

Far from the MDGs but near a strong people's movement



In the wake of the 2009 coup d'état the country is in serious regression in all aspects but mainly as regards human rights, which are being violated with impunity. A people's movement quickly came together to resist the oppression and a National Front against the Coup was formed, but in the corridors of power there is no political will to pursue remedy social ills or pursue the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In this situation what Honduras needs is not just to implement a reform but to lay new foundations for the State.

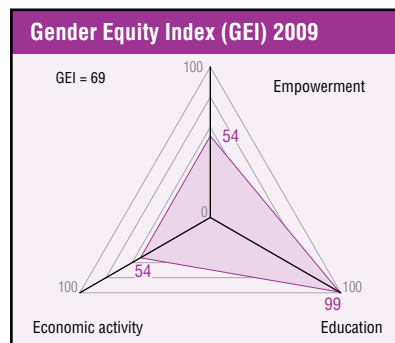
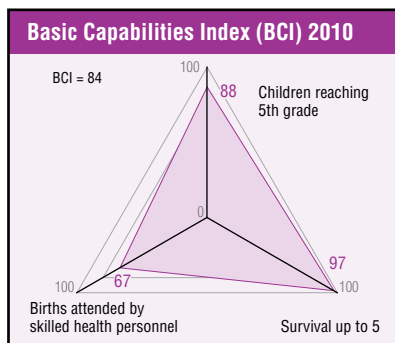
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On 28 June 2009 there was a coup d'état backed by the Honduran oligarchy in alliance with ultra right wing sectors in Latin America and the United States. The constitutionally elected President of the Republic, Manuel Zelaya Rosales, was overthrown by force of arms, and the people of Honduras are still resisting in the streets.

The Zelaya Government had been promoting a series of measures such as increasing the minimum wage from USD 176 to USD 285,¹ that met very strong opposition from private enterprise. In addition, it signed the *Alternativa Bolivariana para los pueblos de las Américas* (ALBA) (Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America and the Caribbean), which raised great expectations above all among the common people because it promised medical and education services and donations of machinery and equipment.

Another measure the Zelaya Government took was to approve the Petrocaribe initiative whereby Honduras could purchase oil with long-term financing and very low interest rates, and the savings this yielded would enable the Government to set up a trust fund to finance social development projects. These policies linked Zelaya more and more with the lower classes of the country, and this alliance was sealed when he organised a general people's vote called the "fourth ballot box".

As part of this shift to the left, the President advanced proposals for a reform to the Constitution because, as it now stands, there are fundamental articles that effectively bar the people of the country from participating in local and national decision-making and problem-solving processes. The President held talks about this reform with various sectors in the country and even with the other political parties, and from these discussions there emerged the idea of a National Constitution Assembly and to introduce a "fourth ballot box" in the elections of 29 November to ask the people whether they wanted a National Constitution Assembly to be convoked to draft a new constitution.² This initia-



tive turned into a public opinion poll that was to be held on 28 July, but on that day the coup d'état took place.

The people's movement reacted immediately: on that very day masses took to the streets and kept up their resistance for more than 200 days of demonstrations. The National Front against the Coup D'état was formed, and today is known as the National People's Resistance Front (FNRP—Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular).

A few months after the coup there was a very questionable election. This took place in the context of an extremely militarised situation, just like in Iraq, with constant human rights violations, and in November 2009 Porfirio Lobo Sosa became President. He is from the National Party which, along with the leaders of the Liberal Party, instigated and organised the coup d'état.

The new Lobo Government has made a big effort to obtain international recognition, but it has not been accepted in strategic organizations in the region like the SICA or the OAS. The President talks a lot about his intention to pursue reconciliation and establish dialogue but this is contradicted by the facts. Without consultation he has unilaterally implemented the so-called Law of the Vision of the Country, the National Plan, the formation of the Truth Commission and the non-recognition of the FNRP.

