



Q&A

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Crackdown Raises Stakes as Honduran Protesters March On

Ten years after a coup, Honduras remains deeply polarised. Mass protests and the government's heavy-handed response have damaged the economy and sparked deadly violence. Crisis Group Northern Triangle Analyst Tiziano Breda explains the origins of the intense public discontent that is roiling the country.

What is happening in Honduras?

Tensions between the administration of President Juan Orlando Hernández and a months-old national protest movement have intensified in recent weeks and crossed the line into violence. On 24 June – four days after Hernández ordered the military to crack down on demonstrations across the country – military police burst onto the campus of the Autonomous University of Honduras in the capital city of Tegucigalpa. They opened fire on students, wounding at least four. Altogether clashes have claimed at least three protesters' lives – and resulted in dozens more injuries (chiefly on the protesters' side).

The tensions initially arose in reaction to a government initiative to restructure the country's health and education systems – both segments of the economy that employ large numbers of public-sector workers. The Hernández administration kicked off the reform initiative by decree early in 2019 but protests began in earnest only after the Honduran Congress enacted implementing legislation in late April. Fearing that reform would result in

privatisation and mass layoffs, trade unions representing doctors, nurses and teachers urged their members into the streets. May saw several national strikes, with protesters blocking major highways in mass mobilisations.

By early June, both the administration and Congress had walked back their formal actions – revoking the relevant decrees and nullifying the legislation – but by then the range of protesters had expanded and the grievances they were protesting had multiplied. It did not help that in early May the government published a new penal code creating new penalties for public criticism of government figures and feeding worries that the government would use the law to suppress free expression and peaceful assembly when it is scheduled to come into effect in November. (The government has since agreed in principle to amend the new code.) The protest movement grew beyond the trade unions that were initially involved and came to include other unions, university students, human rights defenders and land rights activists; even some branches of the police joined the demonstrations. Protesters also came to focus on a new demand: calling for President Hernández's resignation.

Other government efforts at calming the waters have also failed to win over

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the protesters. On 13 June, following failed attempts to engage with a handful of health and education associations, the government sought to launch a national dialogue. But the Platform for the Defence of Health and Education – a Honduran consortium that brings together key representatives from its namesake professions – chose not to take part in the dialogue, imposed a list of nine preconditions for its participation going forward, and convened its own parallel talks on 18 June.

Facing a growing protest movement that shows no signs of abating, and after clashes between protesters and police became more dangerous, Hernández ordered troops deployed on 20 June.

What's the background to the protests?

The protests reflect public discontent with the current government – led by the weak and increasingly isolated President Hernández – and are exacerbated by the growing political polarisation that has enveloped the country since a coup ousted former president Manuel Zelaya (now leader of the left-wing opposition party Libre) ten years ago.

Hernández has served two scandal-ridden terms. In 2015, he faced accusations that his 2013 presidential campaign had benefited from funds illegally siphoned from the Honduran Social Security Institute. In 2017, accusations of fraud marred his election to a second term, and violence marked the aftermath. Post-electoral clashes between police and protesters resulted in 23 deaths and 1,351 arrests amid allegations by the UN that the police used excessive force.

Moreover, last year, U.S. authorities detained Hernández's brother in the U.S. on drug trafficking charges, and prosecutors recently revealed that the Drug Enforcement Administration investigated Hernández himself for the same crimes in 2013. Recent surveys by Cid Gallup show the president's approval rating dropped from 61 to 36 per cent since 2017. Another recent poll found that more than 80 per cent of interviewees said they do not trust the country's main judicial and political institutions.

President Hernández has weathered political turbulence thanks in part to the backing of some powerful allies – including the Catholic Church, the ruling National Party, the private sector, the security forces and the U.S. – but some of those allies are showing signs of frustration. After years of support for Hernández, the Episcopal Conference, which heads the Honduran Catholic Church, issued an unusual statement at the start of June, condemning the Honduran government's response to the protests, criticising the judicial system's lack of independence and lamenting the political elite's estrangement from the Honduran people.

Within the National Party (which has enjoyed a near monopoly on political power since the coup), high-level figures such as the president of the Congress, Mauricio Oliva, have kept their distance from Hernández during the crisis, rarely accompanying him in public appearances. Former President Porfirio Lobo went so far as to leave the party, found a new political movement and suggest that Hernández resign. While business organisations in Tegucigalpa have stayed loyal to the president, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Cortés, a leading private-sector association based in the country's most industrialised region, stated on 2 June that corruption and mismanagement have damaged the Honduran economy more than the protests have.

Anger has bubbled up even among the security forces, whose loyalty has been a pillar of support for the National Party. Since the coup, they have fared well – benefiting from frequent funding increases and doubling in size over ten years. Nevertheless, on 18 June, several hundred members of the police special forces refused to leave their barracks, explaining that they did not wish to “repress the people” and demanding better working conditions. Although the strike ended two days later, the

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action left an impression of weakening support for the administration.

