

8-2010

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**WESTERN HEMISPHERE
SECURITY ANALYSIS CENTER**

Honduras' Stressed Social Fabric: *Instability and Risks*

The WHEMSAC Team
Applied Research Center

August 2010

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The views expressed in this research paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the US Government, Department of Defense, US Southern Command or Florida International University.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The election of Porfirio Lobos formally ended the crisis created by the Honduran Supreme Court's decision to remove democratically elected President José Manuel Zelaya from office on June 28, 2009. Yet, profound consequences from the decision persist. Honduras remains regionally isolated, economically weak, and internally divided over the applicability of the current constitution for resolving future political predicaments. The crisis has contributed to the entrenchment of opposing views, polarizing of society in an unprecedented way, and the exacerbation of Hondurans' distrust in state institutions.

The opportunity for renewed instability remains the case for Honduras, in part, due to the lack of sustained, institutionalized democracy. As expressed succinctly by J. Mark Ruhl: "The outlook for democracy in Honduras is uncertain."¹ The current system is broken: calls for "a new Honduras" have been expressed from different sectors of society, from government officials to grassroots organizations. If a "new" Honduras is to emerge, it must provide a more competitive political and economic system

¹ J. Mark Ruhl, "Honduras Unravels," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 21, No. 2, April 2010, p. 94, http://www.brookings.edu/testimony/2010/0318_honduras_casaszamora.aspx?p=1. Also, since 2004, Seligson and Booth had found that political legitimacy was thin and that justification for a military coup in Honduras was higher than in any other country in Latin America. See, Michael A. Seligson and John A. Booth, "Predicting Coups? Democratic Vulnerabilities, the AmericasBarometer and the 2009 Honduran Crisis," *Latin American Public Opinion Project, "Insights" Series*, "2009, www.AmericasBarometer.org.

that guarantees all Hondurans tangible opportunities to improve their wellbeing.

Honduras is at a crossroads. The unsettling episode of President Zelaya's (forced) removal from office offers an opportunity for inaugurating substantive change. The crisis has had the effect of raising widespread social consciousness and awareness of the importance of democratic values. It has also galvanized new organizations to engage in national political discourse, particularly by way of social media. Failure of the State to take advantage of heightened awareness, interest and participation by the mass populace and to respond to Hondurans' long standing social demands for inclusion and equality could lead, sooner or later, to the rise of new messianic leaders seeking to profit from Hondurans' distaste for "politics as usual."

Restoring Honduras' social fabric requires building trust and credibility in the State and its institutions. The government of Honduras (GOH) needs to produce verifiable results that directly and rapidly impact citizens' wellbeing. The State could achieve this goal by implementing a short-term agenda focusing on three key issues: promoting reconciliation, fighting corruption, and improving citizens' security. Obtaining some degree of positive results could help Hondurans believe that positive change is possible, and thus lay the groundwork for much needed long-term reforms. If Honduras is to accomplish this task, it requires the support of the international community.

INTRODUCTION

Values, beliefs, traditions, customs, morals, law, and institutions all help comprise the social fabric that binds a nation together. Shared cultural components help create a strong and cohesive society; pulled or broken threads stress and/or tear at the social fabric. The constitutional crisis in 2009 created a significant amount of turmoil that stressed Honduras' social fabric. One year later, Hondurans remain anxious over how and when reconciliation will take full effect.

The ouster of President José Manuel Zelaya sharply split Honduran society. Families, friends, and colleagues took sides with *Golpistas* (who supported Zelaya's removal) or the *Resistencia* (who rejected it). More importantly, Hondurans who had opposed Zelaya's policies also wrestled with the legality of the Supreme Court's and Armed Forces' decisions and actions, respectively.² These perceptions pertaining to the legality of the ouster in turn influenced Hondurans' acceptance or rejection of Roberto Micheletti's transitional government and of the legitimacy of the November 2009 election that brought Porfirio Lobo to office. Despite the richness of the constitutional discussions that followed, the events that set the election into motion startled

** Information for this paper is based primarily on interviews conducted by the authors during field research to Tegucigalpa, Honduras in February 2010. Substantial research was also conducted by Gina A. Moreno, at ARC.

