind eye to a shipment of drugs crossing into Guatemala (Spring 2014). As Bertha Oliva describes it, “they are all corrupt, they are doing battle on behalf of rival gangs or political factions, and the citizens are sandwiched in between.” Oliva added that, after meeting with the head of the armed forces in January to talk about the need to protect human rights, she saw “not a single crack where the light can come in.”²²

9. Militarizing the Community

9.1 Guardianas de la Patria

CEDOH's documentation of the re-militarization of Honduran society draws particular attention to the contradictory dynamic wherein the provision of public security is, itself militarized. This is contradictory, of course, because it is precisely the militarization of society that has created such a context where public security is so fragile (Meza 2014a). And this “re-militarization” is taking place well beyond the confines of the institutions of the state. It is manifest most dramatically in Honduran communities. Flor del Campo is one of Tegucigalpa's poorest neighbourhoods, and was one of the sites of the new *Guardianas de la Patria* program, a free program for kids from age six to nine, run by the military. The military offered to take the kids from 7 am to 3 pm on Saturdays to “teach children values.” Many parents in the community were thankful for a day of free childcare and an opportunity for their kids to play outside as outdoor public facilities in Flor del Campo have been systematically privatized in the past five years, fostering much frustration in the community (Shipley 2012).

²⁰ Bertha Oliva, interview, 20 February 2015.

²¹ Maria Luisa Borjas, interview, 19 February 2015.

²² Bertha Oliva, interview, 20 February 2015.

But many of those same parents were appalled when their children came home scared and upset by what was, in fact, a kind of early military education/training program in a neighbourhood where the armed forces have earned a certain reputation. Indeed, it seems hardly a coincidence that such programs are being introduced in poor neighbourhoods, where conflict between the community, the armed forces, and organized crime are prevalent. Not surprisingly, the people of Flor del Campo have not reacted positively to the *Guardianas* program, especially as it has been introduced at the same moment as Juan Orlando's new military police unit set up a base inside the newly privatized football field in the neighbourhood (Spring 2015a).

9.2 Security and Insecurity

Indeed, what is regularly missed about the re-militarization of Honduran society are these community-level dynamics. In a country where questions of security are persistent and paramount—Honduras has held the highest homicide rate in the world for several of the past 6 years—it is insecurity that defines daily life for most Hondurans. Leticia Salomón has described insecurity as “a concept that must be amplified to encompass all the factors that create fear, pessimism, worry and angst, whether for the present or the future, whether for oneself or for one's family” (Salomón 2014a).

That insecurity has increasingly gripped Honduras since 2009 and, as Salomón notes, it often manifests itself as violence and criminality. With the highest levels of the state captured by organized crime, it should be no surprise that violence has a ripple effect through society, often falling hardest on those at the bottom. Communities like Flor del Campo see that daily violence, whether as domestic violence in homes or in gang assassinations, with body parts scattered through the community.²³

10. The Way Forward

10.1 The IHSS Scandal

Nevertheless, there are still glimmers of hope for a re-assertion of civilian governance in Honduras. In the summer of 2015, Hondurans staged the largest series of demonstrations since 2013, in the wake of a significant corruption scandal. The scandal broke in the aftermath of the failed assassination of John Bográn, a travel agent who had facilitated the embezzlers' escape from the country. Bográn was targeted because he would be called upon to testify against Mario Zelaya (no relation to former President Manuel Zelaya), who had been named the head of the *Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social* (IHSS or Honduran Social Security Institute) in 2010, shortly after the coup. Mario Zelaya, and several of his associates in the oligarchy, embezzled as much as USD 350 million from the IHSS, some of it as funds raised for the ruling National Party, some of it spent on their own lavish lifestyles, and some of it apparently funnelled to “allied” criminal organizations through “ghost companies” (Spring 2015c)

The gradual revelation of the details of the case sparked a series of protests that grew into nationwide manifestations by early June, but the story was about more than just petty corruption. Even while the IHSS directors were looting the institution of cash, the Juan Orlando government was negotiating a USD 1 billion loan from the IMF that would be conditional on the privatization of the IHSS

²³ Interview, Edwin Espinal, 5 May 2012.

(Lakhani 2015). In sum, the directors were stealing money from a public institution, making it appear to be hapless and incapable of carrying out its mandate, in order to justify selling it to themselves. It is easy to see why so many Hondurans were upset. This incident also illustrates how profoundly the system of governance and rule of law has been broken in Honduras, and why the state has come to rely so intensely on police and military force to maintain its authority.

