



Freedom in the World - Honduras (2010)

Capital:
Tegucigalpa

Population:
7,466,000

Political Rights Score: 4 *

Civil Liberties Score: 4 *

Status: Partly Free

Ratings Change

Honduras's political rights and civil liberties ratings declined from 3 to 4 due to the forced exile of President Manuel Zelaya and subsequent restrictions on citizens' civil liberties.

Overview

Democratically elected president Manuel Zelaya was deposed and forced into exile in a June 2009 coup that was widely condemned by the international community. The resulting de facto regime, led by Congress president Roberto Micheletti, oversaw the systematic violation of civil liberties by security forces, including the freedoms of assembly and the press. Zelaya managed to return to the country in September, but he was confined to the Brazilian embassy, and the de facto authorities refused to reinstate him as they pressed forward with the previously scheduled national elections in November. Porfirio Lobo Sosa of the National Party won the presidential vote and was due to take office in early 2010.

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, Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales of the PL defeated the PN's Porfirio Lobo Sosa to win the presidency. The PL also took control of Congress, winning 62 of the 128 seats. The PN was left with 55 seats, and three minor parties split 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, Petrocaribe and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), drawing objections from business organizations, the opposition, and elements of 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, and 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 Vasquez on June 24, in addition to accepting the resignation of Defense Minister Angel Edmundo Orellana. The following day, the Supreme Court ordered General Vasquez's reinstatement on the grounds that there was no reason for his removal. 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 of Honduras. 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 after the coup. It imposed nationwide curfews that sometimes lasted up to 72 hours, often with little notice, and violently suppressed public demonstrations of support for Zelaya's reinstatement, reportedly resulting in the deaths of several protesters. Many media outlets and journalists reported harassment and threats, in addition to frequent power outages and blocked transmissions. The authorities temporarily shut down two radio stations and a television station in September, raiding their offices and confiscating equipment. Civil society organizations and human rights defenders also faced harassment, reporting increased surveillance, threats, and physical assaults. Many of these abuses were carried out under an executive decree issued by Micheletti in late September. It suspended civil liberties for 45 days, granting the police new powers of detention, banning all public meetings, and effectively licensing the security forces to act without regard for human rights or the rule of law. Micheletti reversed the decree under international pressure on

October 5.

Zelaya succeeded in reentering the country on September 21, but took refuge in the Brazilian embassy, where he remained through the end of the year 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 upcoming national elections, long 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. Porfirio Lobo Sosa of the PN, Zelaya's opponent in 2005, won the presidency with 56 percent of the ballots, 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. While Zelaya had called for a boycott and turnout was reportedly below 50 percent, it was apparently not much lower than in previous elections. Lobo's inauguration was set for January 2010.

Honduras's 2009 political crisis severely inhibited economic activity, isolated the country from major trading partners, and combined with the global economic downturn to exacerbate existing poverty. In September 2009, the Central Bank announced that remittances from Hondurans working abroad dropped by 13.1 percent during the first eight months of the year, due to recession in the United States.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Honduras is not an electoral democracy. Elected president Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed by the military in a June 2009 coup, and although his term ran through January 2010, he had not been reinstated by year's end. Roberto Micheletti, the president of Congress, was named the interim leader, and his de facto government oversaw previously scheduled general elections on November 29. Amid a climate of severely compromised civil liberties and press freedoms, November's elections were generally considered to have met international standards and resulted in a win for conservative candidate Porfirio Lobo.

The president and the 128-member, unicameral National Congress are elected for four-year terms; the president is limited to one term. The proportion of the votes received by a party's presidential candidate determines its representation in 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 cast a shadow over the political scene. Army officers have been found guilty of involvement in drug trafficking and related cartel conflicts. A 2006 transparency law was marred by claims that it contained

amendments designed to protect corrupt politicians. In 2007, three commissioners were appointed to the regulatory Access to Public Information Institute in a reportedly politicized manner. Long-standing civil society complaints of corruption among the political and business elite led to the creation in May 2008 of the Comprehensive Movement for Dignity and Justice (MADJ), an umbrella group that included social and religious organizations, trade unions, and prosecutors. In April 2008, 25 prosecutors staged a 38-day hunger strike to protest the unwillingness of the attorney general's office to investigate alleged acts of corruption. The group also objected to a new law creating a criminal investigative unit within the office of the attorney general, arguing that it would concentrate power in the hands of corrupt officials. Honduras was ranked 130 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

