

Honduras' president implicated in assassination of drug trafficker held in maximum-security military jail

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“Former President Lobo and current President Hernández — whom the United States had [backed](#) and is [currently supporting](#) — are both alleged to have [close criminal ties](#), in addition to having allegedly [accepted bribes](#) from drug traffickers to help fund political campaigns in exchange for protection and other benefits, among other [corruption allegations](#).”

WARNING: The video is very troubling, including prison guards letting the killers in: [here](#)

VIEW & READ IT, ... & WEEP

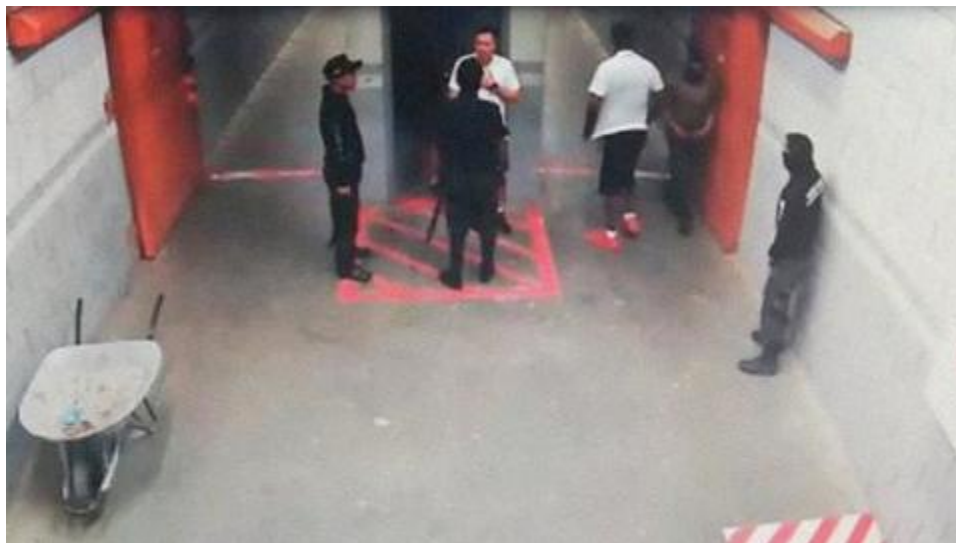
As long as the U.S./ Canada/ European Community maintain full relations with this “democratic allie” (the repressive, drug-trafficking and utterly corrupted Honduran regime) ...

- the drugs will continue to flow,
- tens of thousands of Hondurans will continue to be forced to flee home and country every year, and
- North American politicians, government officials and international relations ‘experts’ will continue to pretend they don’t understand why so many refugees are fleeing.

Accused drug trafficker murdered in prison "hit" was alleged partner of brother of Honduran president

By Jeff Ernest & David Adams, Oct.28, 2019

<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/latin-america/accused-drug-trafficker-murdered-in-prison-hit-was-alleged-partner-of-brother-of-honduran-president?spa=true>



The moment before his death. Nery López Sanabria is discussion with prison guards. Moments later inmates armed with a gun and knives burst through the red sliding door on the left.

Crédito: Univision

Shortly before 10:30 on Saturday morning, suspected drug trafficker Nery López Sanabria chatted with a pair of uniformed security guards in a hall inside a maximum-security prison in western Honduras. Dressed in a white t-shirt and black gym shorts, López Sanabria can be seen on a security camera as one of the guards, wearing a hood, walks to a red, metal prison door, dangling keys.

A few seconds later the heavy door slides open and the masked guard steps aside. A brutal and horrific scene ensues. Out leaps a prisoner with a gun who quickly unloads the entire cartridge at López Sanabria.

The violent spectacle comes barely a week after a U.S. federal court in New York found Juan Antonio 'Tony' Hernández guilty on four counts of drug trafficking and related weapons charges. Ledgers that were confiscated from López Sanabria during his June 8, 2018 capture in Honduras were key evidence in the conviction of Hernández, and could potentially implicate his brother, President Juan Orlando Hernández.

