

The Coup and Its Aftermath: Honduras Bleeding

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June 28 marked the six year anniversary of the military coup in Honduras – the day that a democratically elected left wing government was ousted by a US-backed, US-trained cabal of generals and right wing politicians and landowners. It could correctly be called a “Quiet Coup” primarily because it took place with very little fanfare from the corporate media which, to the extent that it covered it at all, did so mostly from a distorted perspective which spread more misinformation than truth. Today, six years (and many innocent lives, and billions of dollars) later, this shameful moment in recent history still remains largely forgotten.

Perhaps it was the lingering euphoria felt by liberals and so-called progressives in the months after Obama’s election and inauguration. Perhaps it was the still new economic crisis and subsequent bailout and financial turmoil. Perhaps it was plain old imperialistic, neocolonial disregard for Latin America and the rights of the people unfortunate enough to be living in “America’s backyard.” Whatever the reason, the fact remains that the Obama administration and those who supported it, then and now, are complicit in an ongoing political, economic, and social tragedy in Honduras.

But why bring it up now, other than to mark the anniversary of the coup? For starters, because one of the primary participants and benefactors happens to be the likely Democratic Party presidential candidate: Hillary Clinton. Also, far from being a discrete episode of US imperialism’s sordid past, the coup and its legacy remain a driving force in Honduran politics and society today. The beneficiaries and participants are all still either in government or have shifted to the private sector, and continue to enrich themselves at the cost of the poor and working people of the country. The coup government of Honduras continues to wage a brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against minority communities to benefit itself and its patrons from the US and elsewhere.

Perhaps most importantly, the coup of 2009 reveals the extent to which the United States remains a neocolonial, imperial power in Latin America, and reminds us of just what countries like Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador have been struggling against. It illustrates in the starkest terms the human cost of Washington’s policies, not in books about a historical period, but in images and videos of a country under its thumb today. It reminds us just how real the struggle still is.

The Coup and the US Role

The 2006 election of José Manuel Zelaya, known as “Mel” to his friends and supporters, was a watershed moment in the history of Honduras. A country that, like its neighbors, suffered under a succession of US-backed right wing governments, had finally elected a man whose politics were of the people, rather than of the military and business interests. Despite

coming from a wealthy family, and having been elected under the Partido Liberal (Liberal Party) banner, Zelaya's politics shifted significantly to the left once he assumed office.

Not only did Zelaya commit the great sin of [forging ties](#) with the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his ALBA (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) and PetroCaribe blocs, but Zelaya challenged the political status quo in the country, promising to represent the poor and working class in a country traditionally dominated by wealthy landowners and the military. As journalist, author, and former adviser to the Permanent Mission of Honduras at the United Nations, Roberto Quesada, told Counterpunch in an exclusive interview:

When Zelaya came into power, even though he was in a traditional party, he changed the traditional politics of the Liberal Party and made it into a people's party. He turned the presidential palace into a house for the people...For the first time those without voices were given a voice...He wanted to introduce the Cuarta Urna [Fourth Ballot Box Referendum]. For the first time the Honduran people could decide what they wanted and change the constitution [because]...the constitution of 1982 was in favor of the right wing and was not in the interests of Hondurans.

And so it seemed in 2009 that Honduras, like Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua before it, would legally and democratically break free of the political and corporate hegemony of the US. Clearly this was something that Washington, even with the newly elected president of "Hope" and "Change" in the White House, could not abide. Enter: then newly appointed Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Clinton has since admitted openly, and quite brazenly, her central role in legitimizing, supporting, and providing political cover for the illegal, and [internationally condemned](#), coup against Zelaya. As Counterpunch contributor Mark Weisbrot has [noted](#), Clinton stated clearly in her book *Hard Choices* that, "In the subsequent days [after the coup] I spoke with my counterparts around the hemisphere, including Secretary [Patricia] Espinosa in Mexico... We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot."

What exactly was the plan? Aside from providing diplomatic cover by not openly calling it a military coup, Clinton employed her longtime associates Lanny Davis and Bennett Ratcliff who whispered sweet nothings in the ears of the right people in Washington and on Wall Street, including in a laughable [op-ed in the Wall Street Journal](#), thereby paving the way for new "elections" in Honduras, in order to, as Clinton put it, "*render the question of Zelaya moot.*" Lanny Davis, as has been [noted](#) by a number of journalists, is a direct representative of powerful business elites in Honduras.

Davis himself explained this fact in an [interview](#) just weeks after the coup when he stated, "My clients represent the CEAL, the [Honduras Chapter of] Business Council of Latin America...I do not represent the government and do not talk to [interim] President [Roberto] Micheletti. My main contacts are [billionaires] Camilo Atala and Jorge Canahuati. I'm proud to represent businessmen who are committed to the rule of law." Indeed, Davis quite candidly exposed himself as an agent of powerful oligarch [financiers](#) and landowners who, until the election of Zelaya, had always maintained firm control of the reins of government in Honduras.

