

## **Closing Space for Honduran Citizens, along with the Pandemic, Poverty, Corruption, and Violence, Fuel Migration from Honduras**

**By Lisa Haugaard, Latin America Working Group Education Fund**

**October 6, 2020**

The impact of the pandemic, pervasive poverty and inequality compounded by the effects of climate change, and violence from organized crime, gangs, and state agents, as well as violence against women and LGBTQ+ Hondurans, continue to drive migration from Honduras, despite the near-total closure of access to asylum in the United States and worsening conditions for migrants in Guatemala and Mexico.

A less discussed but crucial factor is the closure of space for Honduran citizens to organize and express their views to create a better life for themselves, their families, and their communities, and to build a responsive democracy. Hondurans face a government that not only fails to meet their basic needs, but profits from corruption, led by President Juan Orlando Hernández, whom U.S. [prosecutors](#), during their successful prosecution of his brother Tony Hernández for drug trafficking, claimed accepted [money](#) from drug cartels for his campaigns. Yet efforts to organize for change are met by repression against protesters and threats, attacks, and legal harassment of human rights activists and journalists. Hondurans looking towards their 2021 national elections for prospects of change see that their Congress failed so far to pass electoral reforms to fix serious fraud allegations that plagued the 2017 presidential elections.

As one Honduran humanitarian organization summed up the reasons people were giving for joining the latest caravan that left Honduras in late September-early October 2020 (many of whom were [turned back](#) to Honduras by Guatemalan authorities): ***“There is nothing for us in this country, I lost my family members because of COVID-19, there is no work, and the tyrant is overwhelming us.”***

Let’s take a deeper dive into the impact of the pandemic, corruption, violence, and the closure of space for Honduran citizens.

### **Pandemic: The Last Straw**

Honduras has registered over [80,000](#) COVID-19 cases as of October 6, 2020, although given limited testing, this is likely an undercount. The Association of Funeral Homes [announced](#) in September that there have been over 5,000 COVID-19 related deaths, twice the official death toll. The pandemic is complicated in Honduras by an ongoing dengue epidemic, estimated at nearly 20,000 cases.

Some hospitals are filled to capacity, and health care workers are overwhelmed, and a number of health care workers have died, yet the Honduran government [announced](#) on September 17, 2020 that contracts would not be renewed for additional doctors hired to address the pandemic.

**The economic impact of the pandemic is profound.** Pandemic restrictions permitted people to leave their homes only once every two weeks, which was changed in September to once a week. Yet most of the population work in the informal sector or in jobs that cannot be performed from their homes. Former Honduran Central Bank head Hugo Noe Pino [asserts](#) that business and labor estimates of some 250,000 – 300,000 jobs lost are accurate. State employees in September [protested](#) in front of the

Finance Ministry due to nonpayment of their salaries. Some 50,000 state workers are [owed](#) backpay, according to a union leader. Many maquila factories reopened with government permission in mid-May, but often [without](#) adequate protective gear for workers, conditions for social distancing, or access to healthcare. Oxfam's director in Honduras [warns](#) that the pandemic will increase hunger and increase inequality in the rural areas, especially the dry corridor. Government programs to provide food and other supplies to address the impact of COVID-19 are limited and, observers claim, sometimes distributed in ways that favor political supporters.

**Pandemic restrictions have been at times brutally enforced.** Thousands of people were arbitrarily detained at the start of the lockdown. On April 24, 2020, members of the Military Police (PMOP) [shot at and beat](#) three brothers returning home from selling bread; one brother, Marvin Rolando Alvarado, [died the next day](#) of his wounds, one was seriously injured, and the third was detained. As part of its lockdown, the Honduran government suspended constitutional guarantees, including freedom of expression and assembly. While journalists were granted permission to circulate with press passes, they continue [to face](#) serious obstacles to their work. Human rights defenders were not allowed to circulate freely to report on the crisis, protect citizens' rights, and conduct oversight until September 2020, when they were allowed to apply for passes—and even now, their passes are not always recognized by security forces.

The United States continued to deport Hondurans during the pandemic. Deportees arrived in a country with public transport halted and pandemic restrictions in force, making it difficult for them to return to their relatives. [According](#) to the Honduran government, 12,593 Hondurans were returned from the United States via air from January 2020 – September 30, 2020 and 18,199 Hondurans were returned by land and air from Mexico in the same time period. Many of these deportations took place after the pandemic started.

