



Embassy Magazine

Why Is Canada Friendly with Repressive Honduran Regime?

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The Parliamentary Subcommittee on International Human Rights' decision to study Honduras was well-founded. The situation there has been called a "human rights emergency" and is widely-recognized as one of the worst in the hemisphere. The hearings have painted a dismal picture of extreme violence against rights activists and political opponents; of widespread impunity and police corruption; of judicial politicization; and of institutional decay.

Why then, is Canada treating the current Honduran government like a friendly partner rather than denouncing its human rights abuses and the lack of rule of law?

Honduras took a turn for the worst in 2009, when a military coup deposed democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya. There were elections after the coup, but they were deeply flawed. Hondurans who opposed the coup were systematically threatened and assassinated, and the main opposition candidate spent much of the campaign recovering from a severe beating by security forces. Although voting is mandatory in Honduras, close to half of the population boycotted the election, as did major international observers. The election of Porfirio Lobo Sosa, Honduras' current president, was therefore widely regarded as an extension of the post-coup regime.

Since then, human rights abuses in Honduras have spiraled. In the words of Teresa Lopez, a Honduran community organizer who visited Canada last month: "We all know, theoretically, that a coup will impact the economic and human rights situation of a country, but I never imagined it would be this bad."

Honduras now has the highest murder rate in the world – one similar to a nation at war. There have been 206 politically motivated assassinations in the past three years, and the country is considered the most dangerous in the world for journalists. Most crimes are met with impunity by an inadequate justice system and a largely corrupt police force – one that has deep ties to organized crime and has been accused of running death squads.

Last month, the Attorney General of Honduras was suspended for failing to prosecute homicide cases: Only 20 percent of the past four year's cases have even been investigated. These



incredible levels of impunity leave Hondurans, especially those who challenge the status quo, vulnerable to the escalating levels of violence.

In December 2012, the Honduran Congress illegally deposed four members of the Supreme Court, swearing in new justices within hours. Congress then quickly proceeded to review a series of laws that had been overruled by the court.

Canada boosting ties

Instead of denouncing the human rights situation and the Honduran government's blatant disregard for the rule of law, Canada is rapidly expanding its presence in, and relationship with, Honduras. Canada's official human rights and good governance rhetoric seems to be subordinated, in practice, to business interests.

In January 2013, the Honduran Congress passed a new mining law. This law, developed with support from CIDA, creates a more favorable environment for large-scale mining, an industry in which Canada is a global leader. Many sectors of Honduran society rejected the new law and there is significant community opposition to large-scale mining.

Canadian investors have also backed Honduras' plan to build "Model Cities", even though they were ruled unconstitutional by Honduras' Supreme Court. The plan would allow private entities to create and enforce their own laws within these cities, ignoring labour, environmental and other protections enshrined in Honduran law. The proposed cities would also violate laws that prevent foreign ownership of land within 40 kilometers of the coast—land currently claimed by indigenous groups. The imposition of these "Model Cities" seems antithetical to democracy and the rule of law, pillars of Canada's policy in the Americas. Tragically, Honduran lawyer Antonio Trejo Cabrera was gunned down shortly after presenting a legal challenge to the "Model Cities" project, in September 2012.

Canada and Honduras recently concluded free trade negotiations, including parallel agreements on labour and environmental cooperation. This deal, which will reportedly be finalized within the next few months, is consistent with our government's recent FTA model which includes human rights and labour protections only in unenforceable side agreements. The FTA will protect and promote Canadian investment but there is no corresponding guarantee that it will protect Honduras' most vulnerable.

Canada's involvement in Honduras demonstrates that while Canada's Americas Strategy promised engagement along three major pillars -- security, prosperity and democratic governance -- the record of action to date has been narrowly focused on the prosperity pillar. In



a country like Honduras, where corruption, violence and impunity are widespread, this prosperity will only benefit a small group.

Canada should signal a more genuine commitment to Honduras and to the hemisphere, engaging deeply on issues such as development, security, corporate accountability, democratic governance, and human rights. This could go a long way towards rebuilding Canada's deteriorating reputation in the region, which is increasingly defined by mining controversies rather than by its traditional leadership in peacebuilding and human rights.

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