

## HONDURAS

Given the lack of an official census, it is estimated that the nine indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples living in Honduras number 1.27 million inhabitants, divided between the following groups: Lenca, 720,000; Garífuna, 380,000; Miskito, 87,000; Tolupan, 47,500; Nahua, 20,000; Chortí, 10,500; Pech, 3,800 and Tawahka, 1,500. The territory claimed by the indigenous peoples accounts for approximately 2 million hectares out of a total national land mass of 11.2 million. Only 10% have a guaranteed property title.

Each of the indigenous peoples retains a degree of individuality, in line with their customs, and this is reflected in their day-to-day practices in terms of, for example, their community councils. Honduras ratified ILO Convention 169 in September 1994. In 2007 it voted in favour of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Apart from Convention 169, there is no case law to protect the rights of indigenous peoples.

### The 2013 General Elections

In the 24 November 2013 elections, the peoples' mistrust of electoral results became more entrenched, highlighting the lack of a sufficiently coordinated state institutional structure that is able to ensure the necessary transparency that would underpin both legality and legitimacy of the democracy that is being built in Honduras.<sup>1</sup> Over the last three years, there has been a gradual increase in public corruption, combined with a rhetoric against corruption, criminality and violence that has ended up legitimising both militarisation and authoritarianism.

Although there was clearly fraud and violence in the 2013 elections, the results were immediately supported by the US embassy and, a little while later, by the European Union and observers from the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Carter Center and the Supreme Electoral Court of Honduras (TSE).<sup>2</sup> The mechanisms by which fraud is perpetrated are maintained by means of a deep-rooted system of patronage, and this perpetuates a fraudulent system

whereby state social compensation programmes are used for party political ends and to buy the votes of the poor, who form a majority in the country. This vote buying on the part of the National Party, which also bought hundreds of the smaller parties' credentials, was a key factor in its success, along with the many inconsistencies that were denounced and documented by civil society organisations and opposition parties (such as the PAC and LIBRE).

The buying of credentials meant that National Party (NP) activists were able to present themselves as the representatives of other parties at polling stations in a majority of constituencies nationally and thus manipulate voters in favour of the NP (a polling station must have an accredited representative present from every party participating in the elections). Combined with a high level of public corruption and a lack of transparency in the financing of the electoral campaigns, this played a decisive role in the governing party's victory, and that of Juan Orlando Hernández in particular. During the entire electoral period, the National Party was maintaining between 27 and 29% in the polls as a presidential favourite, but won 36% of the actual vote.

The position of the *Libertad y Refundación* (Freedom and Reform) party is that they were robbed of the presidency and other political posts. However, the elections led to a regrouping of the parliamentary political forces. Two new parties appeared on the political scene: *Libertad y Refundación* (LIBRE) and the *Partido Anticorrupción* (Anti-Corruption Party/PAC). The former is the direct result of the resistance movement that was created following the *coup d'état* on 28 June 2009 and the Cartagena Agreement which, among other things, enabled the return to the country of former (deposed) president José Manuel Zelaya Rosales. The latter burst onto the scene during the post-coup process and has managed to capitalise on the urban youth vote, a highly important sector of the population that had previously been more prone to abstaining and demonstrating political apathy.

The effect this political opposition will have over the next four years remains to be seen. The PAC and LIBRE have taken their seats in a Congress in which there has been very little real political opposition and, in contrast, clear anti-democratic political practices on the part of the two main parties (the Liberal Party and the National Party). This bi-party system, institutionalised for more than 100 years and with 30 years of alternating political power between them in the "democratic era", has not been accustomed to facing opposition within its own "natural" space. Although this bi-party system has been damaged, it is very far from dead. According to the official (albeit disputed) results of the 2013 elections, the Liberal and



National parties between them obtained 57.19% of the valid votes cast. In previous elections they used to win 95% and so, according to these figures, there has been a 42.81% drop in voter support for them. In other words, although a split in the bi-party system was inevitable, as an institution it remains in place, with the social bases to sustain it, along with a complex system of patronage plus control over the state's main revenue streams in order to finance<sup>3</sup> and engineer electoral support for the two parties.