² In surveys conducted by different organizations, between 46 and 60 percent of those surveyed opposed the way Zelaya was removed from power. The Supreme Court acted at the request of the Attorney General, and gave orders to the Armed Forces to arrest Zelaya. The arrest should have been assigned to local/state police.

Hondurans, especially the young, who for the past two decades had witnessed peaceful transfers of power.³

The crisis produced other serious consequences. It exacerbated Hondurans' lack of trust in already discredited institutions. Economic activity came to a standstill as protesters took to the street and international donors suspended foreign assistance. Businesses were looted and burned. Several people died during the violence. Strong-arm law enforcement tactics against protesters led to several allegations of human rights violations. Tension increased as international mediation efforts failed, and Zelaya returned to the country seeking diplomatic asylum at the Brazilian embassy. For six months violence and fear dominated everyday life for most Hondurans. While the immediate crisis subsided after the new presidential election, the effects of the conflict have persisted.⁴

This paper will thus briefly examine some of the key stressors of the Honduran social fabric in light of the ouster, such as polarization, lack of trust in institutions, corruption, and lack of citizens' security. In sum, this paper contends that Honduras is at a crossroads, and that the GOH has an

³ Honduras has a well-documented history of dictatorships. The transition to democratic rule began in 1982.

⁴ See, J. Mark Ruhl, "Honduras Unravels," *opp. Cit*; and Alvaro Calix, "Honduras: de la crisis política al surgimiento de un nuevo actor social," *Nueva Sociedad*, No. 226, March-April 2010, www.nuso.org. See also, an analysis of events prior to June 2009 in Ambassador Charles A. Ford (retired), "Re-setting our Engagement with Central America: Lessons from the Honduran Crisis," *Perspectives on the Americas* University of Miami, Center for Hemispheric Policy, June 22, 2010; and Kevin Casas-Zamora, "Next Steps for Honduras," Testimony on the political crisis in Honduras before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Brookings Institution, March 18, 2010.

opportunity to implement serious reforms to alleviate the risk of renewed instability.

A POLARIZED SOCIETY

Honduran society was on the path of polarization long before the crisis that erupted in June 2009. Zelaya was turning more ideologically motivated than he seemed when elected in 2005. The traditional elites rejected his call for a Constitutional Assembly-- the now famous “fourth ballot box” --believing that Zelaya intended to change the law that banned presidential reelection. Also worrisome was Zelaya’s closeness to President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and fears that Honduras would follow the Venezuelan path. With this fear, stopping Zelaya resonated well with many Hondurans.

Others saw it differently, however. Shortly before his removal, Zelaya enjoyed a 62 percent approval rating.⁵ His social policies, including the 60 percent increase in minimum wages that had caused havoc on the economy, had benefited the less-privileged sectors. These groups also welcomed his decision to join the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) because it provided much-needed developmental aid.⁶ The growing political gap turned into a war of words in

⁵ CIMA, “Honduras,” *Barómetro Iberoamericano de Gobernabilidad 2009*, www.cimaiberoamerica.com.

⁶ The Zelaya administration also received substantial assistance for poverty reduction from the US and other donors. For example, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) signed a 5-year, US \$205 million Compact Contract with Honduras to “increase the productivity and business skills of farmers and to reduce transportation costs between targeted production centers and national, regional and global markets.” In September 2009, the MCC suspended two of the activities scheduled under the Compact based on “the undemocratic political activities of

the media and fueled strong sentiments in favor or against every decision made by the Zelaya Administration. The class struggle was deepening by the time the crisis erupted. By 2010, the *Americas Barometer* survey found that “the coup and its outcome appear to have opened a stark difference between socioeconomic classes and their support for democracy.”⁷

Considering the growing political tension, the sharp split of Honduran society in June 2009 was not unexpected. Unanticipated perhaps was the extent and level of segmentation that occurred. Extremism reigned among the splintered groups, and “the truth was lost in the process.”⁸ There were no winners in the struggle; only losers.

The intensity of socio-political polarization in Honduras has not diminished. The Honduran society is divided between those that believe that the Constitution is still valid and those that believe that it needs to be revised and reformed.⁹ Ironically, the call for a Constitutional Assembly that triggered Zelaya’s removal from office remains today a critical barrier separating Hondurans.

