Honduras

Political upheaval in Honduras in 2009, which culminated with the military's removal of the democratically elected Honduran President Manuel Zelaya in June, led to widespread human rights abuses by security forces during the demonstrations that followed the coup. The de facto government led by Roberto Micheletti sought to consolidate control of the country through repressive measures.

Facing international pressure to step down, the de facto government responded by continuing to abuse protestors and issuing decrees suspending basic liberties. It also applied the law selectively in what looked like a campaign to persecute opponents, doing serious damage to human rights and the rule of law. In addition, the government turned a blind eye to other human rights problems, including the ongoing abuse of transgender people by police forces.

Excessive Force and Arbitrary Detentions

Following the military coup the de facto government imposed an immediate curfew and issued a decree suspending key civil liberties, including freedoms of the press and assembly. It also gave the military broad authority to quell protests. In the ensuing days the military occupied opposition media outlets, temporarily shutting down their transmissions, as well as government institutions and government-run companies such as the telecommunications company, Hondutel.

Protests soon followed. The vast majority of demonstrations were peaceful, and there were no reports of protestors carrying or using lethal weapons, although there were scattered reports of protestors throwing rocks and other debris at security forces, and several businesses were looted. Police and military personnel responded with excessive force in cases where marchers posed little or no threat to others.

The excessive use of force resulted in at least four deaths. Isis Obed Murillo Mencías died after being shot in the head while participating in a demonstration outside Tegucigalpa's Toncontín Airport on July 5. The body of Pedro Magiel Muñoz, which bore signs of torture, was found on July 25 in the department of El Paraíso. Witnesses told the Inter-
American Commission on Human Rights that Muñoz had participated in a rally in front of military roadblocks that day and had been arrested by the military. Roger Vallejos Soriano, a teacher, was shot in the head during a protest in Comayagüela on July 30. Pedro Pablo Hernández was shot in the head by a soldier at a military roadblock in the valley of Jamastran on August 2, according to testimony collected by the Commission. Local rights advocates identified several more homicides that they believe may have also been the result of excessive force by Honduran security forces.

Security forces also repeatedly used wooden batons, metal tubes, and chains to beat protestors who had been taken into custody or subdued. There were numerous reports from local human rights organizations of continued physical and verbal abuse in police posts and detention centers. According to human rights organizations who visited the detention centers, police posts, and jails, the security forces did not always register detainees or accuse them of any criminal activity.

While many detained protesters were charged with destruction of public property and theft, prosecutors also filed charges against approximately 70 persons for “sedition.” In one case, the judge sought to keep the accused, a teacher and sister of a prominent Zelaya supporter, in jail, even while the judge released a man accused of the same crime on the same day in the same place. The accused woman was later released on bond, but the “sedition” charges remained.

**Obstruction of Human Rights Investigations**

Following the coup, the small human rights unit in the Attorney General’s Office began investigations into some killings, illegal and arbitrary detentions, and cases of alleged excessive use of force by security officials. The unit also filed a motion objecting to the decree limiting freedoms of the press and assembly, which the de facto government had used to bar two media outlets from broadcasting. But the unit met with resistance from their superiors in the Attorney General’s Office, delays by the Supreme Court in ruling on motions, and acts of obstruction, including direct threats from members of the armed forces.

During one investigation an army officer threatened one member of the unit, telling him, “I wish I were in the Cold War, the days of Pinochet, the days when you could just disappear [someone].” The prosecutor interpreted this as a direct threat. Two other members of the unit were barred from entering an army battalion to work on a case. The attorney general also began a new practice of vetting the unit’s motions before the Supreme Court.
Media Freedom

On September 27, six days after Zelaya secretly returned to Honduras and sought refuge in the Brazilian embassy, de facto President Micheletti publicly declared that two opposition media outlets, Canal 36 television and Radio Globo, would face charges of “media terrorism.” In the early morning of September 28 the military took control of both stations, as well as a radio affiliate owned by Canal 36. Soldiers also confiscated the media outlets’ equipment. The government’s communications’ commission, CONATEL, justified these government interventions by saying that both stations were inciting violence and injurious acts by calling on Zelaya supporters to protest the coup.

On October 5, on the verge of a visit from the Organization of American States to facilitate dialogue between the sides, the de facto government announced it would withdraw the decree suspending constitutional freedoms, including freedom of the press. But it did not publish an official withdrawal of the decree, and the media that had been shut down on September 28 remained closed. On the same day, the government announced a second decree further limiting freedom of the press. On October 19, Radio Globo and Canal 36 returned to the air hours after the government officially published its decision to rescind the first decree.

However, the second decree specifically limiting the press was not revoked, and the threat of closure continued to hang over the media. Journalists working for mainstream publications in Honduras told Human Rights Watch that they were engaging in self-censorship due to fear they would lose their programs or jobs, or be otherwise harassed. A number of journalists and photographers reported suffering injuries or attacks while covering protests.

Violence against Transgender Persons

In May 2009 Human Rights Watch issued a report detailing a surge in rape, beatings, extortion, and arbitrary detention of transgender persons in Honduras by law enforcement officials. At least 17 travestis (as many transgender people are called) were killed in public places in Honduras between 2004 and early 2009, including leading transgender rights activist Cynthia Nicole on January 9, 2009. None of these killings were subject to an effective investigation which would have resulted in prosecution or conviction of the perpetrators.

The situation only worsened after the coup with non-governmental organizations in Honduras reporting that six transgender people were killed between July and mid-November. They also reported having discovered a clandestine prison used by municipal police to “disappear” individuals, detainees and transgender persons among them, were held,
beaten, and released without any official record of them ever having been arrested or detained.

**Key International Actors**

The United States government exerts the most influence on the key political, military, and economic actors in Honduras. The US is Honduras' principal trading partner. The US military has a long-established relationship with the Honduran armed forces, part of which includes use of the Soto Cano air force base where the US has 500 troops stationed.

Following the overthrow of Zelaya, the US condemned the coup and called for Zelaya to be restored to power. However, the US waited several weeks before imposing key sanctions (including freezing the visas of military, economic, and political actors) to pressure the de facto government to restore Zelaya to office. At this writing, US efforts to broker a resolution to the political crisis appeared to have stalled.

The Organization of American States (OAS) also denounced the coup and sanctioned the de facto government by suspending its OAS membership. It also sought unsuccessfully to broker a resolution to the political crisis. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the OAS was critically important during this crisis. It sent a fact-finding delegation that shed light on human rights abuses—including deaths, mass detentions, and excessive force by security forces in Honduras—following the coup.

The United Nations also increased its attention to the country. On October 1 the UN Security Council authorized the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to produce a report on human rights abuses since the coup.