

The Struggle Against Honduras' Stolen Election

Last year's disputed elections in Honduras continue to present a struggle for grassroots activists in the country, who face harsh police and military crackdowns in response to protests, reports Dennis J. Bernstein in the following interview.

By Dennis J. Bernstein

The latest tragedy of misguided U.S. foreign policy in Central America is the tacit support for another stolen presidential election in Honduras. The new right-wing renegade government there is inflicting terrible violence upon people who refuse to accept the election results from last November's election between extreme right-wing parliamentary dictator, Juan Orlando Hernandez, the current president, and progressive reformer, Salvador Nasralla.

To get a clearer picture as to what is happening on the ground in Honduras—which includes dozens of murders of street activists—I spoke to Sandra Cuffe. Based in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Cuffe has resided for many years in Central America and writes for several online publications.

Cuffe also expressed deep concern for the safety of Edwin Espinal, a noted activist and ally to many movements in Honduras, including COPINH. COPINH is the group founded by the late Berta Caceres, who it is believed was assassinated by right-wing forces affiliated with the Honduran government. Espinal has now been arrested and is being held under difficult circumstances at a Honduran military base.

“The current government has arrested, beaten Espinal many times,” said one friend and co-worker of Espinal. “His body has been beaten and broken repeatedly. Now he is a political prisoner, held in leg chains, for having exercised his right to free speech and free assembly”.

I spoke to Cuffe on January 24 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Dennis Bernstein: Could you remind people what happened in terms of recent elections in Honduras, and give us a sense of the atmospheric pressure right now?

Sandra Cuffe: Last November 26 there were general elections in Honduras. It was a fiercely contested election between Juan Orlando Hernandez, the current president, and Salvador Nasralla, who was the candidate for the oppositional

alliance against the dictatorship.

According to the Honduran constitution, re-election for the office of president is not allowed but the right wing has been concentrating power to the point where the executive branch controls basically all branches of government and a supreme court ruling allowed for the president's re-election.

On the other side, the Libre Party grew out of resistance to the 2009 coup d'état that was supported by the United States. For these elections, it formed an alliance with a smaller party, as well as with Salvador Nasralla.

After more than half the votes had been counted, preliminary results had Nasralla in the lead by five points, which was considered irreversible. The computer system then mysteriously crashed and when it came back online that lead began to rapidly disappear.

That was the earliest indication that fraud was involved. The official results took another few weeks to come out. The Organization of American States found serious irregularities in the voting and numerous indications of fraud.

Meanwhile, there were massive protests and all kinds of actions going on across the country. At least 35 people have been killed, with the actual number being probably much higher. Most were killed when security forces opened fire on protests around the country. Hundreds have been wounded and well over a thousand have been detained. Many have been released but some are still being held as political prisoners. The inauguration is set for January 27 so we are now in the middle of a week of action leading up to that.

DB: Please say a little more about what is at stake here and why people are willing to put their lives on the line.

SC: What is at stake is democracy. Since the 2009 coup, people have organized, formed political parties and alliances. A lot of people who hadn't been politically active before are now starting to take action in an attempt to change what is going on.

The ruling National Party has been in power since 2010. They have concentrated power to an extreme degree. There has been a huge rise in militarization, including the creation of a military police which has been responsible for the majority of the deaths of protesters.

Even aside from this current crisis since the election, Honduras has long been one of the most violent countries in the world, one of the most dangerous for environmental defenders as well as for journalists. Healthcare and education are in shambles. Corruption is rampant. So really the future of the country is at

stake.

But despite the repression, people are not backing down. There have been massive marches, especially last December in the capital, with tens of thousands of people in the streets. The opposition alliance has its strongest base in the northwest of the country, where resistance has always been strongest. Tire blockades have been used in a lot of places. There was at first some limited dialogue with police, but recently it has mainly been military forces showing up, opening fire or using tear gas.

DB: What has the U.S. government said about the killing of protesters? Do they continue to support the coup?

SC: For decades, Honduras has been a key ally of the U.S. in Central America. There is a huge military base there. It is home to the U.S. Southern Command Joint Task Force Bravo. In the 1980s it was the training ground and launching pad for counterinsurgency operations throughout Central America. The United States is in the background of everything that goes on politically in Honduras.

The U.S. and the OAS disagreed on whether to recognize the election results. Two days after the election and just before soldiers started opening fire on protesters, the U.S. State Department certified the election, which freed up military aid to the Honduran government.