Honduran citizens have repeatedly denounced government mishandling of the pandemic and called on the government to turn some authority over to medical experts. As Hondurans observe the failures of their government to address the pandemic, they also hear the government announce multi-million-dollar contracts for medical supplies and new international loans.

### **Corruption: Where's the Money?**

The massive scale of corruption in Honduras led the international community to press the Honduran government to establish an anti-corruption mechanism known as the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity (MACCIH) under the auspices of the Organization of American States. As the MACCIH began to advance in investigating corruption with Honduran prosecutors, resistance by corrupt elites grew. Following the negative precedent set by former Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales, President Hernández refused to renew MACCIH's mandate, and it was forced to shut its doors in September 2019. **The Trump Administration's overwhelming focus on pressing the Honduran government to establish Honduras as a "safe third country" for other asylum seekers, receiving deported Honduran migrants, and attempting to deter migration, rather than emphasizing improvements in governance and combatting corruption that could help reduce the causes of forced migration, gave President Hernández the political space to shut MACCIH.**

In 2020, two of the major successes of MACCIH's anti-corruption efforts in Honduras were unraveled by Honduran courts. On July 23, a Honduran court ordered former First Lady Rosa Lobo released from jail, where she was awaiting retrial after the Supreme Court overturned her conviction in March 2020. She had been sentenced to jail for using \$650,000 in government funds intended for social programs to pay her credit cards and buy jewelry in a case known as the "First Lady's Petty Cash." On August 3, a Honduran special appeals court dismissed charges against 22 of the 38 defendants in the "Pandora" case, many of them members of Congress, in which some \$12 million of agricultural ministry funds were channeled through fake NGOs, much of which ended up financing National and Liberal political party campaigns. Charges were dismissed against [two more](#) Pandora defendants on September 28. One of those implicated was the current President of Honduras's late [sister](#). While the Attorney General tweeted that he would appeal the ruling, Insight Crime [termed](#) the ruling "the final nail in the coffin of Honduras' fight against graft."

**Meanwhile, new cases of corruption and misspending are surfacing, especially related to the pandemic.** The nongovernmental National Anticorruption Council (CNA) denounced flawed or corrupt purchasing practices for COVID-related items, including no-bid contracts, purchasing from companies not known for producing items, paying excessive prices, and lack of transparency preventing public oversight. For example, the Honduran government agency charged with purchasing for the pandemic, Invest-H, with fanfare in March 2020 paid in advance and without a contract a \$47 million order for [5 mobile hospitals](#) from a Turkish company. Three months later, only two hospitals had arrived in the country, and those were still not functional as of the end of September 2020. According to the CNA's on-site [inspection](#), the two mobile hospitals were cramped, lacked ventilation, and contained used medical equipment. The CNA questioned why the Attorney General has failed to act against officials for corruption during the pandemic when the CNA itself, a nongovernmental organization, has [managed](#) to [identify](#) networks of corruption engaged in raiding state coffers in no fewer than 11 reports. Finally, in early October 2020 the Attorney General's office filed [charges](#) against the former head of Invest-H, but for minor crimes.

In August 2020, civil society activists launched social media campaigns and graffiti appeared across the country with the slogan, "Where's the Money?" Another sign then appeared in front of the ruling National Party headquarters: "Here Is the Money." The Honduran government reacted by detaining [several people](#) involved in painting graffiti. One prominent doctor, critical of the government's response to the pandemic, was [detained and beaten](#) by police.

### **Protesters Face Repression**

**With the absence of effective avenues to influence the government to serve its citizens, protest continues to be a primary way that Honduran citizens express their concerns.** The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Honduras tallied more than [470 demonstrations](#) in 190 days of the pandemic. "Where's the Money?" rallies and graffiti appeared in many areas of the country recently as a response to massive corruption, including in purchasing pandemic supplies.

Yet the rights of protesters, and journalists and human rights defenders covering the protests, continue to be routinely violated by Honduran security forces. In September 2020, a photojournalist for Agence France Presse covering an Independence Day rally protesting corruption was wounded by a tear gas canister thrown by police, [according](#) to the journalist, directly at him. A 22-year old bystander to the same event was [beaten](#) by police; the local police station refused to accept his complaint. Garifuna

leaders protesting the disappearance of their community members (see below) were [teargassed](#) in July. Police [beat](#) transport workers demanding government pandemic relief in San Pedro Sula in June.

