



PITY THE NATION: HONDURAS IS BEING EATEN FROM WITHIN AND WITHOUT



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COVER

Colectivo Culturas Vivas, *Me lo dijo el río / The river told me so*, Honduras, 2021

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Pity the nation that acclaims the bully as hero, and that
deems the glittering conqueror bountiful.

– Khalil Gibran, *Pity the Nation*, 1933



Colectivo Culturas Vivas, *Salgamos a jugar / Let's go play*, Honduras, 2020

Part 1: The Coup of 2009

On 28 June 2009, President Manuel Zelaya was overthrown in a coup d'état engineered by the Honduran oligarchy and the United States government. The reverberations of the coup extend into present-day Honduras, which continues to struggle to maintain its political sovereignty.

For the past seven decades, interference by the United States government has seriously compromised Honduras' political sovereignty. The United States engineered coups in Haiti (1991 and 2004) and Bolivia (2019) as well as set in motion a long-term – failed – coup process against Venezuela beginning in 1999.

Why was President Zelaya overthrown? Nothing in his personal history as the son of a rancher, a businessman, and the manager of the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise (*Consejo Hondureño de la Empresa Privada*, COHEP) or in the history of his party, the Liberal Party of Honduras (*Partido Liberal de Honduras*, PLH), suggested either his radicalisation or that he would be the victim of a coup. Elected in 2006, Zelaya saw the merit of a broad reform agenda.

Great disparities and social infirmities in Honduras held back social progress for the people of Honduras, for which reason Zelaya's government introduced free public education for children, a higher minimum wage, and a range of social welfare

policies, including cash transfers and free electricity. It is by now well-acknowledged that social indignities cannot be overcome if the rights of women are set aside, so Zelaya vetoed a decree that sought to ban emergency contraception pills (a measure overturned immediately by the coup regime). As a consequence of the actions of Zelaya's administration, absolute poverty was reduced in Honduras.

In 2009, Berta Cáceres Flores, a leader and co-founder of the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH), [reflected](#) on why this coup took place:

Because of the rich, the oligarchs, [and] the far right – with support from the mafia of Miami [and] the Cuban and Venezuelan counter-revolution – these are the consultants of these coup supporters. Their worry is that the Honduran people could decide what to do with strategic resources like water, the forests, the land, our sovereignty, with our labour rights, the minimum wage, women's rights, constitutional rights, the self-determination of the Indigenous and Black people. So many things that we, as Honduran people, dream of, the possibility of having an inclusive, democratic, equitable state and society with direct participation of the people. The coup-supporting oligarchs know all of this. That is why there was a coup. And this coup is against all of the processes of liberation of our continent.

To advance the agenda of reform further, Zelaya affiliated his country with the ALBA's (the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) process of regional integration and with PetroCaribe, a social democratic oil agreement that provides low-cost Venezuelan oil to the region. Up to this point, Honduras' fuel industry had been surrendered to the major oil giants. Zelaya sought to change this relationship by subjecting the fuel industry to an international bidding process, which enabled Honduras to gain \$200 million from Esso, Shell, and Texaco. Due to Honduras' affiliation with ALBA, ties with Cuba increased. About 480 Cuban doctors had already been in the country since Hurricane Mitch in 1998. By 2009, hundreds of Hondurans had graduated from the Latin American School of Medicine (ELAM) in Cuba and worked to build the public health institution. Some, like Dr. Luther Castillo, a member of the Garifuna community, served under Zelaya as vice-minister of cooperation with ALBA.

The domestic reforms angered the oligarchy, while the linkage to the ALBA process angered Washington, DC. US Ambassador Charles Ford [described](#) Zelaya unkindly as 'almost a caricature of a landowner and caudillo in terms of his leadership style and tone'. Ford accused Zelaya of being beholden to 'powerful, unnamed interests'. Zelaya's days were numbered.

Zelaya proposed the formation of a National Constituent Assembly to revise the 1982 Constitution, which had been written in the aftermath of a long period of the military dictatorship from 1955 to 1982 to defend the interests of US firms such as United Fruit (the US Ambassador in Tegucigalpa was known colloquially

as the 'pro-consul'). People's movements backed the idea, while the oligarchy and the US government opposed it on the grounds that a new constitution might deepen the process of social reform in Honduras.

For the November 2009 elections, Zelaya proposed that, in addition to voting for a new president, congress, and municipal officials, the electorate also vote for a National Constituent Assembly in a fourth ballot. However, he wanted to leave the question of whether or not there should be a fourth ballot to the Honduran people; in March 2009, he proposed that the public vote in a referendum on 28 June 2009. A dirty tricks campaign run by the opposition began to suggest that Zelaya wanted to extend his term of office, although he [told *El País*](#) in June 2009 that he planned to leave office when his term ended in January 2010. On the same day that the people of Honduras were set to vote in the referendum, the military arrested Zelaya and dismissed his cabinet.