In the face of this situation the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has expressed serious concern over the fact that high ranking army officers and ex-members of the armed forces, who have been charged with taking part in the coup, are in public office managing departments in the Porfirio Lobo Government. For example, Major General Venancio Cervantes, who was the vice-head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of the coup, is today the general director of the Direction of Migration and Foreigners; Brigadier General Manuel Enrique Cáceres is the director of Civil

Aviation; ex-General Nelson Wily Mejía is in charge of the Merchant Marine Administration, and ex-General Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, who was Commander in Chief of the armed forces at the time of the coup, is now manager of the Honduran State Telecommunications Enterprise.³ In addition, the public prosecutor and judges at the Supreme Court, who were physically and intellectually involved in overthrowing constitutional rule in the country, are still in the same positions of responsibility as before.

The Lobo Sosa Government has been in office for seven months but the country is still completely polarised politically and there is resistance from the people's front in various sectors. For example, the teachers' union (80% of whose members are women) took to the streets to demonstrate against the privatisation of the Teachers' Retirement Fund and to try to prevent the State from implementing a general education law that would abolish preschool and the basic secondary cycle in public education.

Another focus of opposition to the Government is the collection of women's organizations that make up Feminists in Resistance (*Feministas en Resistencia*), a movement that sprang up after the coup. They are defending the progress that had been made in women's rights, which was threatened when the ruling junta issued decrees banning emergency contraceptive pills, for example, and cut back the Second Equal Opportunities and Gender Equity Plan.

In this context of ongoing turbulence and social confusion, the FNRP is getting stronger and stronger. This is made up of all the organizations in the social movement in Honduras, and their common aim is to

1 "Gobierno decreta salario mínimo en 5,500 lempiras" (The Government decrees a minimum wage of 5,500 lempiras), *La Prensa.hn*. Available from: <www.laprensa.hn/content/view/full/97312>.

2 Golpe de Estado en Honduras, Un Análisis Jurídico por Edmundo Orellana, (Coup D'état in Honduras, a legal analysis by Edmundo Orellana), University professor, 27 September 2009

3 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Preliminary Observations of the Commission on its visit to Honduras, 15 to 18 May 2010.

call a National Constitution Assembly to draft a new constitution that would include women, young people, the population of African descent, indigenous people and other groups that have always been excluded. The ultimate aim is that these changes would enable the country to lay new foundations to build on in the future.

Economic impact of the coup d'état

In 2009 the country's economy was battered from two directions: not only was it suffering the effects of the world economic crisis, which brought a fall in family remittances and also job losses in the *maquilas* (manufacturing plants that import and assemble duty-free components for export), but it was also reeling under the impact of the crisis caused by the coup d'état.

Initially in 2009 it was expected that the Zelaya Government's plan to cope with the international crisis would enable the country's economy to grow by 2% or 3%.⁴ But then came the coup, and the international community reacted with economic pressure by freezing cooperation funds (which amounted to around USD 500 million) and at the same time blocking access to loans from the multilateral organizations. These measures had a very serious impact on the country's budget as external financing had been covering 16.4% of the central administration's budget and 56% of the funds for public investment.⁵

Another very negative factor that exacerbated the situation in the wake of the coup was that 60% of the productive businesses and enterprises in the country closed down for approximately two weeks, and according to the Tegucigalpa Chamber of Commerce and Industries, this caused losses of around USD 52.6 million. At that time, there was resistance in parts of the capital city and in the north, which caused further losses of at least USD 6.6 million. On top of that the Central American countries closed their borders with Honduras to put pressure to reverse the situation, and this has resulted in losses of around USD 3,000 million.⁶

The two economic sectors that have been hit hardest are construction and trade. In July alone the construction sector shrank by around 50% and trade by 11%, and in September trade decreased by a further 17%.⁷ From January to December the country's internal debt increased by USD 505.5 million, two thirds of which went to maintaining the administration of the de facto Government.⁸

Regression in human rights

While the international financial crisis undoubtedly caused serious problems for Honduras, the armed forces takeover of 28 June amounts to a very serious regression in the field of human rights. In the period from 3 July 2009 to 20 June 2010, various mass media enterprises were shut down and more than 86 people were murdered for opposing the military coup, including 9 women and 20 members of the lesbian,

	1990	1995	2001	2006	2009
Total	87.4	90.1	91.2	92.5	94
Women (%)	88.4	91.6	92.7	94.4	95.3
Men (%)	86.4	88.4	89.7	90.5	92.6
Relation(*)	1.07	1.09	1.08	1.11	1.04

Source: MDG Report 2009. Author's preparation based on INE 1990-2009.