Although US officials were able to obtain the ledgers and present them as evidence, it is not clear if U.S. officials tried to obtain testimony from López Sanabria. The U.S. Department of Justice wrote a letter to the head of the Honduran prosecutors office in April, requesting "the duly authorized custodian of records to provide copies of the investigative records, evidence, and reports," pertaining to the capture of López Sanabria.

Besides the actual drug ledgers, it is not clear how much information was provided to U.S. officials.



Nery Orlando Lopez Sanabria was captured in June 2018 in Honduras with drug ledgers that implicated Tony Hernandez. At the time of his arrest, Lopez was believed to be one of the largest drug traffickers in Honduras. He was murdered in a maximum security prison in Honduras, October 26, 2019. Crédito: Courtesy of La Prensa.

Prison fight or a "hit"

The first official reports of the murder cited a prison fight as the cause. But within hours, a graphic video of the killing began circulating on social media that debunked the claim. The sequence of events depicted in the video demonstrate all the tell-tale signs of a coordinated hit.

Government critics suggest that López Sanabria was murdered to avoid any chance that he might cooperate with U.S. prosecutors and that the brutality of the caught-on-camera scene was intended to send a message.

Lawyers for López Sanabria are blaming the government for his death, saying they repeatedly requested that he be transferred to a military jail due to death threats. "That there was conspiracy is a fact, it can't be denied," said Carlos Chajtur, a lawyer for López Sanabria who spoke to Univision News.

Maximum security

"We are talking about a maximum security prison, practically impregnable," he said. "Anyone who visits has to go through a series of security screens including a full body scan to verify that you're not carrying any type of illegal material or artifact," he added. "He was killed with knives and guns ... these weapons did not enter the prison all by themselves. Someone had to bring them in, and that someone has to be part of the authorities," he went on.

President Hernández has vigorously denied any links to drug trafficking, and has called the accusations that surfaced in the New York trial against him and his brother were a fairy tale of lies worthy of 'Alice in Wonderland.'

The government announced it is investigating the killing and has suggested an alternative motive. "The President has asked the Public Prosecutor for a thorough investigation because there are reasons to suspect that it was directed in the interest of drug traffickers [who testified against Tony Hernández] , given that according to his lawyer, [López Sanabria] was in a position to prove the notebook used in [the New York trial] are fake," said deputy Minister of Security, Luis Suazo, in a tweet early Sunday morning.

Lawyers for López Sanabria denied that versión to Univision saying government officials had offered to transfer their client "in return for denying the drug ledgers."

Visit by Miami private eye

Before the trial, lawyers for Lopez Sanabria say their client was visited without their prior knowledge or authorization by a Miami private investigator, Chase Lalani, who was employed by the Hernández family. Others who were approached by Lalani say he misrepresented himself as working for the U.S. government. Lalani denied misrepresenting himself during a brief conversation with Univision in New York.

Prosecutors presented the drug ledgers in court on the second day of the Hernández trial earlier this month. An anti-narcotics agent from Honduras testified that he discovered the ledgers inside a hidden compartment in a vehicle seized during the capture of López Sanabria. The prosecutors presented several pages in court, including one that supposedly detailed a cocaine shipment of 650 kilos and listed someone named "Tony Hernandez."

Univision obtained copy of ledgers

Univision obtained a complete copy of the ledgers, that runs to over 350 pages, and detail mundane expenses, such as the upkeep of a ranch, as well as what prosecutors say are numerous large-scale cocaine shipments. The validity of the ledgers was confirmed by Chajtur to Univision two weeks before the trial.

Univision also obtained a copy of the official arrest report which mentions nine notebooks, along with \$200,000 in cash and several guns.

Besides numerous mentions of “Tony,” the ledgers also list payments to a person identified as “JOH,” which are the initials and primary nickname of President Juan Orlando Hernández.

The lawyers for López Sanabria declined to say if their client explained to them before his death if the initials in the narcolibretas do indeed refer to the Hernández brothers.

Previously faked his death

When López Sanabria was captured, he carried an id card with the name of Magdaleno Meza Funez. Years earlier he had faked his own death through a bizarre scheme that involved photos of him lying in a coffin, a falsified death certificate and the new ID card issued to him by the national registry. He reportedly also underwent plastic surgery to alter his appearance.

