

“Serving Time in Honduras”, by Adrienne Pine

Portrait of Edwin Espinal, political prisoner unjustly jailed by the U.S. and Canadian-backed Honduran regime

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/portrait-of-edwin-espinal>

- What to do: See below

Since the 2009 military coup in Honduras, the U.S. and Canadian governments, and media, have got it all (mostly) wrong, with on-going disasterous results for the majority of Hondurans. It is never too late to change course, and begin to get it right.

Serving Time in Honduras

By Adrienne Pine, March 19, 2018

<https://nacla.org/news/2018/03/19/serving-time-honduras>

Edwin Espinal is just one of dozens of Honduran political prisoners currently being held in high-security facilities. On the Global Day of Action for political prisoners, the international community must join their struggle.



Edwin Espinal, posing in November 2015 with young friends in Rio Blanco, where he had gone to support Berta Cáceres, just months before her assassination. (Photo by Karen Spring.)

I first met Edwin Robelo Espinal on July 1, 2010, three weeks before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [granted him precautionary measures](#) due to the repeated torture and persecution he had suffered at the hands of Honduran police over the course of the previous year. I had arrived at the Tegucigalpa offices of the Honduran human rights organization Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH) at 8:30 that morning to meet with Bertha Oliva, the organization's director. Bertha, it turned out, was not at the office but at Flor del Campo police station demanding Edwin's release after he had been arbitrarily detained the night before. She and Edwin returned to COFADEH about an hour and a half later. His eyes swollen shut and in evident pain, he nonetheless immediately agreed to an interview.

He told me that the police in the impoverished neighborhood where he lived, Flor del Campo, had threatened and attacked him on numerous occasions because they knew he was part of the resistance movement, and was actively organizing with it. The previous night, he had been sitting in his car when the neighborhood police ambushed him, dragging him out of the car by force without providing any explanation. They had punched him, he told me, and violently forced him into the patrol car, which they drove to an undisclosed location and continued to beat him. They sprayed pepper spray directly into his eyes, forcing him also to inhale large quantities of it. "It was all in my lungs, and all over my face," he said. "My whole body hurt terribly."

After the initial torture, Edwin was taken to the neighborhood police station where he was detained overnight. There, he said, "they laughed at me when I said I was in pain and needed help. They shocked me using a Taser gun on my back and on my stomach, and then they set off the Taser in my ears to intimidate me—the sound is terrifying. I was suffocating." They refused him medical assistance.

Already a well-recognized member of the National People's Resistance Front (FNRP) motorcycle squad, Edwin had become famous following the September 26, 2009 death of his girlfriend Wendy Elizabeth Ávila from tear-gas inhalation during the violent repression by U.S.-trained Honduran state security forces of a vigil outside the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa, the nation's capital.

Fluent in English from his years working in construction in the United States, Edwin [passionately denounced](#) Ávila's murder in national and international media, illustrating through his own loss the suffering of a nation following the June 28, 2009 U.S.-supported military coup.

Since our first meeting, I have come to admire Edwin and to consider him a dear friend. I have been teargassed with him and [Berta Cáceres](#) outside the U.S. army base that played a central role in the 2009 coup against Manuel Zelaya. I have accompanied him and his longtime partner Karen Spring to the funeral of one of his many friends murdered by death squads run through the Honduran military and police. I stood with him, journalists, human rights defenders, and a large group of his indignant neighbors as a group of around 60 heavily-armed members of the military police—in an attempt to

plant evidence implicating him in drug trafficking—[broke into Edwin's home](#) in the lead-up to the 2013 presidential elections.

I have shared his outrage at the pain he and his family endured during the premature death of his mother due to medical abuse and neglect at the hands of the Honduran Institute of Social Security after the ruling National Party [stole from its coffers to pay for their electoral campaigns and personal enrichment](#). Researchers have estimated, based on Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social (IHSS) mortality statistics, that between 2012 and 2014 [nearly 3,000 people died](#) as a direct result of the theft of IHSS funds.

