

Rights Action – July 4, 2011
HONDURAS – The Way Forward ?!

BELOW: an inspiring and sobering interview by Jeff Webber and Todd Gordon with Berta Caceres of COPINH, first published at www.upsidedownworld.org.

"Honduras has become an industry of paramilitarism, it's been transformed into a business sector in this country." (Berta Caceres)

THE DIFFERENT LOGICS WITHIN THE HONDURAN RESISTANCE

The struggle in Honduras against the military backed, illegitimate regime, remains hugely important for the future of Honduras (obviously) and remains an important barometer of struggles across the Americas to transform historically unjust political and economic orders and countries.

Jeff Webber and Todd Gordon were recently in Honduras with Karen Spring, of Rights Action, on an investigatory, fact-finding trip, and interviewed Berta Caceres.

On May 28th, ousted president Zelaya returned to Honduras after 2 years in exile. At the same time, Honduras was re-admitted to the OAS (Organization of American States).

Systemic repression continues in Honduras, unabated, to the shame of the OAS system, and due in no small part to the roles of the governments of Canada and the US that have legitimized and supported the military backed regime of Honduras since the June 28, 2009 coup, and done effectively nothing to demand justice and accountability for the regime's repression. Since the coup, the US and Canada have been pushing ahead steadily with their military and economic interests in Honduras.

Despite the on-going repression, and complicity of many actors in the so-called "international community", Honduras' amazing pro-democracy movement continues their struggle to re-found the Honduran State and society, and to rebuild real democracy and rule of law.

This inspiring and sobering interview covers many issues, including the complicated issue of whether the pro-democracy movement will put its time and energy into backing a political movement that will run in the 2013 presidential elections, given that the institutions of the Honduran State and society (judiciary, congress, police, army, electoral system, etc.) are still dominated and corrupted by pro-military coup sectors.

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Thank-you / Gracias a la vida ...

THE DIFFERENT LOGICS WITHIN THE HONDURAN RESISTANCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH BERTHA CÁCERES

By Todd Gordon and Jeffery R. Webber, 27 June 2011

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/honduras-archives-46/3097-the-different-logics-within-the-honduran-resistance-an-interview-with-bertha-caceres>

On June 18, 2011, during a two-day assembly of the Espacio Refundacional (Refoundational Space) current of the Frente Nacional de la Resistencia Popular (National Front of Popular Resistance, FNRP), we caught up with Bertha Cáceres, General Coordinator of Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares y Indígenas de Honduras (Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, COPINH).

COPINH is one of the most important social forces within Refoundational Space, and the resistance more generally.

In the National Assembly of the resistance that took place in Tegucigalpa on June 26, 2011, and which is discussed in an anticipatory way at different points in this interview, the electoral strategic option won the day, with a majority of the delegates voting in favour of the formation of a new political party to run in the 2013 elections.

The new political party will be a temporary coalition for participation in these elections, and the FNRP will not be dissolved as an independent entity, or formally subsumed into the new party, according to the resolutions adopted.

CAN YOU DESCRIBE YOUR POLITICAL FORMATION AND TRAJECTORY?

My participation has been directly in COPINH itself, which is a collective space. Inside this space everyone has the opportunity of participation, debate, and discussion about the wider political process that we're living through. Above all, COPINH is a form of struggle. It's a dynamic and complex space, which is always moving. There are a number of different foci of COPINH – the struggle for territory, indigenous culture, autonomy, self-determination, the anti-patriarchal struggle, the struggle against racism, and the struggle against capitalism. There's an effort within the organization to construct a vision against these multiple forms of domination. Our answers to these questions within the resistance have to operate along these multiple dimensions.

AND YOUR PERSONAL POLITICAL FORMATION WITHIN THIS PROCESS?

COPINH is a school, a space of popular, indigenous and communitarian education. It's within this space that we're all constantly learning, relearning, and unlearning.

CAN YOU EXPLAIN IN GENERAL TERMS THE DIFFERENT PHASES OF THE RESISTANCE SINCE THE COUP OF JUNE 28, 2009?

The first thing to mention is that it started with a spontaneous stage that was of historic importance in this country. It emerged out of the indignation with what had just happened. The coup was extraordinary. We couldn't believe that this could happen in the twenty-first century. There was consequently a tremendous period of agitation, of massive mobilizations, a period of direct struggle against the coup.

But this was also a period of effervescence and diverse creativity – for us, this is one of the richest aspects of the resistance. An unimaginable variety of ideas, proposals, and forms of struggle surged forward against the coup. Social sectors that had not been considered militant moved to the forefront – for example, the youth.

