

Tucson Star article: US & Canada support Honduran drug trafficking regime that forces many to migrate

<https://mailchi.mp/rightsaction/us-canada-support-honduran-drug-trafficking-regime-that-forces-many-to-migrate>

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“A body lies in a pool hall after an attack by masked assailants on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The country has one of the highest murder rates in the world.”

Esteban Felix / The Associated Press 2012 (Tucson Star article)

While the U.S. is the ‘big elephant in the room’, in terms of supporting and ‘legitimizing’ the military-back, drug trafficking government of Honduras, Canada – since the 2009 military coup – has been lockstep with the U.S. in ‘legitimizing’ and empowering the Honduran regime.

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US supports Honduran government that forces many to migrate as it protects drug trafficking

By [Tim Steller](#), Tucson Star, Sep. 12, 2020

https://tucson.com/news/local/star-investigation-us-supports-honduran-government-that-forces-many-to-migrate-as-it-protects-drug/article_cbfacb4c-dc94-50e8-a80f-82f307574662.html

If you spoke with any of the thousands of Honduran asylum seekers who passed through Tucson last year, you heard common reasons for their flight to the United States: violence, poverty, extortion.

If you listened carefully, you might also have heard an unfamiliar phrase: “JOH.” In Spanish it’s pronounced, more or less, “Ho,” and refers to a man’s initials. The man is Juan Orlando Hernandez, the president of Honduras.

What Hondurans long suspected and Americans later found out was that the president of Honduras, who has functional control of all branches of government, is also deeply implicated in drug trafficking to the United States.

Federal prosecutors in Manhattan revealed that in court filings against the president’s brother, Tony Hernandez, in August 2019, and [witnesses testified to it in Tony Hernandez’s October 2019 trial](#). The president’s brother [was found guilty of four crimes, including conspiring to import about 220 tons of cocaine](#) to the United States.

Honduras had plenty of problems before Hernandez first took power in 2014, of course. But some Honduran migrants say the destruction of social protections that drove them out occurred under his watch, even as the Obama administration aided him and Trump tightened the American embrace.

Not surprisingly, a country run by organized crime became consumed by it from top to bottom. What has been surprising is the U.S. role in supporting the same government that, according to many Honduran migrants and experts, caused them to flee to the United States.

Hernandez was first sworn in as president in January 2014. Months later, a surge of Honduran children fled to the United States.

When he ran for re-election in November 2017, dubious vote-counting put Hernandez ahead again. [Despite deep suspicions of fraud, the United States recognized him as the victor](#) in December of that year.

Hondurans fled to the U.S. again, many turning themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents and requesting asylum. [Border Patrol apprehensions of Hondurans](#) rose by 62% in fiscal year 2018, to 76,513. Then apprehensions surged by 430% in fiscal year 2019, to 253,795.

This year isn't complete yet, but apprehensions have dropped sharply because of coordinated crackdowns by the U.S., Honduras and Mexico — not because of improved conditions.

At [the Benedictine Monastery](#) and other migrant-support sites run by Tucson's Casa Alitas, 3,650 asylum-seeking Hondurans passed through in 2019. "Migration is not a new phenomenon, and it predates Hernandez, but it's become demonstrably worse under Hernandez," said Tim Rieser, a top foreign-policy and appropriations aide to Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, who has long scrutinized the Honduran government.

While [President Trump criticized the Hernandez government in spring 2018](#) as the first caravan of the year walked north, Hernandez eventually brought the American president back to his side by accepting U.S. measures on migration — and even by deciding to move Honduras' embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

At the December 2019 Israeli-American Council national summit in Florida, [Trump praised Hernandez](#). "We're delighted to have with us President Juan Orlando Hernandez of Honduras and the first lady of Honduras," [he told the audience](#). "And I have to tell you — thank you, sir — that President Hernandez is working with the United States very closely. You know what's going on on our southern border. And we're winning after years and years of losing. We're stopping drugs at a level that has never happened."

The audience applauded, probably unaware of the irony: Trump was crediting Hernandez for stopping drug trafficking although he had just been accused by U.S. prosecutors — and his brother convicted — of participating in it.

PAYING A "WAR TAX"

Although I had spoken with Honduran migrants in Tucson; Nogales, Sonora; Mexicali; and Tijuana, the anger toward "JOH" never hit home until [I was in Tapachula, Chiapas, on Mexico's southern border, in February](#).

