

Rights Action
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Term-Limit Ruling Is Another Nail in the Coffin of Honduran Democracy

By Dana Frank

Given the role of the U.S. and Canadian governments, the North American media in general, and our companies and investors in legitimizing and doing profitable business with the military-backed, repressive regime in power in Honduras, Rights Action – and other grassroots groups north and south – continue with our relentless work, chipping away, to expose and denounce North American government and private sector complicity with the repressive regime and economic elites, and to direct fund and support Honduras' courageous grassroots movement.

Term-Limit Ruling Is Another Nail in the Coffin of Honduran Democracy

By [Dana Frank](#), May 7, 2015

<http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/15706/term-limit-ruling-is-another-nail-in-the-coffin-of-honduran-democracy>

Last month's ruling by the Supreme Court of Honduras throwing out a constitutional ban on the re-election of presidents is far from an innocent opening up of democratic possibilities. Rather, the court's decision is another step in the ongoing, methodical destruction of the rule of law and constitutional order in Honduras, which began with the 2009 military coup that deposed the country's democratically elected president, Manuel Zelaya.

Most ominously, given his record so far, the court's decision paves the way for President Juan Orlando Hernandez's continued hold on power, even as the United States is shoring him up as a strongman and welcome partner.

Article 239 of the 1982 Honduran Constitution, written in the aftermath of decades of military rule, deliberately and explicitly bans re-election of the president and vice president. It even mandates the immediate termination of any sitting president or vice president who advocates changing the ban, and his or her banishment from public office for 10 years for doing so.

This was the ostensible justification for ousting Zelaya, who was planning to put to a referendum the formation of a constituent assembly to consider changes to the constitution. The Honduran military officers and right-wing politicians behind the coup charged, with no evidence, that Zelaya [was planning to change the constitution](#) so that he could run for re-election himself, which he denied.

But in recent weeks, 16 members of Congress, almost all of them from Hernandez's ruling, right-wing National Party, along with former President Rafael Callejas, who was in office from 1990 to 1994, petitioned for the ban to be overruled. Ironically, Callejas and many of the members of Congress had supported Zelaya's removal in 2009.

Hernandez, too, strongly backed lifting the term limits, consistent with his lengthy history of rolling back the rule of law in Honduras. As a member of Congress, Hernandez was the chair of a key congressional committee that authorized the 2009 coup. In late 2012, as president of Congress, he led the so-called technical coup, in which four members of the Constitutional Branch of the Supreme Court were illegally fired in the middle of the night and replaced the next day by new judges loyal to Hernandez. In 2013 he led the illegal naming of a new attorney general, loyal to him, to a five-year term. It is those very same loyal judges who have made his re-election possible.

The implications are alarming, given that Hernandez now controls almost all the reins of power in Honduras. Since assuming the presidency in early 2014, he has used these consolidated powers to militarize domestic security, while countenancing vast corruption and repressing those who challenge his rule.

Rather than reform the notoriously corrupt police—who are so tainted by ties with drug traffickers, gang members and organized crime that the government itself estimates that 70 percent of the force [is beyond saving](#)—he has deployed a terrifying new military police force, along with the regular military, to handle domestic policing.

In the past year, the new military police have committed human rights abuses with impunity, most notably [beating up and detaining Honduras' leading advocate for children](#), Jose Guadalupe Ruelas, and [tear-gassing 35 opposition members](#) inside the main hall of Congress. That comes amid a concerted government media campaign against human rights defenders, NGOs and members of the opposition who might dare suggest to Washington that Honduras has a human rights problem.

In such a climate, it is no wonder that the opposition, which in December united in calling the Hernandez regime a dictatorship, reacted to the Supreme Court decision with immediate outrage. The one institution Hernandez does not completely control is Congress, where his party lacks a majority and three different parties—the largest being LIBRE, a new center-left party led by Zelaya, followed by the new Anti-Corruption Party and vestiges of the traditional center-right Liberal Party—make up a formidable but largely repressed opposition.

In January, a united opposition did manage to defeat an effort by Hernandez to expand the military police in violation of the constitution, but its ability to speak out or introduce legislation in Congress has been sharply limited by the National Party, while maintaining opposition unity remains a challenge.

Beyond the political parties lies an array of grassroots social movements that have been quick to link the re-election ruling to a broader socio-economic agenda that they say is tearing the country apart.

It's a different story in Washington, however, where U.S. President Barack Obama's administration has promoted Hernandez as a key figure fighting crime and poverty, while remaining silent about his repeated subversions of constitutional order.

[A billion-dollar U.S. development plan for Central America](#), for which Vice President Joe Biden has become chief advocate, would triple U.S. funding for the Honduran military and reward the Hernandez regime with hundreds of millions in aid. While ostensibly framed around stopping the flight of unaccompanied minors north to the U.S., the administration's policy is also designed to secure U.S. influence in Central America's Northern Triangle, ensure access to the strategically important Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, and advance a free trade agenda in the face of a shift toward left and center-left governments in Latin America.

There's a deeper economic agenda at play, as well. Corrupt Honduran elites, who in the past year have leapt onto the global billionaires' list for the first time, stand to benefit from privatization schemes and an array of export-processing zones, hydroelectric dams and mining projects. Since coming to power in 2009, the National Party governments of Hernandez and his predecessor, former President Porfirio Lobo, [have already sold off nearly 30 percent](#) of all Honduran land [in mining concessions](#).

In recent months, multilateral development banks, including the International Monetary Fund, the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, have lent Hernandez's government hundreds of millions of dollars to advance an exaggerated neoliberal agenda, with the public sector, along with Honduran workers and the environment, paying a heavy cost.

The Honduran Supreme Court's ruling is yet another nail in the coffin of Honduran democracy. Washington spends millions of dollars every year through the U.S. Agency for International Development, the National Endowment for Democracy and other organizations, ostensibly to promote democracy and good governance for the Honduran people. But it has remained silent about Hernandez's consolidation of power and attacks on the rule of law, while Honduran human rights defenders continue to risk their lives to fight for actual democracy. The contradiction between U.S. rhetoric and its practice is all too clear.

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The Mir Centre For Peace At Selkirk College and Rights Action Invite You To Join An Education-Seminar Trip To Honduras

- <http://www.rightsaction.org/action-content/honduras-education-seminar-trip>

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The U.S. and Canadian governments, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, and North American companies and investors (including pension funds) maintain profitable economic and military relations with the Guatemalan, Honduran and Mexican elites, turning a blind eye to death and suffering by exploitation, repression, violence and impunity that are the norm in these countries.

Because of impunity and immunity from legal liability in Canada and the U.S., it is extremely difficult to hold our companies, investors, governments and international “development” banks accountable when they contribute to and benefit from human rights violations and environmental and health harms in other countries.

Send, and keep on sending copies of this information, and your own letters, to your own elected politicians (MPs, Congresspersons, Senators), to your media, and to your own pension and investment funds, asking: Why our governments, companies and investment firms do nothing about the poverty, repression and violence, and environmental and health harms associated with North American businesses, while benefiting from these economic, military and political relations?

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- Daily News: www.democracynow.org / www.upsidedownworld.org / www.dominionpaper.ca / www.rabble.ca /
- Recommended Reading: “This Changes Everything: Capitalism versus The Climate”, by Naomi Klein; “Open Veins of Latin America”, by Eduardo Galeano; “A People’s History of the United States”, by Howard Zinn

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