After this initial period, another one began with the signing of the San José-Tegucigalpa Accord. From our perspective, this had a dampening and demobilizing effect on the first explosive phase of mobilization, the phase of the unarmed insurrection of the Honduran people. If there had not been this damming of the process of resistance through the accord we believe it would have been possible to reverse the coup that Micheletti had orchestrated.

But the resistance still didn't have a sufficient level of debate, development of consciousness, to move beyond the slogans of ending the coup and demanding the return of Mel Zelaya. The latter was an important demand, but there hadn't yet developed a more strategic perspective.

In light of this absence, a number of organizations started arguing that we had to strengthen the resistance movement, and that would best be achieved through the development of a re-foundational position, one that would demand profound, transformative change. Out of this necessity emerged the argument for a foundational (originario), democratic, inclusive, and radical (refundacional) Constituent Assembly. The Honduran people wanted to be listened to. This continues to be one of the principal demands of the struggle.

The resistance movement in general began an expansive – although still inadequate – debate on strategy, as well as on the collective construction and strengthening of the Frente, its national and local structures.

An additional component of the resistance has been the various historic struggles of the Honduran people – the struggle against repression, the struggle against the privatization of water, against the privatization of education, joining the vitally important teachers' struggle, the anti-mining struggle, and the struggle against the privatization of our forests.

There are a huge number of struggles that the resistance has taken up, and we have to continue with these historic grievances of the Honduran people, including the situation of Afro-Hondurans, the indigenous peoples, and women. But the leadership of the Frente has still not understood that these areas of struggle are fundamentally important to the resistance as a whole, and that we need to integrate each of them as a basic necessity.

SHIFTING GEARS SLIGHTLY, ON MAY 22, 2011 THE CARTAGENA ACCORD WAS BROKERED BY THE COLOMBIAN, VENEZUELAN, AND HONDURAN GOVERNMENTS, FACILITATING THE RETURN OF ZELAYA AND THE REINTEGRATION OF HONDURAS INTO THE ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES. WHAT IS YOUR ANALYSIS OF THE IMPACT OF THE RETURN OF ZELAYA IN THE WAKE OF THE ACCORD?

The last return of Zelaya to the country, on May 28, 2011, marks a new phase of the resistance, I believe, but it doesn't mean the Honduran context has changed fundamentally. We have made a number of criticisms of the Cartagena Accord. Everyone is happy that Zelaya has returned, and his right of return should have always been unconditional. He's a human being and he has the right to return to his country.

However, we believe that the Cartagena Accord is in accordance with US strategy. Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia, played a key role, alongside Hugo Chávez, the Venezuelan President. For us it's unacceptable that someone like Juan Manuel Santos, a recognized backer of paramilitarism in Colombia, and a violator of human rights, is talking about reconciliation and peace. For us, this is unacceptable. Furthermore, it's unacceptable that Chávez participated in this process without listening to the Honduran resistance, the resistance that is actually here in this country, because the resistance is not reducible to Mel Zelaya.

All of this together, the Cartagena Accord and the reintegration of Honduras into the OAS, ignores the grave violation of human rights in Honduras, which continues systematically, and the militarization and paramilitarization of politics in the country. Honduras has become an industry of paramilitarism, it's been transformed into a business sector in this country.

Meanwhile, we should not forget that the US began to strengthen its military bases in Honduras immediately after the coup d'état in Honduras, a military presence that we've been denouncing for many years – the bases in Caratasca, La Mosquitia, Mocerón, and Guanaja. They have now established one very near Puerto Lempira, and want more bases in the Zona Lenca (which operated during the 1980s as torture camps and bases for counterinsurgency training). In addition, we have witnessed the militarization of Río Patuco and Río Plátano. Through these mechanisms the US has been positioning itself in the region, and supporting the coup regime.

The economic transnationalization of the country also has to be taken into consideration, with events like Honduras is Open for Business, that took place on May 5 and 6, 2011, in San Pedro Sula. Those of us in COPINH have argued that this event and what it represents, together with the coup d'état, is one of the most nefarious recent blows against the Honduran people. They're aiming to give away this entire country.

So the context in which Mel Zelaya is returning is one in which the situation of the economy is even worse than it was, respect for human rights has diminished still further, gains won in the past by the women's movement have been overturned, the situation for young people has worsened, and there has been a further criminalization of social movements.

HOW HAS THE FRENTE NAVIGATED THROUGH THIS NEW SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TERRAIN?

The leadership of the Frente has not responded effectively to this environment. The leadership has not taken into account all the different social forces in the resistance, and therefore hasn't been able to unify all these forces. They have not taken into account the perspective of Refoundational Space, which, as I mentioned, is demanding profound change.

It has to be pointed out, also, that part of the current leadership – not all of it, but part of it – has even been talking about reconciliation with the regime of Porfirio Lobo, a position

which we don't share whatsoever. We don't agree with reconciliation because the strategy of the coupists continues, the strategy of assassinations, torture, militarization, and criminalization. And these promise only to become worse.