At the time of the arrest, López Sanabria was considered one of the largest drug traffickers in Honduras. U.S. prosecutors revealed that he had previously worked with confessed drug traffickers Víctor Hugo Díaz Morales, alias ‘El Rojo,’ and Devis Rivera Maradiaga, head of the infamous Cachiros crime family, both of whom are in U.S. custody and testified against Tony Hernández in New York.

4 Takeaways from the US Trial against the Honduras President’s Brother

by Héctor Silva Ávalos and Parker Asmann, OCTOBER 24, 2019

<https://www.insightcrime.org/news/analysis/takeaways-us-trial-honduras-president-brother/>

The US drug trial against the brother of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández brought the nexus between organized crime and political power to the forefront, undermining the country’s purported role as an ally in the fight against corruption and powerful drug trafficking groups.

Over the course of the two-week trial that [ended with the conviction](#) of former Honduran congressman Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernández — the president’s brother — on drug and weapons charges, little doubt remained about the importance his connections to political power and dirty members of the country’s security forces played in facilitating his network.

Still, it’s unclear if this conviction alone — especially in the wake of [past convictions](#) that in hindsight only temporarily shook up Honduras’ elite — will knock down the criminal structures firmly in place. Below, InSight Crime considers four main takeaways from the high-profile trial.

What’s Next for President Hernández?

In the capital Tegucigalpa, the situation has remained calm after the conviction of the president’s brother. It’s still unclear how the ruling will affect the president himself. For now, JOH, as President Hernández is known informally, is still clinging to the presidency. There don’t appear to be any signs that he’s thinking of relinquishing his power as head of state.

Shortly after becoming aware of the verdict against his brother, the president [issued a statement](#) in which he said he felt “sad,” but was quick to return to what has become his main argument: that the whole case was based on testimony from drug traffickers the Honduran government persecuted and

extradited. “What can be said about a conviction based on testimonies of confessed murderers?” [he said](#).

This testimony, however, has fueled significant concerns about the president’s own participation in his brother’s drug conspiracy. US prosecutors [even admitted](#) that Joaquín Guzmán Loera, the imprisoned former Sinaloa Cartel leader known as “El Chapo,” had sent \$1 million to Juan Orlando Hernández via Tony. It was also made clear that the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) had [investigated the Honduran president](#) for his possible participation in his brother’s network.

But not 24 hours after the verdict was read, US Chargé d’Affaires in Honduras Colleen Hoey was [photographed](#) accompanying President Hernández at a military parade. “The United States is one of the president’s main supporters here,” a diplomat who asked to remain anonymous because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter, told InSight Crime.

The support of Washington and the army are critical to safeguarding the president. “Everything depends on the United States, the armed forces and the economic elite,” Carlos Hernández, from the Association for a More Just Society (Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa – ASJ), [told Univision](#).

For the army, where President Hernández ordered sudden changes for at least 10 officers after his brother’s conviction, the head of the force hastened to deny rumors about a possible coup d’etat. “The rule of law must prevail, and if someone wants to take control by force, that’s when the army will enter,” General René Orlando Ponce Fonseca, chief of the armed forces, [told La Tribuna](#) October 21.

Several of the officers — including four colonels — removed from the force, a move that was seen as a way to manage discontent within the rank and file, were allegedly opposed to the president, a military intelligence source told InSight Crime. On October 23, some of those same officers went to Honduras’ Supreme Court to file appeals.

“I think the United States prefers to stick with the president rather than a situation of chaos that’s out of their control,” according to the diplomat consulted in Tegucigalpa.

For now, President Hernández can breathe calmly while [posing for photographs](#) with US diplomats. Meanwhile, in the mountains of Honduras, organized crime continues to transform while dubious congressional reforms make it more difficult to prosecute officials accused of corruption.

Corruption, Impunity Continue Apace

The same week that Hondurans anxiously awaited the verdict in the trial against Tony Hernández, lawmakers in Congress were quietly cooking up a new recipe for impunity as the wheels of corruption continued on.

As the period allocated for Congress to ratify reforms [approved months ago](#) neared its end, lawmakers went ahead and gave them the green light. One of the more controversial measures involved changes to the country’s penal code, which will soften punishments for high impact crimes like corruption, money laundering and drug trafficking when the regulations go into effect on November 10, according to [El Heraldo](#).