The United Nations General Assembly condemned the coup, and so did US President Barack Obama (although Obama's secretary of state Hillary Clinton [contradicted](#) him immediately). The US role in the coup requires some explanation. On the surface, the US government, including US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens, said in public that, while the US opposed the direction Zelaya had taken, they were opposed to a coup against the 1982 Constitution. Meanwhile, beneath the surface, the US military, represented by US Military Group commander in Honduras Colonel Kenneth Rodriguez, was in direct contact with the head of the Honduran military General Romero Vásquez Velásquez

right through the coup. Vásquez was trained at the School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia in 1976 and 1984.

In leaked [emails](#), US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made the case against following the Organisation of American States (OAS) process, through which Zelaya's ALBA allies could have driven the agenda and likely could have restored him to office. Instead, Clinton successfully put pressure for the negotiations between the coup regime and Zelaya's government to take place in San José, Costa Rica under the watchful eye of US ally Costa Rican president Óscar Arias. The end result of the Clinton process was to legitimise the coup. It was clear that the US wanted the policies pushed by Zelaya nullified, and the Honduran military chiefs – close to the US officials – concurred.

There is nothing new about US military intervention in the country. In the 1980s, Honduras was used as a launching pad for US-backed wars of destabilisation against the people of El Salvador and Nicaragua. In the same period, the US took charge of the Soto Cano (Palmerola) Air Base outside of Tegucigalpa for its own purposes, including to carry out the dirty wars inflicted on El Salvador and Nicaragua. Decades later, Zelaya wanted to turn that base into a commercial airport, which the US government opposed. In 2008, US Ambassador Charles Ford [wrote](#) that the US needed to maintain a 'low public profile' while working to 'protect US security interests at Soto Cano'.

After Ford left his post as Ambassador, he went to work at US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), the US combat command

for Latin America and the Caribbean. When Zelaya was arrested, he was brought to Soto Cano. US soldiers manned the control tower, which gave permission to the aircraft that took Zelaya into exile in Costa Rica. SOUTHCOM's [assessment](#) of the political situation prevailed over any liberal hesitancy about the coup: 'To defeat Zelaya, the de facto government [of Roberto Micheletti] needs only to endure until new elections occur'. This election was held in November 2009 under military rule. It resulted in the victory of the right-wing National Party's Porfirio Lobo Sosa, who reversed the process of reform started by Zelaya.



Colectivo Culturas Vivas, *Senderos latinos / Latino paths*, Honduras, 2019

Part 2: The Swift Descent into the Extreme Right

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, the military and the police arrested and harassed those who opposed it. The threats and acts of violence did not abate with the election of Lobo, with at least eighteen journalists, human rights defenders, and movement leaders killed in the months after his inauguration.

None of these documented cases of violence perpetrated by the coup regime could come before the courts. This was largely because of the actions of the Supreme Court, which endorsed the coup on the day that it happened, rejected any constitutional appeals that challenged the Micheletti government, and – in May 2010 – removed four judges who questioned the coup’s legality. Despite immediately suspending aid after the coup, the US government soon resumed military aid, USAID money, and money through the anti-drug trafficking Mérida Initiative. The Obama administration openly lobbied for the governments of Micheletti and Lobo; its military and civilian aid publicly validated US recognition of the coup regime.

Lobo’s government gave amnesty to the coup plotters, amongst whom was Juan Orlando Hernández, who became the president of the Congress in January 2010. Hernández used his post to create an effective dictatorship of the National Party, with the military right behind it at every step. There was the Anti-Terrorism

Financing Law (2010), the Special Law on Wiretapping (2011), and a law that created the National Security and Defence Council (2011). These laws weakened the Congress and the judiciary and centralised power in the office of the presidency. Faced with judges unwilling to go ahead with the Lobo-Hernández plans for privatisation and with Hernández' desire for a second term, Hernández fired judges in the middle of the night in what has come to be called *el golpe técnico* ('the technical coup').

The social impact of the coup regime's lawlessness was almost immediate. The National University's Observatory on Violence [tracked](#) the increase in criminality. The data was so dramatic that it led the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) to release [reports](#) that warned of Honduras' slide into general social violence. For example, the IACHR [noted](#):

For years, the Inter-American Commission has followed the high levels of citizen insecurity in Honduras and its impact in the effective enjoyment of human rights. The State recognises that in the last decade (2009-2019), Honduras has been one of the most violent countries in the world, having arrived at a level of 86.5 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2011. Additionally, it indicates that a factor contributing to this violence is drug trafficking and organised crime, which have both infiltrated several state institutions.

It is this general violence that led the mass migrations out of Honduras to [triple](#) in the years following the coup, including in 2021.

In the aftermath of the coup, Cuban Ambassador Juan Carlos Hernández Padrón, with the support of the Nicaraguan and Venezuelan ambassadors, [opened](#) the doors of his embassy to protect the lives of those whom the coup sought to persecute. Zelaya's foreign minister Patricia Rodas took shelter there after it became clear that the military had her in its sights.