The authorities systematically violated the constitution's press freedom guarantees in 2009. The de facto government regularly restricted press coverage, shutting down the operations of Radio Globo, Radio Catracha, and television's Channel 36 for a period in September and October. Numerous radio and television stations reported harassment that included police surveillance, police assault, threats, blocked transmissions, and power outages. Three journalists were murdered during the year, in each case by unidentified gunmen. Two of the killings occurred well before the coup, and none appeared to be directly related to the political situation. Authorities linked at least one of the murders, that of Rafael Munguia Ortiz of Radio Cadena Voces in March 2009, to the victim's reporting on organized crime. Separately, in July police beat and temporarily detained a journalist with the state-owned Radio Nacional de Honduras.

Media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few powerful business interests, and although the Supreme Court struck down restrictive defamation laws in 2005, many journalists practice self-censorship. Lack of access to public officials and information is a significant obstacle for reporters. Payments to journalists and manipulation of state advertising are reportedly used to secure favorable coverage or silence criticism. There is generally unrestricted access to the internet, but access was impaired following the coup by multiple politically motivated power outages and cuts in telephone service.

Freedom of religion is typically respected, though religious gatherings were included in the de facto government's announcement of restrictions on freedom of assembly in October 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 were not observed in 2009, and in late September an executive decree suspended civil liberties for several days, including a ban on public meetings. The de facto government's October announcement on freedom of assembly required all public meetings and marches to be registered with the police 24 hours in advance.

Security forces have violently suppressed peaceful demonstrations. More than a dozen civilians were killed during or after their participation in anticoup demonstrations in 2009, and more than 1,200 protesters were arrested.

The 2006 Citizen Participation Law protects the role of civil society groups and individuals in the democratic process. 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. In 2008, security officials at the National Autonomous University of Honduras seized a “black list” of 135 public figures from two plainclothes policemen who had been following the president of the student union. The list included indigenous and labor leaders, lawmakers, journalists, and clergy, many of whom were marked for surveillance. Human rights defenders and political activists faced significant threats following the coup in 2009, including harassment, surveillance, and detentions. A number of coup opponents and activists were murdered, including two members of the leftist Democratic Unification Party—a labor leader and a peasants’ rights activist—who were killed on the same day in July, and an indigenous leader killed in October. Some individuals with links to the military or the coup leaders were also killed during the year. The motives and identities of the perpetrators of the various attacks were often unclear.

The judicial system is weak and inefficient, and there are reportedly high levels of politicization. The vast majority of inmates are awaiting trial, prison conditions are harsh, and the facilities are notoriously overcrowded. Two prison riots in 2008 left 27 inmates dead. There is an official human rights ombudsman, but critics claim that the office’s work is politicized. In 2009, Human Rights Watch accused the attorney general’s office of blocking investigations into human rights violations.

While the murder rate has dropped from the 1999 figure of 154 per 100,000 inhabitants, it remains among the highest in the region. Figures for 2009 are unknown, partly due to government censorship of politically-motivated murders. Most homicides are attributed to youth gangs, including transnational groups like Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and 18th Street, or to Mexican drug trafficking cartels that have become active in Honduras. However, the repression and violence associated with the coup resulted in an increase in deadly attacks on members of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP), a social movement against the coup. The violence is exacerbated by the presence of an estimated 600,000 firearms in private hands, only 40 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. The United States suspended nonhumanitarian aid to Honduras in the wake of the 2009 coup, potentially hampering government counternarcotics efforts.

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. In October 2009, the authorities raided a Garifuna-run community hospital in Ciriboya and eliminated physician stipends; the Fraternal Organization of Black Hondurans claimed that the hospital takeover was retaliation for Garifuna opposition to the coup.

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: 41 percent are under 15, and 20 percent are aged 15 to 24. The U.S. State Department's 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report ranked Honduras as a Tier 2 country, finding that while it 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.*