Edwin has babysat for my daughter, who adores him. His kindness, sense of humor, soft spot for kittens, and bad taste in music (like me, he has an embarrassing fondness for 1980s soft rock ballads) merge seamlessly with his tireless solidarity work, which—I have come to realize over the years—is borne of pure love.

Edwin has spent two months of an indefinite pre-trial detention in the La Tolva prison, one of the two military-run maximum-security facilities opened in the last two years along with El Pozo prison, ostensibly to house the country's most dangerous violent criminals—high-level drug traffickers and gang leaders.

He was arrested on January 19, following an anonymous social media campaign circulated by supporters of President Juan Orlando Hernández and government officials accusing Edwin along with numerous other opposition leaders, human rights defenders, and journalists—including [renowned Jesuit priest and scholar Ismael “Padre Melo” Moreno](#)—of having ties to criminal organizations and drug cartels and calling for and/or participating in violent and terrorist acts.

While not all the targets of this campaign have been arrested, the general understanding among the opposition is that the accusations double as death threats (and indeed, in most cases, the latter have accompanied the former).

At his pre-trial hearing, Edwin was accused of a litany of charges (including terrorism) related to suspicious damages to the Tegucigalpa Marriott Hotel, adjacent to the presidential palace, that occurred during a January 12 anti-Hernández protest this year in Tegucigalpa. The government “evidence” presented against him included the same blurry photographs that were used in the fliers used to criminalize him.

Even before the government regime began openly accusing specific opposition leaders of property damage, its members had pointed out concerns about the pro-government media coverage of the damage incurred to the Marriott's damaged ground-floor windows. They pointed to the unprecedented, seemingly intentional absence of police and soldiers guarding the hotel during the march, testimony of hotel guests who were cleared from the first floors of the building well in advance of the arrival of the marchers, and clear photographic and eyewitness evidence of National Party infiltrators throwing Molotov cocktails.

The broader context of this heightened criminalization of opposition leaders and journalists, two years after the internationally-denounced murder of Edwin's close friend Berta Cáceres, is the [blatant fraud](#) carried out by President Hernández and his allies in the Supreme Electoral Tribunal following the November 26, 2017 presidential election, and enforced through brutal state repression of widespread protests against the electoral coup.

While both of the other presidential elections that followed the 2009 U.S.-supported military coup were riddled with fraud and state violence, on this occasion the fraud was so obvious that not a single foreign dignitary attended Hernández's inauguration. In an absurd attempt to invert the widespread public rejection of Hernández's claim to victory and criminalize the opposition, the National Party Central Committee [publicly accused](#) Opposition Alliance candidate Salvador Nasralla and general coordinator and former president, Mel Zelaya, ousted in the 2009 coup, of joining with gang members to "steal" the election from Hernández.

At the time of Edwin's arrest, COFADEH's confirmed count of police and military murders of protestors since the elections stood at 32, and numerous regime opponents had already been jailed on trumped-up charges. Today those numbers continue to grow, with COFADEH's most recent tally a month ago at 38 confirmed murders.

Last week the office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [issued a dramatic report](#) condemning 23 murders in the context of post-electoral protests, affirming that at least 16 of those resulted from state security forces shooting directly into crowds.

Against this backdrop, the Honduran government's prosecutorial priorities are striking: while not a single person has been investigated or charged for any of the extrajudicial assassinations carried out since the November elections, the Honduran state brought in five regime-supporting forensic experts to testify against Edwin at his January 22 initial military-court hearing.

At least 25 other political prisoners have been jailed in high-security facilities since the elections. The majority of them—like Edwin—are strategically accused of non-political criminal activity, including property damage, arson, criminal association, theft, and use of homemade explosive charges. In Pimienta, in the department of Cortés, the TIGRES, U.S.-trained and supported special forces agents [illegally raided](#) community members' homes at night after residents took part in anti-fraud protests [exposed and humiliated police infiltrators](#). TIGRES forces rounded up and arresting 11 adults in Pimienta, 10 of whom are currently housed in El Pozo prison. Five opposition members from the city of Choloma, in the same department, are also imprisoned at El Pozo, having been charged with criminal association in relation to their participation in protests against police who have been terrorizing local citizens through carrying out forced disappearances and [murdering protestors](#).