Having legitimised the coup and strengthened the presidency, the right-wing candidate and coup plotter Juan Orlando Hernández ran for the post in 2013 and won against Xiomara Castro, Zelaya's wife. He had the full support of the National Party of Honduras (PNH) and the military, as well as the United States. Allegations of fraud dogged that election. Salvador Romero, who headed Bolivia's election agency and who was hired by the US government's parastatal agency, the National Democratic Institute, worked in Honduras during the election process. Confronted with evidence of fraud and state violence – including the assassination of two leaders of the National Centre of Farmworkers (CNTC) María Amparo Pineda Duarte and Julio Ramón Maradiaga – Romero [told](#) the *New York Times* that, despite 'the general perception of fraud', the election was legitimate. The US government backed this assessment as did the Honduran agencies controlled by the oligarchy.

New structures, such as the National Interagency Security Force (FUSINA) and the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP), enabled Hernández to exercise control over both the military and the police. Both structures – already pliant to the post-coup National Party regime – now became institutionally subordinate to the presidency. Many key PMOP officials were trained by US Southern Command and several of them have been accused of murder, torture, and sexual violence. A general atmosphere of impunity pervades the presidential security state run by Hernández.

Such harsh measures fell into place to reverse Zelaya's social democratic advances and to sell the country (*vendepatria*) to the overall interests of key sectors of international capital. Hernández pushed through an array of laws to privatise energy, water, social security, health, education, and the mining sector. Zelaya's moratorium on mining concessions was revoked and new policies were put in place that discarded the possibility of any consultation by the communities that lived where the mining was to take place. Evictions of the poor – especially the indigenous poor – came alongside the granting of concessions to foreign companies that had collaborations with a few wealthy Honduran families.

The situation of the indigenous and afro-descendants has worsened since the coup, with conflicts rife over their land for mining and tourism projects. There are roughly 837 potential mining projects on what amounts to 35% of Honduran land, according to a 2015 IACHR [report](#). A large number of the sizable projects are on indigenous and afro-descendant land, including 98

mining concessions in the Departments of Lempira and Santa Bárbara, where the Indigenous Lenca people live, and where much of COPINH's organising takes place. Additionally, there are 76 hydroelectric projects in 14 of the 18 departments of the country.

These concessions were consolidated through the creation of Zones for Employment and Economic Development (ZEDE), which allow private, often foreign, firms a free hand to manage labour and the land. In October 2012, the Supreme Court said that the ZEDEs were legal entities; this was further established through the legislature in June 2013 by the Organic Law of Employment and Economic Development Zones.

Over three hundred concessions were given out for hydroelectric projects and a hundred other concessions were given for mining operations. Many of the ZEDE projects opened up one third of the Caribbean coast of Honduras to tourism, ports, and mineral exploration (including for oil). A combination of tax exemptions and guaranteed investments with zero losses provided foreign and Honduran capital with enormous advantages. Former military men, such as [Roberto David Castillo Mejía](#), exchanged their uniforms for suits and profited from the coup regime. Honduras, the National Party-military regime announced, is open for business.

Reflecting on the ZEDE laws, Berta Cáceres Flores of COPINH [said](#):

the ZEDEs or 'model cities' are a complete surrender of what was left of the sovereignty of what is known as the

State of Honduras. The laws and Free Trade Agreements that they promote don't even have to go through the National Congress. It is pure neoliberalism; they are handing over huge swaths of land to transnational companies, which will have their own armies, their own migratory systems, legislative systems, their own systems of government, their own system of justice. It is so ridiculous that they have already made a committee, and they call it 'good practices'. This is the discourse of the transnational companies. They talk about 'mitigation'. There is a committee of 21 very powerful businessmen; 17 of them are foreigners. It is one of the most aggressive instances of plundering and displacement that we have seen, and they already have defined the places where they will begin. They are Indigenous and black lands of the peasant and fishing communities in the south of the country. It is one of the worst things that we, as Honduran people, are suffering.

The coup regime has been led by three administrations under the National Party: Roberto Micheletti (2009-2010), Porfirio Lobo Sosa (2010-2014), and Juan Orlando Hernández (2014-present). Each of these administrations is beholden to the Honduran oligarchy, the Honduran military forces, and the United States government. As a consequence of the coup regime's policies, poverty rates in Honduras [escalated](#); as of 2018, 62% of the population lives in poverty, with 38.7% in extreme poverty.



Roberto Paz, *Un registro de nuestro legado lenca / A record of our Lenca heritage*, Honduras, 2019

The nature of the coup regime became clear once again in 2015 when Hernández announced that he would seek re-election in 2017. This was despite the fact that one of the reasons given for the overthrow of Zelaya was that he allegedly wanted to seek a second term in violation of the Constitution's one term limit. The Supreme Electoral Tribunal (*Tribunal Supremo Electoral*, TSE) backed Hernández by a narrow vote, which allowed him to lead the National Party to the polls. The election that took place in November 2017 was marked by widespread accusations of fraud. The fact that Hernández ran for the election – despite constitutional term limits that had earlier been used as a pretext to overthrow Zelaya – and that there were proven accusations of fraud mark the nature of this regime.