Against this backdrop, the state and the three powers (executive, legislative and judicial) have one main feature in common: a concentration of power in the hands of the new president, Juan Orlando Hernández. During the period 2010-2013, there was clear manipulation of the national political agenda by the legislature, with Hernández as president of the National Congress. He was also strongly backed up by Lobo Sosa, President of the Republic at the time. Now, with Juan Orlando Hernández as president, a process of “re-engineering” of the state institutions has commenced. On the one hand, this is in response to recommendations made by the international financial institutions aimed at “reducing” public expenditure – this was the justification given for the closure of the Ministry for Indigenous and Afro-Honduran Peoples (SEDINAFROH) and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Sports (both essential links between the state and indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities). On the other, it is a result of a reconcentration of

power in the hands of the executive. For example, social militarisation has returned to stay for the foreseeable future. From within the National Congress, Juan Orlando Hernández had promoted the Military Police, defining this force as “key to his government”. He is now promising a return to the mass military recruitment of young people “at risk”, a practice that has historically had devastating effects on indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup>

The Honduran political context is unfolding against a backdrop of few promising outlooks. The country continues to be described as one of the most dangerous in the world, with a murder rate of 83 for every 100,000 inhabitants.<sup>5</sup> Quite apart from this statistic, however, the state policy of auctioning off sovereign lands (along with rights to the subsoil, air and water) and of criminalising social protest has increased the vulnerability of the historically-excluded indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities. Violence has merely reinforced the theory and practice of a militarisation of Honduran society, with a return to a modernised hard-line policy. There have also been growing levels of public corruption: Transparency International (TI) identifies Honduras as one of the most corrupt countries in Central America, and even among the most corrupt in the world, according to its Corruption Perception Index 2013.<sup>6</sup> And, finally, there is the question of whether the political elite is really interested in a true process of democratising Honduran society or not. Meanwhile, although the *coup* gave a boost to important elements of popular political culture such as civic mobilisation in defence of their rights, the climate for this now seems to be virtually at an end.

## **The process of indigenous and Afro-indigenous struggle**

Since 2011, conflicts have become more prevalent and have been particularly detrimental to indigenous and Afro-indigenous peoples. Their ancestral right to autonomy and sovereignty over lands and territories, to use of the soil, subsoil and rivers is being clearly threatened and, in many cases, process of territorial dispossession are already being consolidated. This has been the consequence of stronger policies aimed at liberalising the land and natural resources in general. Although these are historic conflicts, they are also a particular response to the June 2009 *coup d'état*. The “transitional government” of Roberto Micheletti, and Porfirio Lobo Sosa’s government, through the National Congress, approved dozens of mining, hydro-electric, oil (in the Honduran Moskitia) and river conces-

sions, to name but a few. It is in the context of these processes that important struggles are being taken forward by some indigenous and Afro-indigenous organisations.

Among the Lenca peoples, COPINH (the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras) has organised open struggles against river concessions and against the construction of hydro-electric power stations and mining, organising the peoples and communities around these issues. The struggle for territory being taken forward with the communities of the Río Blanco, in Intibucá department, north-western Honduras, is vital. Indigenous inhabitants, members of COPINH, are opposing the Agua Zarca hydro-electric project being promoted by sectors of national and transnational private capital. The project directly threatens the Gualcarque River, the historic heritage of the Lenca people.<sup>7</sup> This struggle has not only been waged against these sectors specifically; more fundamentally, if this work goes ahead it will set a precedent for the wider start-up of the megaprojects that have been considered by successive governments related to the liberalisation of natural resources. This is despite the fact that COPINH signed an agreement with Porfirio Lobo Sosa's government, permitting a certain level of institutionalisation. The agreement signed did not, as hoped, ensure that the lives of the community leaders would be respected and protected and nor did it prevent their growing criminalisation and persecution, as can be seen in the internationally-renowned case of Berta Cáceres, Aureliano Molina and Tomás Gómez.