The looting of the Honduran people has intensified. The pressure for the privatization of natural resources has amplified. They've given out concessions for mountain ranges, rivers, and beaches. They're planning their so-called "model cities," tourism projects, huge new ports for cruise ships, and floating discotheques for rich people. The beaches in Garífuna communities are being privatized.

We can add to these dynamics the issue of the military bases, the free trade agreement, and the impunity enjoyed by the transnational mining companies. The mining companies are ready and waiting for the reforms that will be introduced in the new mining law which will provide them with even further legal guarantees. So, the situation is fucked. And there needs to be a big internal debate within the resistance that is transparent, honest, and horizontal. This is the only way the Frente won't be steered, as the US desires, into participating in the 2013 elections.

WHAT IS REGIME'S STRATEGY IN THE NEW CONTEXT, AND HOW IS THE US RESPONDING TO RECENT DEVELOPMENTS?

The regime wants to promote the image that there has been an advance in the situation of human rights in Honduras. For example, Mario Canahuati, Minister of Foreign Affairs, in the last session of the OAS, hypocritically declared that there had been a massive improvement in respect for human rights in Honduras.

The gringos couldn't care less if an electoral political force is formed under the banner of the Left, if all of these favourable conditions – of investment, militarization, criminalization of social movements – persist. The US doesn't care in this context if there is a political force called "the resistance" or "the Left." This doesn't worry them.

What worries them is the prospect of the resistance and the Left demanding real, transformative changes to these conditions.

To fall into the trap of participating in the 2013 elections would be a huge mistake. We believe that the Frente should continue to be a diverse, multicultural space, rooted in the authentic self-organization of the Honduran people. We hope that the resistance continues in this vein, in this socio-political manner, because we are a crucial socio-political force. Politicians operating through the existing political parties do not have a monopoly on being political. What we've been doing is inherently political, with the indigenous peoples, with our struggle. To abandon this path for elections would be to abandon the principles and objectives of the resistance that were defined and determined in past assemblies. This is the biggest challenge that we'll be up against in the next national assembly of the resistance, on June 26, 2011.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT CURRENTS WITHIN THE RESISTANCE, AND WHAT ARE THEIR UNIQUE STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES?

It's difficult to characterize the different components of the Frente because it's very complex. The social base of the resistance is extremely diverse. There is no uniformity, even within those spaces of the resistance that are more or less defined. Even within these spaces there are differences, and I think these constitute one of the strengths of

the movement. We must not see this as a weakness. These are all expressions of the different perspectives that exist within the Honduran people.

Nonetheless, there are some spaces within the resistance with clear objectives. For example, in Refoundational Space, we've argued for the self-organization of a Constituent Assembly, to be achieved through a profound social and political struggle, through mass mobilization from below, building from the barrios and the communities, an inclusive process that would privilege building a path toward transformation rather than merely reforms.

There are other currents within the resistance that argue for the electoral path. They believe that to win elections means to have assumed power. Their idea is to govern the state apparatus, and from there to convene a Constituent Assembly. This is all premised on the supposed legality of the current regime. This is not something with which we can agree. Even before the coup in June 2009, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, for example, backed the electoral law that favoured the continuity of the two-party system (bipartidismo). Not to mention the corruption that exists within the existing institutions, that is phenomenal.

Those advocating an electoral path have a very different conceptualization of power from those of us in Refoundational Space. We believe that power has to be built from below, rather than simply taken. It has to be constructed from below in all of its diversity – a popular, constituent power built from below. From this perspective, the people have to continue preparing themselves in the current moment for their self-organized Constituent Assembly. This is not a theme that can be left to intellectuals and lawyers. It's a matter of social and political struggle.

There are, furthermore, a number of additional components to the resistance that are based in sectoral struggles, with actors that have very specific demands. It's extremely complex. There are, for example, those sectors with religious affiliations. And this has generated debate within the women's movement, over the necessity of a secular state and the abolition of patriarchy. But there are those in the resistance who are religious, and they have their personal options of faith.

There are also rural and urban sectors, intellectuals, and small parties of the Left, parties that don't have official institutional recognition, but that are authentic parties. Therefore it's very complex panorama, one that is very difficult to characterize easily, to document all the different tendencies within the resistance. At the same time, we can characterize those currents that are most clearly defined.

DO YOU THINK THOSE OF YOU WITHIN REFOUNDATIONAL SPACE HAVE SUFFICIENT SOCIO-POLITICAL WEIGHT TO INFLUENCE THE OUTCOME OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF THE RESISTANCE THAT IS TO TAKE PLACE ON JUNE 26, 2011 – THAT IS, TO PERSUADE THE ASSEMBLY TO MOVE AGAINST PARTICIPATION IN THE 2013 ELECTIONS, AND TO OPT INSTEAD FOR A STRATEGY OF SUSTAINED BUILDING OF SOCIO-POLITICAL POWER FROM BELOW?