### **Hondurans Face Pervasive Violence from Gangs, Organized Crime, and State Agents**

Honduras' homicide rate in 2019 [increased](#) 7.1. percent from 2018 to 41.2 per 100,000 inhabitants. Prior to 2019, it had declined for several years but remained perilously high. Numbers of homicides are greatest in San Pedro Sula, to which the United States flies deported Hondurans, and Tegucigalpa, which were [reported](#) respectively to be the 15<sup>th</sup> and 33<sup>rd</sup> most violent cities in the world in 2019. These are the principal cities and where many migrants and asylum seekers would likely settle if deported.

Multiple homicides or massacres, the killing of three people or more in the same location and context, including of minors and children, remain an issue. In 2020, [according](#) to the Violence Observatory of the National Autonomous University, 37 massacres with 137 victims were registered as of September. In the three years from 2016 to 2018, 186 massacres were [registered](#), totaling 669 killed.

The high murder rate derives from a variety of factors, particularly the oppressive presence of competing gangs. Extortion by gangs on businesses drives some of the threats and murders. Extortion targets a wide range of citizens including taxi drivers, public transport operators, small businesses, merchants from store owners to street vendors, residents of poor neighborhoods, prostitutes, and individuals with family members in the United States—the latter making deported migrants with ties in the United States a particular target.

However, gangs are not the only factor driving violence in Honduras. Organized crime plays a strong role, with pervasive ties not only to local officials but to some of the nation's top political and security leaders. The pervasive drug trafficking and organized crime ties to the very officials charged with protecting the citizenry leave Hondurans citizens without recourse. Moreover, law enforcement often acts with brutality in policing poor neighborhoods or in addressing protest, with the Military Police of Public Order as well as police using tear gas and live ammunition.

Children and youth are at great risk in Honduras. The majority of victims are young adults from 18 to 39 years old. Youth and children are at risk because they are targeted for gang members for recruitment, and forcibly recruited with threats of death or threats against their families. Children are forcibly recruited to act as lookouts. Young women and girls are forced into sexual relationships with gang members, and gangs use rape or the threat of rape as a method of control. Gangs operate within schools and surrounding school grounds. These dangerous situations are often the driving force compelling children and youth to flee Honduras and leading to unaccompanied children making the dangerous attempt to travel to Mexico and the United States.

The levels of gender-based violence and femicide continue to be alarming in Honduras. Women's organizations report increases of [domestic violence](#) during the pandemic. In 2019, [387](#) women were murdered, and in 2018, 376 women were murdered. Of the estimated 6,200 femicides between 2002 and January 2019, 90 percent of cases [remain](#) in impunity for lack of investigation. High levels of other crimes, including domestic abuse, sexual violence, kidnapping, and extortion persist and generate internal displacement.

No fewer than [367](#) LGBTQ+ Hondurans were murdered from 2009 – September 2020, according to the observatory of the Honduran nongovernmental organization Red Lésbica Cattrachas. In some cases

attacks appear to be hate crimes motivated by the victim's gender and activism, as in the November 9, 2019 beating of LGBTQ+ activist [Alejandra Vega Balenciaga](#) in San Pedro Sula and the murder of trans woman [Bessy Michelle Ferrara](#) who was killed with 8 shots on July 8, 2019 in Comayagua.

Internal displacement is substantial and ongoing. According to a Honduran government report, 247,090 people were internally displaced in Honduras between 2004 and 2018. Of these, 191,000 people were directly [displaced](#) by violence or other human rights violations, while almost 56,000 were born into or later became part of a displaced household. More than half of these displacements occurred after 2014. While the Honduran government recognizes the existence of internal displacement, the legislature has failed to pass a draft law on displacement that has been in discussion for several years. Efforts by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and nongovernmental organizations to relocate internally displaced persons at grave risk only cover small numbers of those in need.

### **Human Right Activists and Journalists Face Threats, Attacks, and Harassment from the Legal System**

The situation for human rights defenders (HRDs) and journalists is bleak. **The space for civil society expression is extremely limited and closing while the opportunities for corruption and abuse expand.** The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders [reported](#) that Honduras “has become one of the most dangerous places on earth for land rights and environmental defenders.” Environmental monitoring group Global Witness [rates](#) Honduras as the most dangerous country (per capita) in 2019 to be an environmental or land rights defender. Government efforts to protect human rights defenders, including a Protection Mechanism for journalists, human rights defenders, and justice operators, are weak and too often [ineffective](#). Here are only a few examples of the difficult situation of human rights activists and journalists in Honduras today.