June 2009.”, but by March 2010, Honduras had received US\$152.5 million of the allocated funds.

⁷ The findings suggest that the coup and its resolution decreased upper class Hondurans’ satisfaction with democracy, much more than for poorer Hondurans. See: Orlando J. Pérez, John A. Booth and Mitchell A. Seligson, “The Honduran Catharsis,” An American Barometer Insights Series Report, *Americas Quarterly*, August 2010, <http://www.americasquarterly.org/honduran-catharsis>.

⁸ Interview with members of civil society organizations who asked to not be identified. Tegucigalpa, February 2010.

⁹ “Comisión de la Verdad enfrenta enorme polarización: Stein,” *La Tribuna*, Tegucigalpa, HN: May 19, 2010, <http://www.latribuna.hn/web2.0/?p=133627>.

LACK OF TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS

Hondurans' trust in institutions is among the lowest in Latin America. Even prior to 2009, citizens had little respect for Congress, Supreme Court, police, and Elections Tribunal. They trusted local government more than the political parties, which were at the bottom of the scale. Only the institutional churches and international donors earned the trust of large segments of the population. The media and the Armed Forces also enjoyed significant levels of trust (see below).

<u>Most trusted institutions, 2009</u>	
<u>Institution</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Catholic Church	38%
Evangelical Church	37.5
International donor agencies	27.5
Media	18.1
Armed Forces	15.6
Human Rights Commissioner	10.7
Municipal governments	10.3
Institution Access Information	9.5
Supreme Court	7.8
Superior Court of Accounts	6.6
Superior Elections Tribunal	6.5
Labor unions	6.4
Police	6.4
Anti Corruption Attorney General	6.1
National Congress	4.7
Political Parties	2.1

Source: CNA, *Informe Nacional de Transparencia, 2009*

The 2009 events further undermined Hondurans' confidence in their institutions. Zelaya's removal and replacement by Roberto Micheletti as interim president involved decisions by the Supreme Court, Congress, the Office of the Attorney General, and the military, among others. For the majority who opposed the ouster, it was precisely the decisions made by these institutions and their compliance or non-compliance with the constitution that raised the legality question and further undermined trust in public institutions.

Of greater significance was the impact of the crisis on the most trusted institutions. Unexpectedly, the trusted Catholic Church took sides rather than assume the role of mediator to the torn society. The highly respected Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez asked President Zelaya during a live broadcast in July not to return to the country, a call interpreted as Church support for the interim government.¹⁰ In August, Cardinal Rodríguez explained that, "If we look back at what happened, we will discover the law was not respected because the highest authority was the first to violate it,"¹¹ again blaming Zelaya for his downfall. Regardless of which side it took, the fact that the Church took one side over the other significantly disappointed many

¹⁰ Radio Evangelización, "Sacerdote hondureño condena posición del Cardenal Rodríguez," *Radio Evangelización*, 10 July 2009, <http://www.radioevangelizacion.org/spip.php?article3297>. See also, "Ecologics, La Postura Política de la Iglesia Católica en Honduras: el Cardenal Óscar Andrés Rodríguez Madariaga," 16 July 2010, <http://ecologics.wordpress.com/2009/07/12/la-postura-de-la-iglesia-catolica-en-honduras-el-cardenal-oscar-andres-rodriguez-maradiaga>; and Cardinal Rodríguez live broadcast at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMuZ94aFurM>.

¹¹ Catholic News Agency, "Cardinal Rodriguez: 'Church supports reconciliation in Honduras'," Tegucigalpa, Honduras: 10 August 2009, http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/cardinal_rodriguez_church_supports_reconciliation_in_honduras/.

Hondurans. It hurt one key element of Honduras social fabric and raised doubts about the Church's role in post-conflict efforts at reconciliation.

Similarly, there was despair over the role of the media during the conflict. The mass media, although owned and controlled by a handful of wealthy families, had enjoyed a high level of credibility. That the media supported Zelaya's removal was expected given previous antagonisms between the media and the Zelaya government. For the average citizen, anguish came not from media support for the "Golpistas," but rather for failing to provide accurate, objective, and timely information during the crisis.¹² Again, one of the trusted institutions led Hondurans down.

