

Rights Action
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Hernández's Election Built On Corruption: U.S. support for Honduras' new leader is misguided and unethical

By Dana Frank, San Francisco Chronicle

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On Monday (Jan. 27), a new president will take the helm in Honduras: Juan Orlando Hernández. He's handsome. He's charming. He's young. He looks as though he was born wearing a clean white shirt.

And he's a dangerous thug.

Hernández was one of the key architects of the 2009 military coup, and has a stellar track record ever since overthrowing the rule of law. Yet, the Obama administration is welcoming him with open arms, pretending Hernández has somehow changed his stripes and will now effectively address the country's dire human rights nightmare.

As is well-documented, the coup ushered in a reign of horror in Honduras, where U.S. police and military aid in 2012 rang up at least \$27.6 million. The police are largely corrupt and kill people, the judicial system barely functions and drug traffickers and organized crime have allegedly wormed their way to the very top levels of the government. Impunity reigns. And Honduras has the highest per capita murder rate in the world.

Outgoing President Porfirio Lobo, who came to power in 2009 through an illegitimate election managed by the coup perpetrators, has utterly failed to clean up the police or address the corruption.

Now Hernández, from the same ruling National Party, is in charge. Hernández enthusiastically supported the coup as chair of a key committee

in the Honduran congress. For more than a year now, he's already been the big strongman running the show in Honduran politics. In December 2012, as president of Congress, he led the "technical coup" in which four members of the Supreme Court were illegally deposed and their replacements, loyal to Hernández, named the next day.

In machinating the overthrow, Hernández was not only paving the way for the re-passage of numerous laws the court had declared unconstitutional, he also was declaring supremacy over his own powerful rivals on the right, in light of a dubious primary victory.

Hernández then built his presidential campaign around a rapid militarization of the police, promising "a soldier on every corner." In August, he was the most prominent proponent of a new military police, 5,000-strong. They have already committed egregious human rights violations, as have regular Honduran military forces, which have increasingly been deployed to conduct regular policing in the past three years.

On July 15, for example, the Engineers' Battalion shot and killed Tomás García, an indigenous activist while he was protesting a hydroelectric dam.

It's not even clear if Hernández won the final Nov. 24 presidential election. Throughout the previous year, in almost all the polls, the clear frontrunner was Xiomara Castro, the wife of deposed president Manuel Zelaya, running from a new broad-based opposition party LIBRE that grew out of the resistance to the coup. During the campaign, at least 18 LIBRE activists, candidates and officers were assassinated, more than those from all the other parties combined.

Not only was the context for conducting a free and fair election thus chilling, but international observers reported widespread intimidation, fraud in the vote-counting process, and bald vote-buying by Hernández's National Party during the election itself.

Astonishingly, though, the Obama administration is throwing its support behind the new president. The State Department looked the other way at the election's murderous context and at clear evidence of fraud, announcing that the election was "transparent" the evening of the election - days before credentialed observers had filed their reports. Secretary of

State John Kerry then extended his "warm congratulations" to Hernández and affirmed that he "looks forward to deepening our cooperation."

As predicted, the State Department thus got the demonstration election it evidently wanted: The ongoing coup regime now has the face of a seemingly democratic process and the U.S. can clean up its own image as a supporter of the regime and pretend that Hernández and his National Party cronies, in large part responsible for the vortex of violence and impunity in Honduras, are going to heroically ride in now and solve the crisis.

The State Department thus appears willing to support even the most egregious of leaders in order to promote U.S. power in the region. Seven months after he actively supported the 2009 coup, an embassy cable to the State Department reported that Hernández "has always been a staunch ally of the United States."

The U.S. Congress, though, continues to express alarm about U.S. support for the Honduran government and in particular its security forces. In June, 21 senators led by Sen. Benjamin Cardin, D-Md., and including top leadership, wrote to Kerry asking him to re-evaluate funding for Honduran police and military in light of human rights abuses.

In the House, Texas Democratic Reps. Lloyd Doggett of Austin-San Antonio and Al Green and Sheila Jackson Lee of Houston earlier joined more than 90 members of Congress asking that U.S. police and military aid be immediately suspended. In October, members of the House led by Rep. Raúl Grijalva, D-N.M., expressed alarm to Kerry about pre-election violence against LIBRE, the militarization of the police and Hernández's seizure of key reins of power. The recently passed 2014 Appropriations Bill includes strengthened human rights conditions on security aid to Honduras.

How long will the State Department continue to blow off Congress and support the repressive regime? The State Department's man in Honduras isn't Mr. Clean - quite the opposite - and its own attempted clean-up operation for the ongoing post-coup government is all too transparent.

The United States should recognize Hernández for who he is, and immediately suspend all military and police aid, including funds for training, and work with the human rights community within Honduras and beyond to

restore the rule of law, clean up the corrupt police, roll back militarization and truly promote the values that we purport to support in choosing our overseas partners.

[Frank, a history professor at University of California, Santa Cruz, researches modern Honduran history and recently testified about human rights and U.S. policy in Honduras in both the U.S. House of Representatives and Canadian Parliament.]

In Honduras, Repression, Violence, Impunity And Corruption Are Policy

Americans / Canadians: Keep on, keep on, keep on ... sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your politicians (MPs, Congress members and Senators) and media. Since the June 2009 military coup, that ousted the last democratically elected government, Honduras has become the 'Murder Capital of the world'. Repression has reached the levels of the worst years of the 1980s.

Since 2009, the U.S. and Canadian governments have legitimized a succession of illegitimate and repressive regimes. North American companies and investors, and "development" banks (World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank) have increased business activities in African palm production, sweatshops, "model cities", tourism and mining. The Honduran regime remains in power due in large part to its political, economic and military relations with the U.S. and Canada and the "development" banks. Across Honduras, community based organizations in the pro-democracy movement need considerably more human rights accompaniment, funding, media attention on the harms and violations and education and activism in Canada and the U.S.

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Rights Action

Since 1983, Rights Action has been funding grassroots organizations in Guatemala and Honduras, as well as in southern Mexico and El Salvador, that are struggling for community controlled development and environmental protection, for truth, justice and human rights, and for democracy and the rule of law. Rights Action does extensive education and activism work concerning how the United States and Canada contribute to and benefit from endemic harms and violations in Guatemala and Honduras. Rights Action (Canada), founded in 1999, is independent from Rights Action (USA).

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