The murders of indigenous members of the Toluán people on 25 August 2013 was not an isolated event but closely linked to the struggles and resistance processes being organised by the indigenous peoples in defence of their territories and natural resources. The indigenous Toluán who were murdered came from San Francisco de Locomapa, in Yoro department, and had been involved in blocking roads during the 12 days leading up to their deaths, in protest at the territorial dispossession they were suffering at the hands of mining and logging companies.<sup>8</sup> The Toluán had denounced and publicised this conflict during 2012.<sup>9</sup> The community, however, received no conclusive response from the state institutions in terms of resolving the conflict. These murders have gone unpunished, like so many others, and illustrate the situation that indigenous peoples have been facing these last few years.

The Garífuna peoples have also taken up the struggle against their territorial dispossession and removal of their community ownership. Mega-tourism and for-

eign investment projects require that the Garífuna be removed from their historic lands. Examples of this include the Banana Coast tourist project and that of the Model Towns, a process that commenced under Pepe Lobo and which has become one of the driving forces behind the Garífuna peoples' struggle. The Model Towns are now being promoted as Employment and Economic Development Zones, designed as special areas aimed at attracting foreign investment.

The Vallecito territory, in Colón department, north Honduras, has also been the scene of an important struggle. In recent years, this territory, historically Garífuna, has been threatened and gradually taken over by Miguel Facussé. Facussé is a major player in palm oil cultivation in Honduras and the Central American region – land that is also crucial for drugs trafficking – and his guards have killed dozens of *mestizo* peasants and Garífuna in recent years. Despite the Garífuna community from Vallecito winning its case against Facussé in the Supreme Court in 1999, Facussé's employees have continued to threaten and assault the native inhabitants with impunity.<sup>10</sup>

In the Honduran Moskitia, a remote land that has historically belonged collectively to the indigenous Miskito, Tawahka, Garífuna and Pech peoples, violence and displacement is taking place that has structural links with the processes that Lenca, Tolupán and Garífuna communities outside of the area are currently resisting. In this case, however, the peoples are even more vulnerable given the poor access to the region and the absence of state institutions, a gap that is increasingly being "filled" by drugs trafficking. The situation is an increasingly complex one; unlike the struggles being waged by indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities outside the region, in La Moskitia (incorporated into the Honduran state under the name of Gracias a Dios in 1957) organisational processes are simply not taking place among communities whose main concern is the real threat of hydro-electric projects and, in particular, the oil exploration that is expected to commence in 2014. These people depend almost completely on the rivers, and any change in these would represent a threat to their lives and livelihoods.

The links between drugs trafficking and the political system in La Moskitia are becoming institutionalised. Following her election, the Brus Laguna municipal authority is now being run by Teonela Paisano Wood, although it is well-known that her brother is a drugs trafficker. Another brother, Seth Paisano Wood, is MP for Gracias a Dios department.

In Olancho department, which borders onto La Moskitia, the Tawahka peoples are also struggling to prevent their land from being taken over by drugs traffickers and cattle farmers. Although not intentionally – or with any particular coordination – the work of drugs traffickers and the extractive industries is complementary: the traffickers terrorise and subjugate the peoples, removing them violently from the lands they have traditionally farmed, and this enables the large corporations to move in.<sup>11</sup>

## Conclusion

Against a backdrop of corruption, drugs trafficking, violence and impunity, the general outlook is not promising, particularly for the indigenous and Afro-indigenous peoples, whose very existence is being challenged by the state as an “obstacle to development”. Despite the fact that the indigenous and Afro-indigenous peoples are pursuing processes of struggle and resistance, it is clear that they are facing ever more complex situations: a process of liberalisation of the country’s natural resources has resulted in a scenario that proposes the almost immediate annihilation of the peoples’ relationship with their territories. It seems there is no possibility of “dialogue”, far less of promoting true democratic processes within the state agenda. Looming on the horizon, depending on the historic situation of the peoples and their organisations, are further processes of resistance, struggle, tensions, and also dispossession and greater exclusion. ○