The Armed Forces, prior to the constitutional crisis was also held in relatively high esteem by the population. At least 15 percent of the population viewed it as one of the most trusted institutions (2009). Yet, only 27 percent of those surveyed approved the Armed Forces' role in arresting and taking Zelaya into exile, while 58 opposed it.¹³ The military had been thrown back to a role that many Hondurans had hoped was long gone.

The reaction of the international community, particularly the US, also took many by surprise. The US's strong rejection

¹² See, Leticia Salomón, "El golpe de estado en Honduras: Antecedentes, desarrollo y perspectivas. Notas para comprender lo que ha ocurrido y lo que puede ocurrir," Meeting with Honduran economist and sociologists Leticia Salomon at Tulane University, Center for Inter-American Policy and Research, October 19, 2009, <http://cipr.tulane.edu/home/events/19/meeting-with-Honduran-economist-and-sociologist-leticia-salomon%C3%B3n>.

¹³ Corporación Latinobarómetro, *Informe 2009*, Santiago de Chile, CH, Banco de Datos en Línea, www.latinobarometro.org.

of the coup and calls for Zelaya's restoration surprised the elites, particularly the entrepreneurs that had supported his removal from office. Considering its history of close relations with the US, they were angered by Washington's reaction. In fact, the State Department revoked US visas for 19 top-ranking Hondurans, including the interim president (Micheletti), the foreign minister, 14 Supreme Court justices and several business people, among them Adolfo Facussé, the head of the powerful National Association of Industries (*Asociación Nacional de Industrias—ANDI*).¹⁴ Inexplicable for these elites was watching the United States, Venezuela and Cuba on the same side of the conflict calling for President Zelaya's return to office.

CORRUPTION, CRIME, AND CITIZEN SECURITY

Hondurans' persistent lack of trust in public institutions correlates with their perceptions of corruption in such institutions. In 2009, almost 80 percent of Hondurans viewed politicians as the most corrupt followed by public officials, police, and members of Congress, judges, and ministers. Hondurans identify corruption, along with unemployment and citizen security, as their top three concerns.¹⁵

Corruption in Honduras is endemic and systemic. Corruption assessments conducted in country show that corruption is rampant in Congress, the executive, the judicial sector, the political parties, and the electoral process, as well

¹⁴ Honduras News, "Adolfo Facussé Deported from US," *Honduras News*, 13 September 2009, <http://www.hondurasnews.com/2009/09/13/adolfo-facusse-deported-from-us/>.

¹⁵ CIMA, opp. cit. p. 174.

as in the delivery of services, security institutions and every sector of society.¹⁶ Excessive levels of discretion in the handling of public funds, conflict of interests, and private-public sector collusion, influence peddling and much more characterize corruption in most institutions. More notably, there exist no functional systems of checks and balances or oversight to regulate, prevent, control, and prosecute corruption.

Corruption is inevitably linked to illicit trafficking. The State Department reports that “official corruption continues to be an impediment to effective law enforcement and there are press reports of drug trafficking and associated criminal activity among current and former government and military officials.”¹⁷ A recent study has found that security costs and losses due to crime absorbed nearly 10 percent of gross domestic product (GDP).¹⁸

Drug trafficking and corruption, particularly as it discredits authority and tolerates impunity, translates into crime and violence, which further discredits the institutions in question. The GOH is failing to provide safety for its citizens. The US State Department reports that crime is endemic in Honduras; poverty, gangs, and low apprehension and conviction rates of criminals contribute to a significant crime rate, including acts

¹⁶ The authors have conducted corruption assessments in Honduras in the past. The same conclusions have been reached by the CNA.

¹⁷ US State Department, “2009 INCSR: Country Reports – Honduras through Mexico,” Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, *2009 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR)*, Washington, DC: February 27, 2009, www.state.gov/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2009/vol1/116522.htm.