DB: The important activist Edwin Espinal is now in custody. What is going on there now with his case?

SC: Edwin is a longtime activist in Honduras. He was extremely active in the movement in the streets after the coup. His wife was actually killed in the context of the protests. There have been around a thousand detentions. Most of those detained were released soon afterwards, but there are at least a couple dozen people still in jail. The charges are mainly related to property destruction.

In Edwin's case, in response to tear gas attacks, protesters broke the windows of a Marriot Hotel next to the Presidential Palace. Several police stations have been burned down after police opened fire on protesters. Edwin was arrested last Friday and he faces three charges related to property destruction. He is under investigation for terrorism and criminal association. Edwin's case has been placed in a special court system, with his hearings taking place on a military base. There is virtually no public access. This Monday he had his initial hearing.

DB: Has anyone been able to talk to him directly? And how do you think he will be treated while in custody?

SC: People were able to visit him after his arrest when he was being held in a police cell. They were able to see him very briefly going to and from hearings. However, he has lawyers from a prominent human rights organization so there has been some communication with the outside. Visits are very difficult to arrange. Reading materials are forbidden. In terms of safety, because there have been so many incidents of intimidation and threats by security forces against Edwin dating back to right after the coup, the government has implemented “protective measures” in his case under orders of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

DB: Has Edwin’s case received any support from members of the U.S. Congress?

SC: I don’t know the answer to that yet. There is a very active Honduran solidarity network in the US and Canada who have been very involved since the coup.

DB: In terms of U.S. policy toward Honduras, this is actually what we like to see, isn’t it? It is like one big free-trade zone with a few military bases thrown in. We can also expect a flood of more Hondurans and other Central Americans to the U.S.

SC: I know that when you talk to most young people, they no longer see a future for themselves here. They organized and went to the polls and the signs of clear victory were simply wiped out two days later. People are outraged and many of them will leave the country.

Dennis J. Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Rethinking Cultural Attitudes Towards Sex and Violence

The recent stories of sexual harassment being shared through the #MeToo campaign and allegations against Washington, Hollywood and Olympics bigwigs is an opportunity to correct harmful cultural perceptions of sex and violence, writes Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

Sigmund Freud published his book Civilization and Its Discontents in 1930.

Having witnessed World War I, Freud knew that discontent was part and parcel of the human condition. The question he sought to answer was why that was so.

The short answer he came up with goes like this:

Human beings have instinctual drives such as sex and violent aggression – expressions of the Id. Left unchecked they would destroy any hope of settled life and high culture. According to Freud, civilization is the vehicle humans have created to control these inherent drives. Civilization and its various component cultures create rules and regulations– as well as feelings of remorse and guilt (expressions of a culturally attuned Superego) – that result in either suppression or sublimation of these primitive drives.

However, the results are not perfect, especially when it comes to controlling violent aggression. Indeed, as a consequence of the mass slaughter that was World War I, Freud came to the conclusion that human beings have a deep and permanent “death wish.” Even at less drastic levels of aggression, most societies experience frequent episodes of domestic violence, and the high degree of across-the-board neuroses.

In the Freudian scheme, control of the instinctual sexual drive (itself another form of aggression) is supposed to be a bit easier. Eros can be sublimated into the creation of beauty (art) as well as various intellectual achievements. Yet here too, what has been evolved are imperfect controls, especially when encapsulated in cultures that promote male domination.

If one does not like Freud’s ideas, the whole issue of the activation and control of aggression and sex can be looked at in terms of brain function. In other words, our brains have evolved to promote survival and reproduction – originally in the pre-state, pre-tribal primate bands of distant prehistory. These tasks involve multiple parts of the cortex and amygdala, thalamus and hypothalamus, and so forth. There is one area of the brain that is particularly important in keeping instinct from running amok – the prefrontal cortex. Slow to mature (it is not fully on-line until one’s mid-twenties) it is this part of the brain that exercises “executive function.” It encourages you “to do the right, though perhaps harder, thing.”

The Role of Culture

Despite the fact that the physical manner in which most individuals experience these primitive and instinctual drives is similar, culture makes a difference in how aggression and sexual urges are expressed. For instance, most of the world’s cultures are patriarchal. That is, they overtly assign authority, both in the public realm and private, to men. Men are supposed to exercise that authority

within the confines of their culture's rules and regulations. Sometimes these are relatively strict, damping down the "macho" impulses that rationalize aggressive physical and sexual behavior. More often they condone or even encourage "macho."