The U.S. has also slightly toned down its political support after years of praising the Hernández government for fighting drug trafficking and organised crime, although its embassy in Tegucigalpa has been quite reluctant to adjust its message. It maintained its supportive tone even after President Trump’s March 2019 announcement that he would cut \$615 million in aid to the Northern Triangle countries, including Honduras, because they were doing too little to curb northward migration. (Washington has since partly restored the aid.) After protesters set its front entrance on fire on 31 May, the embassy released a statement in support of the president. But when clashes with protesters turned deadly, and human rights organisations began denouncing the police for use of excessive force, the embassy shifted its rhetoric to demanding accountability for the deaths and injuries in the streets.

The country’s growing political polarisation is to some extent a reflection of wounds that have not healed from the 2009 coup that drove Manuel Zelaya from office. Hondurans who did not support the coup have from the beginning tended to see in the Hernández government what one civil society leader called “a soft dictatorship”. A UN-backed dialogue among the country’s three main parties last year managed to channel grievances into a debate on electoral reforms. But, despite modest progress, the process has stalled during the current crisis, and inter-party relations – which were not strong to begin with – have dramatically deteriorated. Emboldened by the recent street protests, Libre started staging what it called a “legislative insurrection”. Since May, its deputies have been performing acts such as burning the constitution in Congress (ostensibly to protest its constant infringement by the current government) and throwing firecrackers during votes. They

are demanding that the Hernández government step down.

Where is the crisis headed?

Honduras finds itself in a vicious cycle: the current crisis is partly a response to worsening economic, security and humanitarian conditions, which the unrest could turn still worse. The government is not completely intransigent – it stepped back from some of its most unpopular moves and has shown an openness to dialogue. But it has also been prone to misread the challenges it is facing, branding protests, street blockings and looting as a conspiracy between the opposition and criminal elements to destabilise the country.

Instability is badly hurting the Honduran economy. Juan Carlos Sikaffy, president of the Honduran Council of Private Enterprise, recently estimated that since April the economic damage of national strikes, street closures and mobilisations, compounded by vandalism and looting, has been over \$400 million, or around 1 per cent of the country’s GDP. Already 60 per cent of the population live below the poverty line and only 20 per cent earn the minimum wage, which by itself is nowhere near sufficient to support a household. The unrest could press more Hondurans into economically precarious lives.

Hernández’s has staked much of his claim to public and international support on Honduras’ record of halving the number of homicides over the past eight years, but the statistics remain jarring and have recently taken a turn for the worse. Honduras is still among the most violent countries in the hemisphere, with around 40 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, and impunity rates for these crimes remained at 87.3 per cent in 2017, according to a report by the Alliance for Peace and Justice. Moreover, the police reported 192 more homicides between April and the end of June than over the same period last year, and the Honduran Observatory of Violence reports a 50 per cent increase in mass killings over roughly the same period. With the country beset by protests and many

security personnel focused on containing them, there is a risk that unchecked criminal violence will further intensify.

Political instability, widespread insecurity and impunity, and economic distress, accentuated by climate change-induced droughts – affecting more than 170,000 families living in the country’s Dry Corridor, according to the National Commissioner for Human Rights – push thousands of desperate Hondurans to flee every month. Although the mass exodus started well before the current crisis, the number of departures has leapt since April. Around 300 people leave Honduras every day, and around 175,000, or almost 2 per cent of the total population, have been apprehended at the U.S. southern border since October 2018. Apprehensions have boomed in the past couple of months, numbering more than 36,000 in May alone, compared to fewer than 10,000 in October 2018.

What can be done?

The immediate goal for all parties should be de-escalation. To help set that in motion, the government should make another effort to enter into substantive dialogue with the Platform for the Defence of Health and Education. To avoid the cold shoulder it received when it last made this offer, it should make clear that it is prepared to make concessions on issues of core concern to the Platform, including exploring whether there are more resources in the national budget to invest in health and education infrastructure. It should also commit to reining in security forces’ heavy-handed response to protests and to promoting accountability for human rights violations that they may have perpetrated during the crackdown.

While this dialogue cannot address the full range of frustrations that have surfaced during the recent wave of protests, it would be at least a beginning, and could offer a reason for both sides to step back from the increasingly dangerous escalatory cycle that has developed.

On the political front, opposition parties, particularly Libre, should temper their demands that Hernández resign. His immediate exit would merely lead to early polls under the same flawed electoral system the opposition says produced a fraudulent result in 2017. The opposition’s focus should shift to ensuring the implementation of critical electoral reforms. These include the digitisation of the national registry of persons, which would help mitigate voting irregularities, and the creation of a national electoral council to oversee elections and an electoral justice court to settle disputes. Congress passed a package of constitutional changes to enable the creation of these institutions in January 2019, but they require implementing legislation to become a reality.

Finally, foreign partners, particularly the U.S., should make clear that political support for the Hernández government is conditional on the latter taking steps toward dialogue with the opposition and advancing the fight against corruption and impunity. In this connection, Washington should press Honduras to commit to renewing the four-year mandate of the Organization of American States-backed Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras.

While none of these steps will in itself be sufficient to reverse the polarisation that has pulled Honduras apart, they might help stop the situation from worsening in a country that can ill afford further strain.