Essentially then, Clinton and her henchmen played the key role in facilitating an illegal coup against a democratically elected government in the interests of their billionaire friends inside Honduras, and the geopolitical agenda of the United States in the region. Though she is busy employing populist rhetoric in her presidential bid these days, Clinton has done yeoman's work for the right wing, anti-democratic forces of Latin America, and the Empire broadly speaking. Of course, none of this should come as any surprise to people who have followed Clinton, and US imperialism in Latin America for that matter.

Equally unsurprising is the US role in the training and backing of the Honduran generals who carried out the coup on that early morning in late June 2009. As School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) [noted](#) at the time:

The June 28 coup in Honduras was carried out by the School of the Americas (SOA) graduates Gen. Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, the head of the of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Honduran military and by Gen. Luis Prince Suazo, the head of the Air Force... SOA-trained Honduran Army Attorney Col. Herberth Inestroza justified the military coup and stated in an interview with The Miami Herald 'It would be difficult for us, with our training, to have a relationship with a leftist government. That's impossible.' Inestroza also confirmed that the decision for the coup was made by the military... According to information that SOA Watch obtained from the US government through a Freedom of Information Act request, Vasquez studied in the SOA at least twice: once in 1976 and again in 1984...The head of the Air Force, General Luis Javier Prince Suazo, studied in the School of the Americas in 1996.

The School of the Americas (since renamed Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, aka WHINSEC) is a US military institute located at Fort Benning, Georgia infamous for graduating a literal who's who of Central and South American military dictators, death squad leaders, and other assorted fascists who left their bloody marks on their respective countries. It's been called the "School of Dictators" and a "coup factory," and it seems that Honduras in 2009 was merely the latest victim of its illustrious alumni. Indeed, this was not the first time for Honduras, as both General Juan Melgar Castro (military dictator, 1975-1978) and Policarpo Paz Garcia (death squad leader and then military dictator, 1978-1982) were graduates of the School of the Americas. Needless to say, the legacy of the United States in Honduras is a bloody and shameful one.

Honduras: A US Military Foothold in Central America

One should not be fooled into believing that since 2009 and the US-backed coup and subsequent regime change, somehow the US has not been involved militarily inside Honduras. Indeed, just weeks ago the US military [announced](#) that it would be sending a contingent of US Marines to Honduras, ostensibly to "provide assistance during hurricane season." However, the reality is that the US is merely continuing, and indeed expanding, its ongoing military partnership and de facto occupation of Honduras and a number of other key Central American countries.

In an exclusive interview with Counterpunch, the US Coordinator of the National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP) and Refoundation Party (LIBRE), Lucy Pagoada succinctly explained, "The coup forced us to wake up to the reality of Honduras. I lived in Honduras until I was 15 years old. I've never seen my country so militarized as the way it has become after 2009. It has turned into a large military base trained and funded by the US. They even have School of the Americas forces there...There have been high levels of violence and torture since the

coup against the resistance and the opposition.” According to Pagoda and other activists both in Honduras and in the US, the country has essentially become an annex of the US military, acting as a staging area for a variety of Washington’s military operations in the region.

This conclusion is confirmed by a [report](#) from the North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) which noted:

The steady increase of U.S. assistance to [Honduran] armed forces [is] an indicator of tacit U.S. support. But the U.S. role in militarization of national police forces has been direct as well. In 2011 and 2012, the Drug Enforcement Administration’s Foreign-deployed Advisory Support Team (FAST)...set up camp in Honduras to train a local counternarcotics police unit and help plan and execute drug interdiction operations...Supported by U.S. helicopters mounted with high caliber machine guns, these operations were nearly indistinguishable from military missions, and locals routinely referred to the DEA and Honduran police agents as “soldados” (soldiers). According to the New York Times, five “commando style squads” of FAST teams have been deployed across Central America to train and support local counternarcotics units...In July 2013, the Honduran government created a new “elite” police unit called the Intelligence Troop and Special Security Group, or TIGRES (Spanish for “tigers”). The unit, which human rights groups contend is military in nature, has been deployed in tandem with the new military police force and has received training in military combat tactics from both U.S. and Colombian Special Forces units.

For those with even a cursory understanding of how US support for the contra death squads of Central America in the 1970s and 1980s actually worked, the description above should bear a chilling resemblance. Essentially, US military and covert assets provide the arms, training, and coordination for a patchwork of well-organized units whose function is to terrorize communities whose real crime, far from involvement in drug trafficking, is either opposition to the government or having the misfortune of living on valuable real estate prized by the same business interests that Mrs. Clinton and her cronies represent.