A defeated man in his 60s and an optimistic man in his 20s sat down with me at a shelter called Jesus el Buen Pastor del Pobre y el Migrante. Both explained how local gangs controlled their neighborhoods and police worked with the gangs. When threatened, they had no one to turn to for help, and they fled.

The older man repeatedly said how he never wanted to leave his hometown, La Ceiba. "No me interesa aventurarme," he said. "I'm not interested in taking risks." But life under Hernandez left him no options, he said.

I had planned to travel to Honduras in April, but the pandemic intervened. Still, there are Hondurans all over North America wanting to share their stories of flight from a government they say left them hopeless at home.

Seated outside the Kino Border Initiative shelter in Nogales, Sonora, Roberto Táborá emphasized over and over that his family is clean and hardworking. They don't want to be in this border city, waiting for the U.S. system to resume processing asylum applications. It's been eight months.

2009 MILITARY COUP

Táborá, 37, comes from the northern Honduran town of Choloma and traces his family's misfortune, as many Hondurans do, to 2009. On June 28 that year, the Honduran military ousted elected president Manuel Zelaya in a coup.

Before the coup, social services such as health care were good, and public safety was tolerable, he said. "After the coup, everything changed," Táborá said in Spanish. "After the coup, the Colombian groups infiltrated the country, and these guys put their eyes on people to see where they could find an advantage."

While at the upper levels of organized crime, Colombians play a role in some regions, at the lower level, Hondurans carry out the dirty work, Táborá found.

His family ran three separate businesses during the post-coup years: One making wooden furniture; another selling and maintaining motorcycles; and a third selling used cars.

"We had three jobs," he said. "We were making money, you could say, a decent amount for the family. But there were always criminal groups that we had to pay X amount just so they would let us work. We paid 15,000 lempiras."

That's what Honduran criminal groups call a "war tax" of 5,000 lempiras per business — a total of about \$615 per month at today's exchange rate, overwhelming for a typical Honduran family.

"The situation there is that we can't call and report it, because these people have paid off the police," Táborá said. "Making a report is like saying, 'Here I am, I live over here, I did it!' The criminals can easily go and kill you."

A body lies in a pool hall after an attack by masked assailants on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The country has one of the highest murder rates in the world.

Esteban Felix / The Associated Press 2012

"STATE-SPONSORED DRUG TRAFFICKING"

Honduras' descent into narco-state status began after the 2009 coup. [The military ousted President Zelaya on June 28, 2009](#), about six months before his four-year term was scheduled to end. It was also the day the country was scheduled to vote in a referendum to decide whether to hold an additional vote in November that year on constitutional changes.

Zelaya was a member of the Liberal Party, one of two center-right parties that have dominated Honduras for decades. During Zelaya's presidency, though, he turned leftward, allying himself with left-wing governments holding power in countries like Uruguay, Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela.

Opponents suspected Zelaya would use constitutional reforms to give himself a chance at a second term, though Honduras' constitution bans reelection. He never got the chance. The military surrounded the presidential palace that morning, disarmed Zelaya's guards and bundled him off to Costa Rica in his pajamas.

2009 POST-COUP "ELECTIONS"

Protests followed, even after that November's regularly scheduled presidential election. National Party candidate [Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo won, aided, it turns out, by campaign financing from drug traffickers](#). Police cracked down heavily on protesters in a conflict that, on the surface, was about political rights and power.

Below the surface, [Lobo's son was putting his father's new power to work for big-time cocaine traffickers](#). Even before Lobo won the presidency, his son Fabio Lobo began using his father's political network to protect drug traffickers, U.S. prosecutors showed in a 2017 trial against the son.

Traffickers from the notorious Los Cachiros organization paid the president at least \$500,000 in bribes, prosecutors showed at trial, and the son spent much of his father's presidency as a go-between who offered state protection to traffickers for money.

After pleading guilty to conspiracy to import cocaine, Fabio Lobo was sentenced in September 2017 to 24 years in U.S. prison.

The next sentencing of a Honduran president's relative is Nov. 10, when the current president's brother, Tony Hernandez, learns his fate.

Tony Hernandez, himself a one-time deputy congressman in Honduras, also helped consolidate cocaine trafficking to benefit the National Party, witnesses testified at trial.