¹⁸ Quoted in: USAID, *Audit of the USAID/Honduras Democracy and Governance Program*, San Salvador, ES: Office of the Inspector General, Audit Report No. 1-522-09-009-P, June 4, 2009, p. 3.

of mass murder. Kidnappings are increasing and “express kidnapping”—affecting common individuals—is on the rise.¹⁹ The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) reported in 2008 that, with a population of approximately 7.3 million people, Honduras has one of the world’s highest per capita murder rates.²⁰ The conflicts within the police itself and between police and Armed Forces over drug enforcement and interdiction issues reflect a conflict between cartels, which also has the potential to escalate.

Unemployment is also linked to crime and corruption. The increasing unemployment rate, the greater number of youths there are available in the streets with the potential to join drug trafficking gangs. Unemployment increased dramatically after President Zelaya authorized the sixty percent increase in salaries, which small business could not sustain. The global economic crisis contributed to the economic dislocation caused by the political crisis. Many young people in remote municipalities are being trained by the cartels as boat operators, truck drivers, as well as other jobs that help with drug smuggling. Deportation of Hondurans who have committed crimes in the US (and often have been incarcerated) fuels not only increased unemployment but crime and insecurity as well.²¹

DEEDS NEEDED

President Porfirio Lobo came into office with 56 percent of the popular vote. The high approval rating suggested that the

¹⁹ US State Department, opp. Cit.

²⁰ US State Department, “Honduras: Country Specific Information,” at http://travel.state.gov/travel/cis_pa_tw/cis/cis_1135.html.

²¹ Honduras Weekly, “Deportations of Hondurans down by 17%,” December 26, 2009. <http://hondurasweekly.com/national/2023-deportations-of-hondurans-from-us-declining>.

majority of the population accepted the election as legitimate. His campaign team drafted a low-key campaign promising reconciliation and unity in response to growing demands for clear and honest signals of restoring legitimacy and achieving reconciliation.²² President Lobo also faces the development challenges that traditionally have plagued Honduras and that are the basis for the high levels of socio-economic underdevelopment.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Central America, whether poverty is measured against the local poverty line (51 percent, the second highest in the region), the \$2/day poverty line (35 percent, the highest in the region), or the \$1.25/day extreme poverty line (22 percent, the highest in the region). Social indicators are low, with male/female life expectancy at birth at 66 and 73 years, respectively, the lowest in the Central American region. The second highest percentage of the population in the region not using an improved water source is Honduras.²³

During his first six months in office, the Lobo administration emphasized mending fences abroad. Restoring relations with neighbors became a priority, as well as lobbying for a return to the Organization of American States (OAS), which suspended Honduras in June 2009 for President Zelaya's

²² Lobo's campaign manager was the well-know political strategist Juan José Rendón. See, MegaTV, María Elvira Salazar's interview with J.J. Rendón in Bogotá, Colombia, broadcast in Miami on 5 July 2010. See also, PRNewswire, "Political Mastermind and Strategist JJ Rendon Once Again the Driving Force Behind Juan Manuel," *Forbes.com*, 22 June 2010, http://www.forbes.com/feeds/prnewswire/2010/06/22/prnewswire201006221552_PR_NEWS_USPR_DC24965.html.

²³ USAID, *Audit of the USAID/Honduras Democracy and Governance Program*, opp. Cit., p. 3.

ouster. At home, attention focused on revitalizing the economy and recovering from the loss of international assistance and foreign investment. Regarding development programs, Lobo adopted the *Visión de País 2010-2038* (A Country Vision 2010-2038), a 38- year development plan, and a *Plan de Nación 2010-2022* (The Nation’s Plan 2010-2022), a strategy for its implementation over the next 12 years.²⁴

The Vision and Nation plans will serve as the government’s development blueprint for the next seven administrations. Drafted mostly by the *Consejo Hondureño de la Empresa Privada--COHEP* (Honduras’ Private Sector Council), the Plans incorporate several previous plans—including one drafted under the Zelaya administration. A careful review of the two plans indicates that they are overly ambitious, do not focus on resolving immediate concerns, and have unrealistic timeframes.²⁵

Also in process is the implementation of the San José and Tegucigalpa Accords signed in July and October 2009 by Micheletti and Zelaya negotiators. The accords called for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Named by the Organization of American States in May 2010, the Commission (*Comision de la Verdad y Reconciliación-CVR*), is headed by Eduardo Stein, former vice president of Guatemala. The CVR hopes to contribute to “the clarification for some of the most delicate and stringent issues surrounding the events of June 28 [2009]... to provide those sectors of Honduran society that have antagonistic

²⁴ República de Honduras, *Visión de País 2010-2018 y Plan de Nación 2010-2022*, January 2010.