- Four Garifuna (Afro-Honduran) men and a fifth person were [kidnapped](#) from their homes in Triunfo de la Cruz in July 2020 at gunpoint by men [wearing](#) uniforms of a Honduran government police investigative unit (DPI), and, according to witnesses, identifying themselves as investigative police. Among the men were community activists, including Alberth Sneider Centeno, leader of the Triunfo de la Cruz community and active participant in Garifuna rights group OFRANEH. Sneider is a [principal force](#) behind efforts to defend Garifuna territory and urge compliance with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2015 ruling ordering the Honduran government to [respect](#) the rights and territory of the Triunfo de la Cruz community. Little progress seems to have been made in investigating the disappearance of these men.
- Immense international and Honduran civil society pressure led to progress in bringing to justice material authors in the emblematic case of Berta Cáceres, the environmental and indigenous activist murdered in March 2016 due to her activism regarding the environmental impact of a dam project. But progress on prosecuting the intellectual authors of the crime lags, with only one case, against David Castillo, about to open, yet even in this case, the defendant's lawyers are repeatedly delaying the process.
- While deputies charged with corruption in the Pandora case mentioned above were set free, eight environmental activists charged with alleged crimes as they defended their community's river from pollution from a mining project have been in pretrial detention for over a year, in the case known as Guapinol. In August 2020, a court ruling put five more activists in danger of being placed in pretrial detention.

- On September 28, 2020, journalist Luis Almeyda [died](#) of his wounds after he was shot multiple times by gunmen. The Association of Journalists of Honduras then withdrew from the Honduran government's Protection Mechanism for journalists, human rights defenders, and judicial operators, stating that key cabinet officials and heads of security forces do not bother to attend the mechanism's meetings.
- Campesino leaders in Bajo Aguán continue to suffer threats, harassment, and attacks. The Protection Mechanism and other government agencies, according to beneficiaries, still have [not](#) carried out promised protection measures. Members of paramilitary groups, allegedly linked to companies operating in the area present in Bajo Aguán, remain free with arrest warrants not implemented while legal actions against campesino leaders for charges such as "illicit association" continue.

### Electoral Reforms Stalling

In November 2017, President Hernández, the National Party candidate, was reelected in a highly controversial electoral process. Honduran citizens and [international](#) and national electoral observers denounced irregularities and fraud, including in counting of votes; the transmission of votes paused mysteriously, then resumed; later it was revealed by a U.S. court that drug cartel money was used in the National Party campaign. In the aftermath of the election, protests broke out all over Honduras. Honduran security forces, particularly the Military Police, allegedly shot and killed at least 16 protesters and bystanders, according to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights office in Honduras. Almost all of these cases remain in impunity.

Yet a year from the next presidential elections, and six months from the primaries on March 14, 2021, the Honduran executive and Congress have failed to advance electoral reforms, meaning that the elections will likely go forward with the flawed 2004 electoral law and few changes to ensure a free and fair electoral process. Even if the electoral reform bill does advance, it still does not address some of the major issues, such as the need for a second round of voting to prevent a candidate winning with a simple majority but, given a multiple-candidate field, with few votes and little legitimacy; setting presidential terms limits; and blocking dirty money from entering campaigns. A "Clean Politics Unit" (the *Unidad de Financiamiento, Transparencia y Fiscalización*) recommended by the anti-corruption agency MACCIH was stood up, but the reform bill does not specify what role this unit would now play in the new electoral system. As the electoral reform bill foundered in the Congress, the Congress passed some temporary provisions for the next elections, the most important of which are the production of a new electoral roll (purged of dead voters, for example) and new voter identity cards.

Meanwhile, Yani Rosenthal, who served three years in a U.S. jail for [money laundering](#) in connection with drug trafficking, is [preparing](#) to launch his candidacy for president. And while a possible third run for the presidency by Juan Orlando Hernández is not ruled out, Hernández's favorite, Tegucigalpa mayor Nasry Asfura, is rumored likely to be the National Party candidate.

As debate over electoral reforms stalls in the legislature, **there is growing concern that essential electoral reforms will not be implemented prior to the 2021 elections. If advances are not made, it is likely continued lack of legitimacy in the next elections will cause greater social conflict and human rights violations and intensify, not begin to resolve, the profound crisis of democracy in Honduras since the 2009 coup.** And forced migration from Honduras will continue.