From the day of the election onwards, the country was swept into a historic wave of protests, surpassing the levels of mobilisation seen in 2009 against the coup. Road blockades and mobilisations were [documented](#) in 15 of Honduras' 18 departments and were organised at 150 points across national territory. The slogan *Fuera JOH* ('Get out JOH', referring to Juan Orlando Hernández) appeared on walls across the country. This remains a key slogan of progressive forces. Later, the UN Human Rights Council (OHCHR) office in Honduras investigated human rights violations; its 2017 [report](#) provided factual evidence of the annulment of democracy in Honduras. The OHCHR report detailed the state's intimidation of the political opposition and journalists:

At the time of completing this report, on 27 January, OHCHR had registered that at least 23 people were killed

in the context of the post-electoral protests, including 22 civilians and one police officer. Based on its monitoring, OHCHR considered that at least 16 of the victims were shot to death by the security forces, including two women and two children, and that at least 60 people were injured, half of them by live ammunitions.

In addition, OHCHR found that mass arrests took place, and that at least 1,351 people were detained between 1 and 5 December for violating the curfew. OHCHR also received credible and consistent allegations of ill-treatment at the time of arrest and/or during detention. It also received reports of illegal house raids conducted by members of the security forces. Another concern during the period under review is the surge in threats and intimidation against journalists, media workers, social and political activists.

The Committee of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) released an independent [report](#) on the repression after the election, which estimated that at least 33 people had been killed between 26 November 2017 and 23 January 2018; 232 people had been injured between 26 November and 31 December; and a minimum of 1,396 people had been detained, with charges filed against 117 of them. Media reports on 4 December 2017 suggested that at least 1,350 people had been detained.

Before the violence had even ended, the US State Department's spokesperson Heather Nauert [congratulated](#) Hernández while using boiler-plate language about the need for a 'national dialogue' to 'heal the political divide'. After the US recognised Hernández's 'victory,' other countries followed suit.

Meanwhile, [filings](#) in US Courts in 2021 revealed that the US government's own Drug Enforcement Agency had [evidence](#) that Hernández, his brother Tony Hernández, and the former president Porfirio Lobo had used 'drug trafficking to help assert power and control in Honduras'. In 2018, a case was opened against Tony Hernández in the Southern District of New York for being central to a conspiracy to import cocaine into the United States. The US prosecutors [said](#) that Hernández had 'accepted millions of dollars in drug-trafficking proceeds and, in exchange, promised drug traffickers protection from prosecutors, law enforcement, and [later] extradition to the United States'.

US Prosecutor Jason Richman [accused](#) President Hernández of being the recipient of \$1 million in cash from the Mexican drug baron Joaquín 'El Chapo' Guzmán. President Hernández [denied](#) these charges. This avalanche of accusations came alongside the weakening of criminal laws in Honduras to the benefit of criminal conspiracies, including drug traffickers. For example, before the highly partisan court had finished its investigation, changes to the law of the Court of Audit (*Tribunal Superior de Cuentas*) and the Criminal Procedure Code weakened the ability of the Attorney General to start corruption cases and conduct surprise [searches](#) of suspects.

Honduras' Congress passed a new criminal code in 2020 after four years of debate by the weakened opposition and by institutions such as the Mission to Support the Fight Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH). MACCIH, an independent body set up by the OAS to investigate corruption in the country, said in a detailed [study](#) that the new law 'would affect the investigation and criminal prosecution of crimes related to corruption in the country'. Two years earlier, in 2018, MACCIH had handed investigators the results of a [probe](#) into corruption allegations against officials from the ruling National Party. The 'Pandora Corruption Case' revealed that 38 former and current members of Congress, most of whom were from the National Party, were accused of diverting public funds for political campaigns and receiving money from drug traffickers. Several deputies were arrested in July 2018 but were released shortly after. No wonder that MACCIH and other institutions have been defanged by these 'reforms'.



Muralists with COPINH, 2016

Part 3: The Vicious Attack on the Honduran Left

After the coup d'état, the country was paralysed for months by a series of mass mobilisations that called for the reinstatement of Zelaya. Daily protests took place in Tegucigalpa; these went on for months as communities outside the capital formed caravans to drive – and, after the military took their vehicles, to walk – to the capital city. Almost all social and political movements of the left and the centre-left joined together during these mobilisations to form the National Front of Popular Resistance (FNRP). A discussion within the FNRP took place at several large assemblies around the question of whether to remain a front of mobilisation or to transform itself into a political party.