The president's brother helped funnel millions of dollars in cocaine bribes to the party for campaigns, including [\\$1 million from Mexican trafficker Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman for his brother's 2013 presidential campaign](#), testified [Amilcar Alexander Ardón, one-time mayor of the town of El Paraiso](#).

President Hernandez has denied the allegations against him.

However, Hernandez has acknowledged another form of corrupt campaign aid. During the Lobo presidency, insiders siphoned an estimated \$330 million out of the country's social security

system, which provides health-care and other services, about [\\$90 million going to National Party campaigns, such as Hernandez’s first bid for the presidency, InsightCrime.org reported.](#)

The Tony Hernandez trial brought the contradiction in U.S. approaches to Honduras into stark contrast, [as the New York Times pointed out in its trial coverage.](#)

On Oct. 16, 2019, as federal prosecutors in New York described “state-sponsored drug trafficking” taking place in Honduras, [President Trump tweeted the news that Honduras, El Salvador and other countries had signed “safe third-country” asylum agreements.](#) The agreements allow the United States to send Honduran asylum seekers who arrive at the U.S. border to a “safe third country,” such as Guatemala, instead.

“The United States has protected corrupt politicians, the United States has protected drug traffickers,” said Bartolo Fuentes, a one-time member of Congress and migrant-rights activist who lives in El Progreso, Honduras. “They know (President Hernandez) is a criminal, but he is servile. Whatever they ask, he does.”

In fact, starting in 2014, Hernandez began the unprecedented extradition of dozens of accused traffickers and other criminals to the United States. Hernandez says traffickers have lied about his involvement in the cocaine trade in retaliation for these extraditions. If not, [these extraditions could be his own undoing.](#)

CRACKDOWN FOLLOWS DUBIOUS ELECTION

The possibility that Zelaya might have sought a second term as president helped prompt the military coup in 2009. But by the time Hernandez reached the end of his first term, in 2017, a supreme court packed with his allies had decided reelection was all right after all, although the Honduran Constitution prohibits it. So Hernandez ran.

On election night in November 2017, challenger Salvador Nasralla, who led an opposition alliance on the left, had a significant lead with most of the vote counted. Then counting was suspended for more than a day. [When it resumed, the incumbent Hernandez took a lead.](#)

Election monitors suspected fraud, but on Dec. 22, 2017, the Trump administration embraced Hernandez as the winner. Angry protesters took to the streets in demonstrations that the police cracked down on viciously. At least 30 people died.

Among the demonstration leaders in Choloma was Roberto Tábor, the man now waiting with his family in Nogales, Sonora. “They were imposing a president on us by force,” said Tábor, who supported Nasralla.

“Because I had a way of expressing myself, I was always getting the microphone, and I had a lot to say, and the people would get excited due to the violations,” Tábor said. “We always demonstrated peacefully, but the police always arrived and shot tear gas. A few times, they weren’t shooting gases anymore — they were firing live bullets.”

As the crackdown continued, Tabora and his wife, Lourdes Delcid, got worried. [The Honduran Congress had passed a law in September 2017, just before the election, labeling as “terrorism”](#) any gathering of two or more people leading to “grave subversion of the constitutional order, grave disturbance of the public peace, or provoking a state of terror in the public or any part of it.”

Essentially, protesting could lead to 20 years in prison. “I was really scared because I didn’t know if they had photos, or my name or things like that, and we started working on a way to get out of the country,” Tabora said.

In late 2018, the family left Choloma and took shelter in his wife’s hometown in a neighboring province. They planned to leave, but every time they wanted to depart Honduras, there was either a demonstration on the highway they planned to take or groups would be gathering to migrate north, which drew police. And they didn’t go.

“My fear was they would grab me and suddenly have my name. My name would show up, and they’d detain me and throw me in prison. They throw you in prison, and later they kill you in prison and say that the prisoners killed you,” Tabora said.

U.S. CERTIFIES HERNANDEZ

When [James Nealon arrived in Tegucigalpa as ambassador in August 2014](#), thousands of [Honduran children had been crossing Mexico, arriving at the U.S. border](#), many turning themselves in to Border Patrol agents and requesting asylum.

Nealon’s instructions were clear, he said in an interview last week: “Get down there and do something about this wave of irregular migration on the southwest border.” This was under President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry.