The United Nations Human Rights Council report confirms that community-police relations are particularly tense in Cortes, where police have murdered protestors at much higher rates than elsewhere in the country. According to the National Committee for the Freedom of Political Prisoners, many political prisoners were targeted in relation to their vocal criticism of police violence.

Upon entering La Tolva, Edwin was forced to spend 15 days in solitary confinement and allowed out of his cell only two hours per day; Raúl Eduardo Álvarez, the other political prisoner at La Tolva, was kept in solitary for 20 days. Prisoners at La Tolva are denied the right to receive books or music, and the prison library has just ten books. The exorbitant cost of phone calls, monitored by a for-profit U.S.-based prison corporation, makes communication with family members exceedingly difficult. Edwin alone among the growing list of political prisoners has been allowed visits from his partner, a Canadian citizen. None have been granted permission to receive visits from Honduran relatives.

Maximum-security prisons in the style of El Pozo and La Tolva have been developing in Honduras since before the U.S.-supported June 28, 2009 coup that ousted former president José Manuel Zelaya. From the start, the strongest proponents of these jails were [among the same national and international players](#) who most fervently backed the coup—understandable given the underlying logics of neoliberal privatization involved in both endeavors. Both prison privatization and the ongoing coup itself rely on the deeply flawed argument that the greatest danger to Hondurans is Hondurans themselves—specifically poor Hondurans (many poor Hondurans, of course, would beg to differ).

The solutions posed by coup proponents since the early 2000s to the alleged criminality of poor Hondurans have been based in increasingly “tough on crime” legal and extrajudicial social cleansing strategies, accompanied by a discourse arguing that public institutions of social uplift upon which the criminalized poor rely (e.g., education, healthcare, public utilities) are failing, and must be privatized for the ostensible benefit of all. While criminalization of the poor—including the “street cleansing” campaign that I have elsewhere argued amounted to invisible genocide—was in full swing during the 2002-2006 Maduro presidency, it wasn’t until the 2009 coup that the full-scale privatization of Honduran public sector—including its prisons—could be implemented.

Prisons in Honduras have been home to numerous massacres since the early 2000s, [many involving the ruling National Party and state security involvement](#)—often attributed in mainstream media to gangs in order to justify tough-on-crime crackdowns—including at supermax facilities. One such massacre was the [Valentine’s Day 2012 Comayagua prison fire](#), in which nearly 400 prisoners were killed when guards refused to release them from their burning cells, instead shooting directly into cells to prevent prisoners, most of whom were in pre-trial detention, from surviving.

There has been international interest in the development of such facilities, particularly from both [Israel](#) and the United States. U.S. government advisors have played a clear role in their construction and development. But public-private funding mechanisms and [post-coup secrecy laws governing the management of security tax \(Tasa de Seguridad\) funds](#) used for prison construction have effectively shielded information about both supermax donors and private contractors from the public.

Edwin reports via his lawyer and Spring that prisoners at La Tolva are in a constant state of hunger. On numerous days over the past month in La Tolva, prisoners have been allowed non-purified water for only five minutes a day—five minutes to drink, use and flush toilets, bathe, brush their teeth, and fill small prison-issued bottles to survive the rest of the day.

In late February, a serious virus hit the prison. Many inmates, including Edwin and Raúl, suffered severe headaches, sore throat, nasal discharge, chest congestion, facial pain, respiratory problems, and diarrhea, and were denied access to medical care. On March 4, after their water was shut off, prisoners in the section of La Tolva in which Edwin and Raúl are held began a spontaneous protest and were promptly heavily teargassed by the security police and military police who guard the prison. That same week, a tuberculosis outbreak was reported in El Pozo, with the government organization CONAPREV [reporting 34 new cases](#), but family members [alleging at least 80](#).

The treatment of political prisoners contrasts markedly with the relatively luxurious accommodations provided to the few high-profile powerful Hondurans who have been imprisoned in recent years for very serious crimes. Lena Gutierrez, one of the masterminds behind the defunding of the IHSS, which, as noted above, has cost thousands of Honduran lives, is officially on house arrest but is regularly photographed [enjoying coffee at Tegucigalpa malls](#).