²⁵ Ibid.

views an opportunity to express their own experiences and what they went through.”²⁶

The CVR is distrusted by both “*golpista*” and “*resistencia*” sectors. Stein explains that, “on the far right they consider [the Commission] a Trojan horse that will promote constitutional reform and among the *Zelayistas* and the resistance, they see us just as an extension of the coup, only window-dressing.”²⁷ Still, Stein is an optimist, and expects the Honduran leadership to agree, as happened in Guatemala and El Salvador during the peace agreement, to look ahead and work jointly for the future of Honduras.

The new social groups that emerged during the crisis and remain active have identified investigation of human rights violations as essential to a reconciliation process. The CVR has agreed to collect the testimony of victims and also look at the allegations of human rights violations reported by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR). These include human rights abuses continued under the Lobo administration. According to the IACHR, several people have been murdered, including journalists and human rights defenders, and there is an “absence of effective investigations that could lead to clarification of these events.”²⁸ The IACHR has also reported on threats and

²⁶ Tracy Wilkinson, “Q&A: Guatemalan seeks answers in Honduran coup,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/may/09/world/la-fg-honduras-stein-qa-20100510>; and Luis Alonso Lugo, “OEA define a integrantes de la comisión sobre Honduras,” *Associated Press (AP)*, Washington, 17 May 2010, <http://www-ni.laprensa.com.ni/2010/06/17/internacionales/28123>.

²⁷ Tracy Wilkinson, opp. Cit.

²⁸ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, “IACHR concerned about human rights violations in Honduras,” Press Release No. 54/10, Tegucigalpa, Honduras: May 19, 2010.

harassment received by human rights defenders, journalists, communicators, teachers, and members of the resistance. Of particular concern to the Commission was the continuation of impunity for human rights violations and the “acts of harassment directed against judges” who opposed the ouster.

Reconciliation and the restoration of the social fabric will require more than implementing the CVR recommendations. The GOH must be attentive to citizens’ sensitivities and concerns. Some decisions have antagonized both “*golpistas*” and the “*resistencia*.” For example, *resistencia* groups have been demanding accountability from those involved in the coup and instead, General Romeo Vázquez Velázquez, former head of the Honduran Armed Forces who led Zelaya’s removal, was appointed to head the state-owned telecommunications company, HONDUTEL- a position often associated with opportunities for corruption-- leaving unanswered demands for justice. Similarly, the president’s trip to South Africa during the 2010 World Cup to support the Honduran team seemed reasonable, but taking along almost 100 government officials and not transferring authority to anyone before leaving was seen as irresponsible and out of touch with the people’s hardship and anxieties.²⁹

The failure to curb corruption, as well as the increase in drug trafficking, places Honduras on high risk of state capture by criminal interests. Repeated administrations in Honduras have promised to fight corruption but often lack the political will to do so. The Zelaya and Micheletti governments seemed to be no exception. In fact, the once credible National Anticorruption Council (*Consejo Nacional*

²⁹ “*Honduras sin gobierno ni autoridades: Lobo, su familia y sus funcionarios se fueron ayer para Sudáfrica*,” *Aporrea.org*, 13 June 2010, <http://www.aporrea.org/actualidad/n159253.html>.

Anticorrupción—CAN) has practically collapsed.³⁰ Under the current administration, conflict of interests and nepotism continue unabated. Powerful entrepreneurs who have been appointed to the cabinet continue running their private businesses and several of the president's family members occupy government positions.³¹

To address the third key stressor, crime and insecurity, the new GOH named Oscar Alvarez as Security Minister. Alvarez had a solid reputation for fighting crime under the Maduro administration. Shortly after his new appointment, he ordered rapid interventions in key neighborhoods, often confiscating large caches of weapons.³² The impact of these operations will require some time to show results. In the meantime, President Lobo's popular support dropped ten percent precisely because citizens fail to see tangible results from these offensives.³³

³⁰ The twelve civil society organizations that make up the Council took different sides during the crisis, weakening its cohesion. In October 2009, the head of CNA was openly in support of the coup and hurt the institution's credibility. Also, the Catholic Church removed its representatives in disagreement with the running of the institution in March 2010.

