The period since the June 2009 coup has featured few improvements in rule of law. Human rights activists, journalists, union leaders, and members of the anticoup movement continued to be targeted in attacks, kidnappings, and assassinations in 2010. President Porfirio Lobo took office in January, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission established to investigate events surrounding the coup started operating in May. However, the commission’s mandate was limited, and the national government generally ignored politically motivated violence during the year, creating an environment of impunity for human rights violations.

The Republic of Honduras was established in 1839, some 18 years after independence from Spain. The country endured decades of military rule and intermittent elected governments, with the last military regime giving way to civilian authorities in 1982. However, the military remained powerful in the subsequent decades; the first president to exercise his constitutional authority to veto the military and choose its leaders did so in 1999.

Under civilian rule, power has alternated between the Liberal Party (PL) and the National Party (PN). In the 2005 elections, José Manuel Zelaya of the PL defeated the PN’s Porfirio Lobo in the presidential poll. In concurrent parliamentary elections, the PL won 62 seats, the PN took 55, and three minor parties captured the remainder. The run-up to the balloting had been marred by political violence that left several PL supporters injured and at least two dead.

Under Zelaya’s administration, political polarization increased in an environment characterized by poor policy performance and faltering public institutions. The president deepened the country’s political divisions, including within his own party, and pitted factions of the political and business elite against one another through increasingly populist posturing. In 2008, he brought Honduras into two Venezuelan-led regional trade initiatives, drawing objections from business organizations, the opposition, and elements within his own government.

Zelaya announced in March 2009 that he would push forward with a highly controversial overhaul of Honduras’s constitution, including the elimination of presidential term limits. His opponents interpreted the proposal as a power grab, although the constitutional reform process would have begun only after the end of his nonrenewable four-year term in 2010. Zelaya’s plan to hold a nonbinding referendum in June to gauge support for the overhaul sparked a political crisis. In May, the president of Congress, Roberto Micheletti of the PL, declared that the proposed reforms were prohibited by the constitution and the June balloting would be illegal. The military, siding with Micheletti, announced that it would not participate in the mobilization of ballots, as is customary during Honduran elections. In response, Zelaya dismissed army commander Romeo Vásquez on June 24. The following day, the Supreme Court ordered Vásquez’s reinstatement, claiming that his removal was unwarranted. Zelaya refused, and led a group of supporters to collect ballots for the referendum, vowing to follow through with the vote as scheduled.

On June 28, the day of the intended poll, armed soldiers abducted Zelaya from the presidential palace and forcibly deported him to Costa Rica. Congress accepted a forged letter of resignation later that day and named Micheletti the acting president. While Micheletti argued that Zelaya’s removal was allowed by the constitution, the international community condemned the coup and continued to recognize Zelaya as the legitimate president. Both the UN General Assembly and the Organization of American States demanded Zelaya’s reinstatement.
The de facto government curtailed civil and political liberties in the months following the coup, particularly in September after Micheletti issued an executive decree suspending civil liberties for 45 days. Police were granted new powers of detention, all public meetings were banned, and the security forces were effectively permitted to act without regard for human rights or the rule of law. Nationwide curfews were imposed at times, and public demonstrations supporting Zelaya's reinstatement were violently suppressed, which reportedly resulted in the death of several protesters. Media outlets and journalists faced harassment, threats, power outages, and blocked transmissions; authorities also temporarily closed radio and television stations. Civil society organizations and human rights defenders similarly encountered harassment, including increased surveillance, threats, and physical assaults. Micheletti reversed his decree under international pressure on October 5, though many of the abuses continued.

Zelaya reentered the country on September 21, but took refuge in the Brazilian embassy, where he remained through the end of 2009 under threat of arrest by the de facto government. The international community fostered lengthy negotiations aimed at reinstating Zelaya and allowing him to serve out his legal term; many countries warned that they would not recognize the national elections scheduled for November if the coup leaders refused to comply. Nevertheless, the talks repeatedly broke down, and the de facto authorities pressed ahead with the elections. Lobo won the presidency with 56 percent of the vote, defeating Zelaya's vice president, Elvin Santos Lozano of the PL. The PN captured 71 seats in Congress, followed by the PL with 45, and three smaller parties with the remainder. Despite Zelaya's call for a boycott, turnout was reportedly not much lower than in previous elections.

Lobo was inaugurated in January 2010, and Zelaya went into exile in the Dominican Republic the same month. However, the new government made little progress toward restoring the rule of law in Honduras. After a visit to Honduras in May, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) voiced concern over the high rates of violent crime and continued human rights violations—including the harassment and killing of journalists and human rights activists—in the aftermath of the 2009 coup. As of May, the IACHR reported that only 12 people had been charged with human rights violations related to the coup. The four lower-court judges who challenged the legality of the coup in 2009 were dismissed from their posts in May 2010. The judges subsequently appealed to the Inter-American Court on Human Rights to review their cases. Also in May, a Truth and Reconciliation Commission charged with leading an impartial investigation into events surrounding the coup began operating, though it received little institutional support and was considered ineffective because of its limited mandate and difficulties in accessing the key players involved in the coup.

Honduras's political crisis, combined with the global economic downturn, has severely inhibited economic activity, isolated the country from major trading partners, and exacerbated existing poverty.

**Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

Honduras is not an electoral democracy. Elected president José Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed by the military in a June 2009 coup, and although his term ran through January 2010, he was never reinstated. Roberto Micheletti, the president of Congress, was named the interim leader, and his de facto government oversaw previously scheduled general elections in November 2009. The elections were generally considered to have met international standards, but they took place in a climate of severely compromised civil liberties and press freedoms.