“Under this legal framework, the penalty for a Honduran that steals a cell phone is stronger than the penalty for a public official that steals institutional resources,” the country’s National Anti-Corruption Council (Consejo Nacional Anticorrupción – CNA) [said in a September statement](#).

Civil society groups working to combat such criminal activity told El Heraldó that the changes will “generate greater impunity” and keep those who misappropriate public funds and state assets out of prison. Other groups have gathered thousands of signatures opposing the reforms and demanded widespread demonstrations to protest against them.

The Final Narco-Politics Link

The conviction of Tony Hernández was the final piece that connected Honduras’ most notorious drug trafficking clans with the highest echelons of political power in the country.

Even before Tony Hernández emerged as a player in the western highlands of Honduras — especially in Lempira department where the Hernández brothers were born and got their start in politics — groups of family trafficking clans known as [transportistas](#) dominated the country’s main drug routes and worked with the complicity of the army, police and local political leaders to do so.

These links became clear in other high-profile cases in the United States featuring damning witness testimony, such as the [trial against former Cachiros leader](#) Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, as well as Fabio Lobo, the son of former president Porfirio Lobo. Before Tony Hernández landed in US custody, these revelations culminated with the younger Lobo’s conviction and a [24-year prison sentence](#) for cocaine trafficking.

But this most recent verdict has revealed just how much political power was behind the growth of drug trafficking in Honduras. It was a quid pro quo that benefited everyone involved. Drugs flowed freely and unobstructed through Honduras to the United States, and criminal groups “funneled millions of dollars of drug proceeds to National Party campaigns to impact Honduran presidential elections in 2009, 2013, and 2017” in return, [US prosecutors said](#).

US Hands Aren’t Clean

For years, the US government has unequivocally voiced its support for Honduras as an effective partner in the regional fight against organized crime. However, the conviction of Tony Hernández didn’t just provide further confirmation of the narco-politics link in the country, but it also served as an indictment of the United States’ role in legitimizing the political powers that facilitated such criminal activity.

Tony Hernández’s drug trafficking clan operated from at least 2004 until 2016, according to US prosecutors. In that time, the United States [supported and played a key role](#) in a 2009 coup d’état that effectively ushered in what will soon amount to more than a decade of National Party rule, which has been defined by allegations of severe misconduct.

Indeed, former President Lobo and current President Hernández — whom the United States had [backed](#) and is [currently supporting](#) — are both alleged to have [close criminal ties](#), in addition to having allegedly [accepted bribes](#) from drug traffickers to help fund political campaigns in exchange for protection and other benefits, among other [corruption allegations](#).

What’s more, during this time the United States has poured [millions of dollars in security assistance](#) to train and support various Honduran police and military units — including militarized police forces

like [the Tigres](#), an elite unit [created specifically](#) to fight organized crime and bring security to some of the country's most dangerous regions.

In 2016 and 2017 alone, the US government provided more than \$200 million in assistance for anti-drug measures, police and military equipment and training, as well as border security, according to [data](#) from the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA).

Corrupt members of the Honduran police and military were central to the success of Tony Hernández's drug trafficking.

In fact, testimony in the trial against him revealed that the former Honduran police chief, Juan Carlos "El Tigre" Bonilla Valladares, allegedly [played a vital role](#) in facilitating the former congressman's drug ring, among other national police officers like Mauricio Hernández Pineda, [the cousin of](#) both Tony and Juan Orlando Hernández.

But even before this came to light in court, [US support and assistance flowed](#) despite El Tigre's "[dark past](#)" and suspected links to death squads.

The United States may have convicted a few members of the narco-politics structure in place in Honduras, but it hasn't yet answered for helping create the conditions that allowed such a structure to exist in the first place.

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More information

- Rights Action: www.rightsaction.org
- Honduras Solidarity Network: www.hondurassolidarity.org;
- Witness for Peace Solidarity Collective: www.solidaritycollective.org;
- School of Americas Watch: www.soaw.org;
- Alliance for Global Justice: www.afgj.org;
- Simcoe County Honduras Rights Monitor: <https://simcoecountyhondurasrightsmonitor.wordpress.com>;

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