³¹ President Lobo's son, Jorge Dimitrio Lobo, was named governor of Olacho, Honduras' largest department. His daughter Tania is the country representative at the Central American Bank for Economic Integration. His nephew Francisco Quesada Lobo is the Director of the Honduran Consulate in New York. The First Lady is the Coordinator of the Education for All Plan at the Ministry of Education.

³² Televisa, "Honduras declara guerra a la delincuencia," *Noticiero Televisa*, January 28, 2010, <http://www.2.esmas.com/noticierostelevisa/internacional/america/133993/honduras-declara-guerra-delincuencia>.

³³ "Cae popularidad del presidente de Honduras por problemas de seguridad ciudadana," *América Economía*, 1 June 2010, <http://www.americaeconomia.com/politica-sociedad/politica/cae-popularidad-del-presidente-de-honduras-por-problemas-de-seguridad-ciu>.

THE ROAD AHEAD

Honduras faces many more challenges than those outlined here, both internally and externally. Perhaps none is more significant than the frustration of large segments of the population with “politics as usual.” The polarization, distrust in the institutions, corruption, unemployment, crime and citizens insecurity, severe income inequalities, and growing hardships are elements that may lead to protests, particularly after the 2009 experience with taking to the streets to denounce the coup. Hondurans need reassurances that the democratic path is the right one. Failure to do so may provide opportunities for populist leaders to grow on fertile ground.

There is consensus among observers that the Honduran government must provide tangible results. For J. Marc Ruhl, for example, “if the new chief executive simply pays no more than lip service to the need to attack poverty and inequality and to the importance of punishing the corrupt, popular support for democratic politics will likely resume its decline.”³⁴ Similarly, the Honduran Human Rights Commissioner has stated that, “each day, the Honduran people feel more discontent, more unsatisfied and more anxious over demands for good health and education services.”³⁵

The GOH has the opportunity to offer immediate relief to its citizens. It could design and implement a brief agenda that

³⁴ J. Mark Ruhl, *opp. cit.*, p. 106.

³⁵ “Hay toda una burocracia montada a favor de la corrupción,” interview with the Human Rights Commissioner, June 21, 2010, <http://www.conadeh.hn/Joomla/index.php/component/content/article/114-hay-toda-una-burocracia-montada-a-favor-de-la-corrupcion>.

brings about verifiable results within a short period of time. The primary objective should be to restore the social fabric by creating trust and credibility. Such an agenda could focus on three issues: promoting reconciliation, fighting corruption, and improving citizens' security. Hondurans need rapid results in order to believe that change is possible, and thus be prepared to await much needed longer-term reforms. Some initiatives that could produce results in the short term are:

Reconciliation: The Truth and Reconciliation Commission is an important first step. It needs to be inclusive and respond to the questions lingering in people's minds. The final report should be disseminated broadly and without delay. This would provide citizens a sense that the Lobo administration and the Commission are transparent and accountable. The GOH should be readily prepared to implement the Commission's recommendations.

Fighting Corruption: The GOH must provide clear indications that it is committed to preventing and fighting corruption. Honduras has had some successful experiences in fighting corruption in the past. The mechanisms created to verify the use of Hurricane Mitch reconstruction funds, for example, were reliable and effective and included civil society participation. Similarly, the National Anticorruption Council had gained a solid reputation; the government has drafted an Anticorruption Plan and some basic anticorruption laws have been enacted, including the Law on Transparency and Access to Information. Reform of the judicial sector had also gained some momentum with the support of the US.

Honduras requires broad, comprehensive anticorruption reform to fend off the capture of the state by drug trafficking organizations. It needs to revamp the judicial and financial

sectors, restructure oversight institutions, and reform entities in charge of law enforcement.³⁶ These reforms are much-needed long-term goals. In the short term, the Lobo administration, with the assistance of the international community, could take decisive steps that show political will to fight corruption. Among them:

- Restore credibility of the National Anticorruption Commission. It should be an independent entity with sufficient authority and resources to carry out initiatives to prevent and investigate corruption.
- Demand asset declarations from cabinet members. This is a requirement of the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption that Honduras has signed. Ministers should place businesses in blind trust while serving as government officials.
- Drastically reduce corruption in customer services. The procedure to obtain licenses/permits or for paying fines/services, for example, can rapidly become efficient and transparent, helping build citizens trust in their institutions.
- Revamp the Electoral Tribunal to generate confidence in elections.
- Initiate reform of the Supreme Court of Justice and take the necessary measures to reduce impunity.

³⁶ USG will provide significant support in the coming year under the Merida Initiative. It will fund a variety of programs that will strengthen the institutional capabilities of participating governments by supporting efforts to investigate, sanction, and prevent corruption within law enforcement agencies; facilitating the transfer of critical law enforcement investigative information within and between regional governments; and funding equipment purchases, training, community policing, and economic and social development programs.

- Allocate the required budget to municipalities to ensure that the decentralization process moves forward. The *Americas Barometer* surveys indicates that making resources available to improve the performance of local government and local civil society might pay off with a “rebound” in those attributes of a political culture supportive of democratic institutions. In Honduras, all politics is local.

The international community, particularly the US, could assist the GOH in carrying out these tasks. Since 2008, USAID reduced funding to Honduras’ governance programs due to budget constraints. Yet, the Office of Inspector General has recommended that USAID/Honduras continue with the democracy and governance programs, which have had a significant impact on the judicial sector, and to provide funding for programs that would contribute to improving the quality of governance. Moreover, USAID could initiate specific anticorruption programs, particularly since Honduras was not included in the USAID Central American and Mexico Transparency and Governance Programs (CAM-TAG). Honduras needs assistance in fighting corruption and it needs it now.

Citizens Security: Revamping security and law enforcement institutions is an urgent matter, but not one that will provide immediate and visible results for the population. Yet, rapid and effective measures could be implemented to reduce opportunities for violence in local communities. Honduras already has experience with programs to address emergency situations. In 1998, after Hurricane Mitch created a humanitarian crisis, the international community responded in kind. The State Department’s Office of Transition Initiatives provided substantial rapid respond

assistance to thousands of homeless people. Mechanisms were implemented to ensure transparency and accountability in the handling of assistance funds.

While having a rapid impact on reducing drug trafficking in Central America seems to be elusive, there is plenty of room to improve Honduras' judicial system. In recent years, US democracy and governance assistance to Honduras has helped increase the efficiency of criminal court procedure, and helped strengthen the formal legal framework for the justice system and citizen access to government information. These programs should be reinstated and strengthened. Assistance could be provided for creating youth employment in high risk areas, community support for victims of crime, particularly women, and promoting citizens' involvement in taking back their neighborhoods. Honduras has several rapid intervention initiatives already on the ground that could be strengthened and expanded.

CONCLUSION

The Honduran crisis of 2009 has exacerbated societal cleavages and created a demand for profound change. The crisis may also provide the opportunity to seize the moment to transform Honduran society through democratic mechanisms. Failure to do so will leave the door open for populist politicians to promise change, most likely through non-democratic means. Honduras also runs the risk of becoming a failed state subject to the interests of drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) if corruption, inequality, social injustice, impunity, and disregard for the plight of the majority of the population continue unabated.

Honduras has been a privileged recipient of international aid for several decades. With that support, it has made strides in

the transition toward democracy, removed the Armed Forces from politics, provided space for citizens to participate and organize themselves, particularly at the local level, and has attempted to reform the judicial system. It now needs profound reforms that will lead to global integration, economic growth, and social justice. Charles A. Ford, former ambassador to Honduras, has called on the international community to seize this moment “with the same urgency and conviction with which it responded” to the crisis following Hurricane Mitch or the current crisis in Haiti after the January 2010 earthquake.³⁷ There are opportunities to initiate rapid response initiatives to empower Hondurans to embark on the difficult tasks of gaining trust among themselves and in their institutions. Maintaining “politics as usual” does not augur well for the nation’s future.

³⁷ Ambassador Charles A. Ford, retired, “Re-setting our Engagement with Central America ...” *opp. cit.*, pp. 6.

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