Two years after the coup, in 2011, the FNRP along with a range of people's movements and labour unions launched the political party Liberty and Refoundation, or Libre, with Zelaya as its president. Gerardo Torres, international secretary of Libre, told us about the three blocs that make up his party:

The first bloc is made up of the Liberal Party [of Honduras] that left along with Zelaya after the coup d'état. The second is made up of groups that had never participated in politics; these are groups that were formed in the struggle against corruption, groups that had a critique of the traditional *vendepatria* [traitor] of Honduran

politics. The third bloc is made up of those of us from the traditional Left ... which has always been anti-imperialist and has survived in one way or another despite everything that happened in the region: exile, the dictatorship, disappearances, guerrilla struggles. We inherit the legacy of the FMLN of El Salvador, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity. In Honduras, we had our own processes of liberation, such as the Lorenzo Zelaya Popular Revolutionary Forces, the Cinchoneros Movement, and others, but they were unable to develop like those of our neighbours. This is partly because, for a long time, we have had the largest US military base in Latin America, the one in Palmerola. Creating a guerrilla movement with the capacity to liberate the country was very difficult precisely because of the presence of the Marines some 80 kilometres from Tegucigalpa. This small Left that survived took up a significant part of the leadership of the FNRP after the coup. With Libre, we have a broad platform of popular resistance from the Left to the centre Left. With Libre's leadership, we have been able to bring together everyone who is against this puppet government, come to an agreement, and raise proposals.

Libre has helped organise struggles against the coup regime and build an apparatus to contest elections. Despite the repression – including the assassination of its leaders – and widespread election fraud, Libre's percentage of votes in the presidential election increased from 29% (2013) to 41.4% (2017). Austerity policies by

the government increased the viability of a left project while at the same time demoralising society and making it difficult to conduct political activities. Nonetheless, in the period since 2009, a range of political projects have emerged including the revitalisation of the Communist Party of Honduras and the formation of an Anti-Corruption Party (*Partido Anticorrupción*, PAC), which is led by centre-right Salvador Nasralla (the presidential candidate of Libre in 2017).

Waves of revolt shaped the opposition to the coup regime. In 2015, a series of anti-corruption protests developed around the *antorchas* (torches) and *indignados* (indignant) manifestations. This anti-corruption movement pointed its finger at the rot in public health and public infrastructure, two domains where embezzlement had shaped the decline in services and institutions. Demands to create a proper commission of enquiry into corruption (such as the International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala, CICIG) were met with an anaemic response and the creation of the OAS's MACCIH in 2016, which was weakened every year thereafter and was eventually [dismantled](#) in 2020.

In May and June 2019, health care workers and educators took to the streets to defend public health and public health sectors from the virus of privatisation. They demanded immediate investment to save these key sectors, which had been hollowed out by the neoliberal policies of the previous decade. At the heart of these protests was *Fuera JOH*, the demand to end the coup regime led by Hernández.

The approach of the coup regime for the past decade has been to fragment mobilisations, to destroy the Left, and to undermine its confidence by picking off one social movement leader after another. According to a [report](#) by the Washington Office on Latin America, between 2014 and 2017, a total of 141 human rights defenders were killed and attempts were made against the lives of 13 others. Ten of those who were killed had been awarded precautionary security measures by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. This did not help.

Numbers of murders of social movement leaders since 2009 have not been easy to get. The information is fragmented, and government agencies have no interest in keeping track of disappearances and deaths. However, it is safe to say that upwards of 200 such leaders have been killed between 2009 and 2020. Many of those killed were leaders of indigenous and afro-descendent communities who have struggled against the expropriation of their lands. The [IACHR](#) points to three general areas of concern:

1. The creation of grave insecurity and violence resulting from the imposition of plans and projects for resource extraction and energy development in ancestral lands.
2. The forced pillage of and displacement from these lands using excessive force.
3. The persecution and criminalisation of indigenous leaders for motives directly linked to their defence of their lands.

The violence against indigenous leaders and communities emerges directly from the struggle over land.

To explore this in greater detail, we will look at the 2016 murder of Berta Cáceres Flores, a leader and co-founder of COPINH; the attack on trade unions; and, most recently, the forced disappearance of Garifuna social leaders.



Colectivo Culturas Vivas, *Plumas en cantos / Feathers in song*, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, 2020

The Assassination of Berta Cáceres

On 15 July 2013, COPINH, led by Berta Cáceres Flores, went to protest the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River. This river in western Honduras is considered to be sacred by the indigenous Lenca community, but no one from the company that wanted to build the dam had talked to them. The company, Desarrollos Energéticos Sociedad Anónima (DESA), is owned and controlled by one of the most powerful families in Honduras, the Atala Zablahs. The Honduran Army, at the behest of DESA, guarded the site.

During the protest, the soldiers opened fire at the protesters and killed Tomás García. Almost three years later, on 2 March 2016, gunmen broke into the home of Berta Cáceres and assassinated her. Berta's assassination was soon followed by the 15 March 2016 murder of Nelson Noé García of COPINH and the 18 October 2016 murders of José Ángel Flores and Silmer Dionisio George of the Unified Campesino Movement of the Aguán, or MUCA.