The president is elected by popular vote for a single four-year term. Members of the 128-seat, unicameral National Congress are also elected for four-year terms. The proportion of the votes received by a party's presidential candidate determines its representation in the National Congress. The PL was the ruling party at the time of the coup, with the PN in opposition and three smaller parties also holding seats. The PL then fractured between Zelaya supporters and opponents, and the PN won a majority in the November elections. The military has long exerted considerable influence on civilian governments.

Official corruption continues to dominate the political scene. Army officers have been found guilty of involvement in drug trafficking and related criminal conflicts. A 2006 transparency law was marred by claims that it contained amendments designed to protect corrupt politicians. However, the Institute for Access to Public Information has made efforts to enforce transparency rules and punish entities that fail to respond properly to information requests. Honduras was ranked 134 out
of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International’s 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Since the 2009 coup, authorities have systematically violated the constitution’s press freedom guarantees. The de facto government regularly restricted press coverage, temporarily shutting down the operations of Radio Globo, Radio Catracha, and television’s Channel 36 in September and October 2009. José Arnulfo Jiménez, one of the officials responsible for the closures, was released from prison in August 2010, suggesting that the new government would not address press freedom violations. Numerous radio and television stations reported continued harassment in 2010, including police surveillance and assault, threats, blocked transmissions, and power outages. In April, a criminal complaint was lodged against the new community radio station La Voz de Zacate Grande for allegedly building on land belonging to a powerful landowner, Miguel Facussé, and for operating without registration. In June, several hundred police and army officers tried to force the closure of the station, which remained a target of violence and intimidation throughout the year. In August, two Radio Globo journalists were attacked by police while covering a demonstration in Tegucigalpa. Radio Uno, based in San Pedro Sula, suffered from regular violence and intimidation, including tear-gas attacks by army and police forces in September.

Honduras is considered one of the most dangerous countries for journalists, with nine murders reported in 2010. The majority appeared to have been contract killings. The national government’s reaction has been inadequate, alternating between remaining silent and dismissing the cases as routine street crime.

Media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful business interests, and many journalists practice self-censorship, particularly given the deterioration in conditions for the media since the coup. Lack of access to public officials and information is also a significant obstacle for reporters. Payments to journalists and manipulation of state advertising are reportedly used to secure favorable coverage or silence criticism. Internet use is generally unrestricted, but access was impaired following the coup by multiple politically motivated power outages and cuts in telephone service.

Freedom of religion is generally respected, though religious gatherings were included in the de facto government’s temporary restrictions on freedom of assembly in the fall of 2009. Academic freedom is also usually honored, but scholars have faced pressure to support the privatization of the national university, and academic critics of the coup were subject to harassment in 2009.

Constitutional guarantees on the freedoms of assembly and association have not been consistently upheld. In 2009, public meetings were temporarily banned, and security forces’ violent suppression of peaceful demonstrations led to more than a dozen civilian deaths. Police were accused of using excessive force during confrontations with striking teachers in August 2010.

The 2006 Citizen Participation Law protects the role of civil society groups and individuals in the democratic process. However, human rights defenders and political activists faced significant threats following the coup, including harassment, surveillance, and detentions, as well as the murder of a number of coup opponents. In 2010, persecution of members of the anticoup movement escalated, leading to assassinations and kidnappings of activists and their families. Labor unions are well organized and can strike, but labor actions often result in clashes with security forces. Labor, gay and transgender rights, land rights, environmental, and Afro-Honduran activists are regularly victims of threats and repression.

The judicial system is weak and inefficient. The vast majority of inmates are awaiting trial, prison conditions are harsh, and the facilities are notoriously overcrowded. There is an official human rights ombudsman, but critics claim that the office’s work is politicized. The ombudsman not only supported and justified the coup, but has also publicly declared his opposition to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In a positive development for the rule of law, a police officer was sentenced to 10 to 13 years in prison in September 2010 for his role in an attack on a transgender woman in 2008. The case had featured serious intimidation of those involved in the prosecution, including the abduction and nonfatal shooting of the victim in March 2010.

Honduras had one of the highest murder rates in the world in 2010, with a total of 6,236 homicides. In October, Human Rights Commissioner Ramón Custodio reported a homicide rate of 72.8 murders per 100,000 inhabitants. Most homicides are attributed to youth gangs, including transnational groups like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street, or to Mexican drug-trafficking syndicates active in Honduras. The violence has been exacerbated by the presence of an estimated 800,000 firearms in private hands, only 21 percent of which are registered. The government has made...
membership in a gang punishable by up to 12 years in prison and uses the military to help maintain order. However, police officers and other vigilantes have committed extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests, and illegal searches. Hundreds of juveniles have reportedly been killed in “social cleansing” campaigns.

Indigenous and Afro-Honduran residents have faced various abuses by property developers and their allies in recent years, including corrupt titling processes and acts of violence.

Women remain vulnerable to exploitation by employers, particularly in the low-wage maquiladora (assembly plant) export sector. Child labor is a problem in rural areas and in the informal economy. The nongovernmental organization Casa Alianza has estimated that as many as 10,000 children are working as prostitutes. According to UNESCO, 29 percent of Honduran children drop out of school before the fifth grade, and youths head about 10 percent of households. The overall population is dominated by young people: 38 percent are under 15, and 30 percent are aged 15 to 24. The U.S. State Department’s 2010 Trafficking in Persons Report found that while Honduras does not fully comply with minimum international standards to combat trafficking, the government is making efforts to do so. The report also found that criminal gangs’ use of forced child labor is a serious concern.

*Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom. Click here for a full explanation of Freedom in the World methodology.*