## Notes and references

- 1 For further consideration of these issues see Marvin Barahona, *Elecciones y ciudadanía en Honduras (1981-2013): La larga marcha hacia una democracia deficiente y un Estado de derecho incorregible*, in *Envío*, Year 11, N 40, December 2013, pp. 25-31.
- 2 The same TSE that supported the usurping government established after the 2009 coup and prepared the conditions for “demonstrating” the legitimacy of Lobo Sosa’s government; the one that also supported the candidacy of Juan Orlando Hernández, permitting him to break a number of electoral laws (for example, he marched with soldiers in his televised campaign broadcasts) while censoring LIBRE’s broadcasts which broke no electoral laws.
- 3 Drug trafficking is a latent issue in Honduran elections; however, it has not been considered seriously enough by the political parties in general.
- 4 See “Niños y jóvenes serán ‘reclutados’ por las FF AA” in *La Tribuna*, 29 March 2014, <http://www.latribuna.hn/2014/03/29/ninos-y-jovenes-seran-reclutados-por-las-ff-aa/#.UzihcoR5Gz8.twitter>

- (viewed 1 April 2014); and *Ghosts and Warriors: Cultural-Political Dynamics of Indigenous Resource Struggles in Western Honduras*, by Daniel Aaron Graham, University of California, Berkeley, 2009, <http://danielgrahamphd.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/graham-super-dissertation.pdf> (viewed 1 April 2014).
- 5 National Autonomous University of Honduras – University Institute for Democracy, Peace and Security. *Boletín del Observatorio de la Violencia*, January – December 2013. Ed. No. 32, February 2014, p. 1. Available at: [www.iudpas.org](http://www.iudpas.org) (viewed 1 April 2014).
  - 6 See “Corruption Perceptions Index 2013”, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2013/results>, (viewed 1 April 2014).
  - 7 For more information see “Honduras: Río Blanco, cuando un pueblo dice no, es no” by Claudia Korol, in *Biodiversidad en América Latina y el Caribe*, 11 September 2013, [http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Portada\\_Principal/Documentos/Honduras\\_Rio\\_Blanco\\_Cuando\\_un\\_pueblo\\_dice\\_no\\_es\\_no](http://www.biodiversidadla.org/Portada_Principal/Documentos/Honduras_Rio_Blanco_Cuando_un_pueblo_dice_no_es_no) (viewed 1 April 2014).
  - 8 See *Honduras: Masacre de indígenas Tolupanes y la ausencia de la aplicación del Consentimiento Previo Libre e Informado*, published 27 August 2013 on OFRANEH's website, <http://ofraneh.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/honduras-masacre-de-indigenas-tolupanes-y-la-ausencia-de-la-aplicacion-del-consentimiento-previo-libre-e-informado/> (viewed 1 April 2014).
  - 9 See *Carta Pública* de la Tribu de San Francisco de Locomapa, Yoro, published 17 June 2012, <http://www.honduraslaboral.org/article/carta-publica/> (viewed 1 April 2014).
  - 10 See “Honduras: Alerta! Contactos dirigencia OFRANEH y de funcionarios de estado - Garífunas continúan bajo asedio en Vallecito” 26 August 2012, <http://www.copinh.org/article/hondurasalerta-contactos-dirigencia-ofraneh-y-de-f/> (viewed 1 April 2014).
  - 11 See “Prying Native People from Native Lands: Narco Business in Honduras” by K. McSweeney, Z. Pearson, published on 04 February 2014 in NACLA, <http://nacla.org/news/2014/2/4/prying-native-people-native-lands-narco-business-honduras>, (Viewed 1 April 2014).

**Regner Asís Castellanos Álvarez** is a sociologist from the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH)