



PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Human Rights and the Honduran Coup

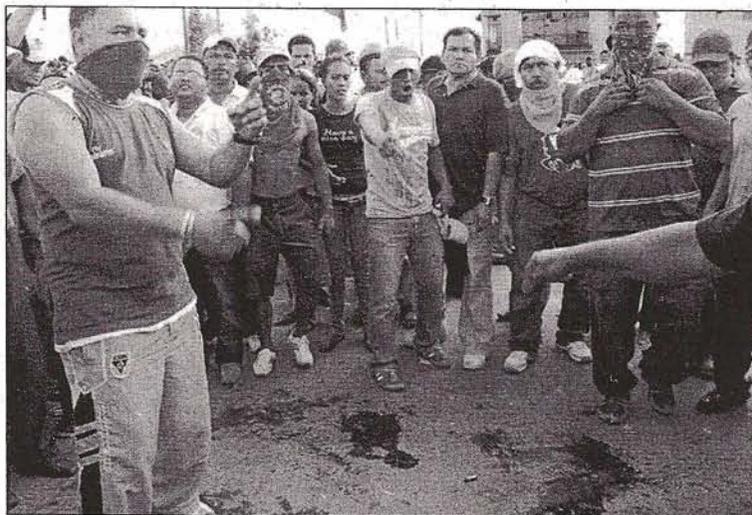
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Hondurans have a saying: "When the media shuts up, the walls shout." Indeed, since the de facto military government of Roberto Micheletti silenced all opposition media, the graffiti-covered walls have screamed about the targeted assassinations, tear gassing, rape, torture and other violations of human rights of the widespread resistance movement. Meanwhile, the Obama administration has said nothing about these well-documented abuses, instead chastising deposed president Manuel Zelaya for provoking this violence, and refusing to enact sanctions legally required of it in the case of a military coup.

Zelaya, elected as a center-left politician, was neither savior nor villain. During his presidency he signed CAFTA and the US Drug War-related Mérida Initiative, complied with neoliberal IMF and World Bank mandates and enacted policies that economically benefited Honduras's small endogamous group of business elites. But he also forced large corporations to pay taxes, and resisted, in response to a strong popular movement, the privatization of the telecommunications industry. He raised the minimum wage by 60% to \$286 a month, infuriating business elites. But it was Zelaya's support of a popular movement of unprecedented scope, demanding constitutional reforms that would pave the way for a more inclusive democratic political system, that led a few of the most powerful members of the oligarchy to finance his pre-dawn removal on June 28 by a School of the Americas-trained military general.

The claims of the Honduran print media—with few exceptions owned by the financiers of the coup—that most Hondurans were happy with this so-called "constitutional succession" were belied by spontaneous and massive nationwide uprisings. Protest marches and rallies, numbering up to the hundreds of thousands, have taken place daily since the coup in every corner of the country. US media, influenced by the Honduran media and lobbyists

nation of brutal repression, media control and legal maneuvering. In August, the Interamerican Human Rights Commission noted that police and military actions since the coup had resulted in "deaths, cases of torture and mistreatment, hundreds of injured, and thousands of arbitrary detentions." This unidirectional violence has increased since President Zelaya's September



Outraged members of the non-violent resistance point at the blood of their fellow protester, killed when the Honduran military shot directly into the crowd. Photo courtesy Roberto Barra

21 return to the country; Honduran military, police and private mercenaries daily attack citizens, including the president himself (sheltered in the Brazilian embassy), with teargas, long-range acoustic devices, and live bullets. Extended curfews mean that people are regularly imprisoned in their houses, sometimes without food.

Attacks on the media have included assassinations of journalists, bombings of radio stations and suspicious frequency interruptions; yet radio and TV stations continued to play a key role in organizing the resistance until all opposition media was rendered illegal

remain in place despite reports to the contrary, Honduran independent media has been effectively silenced.

The list of human rights violations is long, and the military government's policies fit even the narrowest definition of totalitarianism. De facto Minister of Culture Myrna Castro has denounced libraries, cultural centers and the national archives as communist threats to the state and has overseen their military takeover. Castro has similarly taken control of the independent Honduran Institute of Anthropology and History for the de facto government, illegally firing renowned historian Darió Euraque in the process. Sociologist and university chancellor Julieta Castellanos was beaten for asking riot police to stop attacking students inside the National University gates. Books have been burned.

It is hard to imagine how the political situation in Honduras will have changed by the time

this goes to press. But regardless of who is in power, it is doubtful that human rights conditions will have improved; as bad as things are now, overall murder rates do not appear to have changed much from before the coup, when neoliberal crime control policies imported from the US justified the implicitly state-sanctioned killing of young poor men as a security measure, in what I have else-

where referred to as an invisible genocide. The difference today is, to quote another currently popular phrase, "the masks have come off." Rather than blaming themselves, Hondurans are pointing an accusatory finger at the oligarchy, military, IMF, World Bank and US embassy. They are demanding more than an end to human rights abuses; they are demanding democratic control of their nation.

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hired by coup financiers (including Clinton confidante Lanny Davis), have similarly ignored this phenomenon.

The de facto regime's response to the non-violent resistance movement has been a combi-

by presidential decree 124-2009 on October 5. The previous week, another presidential decree rescinded constitutional protections of freedom of speech, assembly and press for 45 days. With these decrees, which at this writing