“In a place like Honduras, there’s nothing but need,” Nealon said. “Poverty is overwhelming. Corruption is overwhelming. The lack of governance is palpable. The police were part of the problem, not the solution. If you called the police, you were more likely to be shaken down by them than have them solve your issue.

“Our job was to assist the Hondurans in reducing violence, in creating economic opportunities and in reforming historically weak institutions so that people would see their futures at home and not in the United States.”

The embassy got to work pursuing initiatives in those three areas, he said, and helped Honduras knock down the out-of-control murder rate from 86 per 100,000 to the 40s, while purging thousands of unsavory police officers.

Nobody told Nealon that when he was working with Hernandez he was working with a possible drug trafficker, he told me. U.S. officials shared that information only on a need-to-know basis,

he said. But he always operated on the assumption that anyone who achieves power in Honduras has risen through a corrupt system and may be compromised.

Even with this skepticism, U.S. officials dealing with Honduras have often been gullible or misguided, experts said.

Tucsonan Peter Quilter, who ran against Ann Kirkpatrick for the Democratic nomination for Congress this year, previously worked as a lead staffer on Western Hemisphere affairs for the U.S. House Democrats and later worked for the Organization of American States.

“The first administration that effectively validated Hernandez was Obama, with (Hillary) Clinton in the State Department,” Quilter said. “We all knew this guy was a thug. We just decided that this is way too much work to try and get this right.”

The United States poured money into Honduras, especially its security apparatus, only to see Hernandez crack down brutally on his political enemies, Quilter said.

The U.S. Congress has tried to force the State Department to take human rights and corruption more seriously by making the department certify that Honduras and other countries are upholding human rights before a portion of U.S. aid is released.

This year the U.S. certification of Honduras was in some doubt. Since 2016, [an international investigative body called the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras](#) had been operating in the country, supported by the Organization of American States.

MACCIH, as it was known, built some splashy cases, winning a conviction for fraud against President Lobo’s wife, Rosa Elena Bonilla. But it probably was getting too close to powerful interests.

In December, Honduras’ Congress voted to recommend the mission be closed, with several members who were targets of investigations voting against the mission. [Hernandez let its mandate expire Jan. 19.](#)

Just five months later, [the United States certified Honduras to receive an additional \\$36.5 million in aid anyway.](#)

“When the Hondurans kicked out the MACCIH, that spoke volumes about that government’s intentions,” Rieser said. “Sen. Leahy is a former prosecutor and he knows that if you were really serious about stopping corruption and impunity, that’s the last thing you would do.”

People like Táborá saw their hope for change in Honduras slipping away after Hernandez took power again in January 2018 for a second term.

HOPE FADES, PEOPLE FLEE

Karen Spring, a human-rights activist from Canada who has lived in Honduras for more than a decade, described the surge in migration from Honduras that took place in 2018 and 2019 as an expression of hopelessness.

“Hondurans saw the 2017 elections and the fraud as being their last defeat,” said Spring, [whose Honduran husband spent 18 months in prison after years of activism against the post-coup governments](#). “They felt like the only option they had was to vote with their feet and leave the country.”

Tábora and his family saw the caravans forming in early 2018 and found them tempting. “I went to the station and wanted to leave, but I didn’t have the money, and my family was too big to put at risk,” he said.

He viewed the caravans in part as a protest. As one commentator put it, Tábora said, “If the United States is supporting this corrupt presidency that the Hondurans don’t want, then they are going to be responsible for us invading them with a caravan.”

In that sense, he said, the Trump administration itself was the “mastermind” of the caravans that Trump railed against.

His family made its own way, departing June 18, 2019. There were 10 of them: Tábora, his wife, their five children, his wife’s niece and her two children.

They walked four days to the Guatemalan border. Crossing it, an unexpected feeling came over the group.

“We felt, like, a tranquility,” Tábora said. “That felt ugly — to feel peaceful leaving our own country.”

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Special project: Immigration Manipulation

This is the fourth column in a project by Arizona Daily Star opinion columnist Tim Steller about how government actors in the U.S. and other countries try to mold public opinion about immigration and the U.S.-Mexico border. It is funded by a fellowship from the Society of Professional Journalists Foundation. The Star will publish the columns periodically this year. The previous installments — “Mexico does little as thousands flee violence for US border,” “Border hysteria misrepresents, hurts border towns,” and “Border wall, touted as health protection, was useless as COVID-19 surged in region” — are posted with this article on Tucson.com.

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More information

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