And Roberto David Castillo, the executive who was arrested for his role in Berta Cáceres's murder two years after the fact en lieu of holding the crime's more powerful intellectual authors accountable, has avoided detention in a maximum security facility, and has not been charged for a wide range of other crimes in which he is implicated. In an editorial on COFADEH's website published earlier this month, Olivia Zúñiga, daughter of Berta Cáceres and newly-elected Congresswoman with the opposition Libre party, [wrote](#): "If the public prosecutor's office had acted months before Berta's assassination, when she denounced death threats and sexual harassment to which she was subjected by David Castillo BERTA WOULD NOT BE DEAD... This is why we must fight for the liberation of Edwin Espinal and all the political prisoners."

She continued, "They, our compañeros who face isolation and state violence with dignity and courage in the most terrifying prisons deserve to be free. And it won't be the Attorney General... fighting for justice for them and their families; it will have to be all of us as a nation who take up the fight for their freedom in a country where impunity reigns, where terrorists are treated as honorable citizens and defenders of the rights of the people are treated as terrorists."

Organizations around the world are participating today (March 19) in a [Global Day of Action](#) to free Honduran political prisoners like Edwin Espinal. The Honduran justice system is borne of multiple coups—most recently, the 2009 presidential coup, the 2012 “[technical coup](#)” in which Hernández (then President of Congress) illegally deposed four members of the Supreme Court, replacing them with judges loyal to him, and the recent electoral coup. As Zúñiga notes, the deeply corrupt judiciary is vested in illegally criminalizing political prisoners, and cannot be relied upon to bring them justice.

As family members and friends of Honduran political prisoners lead the way in fighting for their freedom, it is incumbent upon the international community, whose governments have tacitly or overtly rubber-stamped the increasingly brutal dictatorship, to join their struggle.

(Adrienne Pine is Associate Professor of Anthropology at American University, currently on leave in Oakland, CA collaborating with National Nurses United and teaching anthropology at UC Berkeley. adrienne@quotha.net)

Day of Action, Every Day: Keep on calling and writing Canadian & U.S. politicians

- Free the political prisoners day of action:
<http://freedwinespinallibertad.blogspot.com/2018/03/global-day-of-action-march-19-marzo-dia.html>

More Information

Karen Spring, Edwin Espinal’s partner & Coordinator of Honduras Solidarity Network
spring.kj@gmail.com / <https://freedwinespinallibertad.blogspot.com> / [Free EDWIN ESPINAL Libertad](#) / #FreeEdwinEspinal #LibertadEdwinEspinal /

Rights Action: www.rightsaction.org; www.facebook.com/RightsAction.org;
<https://twitter.com/RightsAction>

United States

Contact directly your elected Senators, Congress members (<https://www.house.gov/representatives/find-your-representative>) and make your demands known to them and urge them to write directly to:

- Heide Fulton: US Chief of Mission, Honduras, BronkeHM@state.gov
- Jason Smith, Human Rights and Labor, SmithJA6@state.gov

Canada

Directly contact your Member of Parliament and make your demands known to them (<https://www.ourcommons.ca/Parliamentarians/en/members>) and ask them to write directly to:

- Ambassador James Hill, Embassy of Canada in Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua, James.Hill@international.gc.ca, tglpa@international.gc.ca

- Minister Chrystia Freeland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, chrystia.freeland@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland.c1d@parl.gc.ca, chrystia.freeland@international.gc.ca
- Canadian embassy for Honduras: Bertrand-Xavier Asselin, Bertrand-Xavier.Asselin@international.gc.ca; Isabelle Solon Helal, Isabelle.SolonHelal@international.gc.ca; Kyle Sundstrom, Kyle.Sundstrom@international.gc.ca

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More information / Other organizations

- Honduras Solidarity Network: <http://www.hondurassolidarity.org>; <https://www.facebook.com/HondurasSolidarityNetwork>; <https://twitter.com/hondurassol>
- Witness for Peace: www.witnessforpeace.org; <https://twitter.com/WitnessforPeace>
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