	Urban	Rural
Women	304	135
Men	386	147

Source: MDG Report 2009. Author's preparation based on EPHM, INE, 2009

gay, transsexual, transvestite, bisexual and intersex community.⁹

The murders are perpetrated by paid killers and they are almost a daily occurrence: "In 2010 at least seven journalists in Honduras have been killed for reasons connected to their professional work."¹⁰ As of May 2010, nine leaders of the people's movement had been executed.

During the demonstrations by Hondurans resisting the Government, women suffered various kinds of sexual aggression: they were attacked with gas, beaten with clubs and even sexually abused to humiliate them as punishment for opposing the coup. Some 240 cases of repressive violence of this kind have been reported and in 23 of these cases the women claimed there had been sexual aggression of various kinds, including seven cases of rape perpetrated by armed forces personnel.¹¹

Following the coup a whole series of measures were taken that amount to serious regression in the institutional mechanisms to promote and defend women's human rights, and these are still in force. They include the ruling junta's cuts to the second Gender Equality and Equity Plan. This involved eliminating important aspects of the six core elements of rights, mainly in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, violence against women and women's participation in politics. By executive decree the Government banned the distribution and sale of emergency contraceptive pills, and it reformed the Municipal Councils Law so as to convert municipal offices for women's affairs into general management spaces that cater to all kinds of populations.

The MDGs and women

Millennium Development Goal number 3 is to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women by

2015. There has been some progress, for example in literacy in the 15 to 24 age bracket, where the rate among women increased from 88.4% in 1990 to 95.3% in 2009, but women's progress in the last three years has been slower than progress among men.

Women are better educated than men; this is reflected in girls' attendance rates at school, which have always been higher than the rates for boys. In 2009, for example, girls' attendance was 0.28% higher in secondary education and 0.37% higher in tertiary education.¹² However, when we cross-check education levels against income we find the balance is unfairly tilted against women as men are still paid more for the same job even though women have better professional training.

The country has a democratic representation quota system, but the political parties have never complied with the rule that at least 30% of elected positions should go to women. Since the coup this situation has deteriorated still further because today women candidates are not allowed to campaign and more than 50 have dropped out because there is no guarantee of transparency in the process. Added to this, there is generalised insecurity brought about by the constant human rights violations and the militarization of the country. At the local level, women's representation in city councils slipped from 9% after the 2005 elections to just 6% after the 2009 elections, and in legislative bodies it dropped from 25% to 19.53%.

All things considered, it is clear that Honduras is a very long way from fulfilling its international commitments because there is no political will to pursue these goals, and the clearest sign of this is the coup d'état itself. The people of the country are demanding that the constitutional rules be changed completely so that Honduras can start to build on new foundations. This is far more than just a cosmetic reform to continue disguising the fact that the country's wealth is concentrated in very few hands and the neo-liberal-patriarch system has not changed at all. ■

4 Grupo Sociedad Civil, 2009.

5 Grupo Sociedad Civil, 2009.

6 Interview with Marvin Ponce, Deputy for Unificación Democrática.

7 Interview with Sergio Castellano, Deputy for Unificación Democrática.

8 Interview with Martin Barahona, economics analyst.

9 Taken from the lists of the Comité de Familiares y Desaparecidos en Honduras COFADEH, Comité de Derechos Humanos CODEH, and Defensores en Línea.

10 Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Preliminary Observations of the Commission on its visit to Honduras, 15 to 18 May 2010.

11 Report "Las Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres después del Golpe de Estado" (Violations of Women's Human Rights after the Coup D'état), Feministas en Resistencia, 2009.

12 United Nations round table for the MDG report, 2009.