After Berta's assassination, a concerted campaign to demand justice was launched by COPINH as well as Berta's family, with support from organisations globally. Even under immense international pressure, the Honduran investigators limited themselves to the [arrest](#) of the main shooters and some of their immediate handlers. These handlers include Douglas Bustillo, a former head of security at DESA who ran the operation; Sergio Rodríguez, an executive at DESA; and Roberto David Castillo Mejía, the president of DESA. Berta's killer and some of their immediate

handlers have been sentenced to prison terms that will run from 30 years to 50 years.

However, none of the intellectual authors of the crime have been arrested. Evidence presented in the court – including phone logs and WhatsApp conversations – shows quite conclusively that these assassins, many of them veterans of the Honduran army, acted on the orders of the executives of DESA. None of the owners of DESA, including members of the oligarchic Atala Zablah family who were part of these WhatsApp chats, have been charged with a crime.

The owners of DESA and members of the government are also among the intellectual authors of these assassinations, with David Castillo being the senior-most DESA official who was arrested. Authorities detained him on 2 March 2018 while he was attempting to flee to the United States, where he had [bought](#) a luxury house worth USD 1.4 million in Houston, Texas just 8 months after Berta's assassination. The call logs and WhatsApp messages show that he had participated in the conspiracy and served as the key link between the financiers and those carrying it out. However, the case against him has [stalled](#). The reiterated delay has opened up the possibility that his preventative detention could expire, leading to his release.

Authorities have been shielding the Atala Zablah family and the ruling party, which had itself tried to collude in the cover-up. After Berta was assassinated, President Hernández's minister of security Julián Pacheco Tinoco wrote to Pedro Atala Zablah, one of

the leaders of the Atala Zablah family and a board member of DESA. He wanted to assure Atala Zablah and his family that the government would not pursue the case with any seriousness; the case, he [said](#), would be seen as a ‘crime of passion’. Bertha Zúniga Cáceres, Berta’s daughter and now the general coordinator of COPINH, reiterated this level of collusion: ‘neither the army nor the company acted alone’. Rather, there is ‘coordination between the economic and military power centres, which is the essence of the dictatorship under which we live in Honduras’.

Indeed, the [investigation](#) – and the court records – show a very high level of collusion. DESA officials would meet in the presidential house as they plotted how to undermine COPINH. This should raise eyebrows about the complicity at the highest level in the murder of Berta Cáceres. But this has been set aside. So have the many WhatsApp messages that show the Atala Zablah family members urging the team to do something about Berta Cáceres in very coded language.

There is ample evidence of DESA officials bragging about how they have the government – and in particular the armed forces and police – in their pocket. In 2013, DESA’s chief financial officer, Daniel Atala Midence, said ‘I have spent a lot of money and political capital to get those three arrest warrants’; within a very short time Berta Cáceres, Tomás Gómez Membreño, and Aureliano Molina were arrested. This showed the extent of Atala Midence’s influence. At another point in the WhatsApp conversations, Pedro Atala Zablah said that the DESA officials, who had already used the Honduran Army and police to guard their site and attack

COPINH activists, should pay the police ‘with something more than food’ to get them to do its bidding.

In August 2019, the UN Working Group on Business and Human Rights went to Honduras. This is a group that tries to get countries to adopt the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. The principles are rather empty, but at the very least they suggest that companies must not behave in a criminal way nor should business deals be made in secret. In their public [report](#), the Working Group made two important points. First, they said that even though the Ministry of Environment (MiAmbiente) says that they hold open consultations when environmental licenses are being considered, most of these meetings are held only after the licenses have been granted. This is precisely what happened in the case of the Agua Zarca dam case and is the basis for another case brought forth by COPINH against David Castillo and 15 other public functionaries alleging that fraud was committed during the granting of operation licenses for the Agua Zarca project. Second, the law (Legislative Decree 418-2013) and two ministerial decrees (725-2008 and 1402-2018) allow the ministry to classify elements of the Environmental Impact Study and whatever they deem as ‘Secret Information’. What this means is that those concerned about a case have no access to free and fair information to deliberate its merits; the government can easily shuffle the paperwork through in a thoroughly undemocratic manner.

Laura Zúniga, one of Berta’s daughters and also part of COPINH, [said](#) in her victim’s impact statement in 2018:

From the moment my mom was murdered, we were excluded from the process, and we don't agree with it. We don't agree with being denied the possibility of having an observer present during my mom's autopsy, of not receiving information. We've had to fight for information at every moment, every step of the way. We didn't do it on a whim, we did it because we are prepared to do everything necessary to get to the truth because we understand that it's our right, because we understand that it's the right of the Honduran people, because we want to establish precedents for justice.