Of course, the US military presence has a regional dimension as Washington attempts to use its assets to reassert and/or maintain control over the entire region which it has seen steadily slipping from its grasp since the election of Hugo Chavez more than 15 years ago, and the subsequent rise of Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador, and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua. But, from the strictly Honduran perspective, this military cooperation is intended to provide the Honduran military, now doubling as internal police and security forces, with the necessary support to carry out ethnic cleansing operations and killing of political opponents in order to make the country safe for business.

Cleansing Honduras for the Sake of Profit

The military operations in Honduras are aimed primarily at enriching the oligarchs running the country since the ouster of Zelaya in 2009. The goal is to ethnically cleanse prime real estate, either through eviction or brute force, in order to free it up for privatization. One of the means by which this is taking place is through the so called “Ciudades Modelos” (Model Cities) program which promotes tax-free business havens for newly privatized land seized from indigenous communities.

One of the communities most deeply affected is the Garifuna, an Afro-indigenous nation

whose land stretches hundreds of miles of prime real estate on the Honduran Caribbean coast which the corrupt government of President Hernandez, and his financial backers in Tegucigalpa (the Honduran capital) and the US, envisions as a money-making tourist zone. [TeleSur](#) noted in 2014 that the Barra Vieja Garifuna community was under eviction threat by the Honduran government which prized their land for the “further development of the Bahia de Tela tourist project and the building of the five star Indura Beach and Golf Resort. In a business alliance, the Honduran government holds 49 percent of the shareholds for the project while 51 percent is in the hands of private business.” New York City alone is [home](#) to roughly 250,000 Garifuna people from Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Belize; they have to watch as their families and friends back in Honduras continue to face persecution at the hands of a right wing government serving business interests from the US and elsewhere.

But of course, the Garifuna are not alone, as many other indigenous communities in Honduras face unspeakable repression at the hands of the militarized Honduran government and its 21st Century version of death squads. As Lucy Pagoada recounted in her interview with Counterpunch, “Margarita Murillo, an indigenous woman, dedicated her life to the defense of the land and the workers. She was killed with seven bullets by her home in the department of Yoro...She was a leader of the resistance.”

Indeed, the brutal [assassination](#) of Murillo in August 2014 was yet another chilling reminder of the war waged by the Honduran government on peasants and indigenous people in the country who refuse to be displaced in the interests of the business elites. Murillo, who had just recently been named President of the Asociativa Campesinos de Producción Las Ventanas (Window Production Peasants Association), had been an advocate for her fellow indigenous peoples and the poor, and had been involved in mediating a land dispute between a number of local families and a group of wealthy landowners in the area. She was shot execution-style by a group of three men in ski masks.

Murillo’s assassination was far more than simply a murder motivated by a local land-grab. Rather, it was a clear warning to the resistance movement in Honduras that any organized effort to fight back against the government and the wealthy landowners backing it would be met with brute force. This is the sort of message that the people of Honduras, especially those who lived through the 1970s and 1980s, understand all too well. In fact, such violence, and the despair that it produces, has driven many Hondurans, especially from the Garifuna community, to flee to the US in search of a better life.

Maria Vives is an administrative assistant with the Give Them to Eat ministries of the Bronx Spanish Evangelical Church. Speaking with Counterpunch she recalled:

We have a soup kitchen and food pantry. We help people on an emergency basis...Three Garifuna women showed up last summer and expressed needs—they were frustrated. They have [sic] been caught crossing the border and ankle bracelets have [sic] been put on them. They were shackled...Word spread that we were helping people in need and soon we had a total of almost 50 or 60 women who show up with their children...They have several reasons for leaving Honduras. For the violence, they were killing off a lot of people in the neighborhood because they wanted to take over their lands. Some were scared their children would join gangs. As soon as the children reach a certain age they were recruited to join the gang. I know one mother in particular who brought over her three children because one of them was being recruited into the gang.

Although the corporate media constantly referred to the "[child immigration crisis](#)" during its brief coverage in 2014, the reality was that it was a refugee crisis, and that those children, at times accompanied and at times unaccompanied, were fleeing precisely the sort of repression described above. Whether Garifuna or members of other indigenous or peasant communities, those children and families sought refuge in the US, refuge from the horrors perpetrated against them in Honduras; of course, all with the tacit approval and covert participation of the US Government.

As we mark the sixth anniversary of the 2009 coup against the legal government of Honduras, we must be sure to not simply recognize the event as yet another despicable example of US imperialism and its support for repressive governments in Latin America. We must instead recognize that that singular event set into motion a series of events which have led to the political and social crisis ongoing in Honduras today. As Roberto Quesada told us, "We can't talk about the coup as if it is in the past. It continues to leave the country in a state of chaos."

In a forthcoming article for CounterPunch we will examine some of the political opposition emerging in Honduras, including the important protests against the government currently taking place. We will also provide an analysis of the revolutionary undercurrent present both in Honduras and its expatriate community in the US and throughout Latin America. The story of the coup, and those fighting to right the wrongs it caused, is far from over.

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