Keep in mind that the assignment of authority is the assignment of power, and power is the ability to act with aggression. Thus, in a patriarchy, it is with men that the issue of control is most immediate. If there are not sufficient mechanisms within such cultures that identify specific aggressive behavior as unacceptable, or promote public shaming, or just generate a heck of a lot of remorse and guilt, you are going to have high degree male recklessness – everything from schoolyard bullying to criminal violence, as well as the sexual "acting out" we now see as not just rape, but also sexual harassment.

Sexual Harassment as a Worldwide Problem

The common definition of sexual harassment is as follows: "uninvited and unwelcome verbal or physical behavior of a sexual nature especially by a person in authority toward a subordinate (such as an employee or student)." The legal definition in the U.S. pertains chiefly to the workplace, where the unwelcome approach has the connotation of blackmail – something like, "Do this with me or you won't get promoted." There are also a myriad number of state and local laws that cover a wide range of situations. Many of these have been on the books only since the 1960s and, unfortunately, are not uniformly enforced.

It is hard to get exact numbers unless you start adding up the results of hundreds of surveys and polls that address the whole range of harassment-related situations. And these only give you the approximate numbers of reported incidents. Time magazine had a series of particularly scandalous cases at Cornell and Harvard Universities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and came up with an estimate that "as many as 18 million American females were harassed sexually while at work in 1979 and 1980."

If this estimate is anywhere near accurate, the problem of sexual harassment has to be huge. We know it can't be just a U.S. problem. It has to be a worldwide phenomenon.

Sad to say, such a horrid diagnosis should not be surprising if sexual aggression stems from evolution-based drives *and* societal accommodation to this primal instinct through the encouragement of machismo male characteristics.

What To Do?

If in nothing else, Freud was correct in seeing that culture is, albeit imperfectly, our only plausible line of defense. It takes on this role by

serving as a guide for the prefrontal cortex – a guide to the “right, though harder, thing to do.” The problem is that, to date, patriarchal cultures have not defined the protection of the subordinate gender as a necessarily “right” thing. They are more interested in directing male aggression into pathways compatible with patriarchal power structures. In other words, the guide is corrupt.

Although this is the way it is, it is not the way it has to be. It is possible to reshape cultural concepts. For better or worse, religions and empowered ideologies have been doing this for a long time. However, their targets have not been male aggression, sexual or otherwise.

But now we may have a window of time when this important subject can be rethought – rethought to the end of improving the cultural assistance given to the mature prefrontal cortex. Along these lines, here are some potential steps to consider. All should be pursued in a non-ideological way. Let’s keep religion and politics out of these efforts, and let science and evolutionary awareness be our tutors.

- Educate both men and women about the nature of the primitive instincts they are subject to. As it is, most individuals grow up without having a clue about what they are experiencing. Explain the need to manage these instinctual urges in reasonable ways. Explain that this means maintaining responsible cultural values.
- Sexual egalitarianism should be implemented by law and then taught as “what is right” from kindergarten through college. The gender biases inherent in patriarchy should be seen as part of an unfortunate past history – like racism.
- Devise instructional lessons to prepare young folks for serious relationships and marriage based on egalitarian principles. Such lessons should be at least as detailed as those needed to get a driver’s license.
- Use the media to create a popular cultural environment that strongly condemns sexual harassment and other forms of aggression. The media should encourage serious remorse among bullies and harassers.

Do these suggestions sound like some civil authority should be allowed to shape how we think? Sorry, but in every culture, past and present, something like that has always been the case. You can also safely assume that those primitive instincts have always been playing with your mind.

And what have all the age-old, status quo cultural rules brought us so far? Civilization? Well, perhaps. But it is a civilization that still suffers periodic outbreaks of aggressive violence and rationalizes a tradition of

unwanted sexual behavior abetted by patriarchal values. Not surprisingly, current laws, as they reflect the current state of culture, haven't been very effective holding either form of aggression back.

Now that the sexual harassment genie seems to have escaped the bottle, we can see the problem more clearly. It's time to pursue serious culture renovation – to take on those primitive instincts and thoughtfully develop better, non-doctrinaire cultural ways to manage them. One thing is for sure, they are not going to go away on their own.

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