Muralists with COPINH, 2016

The Sustained Attack on Trade Unions

In the lead-up to the tenth anniversary of the coup in 2019, a wave of protests took place in Honduras. In the leadership of this upsurge was the Platform for the Defence of Health and Education or *La Plataforma*, a joint front of teachers and medical workers. On 30 May, thousands of health care workers dressed in scrubs and white coats, alongside teachers and students, paralysed Tegucigalpa with their street demonstrations. Protestors marched to the Toncontín International Airport while a dump truck unloaded rocks and dirt on the main road into the airport. The police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the crowd, but the tear gas drifted into the airport and shut it down. It did not stop the protests, which grew over the next few weeks.

The immediate impulse for the protests organised by *La Plataforma* was the Hernández government's drive to privatise the health care and education sectors. In January 2019, Hernández pushed through special decrees that declared 'national emergencies' in the health and education sectors. The government created special commissions that would reorganise the health and education professions along lines that strike at the relative autonomy of the public sector. The names of the bills passed by the Congress are instructive: the Special Commission for the Transformation of the National Health System (PCM 026-2018) and the Special Commission for the Transformation of the Education System (PCM 027-2018). In April, the Honduran Congress passed the Law of Restructuring and Transformation of the National Health and Education System, whose purpose was to advance the

privatisation of these two sectors. Because of the protests by the education and health care workers, the Congress nullified the law on 30 April.

Behind Hernández stood the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which has long called upon Honduras to ‘rationalise’ its spending and to ‘institutionalis[e] fiscal prudence’; this last phrase [appears](#) in the July 2019 staff report on Honduras. When the IMF talks about ‘fiscal prudence’, it means budget cuts to the public sector, with the most frequent cuts in the health and education sectors. Stung by the resistance of *La Plataforma*, Hernández moved – through the National Roundtable on Health and Education – to ‘decentralise’ health and education delivery to local governments that are largely starved of funds. This is a sure way to get these local governments to hand over the provision of health and education to non-governmental entities and to the private sector. This is privatisation in the name of decentralisation.

The repression of the protests came alongside threats and violence against union leaders. In 2019, the International Trade Union Confederation [found](#) that Honduras has ‘no guarantee of rights’ for union members. A UNHCR [report](#) found that, between 2010 and 2019, 90 teachers – many of them union leaders – were murdered. In December 2019, the Honduran Network Against Anti-Union Violence [affirmed](#) the dangerous nature of unionism in the country; on 16 November, labour leader Jorge Alberto Acosta Barrientos of the Tela Railroad Company Workers’ Union (SITRATERCO) was [shot](#) to death. Other union leaders agree that the threats and violence against workers are pressing dangers, among them

María Gloria García of the Federation of Trade Unions of Agro-industrial Workers (FESTAGRO), Tomás Membreño Pérez of the Union of Agro-industrial and Allied Workers (STAS), Sonia Margarita Banegas of the Workers' Union of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (SITRAUNAH), and Joel Almendares of the main trade union federation in Honduras, Single Confederation of workers of Honduras (CUTH).

Workers in trade unions understand that their fight is not only against this or that law or for this or that reform; their fight is to overturn the coup regime and to undermine the classes that back it.

One long-standing fight has been led by the workers in the palm oil industry and large private corporations such as Dinant, which is supported by the coup government as well as the World Bank, from whom it has received funding. Dinant is owned by one of Central America's most powerful families, the Facussés. In the Bajo Aguán valley where Dinant operates, at least 133 farm workers have been killed over the past decade. The intimacy between the Facussé family and the Hernández government illustrates the class nature of the 2009 coup and the rigidities enforced by the coup regime. In one of many examples of this, it was Facussé's aircraft that was used to illegally extradite Foreign Minister Patricia Rodas from Honduras to Mexico during the 2009 coup.

The Facussé family has been involved in a long fight against the Garifuna community in Vallecito over land rights. In 2004, the vice president of an agricultural cooperative, Santos Euquerio

Bernárdez Bonilla, was kidnapped and killed. Since the coup, the violence has intensified and so has the general destruction of the land to benefit these powerful families and their class interests. In 2014, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) [reported](#) on this situation:

The Commission was also told that processes to grant concessions to companies have been accompanied by considerable repression of indigenous peoples, who had been forcibly evicted. 'People are distressed because of the dispossessions and evictions carried out against the Garifuna community', a member of the Garifuna people told the IACHR. The Commission was also informed that the extensive production of African palm in the northern part of the country has had a disproportionate impact on the Garifuna people. The IACHR also received troubling information concerning the impact of human activity in exacerbating poverty in these communities. For example, the Garifuna community of Santa Rosa indicates that as a result of the work done by companies cultivating African palm in the department of Colón, the course of the Aguán River had been changed, with devastating consequences on the environment and on the community's access to water, due to the water's high salinity.

The companies in question include those of the Facussé family. The workers facing this pillage include members of the Garifuna community.



