



The Nightmare Libertarian Project to Turn This Central American Country Into Ayn Rand's Paradise

And naturally, the US is pushing the efforts along.

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Since the 2009 coup against President José Manuel Zelaya and subsequent election of Porfirio “Pepe Lobo” Sosa and his favored successor Juan Orlando Hernandez, Honduras has embarked on a devastating neoliberal economic program that has contributed to its status as one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the region. The privatization of Honduran society has been accompanied by a militarization of public security efforts in the country, both of which have been fueled by a network of U.S.-supported policies and programs.

Despite the country's crackdown on crime, violence in Honduras has skyrocketed in recent years. Honduras now has the world's second-highest national murder rate and is home to two of the world's five most violent cities. Unchecked gang activity has contributed to widespread corruption and impunity within police and government institutions.

This weekend, a coalition of leftist opposition parties came together temporarily to defeat a proposed amendment to the Honduran constitution that would have given permanent status to the country's militarized police force, known as the *Policía Militar de Orden Público*, or PMOP.

This “elite” police unit, which serves under the direct command of the presidency, is intended to support President Hernandez's heavy-handed crime reduction efforts. President Hernandez created the PMOP shortly after coming to office in 2014, with support from a legislature dominated by his conservative National Party. The Hernandez administration's police militarization efforts also had the backing of the country's business sector.

According to one study, in 2013, only 27 percent of Hondurans expressed confidence in the civilian police while 73 percent thought the military should be involved in policing efforts. Nevertheless, both the military and the police have a long history of corruption and criminality as well as abuses committed against civilians in Honduras.

The PMOP plan isn't the only initiative with dubious implications for human rights put forth by Hernandez's government. Honduras is also experimenting with *Zonas de Empleo y Desarrollo Económico* (special employment and economic development zones), also known as ZEDEs or “charter cities.”

According to reporting by Danielle Marie Mackey for the New Republic last month, here is how

the project works: "An investor, either international or local, builds infrastructure....The territory in which they invest becomes an autonomous zone from Honduras...The investing company must write the laws that govern the territory, establish the local government, hire a private police force, and even has the right to set the educational system and collect taxes."

An earlier article by Erika Piquero at Latin Correspondent described the law as "allowing the corporations and individuals funding the ZEDEs to dictate the entire structural organization of the zone, including laws, tax structure, healthcare system, education and security forces. This kind of flexibility is unprecedented even in similar models around the world."

George Rodríguez reported for the Tico Times that the plan was previously challenged and ruled unconstitutional in Honduras' supreme court, but Hernandez "twisted arms, had the [dissenting] judges removed, and brought in obedient replacements." Hernandez then re-tooled the bill and pushed it through the congress.

As Mackey reported, "The ZEDE's central government is stacked with libertarian foreigners," including a former speechwriter for presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush Sr., conservative political operative Grover Norquist, a senior member of the Cato Institute think tank, and Ronald Reagan's son Michael, as well as "a Danish banker, a Peruvian economist, and an Austrian general secretary of the Friedrich Hayek Institute."

According to the official ZEDE website, the zones place a heavy emphasis on security, offering "a 21st century, business-efficient, non-politicized, transparent, stable, system of administration, plus a special police and institutional security to overcome regional issues and meet world standards." A new bill introduced by Hernandez minutes after losing the vote this weekend would allow municipalities and ZEDEs to request that the PMOP or other branches of the Armed Forces provide them with security services.

Honduras' continuing militarization of security efforts appears to have the backing of the United States, which has provided more than \$65 million in security aid to Honduras since 2008. President Hernandez has also met frequently with high-level U.S. officials for talks on security and migration issues. As the U.S. ambassador's Twitter account wrote on Friday, "U.S. cooperation with Honduras' fight against narco trafficking and crime is strong and continuing."

However, contrary to commonly held perceptions, most of the violence in Honduras is not caused by large, transnational drug trafficking organizations, but rather by smaller gangs fighting over territory (including street corners, neighborhoods and even prisons) in which to conduct extortion rackets, small-scale smuggling efforts and prostitution operations among other illegal activities.

Privatization and paramilitarization are also concerns in Honduras, with one recent report estimating that there are three times as many private security guards as police in Honduras, up to a third of whom work for unregistered companies, some of whom reportedly employ off-duty police officers looking to supplement often-meager salaries.

While international investors may be seeking to capitalize on Honduras' voluntary surrender of

its national sovereignty to make a "legal" profit, even more nefarious actors are already operating in a completely unregulated, free-market criminal underworld in Honduras—one that has helped turn the country into the world's "murder capital" in recent years.

Even Honduran schools have become scenes of rampant gang activity. In a recent chilling article for the Associated Press, journalist Alberto Arce wrote that gang members "rely on kids to do much of their illegal grunt work, knowing that even if they get caught, they won't face long jail sentences...School administrators say that teachers generally are more afraid of the gangs than the remaining students are, because so many children admire gangsters." Arce also writes that "a 14-year-old can earn \$500 a month in prostitution — more than a police officer's salary."

U.S.-backed policies in Honduras have fed a cycle of crime, violence, exploitation and abuse of vulnerable populations by state and non-state actors alike. According to the research organization Security Assistance Monitor, gang-driven "violence has been one of the primary drivers behind the surge in migration to the United States from Honduras," but ironically, "[t]he U.S. government practice of deporting thousands of Hondurans with criminal records, which began in the 1990s, has only fueled the growth of these gangs."

When these migrants, many of them women and children—along with those from El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and elsewhere—flee to the United States, they are routinely apprehended and "fast-tracked" for deportation. In the case of Honduras, migrants are sometimes sent back to some of the most violent cities in the world. Many women and children fleeing violence in Central America also experience abuses and violations of their legal rights at the hands of U.S. authorities if they are detained after crossing the border.

And the future doesn't appear to hold a change of course. In all likelihood, the new U.S. congress will continue to support efforts to militarize its southern border, as well as Mexico's southern border with Central America, and to "deter" migration through the use of mass detention and deportation. The U.S. government also seems likely to continue supporting the privatization and militarization of Honduran society.

As Maya Kroth wrote in September for Foreign Policy, "[c]ritics worry that evidence to date — the government's opaque approach, the ZEDEs' undemocratic features, the cast of characters backing the scheme, and the vulnerabilities of people likely to be affected by development — indicate that charter cities would be little more than predatory, privatized utopias, with far-reaching, negative implications for Honduran sovereignty and the well-being of poor communities."

The U.S. has coupled its neoliberal economic prescriptions with its drug war security framework in other countries in the Americas, including at home, with disastrous results. While the vote against the PMOP this weekend was an important victory for human rights advocates, from the perspective of many, much work remains to be done. It appears that the precarious situation of Honduras' most vulnerable citizens could get worse before it gets better.