10.2 Division in the Ranks

Where this will lead is entirely unclear. Within the ruling elites, there is division over Juan Orlando's bid for dictatorship. His allies are keen to cash in, but those who would be shut out of the lucrative advantages of power are uncomfortable giving that up. As Honduran sociologist Tomás Andino explained, "JOH is part of a new elite based in Tegucigalpa, distinct from the faction in San Pedro Sula, and they will not appreciate being frozen out of state corruption."²⁴ Meanwhile, Juan Orlando has strong ties to the military, but he is playing a dangerous game by trying to assert his own long term control over it. He did not rise through the ranks to become a general of the armed forces, and disrespecting this hierarchy will not sit well with the top brass. If he can use the military police as a paramilitary force responding directly to him, he would be effectively weakening the power of the traditional military and police.

Foreign capital will work with him insofar as it appears that he can create stability and security for business, but if his actions provoke a crisis that interferes with the profits coming out of the mines and factories, he may lose support. It is impossible to know just how well-connected he is to organized crime, but it stands to reason that he has an arrangement with some—but not all—factions. Recent developments suggest that the terrain is shifting within the narco-trafficking networks, and wars between rival organizations are heating up (Gagne 2015). This may well also be an indication of tensions brewing amongst the various shadow alliances that hitherto have underpinned Juan Orlando's rule.

10.3 Civil Society Resurgent

All the while, the overwhelming majority of Hondurans are struggling and, it would appear, are rebuilding their capacity to push back against Juan Orlando's authoritarian state. When I last visited Honduras, in February 2015, the movement was still recovering from the fragmentation and division that had been sewn by the troubled electoral process of 2013. But many spoke to the need to repair the splits and work together to block JOH's bid for indefinite power. As Bertha Oliva told me, "we are victims of this fragmentation... the movement is divided, but that is part of the process...."

It appears however that a dialogue is taking place. Bertha Cáceres expressed some hope, in February, that the factions of the movement that had supported the electoral bid were recognizing their errors: "They have been admitting this and we are all forced to address the fact that the people are losing hope." In particular, she noted that the movement had to get everyone back to the table to develop new strategies for the changing political situation: "We are a diverse movement, we have multiple parties [at the table] and we need to be playing to each of their strengths... our methods must be different."²⁵ It is unclear to what extent the long term strategies have shifted, but it is clear that the movement has been able to get back to the table and work together again.

²⁴ Tomás Andino, interview, 17 February 2015.

²⁵ Bertha Cáceres, interview, 18 February 2015.

10.4 The Torch Marches

The demonstrations, which began in June, have now grown to include as many as 60,000 people (in Tegucigalpa alone) on 3 July 2015, and they continued to take place every Friday evening this summer. These torch-bearing mobilizations, affectionately dubbed “*marchas de las antorchas*,” have drawn considerable international attention to the corruption in Juan Orlando’s government. Major articles in newspapers like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* have acknowledged, in the wake of these demonstrations, that the present Honduran government came into power under “widespread calls of electoral fraud,” and that Juan Orlando “has moved to consolidate his control over many of the country’s institutions” (Malkin 2015; Lakhani 2015). This coverage can only weaken Juan Orlando’s position, and if the demonstrations continue to grow, it will only increase the pressure felt by the Honduran elite to find a solution that allows for a more functional state. In that sense, the social movement may be in a position to capitalize on the internal fissures in the ruling class—between those who would accept a JOH dictatorship and those who would not—and it may be possible that the demonstrations can build momentum for a radical shift towards civilian governance and democratic rule of law.



Torch marches. Photo: Luis Mendes

Conversely, the ruling classes may recognize in the growing public outcry, a need to contain the popular rising, and thus give Juan Orlando the power he needs to stamp out dissent and complete his ascent to absolute rule. The outcome of these struggles will likely be affected, to a greater or lesser extent, by the position taken by the United States and its North American and European allies. As such, the re-establishment of responsible civilian governance in Honduras depends not just upon the social movement in the country but also upon the networks of solidarity abroad, which can pressure their own states to assert the end of military domination in Honduras on a world stage. The slogan being repeated in the streets of Honduras this summer is “*Renuncia JOH*,” a call for the resignation of the president and the striking of a constituent assembly in order to re-found Honduras upon the framework of civilian governance and rule of law. It is a lofty goal, in the current moment in Honduras, but it is undoubtedly one that deserves support.

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This CMI Working Paper draws from several years of research in Honduras, including a series of interviews in February 2015, to assess the relationship between civilian and military authority in Honduras today. It highlights the military coup of June 2009 as a turning point wherein the trend towards increased democratic civilian governance was reversed, setting into motion a chain of events that have re-asserted the primacy of the military. It concludes with an evaluation of the current mobilizations of civil society, manifest in major ongoing public demonstrations, and the prospects for reversing the slip into authoritarian rule under Juan Orlando Hernández.