Sarina Martínez, *Vivos los llevaron / They took them alive, Honduras, 2020*

The Forced Disappearance of Garifuna Leaders

On 18 July 2020, ten heavily armed men arrived in the Triunfo de la Cruz community. They wore Military Police of Public Order (PMOP) uniforms, which carried the insignia of the Police Investigations Directorate (DPI). These men kidnapped five members of the Garifuna community, an Afro-Indigenous community on the Caribbean coast of Honduras. The men that went missing that day were Junior Juárez as well as four members of the Black Fraternal Organisation of Honduras (OFRANEH): Snider Centeno, Milthon Joel Martínez Suany, Suami Mejía, and Gerardo Róchez. They have not been seen since.

OFRANEH released a statement saying that they must be released immediately: ‘They were taken alive; we want them back alive’. Miriam Miranda, a leader of OFRANEH, tweeted that ‘In this mafia-like, corrupt, and murderous dictatorship, the machine of death is untouched and strengthened. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, an armed group arrived in Triunfo de la Cruz and took, among others, the leader Sneider Centeno. We demand his immediate appearance, alive’.

Centeno is the president of the Triunfo de la Cruz Garifuna community and a member of OFRANEH. He was at the forefront of a case brought to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACHR) by his community of Triunfo de la Cruz in 2015. The case accused the Honduran state of human rights violations and of failing to protect their territories and stop the displacement of

communities by those with economic and political power. Though the IACHR ruled in favour of the community, the state has yet to fulfil its commitments. OFRANEH points to the Honduran state's failure to comply with the IACHR's ruling as evidence that the state is not invested in the well-being of the Garifuna people.

This kidnapping is part of a pattern; OFRANEH says that over the past few years, at least forty members of the Garifuna community have been assassinated and many have had to leave the community due to threats and persecution. These attacks come both from the state and transnational corporations and include assassinations and other forms of political persecution.

During the eight months since this kidnapping, the Garifuna communities in Triunfo de la Cruz and Sambo Creek have mobilised to demand that the authorities immediately provide information about those who have been disappeared and return them to their community alive. Rather than comply with these demands, the police have attacked protestors with tear gas on several occasions and community members have reported that heavily armed vehicles have entered the Triunfo de la Cruz community to engender fear and terror.

The police repression deepens the suspicion in the community of the state's role in the kidnapping. The forced disappearance took place while there was a lockdown and curfew in the country. This means that anyone driving around in the area would need to have explicit permission to do so. 'It is impossible for us to believe

that the movement of the three vehicles that the heavily armed individuals drove could have happened completely without being detected by the state', OFRANEH [alleged](#).

On 31 July, thirteen days after the kidnapping, Hernández broke the government's silence through a [tweet](#) in which he insisted that the government was working to 'identify those responsible for the crime and bring them to justice'. No progress has been made on the case in the months since. OFRANEH notes that the agency in charge of the case is the Police Investigations Directorate (DPI). Given that the armed men who kidnapped the five people in Triunfo de la Cruz came dressed in Police Investigations Directorate (DPI) uniforms, it is impossible to have faith in the system that seemed to have conducted the crime.

On the day of the tweet from Hernández, Amnesty International released a strong [statement](#) calling on the government to investigate the kidnapping and locate the men. In this statement, Erika Guevara-Rosas, Americas director at Amnesty International commented:

We demand that the Juan Orlando Hernández administration take urgent measures to find the five missing people, including four Garifuna activists from the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras, alive. The authorities must also carry out a swift, exhaustive, independent and impartial investigation to identify and punish all those

responsible for planning and carrying out this crime. We cannot allow impunity to encourage endless cycles of violence and grave human rights violations.

By October 2020, three months after the men had been kidnapped, OFRANEH released a [document](#) that analysed the government's inconsistent [reports](#) to the IACHR. The government's reports and social media posts appeared more and more like a disinformation campaign, said OFRANEH. The posts aim to discredit the disappeared by linking them to drug trafficking and attempt to brush off the kidnappings by pointing to the high frequency of disappearances. The normalisation of this kind of violence shows that the government accepts that the country is 'submerged in violence, a result of the current failed state and the gradual collapse of the justice system due to the lack of its independence', as the OFRANEH report points out. This disinformation campaign came alongside the 'criminal and complicit silence' of the government about the actual evidence that was on public display.

Unable to advance an agenda in the country's formal institutions, OFRANEH launched the Garifuna Committee for the Investigation and Search of the Disappeared from Triunfo de la Cruz (SUNLA) on 18 February 2021 (SUNLA means 'enough' in Garifuna). Miriam Miranda, who coordinates OFRANEH, [said](#) that SUNLA would be 'a way to look for truth and justice in this country'. The committee is made up of various experts and leaders of the community and will have the support of sixteen social organisations from Latin America along with the UN and the IACHR.

'We are tired of lies from the government of Honduras' Miranda said. The reports by the Honduras government 'have no substance. They don't say anything. They make a joke of us, the Garifuna people. We do not want lies. We want the truth. We want life to be worth more in our country. We have to build new paths. We will continue fighting so that this becomes a reality'.





Colectivo Culturas Vivas, *Me lo dijo el río / The river told me so*, Honduras, 2021





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