Refoundational Space, rather than being a clearly defined or structured current, is better conceived as a process. We have a number of basic principles, originating from the practice of the various organizations that in part constitute the space. We recognize that one of the most important components of the struggle is to dynamize the resistance through debate, through analysis, but not through personal or particular interests. This

perspective has allowed many different social sectors to see Refoundational Space as a process in which these kinds of necessary debates and analysis take place.

Refoundational Space has never had as its objective the conquering of the structures of power within the resistance. We have succeeded in having an influence, though, through the kind of debate we've been promoting, for example, in the last national assembly of the resistance that took place in February 2011. We argued against the transformation of the Frente into a political party, and that was the decision adopted by the assembly. We managed to prevent this transformation, and in the face of tremendous disadvantages. Because we don't control the media within the resistance. What we managed to achieve was an interesting debate, before the February assembly, in the public sphere, and during the assembly itself.

It was very difficult and trying. Within the resistance the task of dismantling machismo, patriarchy, racism, and discrimination remains to be done. These are internal challenges that stand out within the resistance. And when you enter into these political debates, the patterns of oppression I've mentioned express themselves. We need to be committed to fighting against these processes, and to make ourselves be heard. This is a crucial point. In the lead up to this next assembly of June 26, 2011, therefore, Refoundational Space has engaged in extensive debate in an effort to arrive at the position we will be advancing.

In the context of this next assembly there is one issue that is incredibly important – that is, the position that Mel Zelaya will adopt. If Zelaya takes a position – within the general space of the Frente, which still lacks sufficient debate and analysis of the real situation that exists in Honduras – and if the position adopted by Zelaya is to steer the struggle of the resistance toward the electoral path, this is what will occur in the assembly.

We are opposed to this kind of caudillismo (big-man leadership), the centralization of the Frente, the concentration of power within the resistance – this is precisely the sort of thing that we have been fighting against. But we can't pretend that Mel Zelaya doesn't continue to have significant weight within the resistance. We would like it if he understood this, and played a positive role from his position of leadership, supporting the refoundational process and arguing for the profound changes we need. But we don't know if this will be possible. In the last assembly it was very important that Zelaya himself was opposed to converting the Frente into an electoral party. But, obviously, at that time he was in exile. Now he's back in Honduras. So it's a more complex situation.

IF ENGAGING IN ELECTIONS IS NOT THE WAY FORWARD IN THE CURRENT CONJUNCTURE, WHAT IS THE BEST ALTERNATIVE STRATEGY OF STRUGGLE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE REFOUNDATIONAL CURRENT?

The first thing we would say is that the struggle for building constituent popular power from below has to continue, has to be built, has to be strengthened. And this process of building is a form of preparing ourselves for the self-organized Constituent Assembly that we are demanding, which can take place with sectors of Honduran society that are not necessarily a part of the resistance, but which are progressive social sectors. This is the way forward for the resistance, a path that puts us in confrontation with imperialism.

Once we have achieved this, a Constituent Assembly of this type, participation in elections might be possible. But even then we won't put aside these other struggles. We won't leave by the wayside the social struggle, the struggle of social movements, the

defence of our communities, the struggle for the self-determination of communities and peoples.

There are different logics at work within the resistance. We are committed to this process of building from below. And if in the June 26th national assembly of the resistance, the Frente decides in favour of participating in the electoral path, our proposal is that they should be able to have the space to participate in elections, but that the FNRP not become an appendix of any new electoral party nor be absorbed within it.

We also argue that it should be the autonomous decision of each popular organization participating within the resistance to decide whether or not it is going to participate within any political apparatus that is oriented toward participation in elections. The structures of the Frente must not serve as the apparatus for this electoral option. The Frente must not be coopted simply for electoral ends. This would result in the dampening of social struggle, and the quelling of the efforts of the refoundational sectors of the resistance in their fight for transformative change. It would institutionalize the Frente. We do not want this. We can see how such processes have played out negatively elsewhere in Latin America.

This theme of electoral participation has generated a huge amount of discussion and impassioned debate. So those within the Frente should have the option, at the individual or organizational level, to participate or not participate in the 2013 elections.

(Thanks to Karen Spring for all her help organizing interviews. Todd Gordon teaches Politics at York University, Toronto. He is the author of Imperialist Canada. Jeffery R. Webber teaches Politics at Queen Mary, University of London. He is the author of From Rebellion to Reform in Bolivia and Red October: Left-Indigenous Struggles in Modern Bolivia. They are both currently in Tegucigalpa.)

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