

# Honduras Nearing Ten Years of Stolen Elections, Neo-Colonial Rule

Despite an organized and active grassroots movement, Honduran politics have been repeatedly steamrolled by the self-interests of international ruling elites, as journalist and filmmaker Jesse Freeston explained to Dennis J. Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

For weeks following its stolen election, the corrupt right-wing, neo-fascist government of Juan Orlando Hernández's in Honduras has been terrorizing its people. Street protests and spontaneous blockades have been met by extreme violence. Dozens have already died on the frontlines and many more have been arrested and brutalized in detention, while often being held incommunicado.

I spoke to Jesse Freeston, who has been based in Honduras for the last eight years working as a video-journalist and documentary filmmaker, ever since the US supported/Hillary Clinton sustained 2009 coup d'état that purged the duly elected president, Manuel Zelaya. Freeston, who has reported for the Real News Network and Democracy Now en Español, is the producer of the feature documentary "[Resistencia: The Fight for the Aguan Valley.](#)"

Freeston reports that, among other crimes against the people, "this regime has: stolen an election; ignored calls from the Organization of American States to hold a new election; passed a law prohibiting the prosecution of all former and current members of Congress in the midst of a series of massive corruption scandals [and has] appointed a new national police chief who has clear evidence against him of drug trafficking..."

I spoke to Freeston on February 7.

**Dennis Bernstein:** We continue our drumbeat coverage of Honduras and the recent stolen election there, an attempt to suppress the will of the people who, by all accounts, want to have a more progressive government. It has been a very violent situation since the election. We are hearing that dozens of people have been killed and that the atrocities being perpetrated by the government have resulted in a nightmare. Could you put this in the context of the last two recent election cycles in Honduras?

**Jesse Freeston:** On June 28, 2009, there was a vote on a non-binding resolution put forward by President Manuel Zelaya, who had taken up the call of various indigenous groups in the country to rewrite the constitution. When people went out to vote on that day, the military staged a coup d'état and Zelaya wound up

in Costa Rica.

This led to the most organized national resistance movement Honduras has ever seen. Assemblies were held, which brought together all these people who stood to gain from a new constitution. Just about every sector of the society were represented, except perhaps the oligarchy.

This led to the formation of the Libre Party, which participated in the 2013 elections [with Manuel Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, running as the party's presidential candidate]. The election was officially won by Juan Orlando Hernandez but there was massive fraud. The November, 2017 elections were even more of a farce.

Despite all that, when the electoral tribunal released its first results, the Oppositional Alliance were up by 5% with 60% of the votes counted. One of the magistrates on the tribunal described it at the time as an "irreversible trend." Then, counting stopped for over a day when the computer system supposedly crashed. When it was back up again, the tendency had completely flipped and Hernandez ended up winning by one percentage point.

This led to another massive uprising. On one day of action there were 48 blockades of highways and major boulevards in the country. During the last two months, this has been happening a couple times a week.

Even international observers such as the European Union Commission and the Organization of American States—who have been discredited here after turning their back many times in the last eight years to the crimes of this regime—even they have said that they have to redo the election or there has to be a recount.

Nevertheless, the members of those organizations, like Canada, like the United States and the countries of the European Union, went ahead and validated the election.

**DB:** We have heard that activists and members of the resistance have been arrested.

**JF:** Yes, there are dozens of political prisoners behind bars right now. One of the most worrying cases is that of Edwin Espinal. He is someone who has consistently paid a price for his resistance against the ongoing coup d'état.

In September of 2009, Edwin Espinal's wife died from tear gas inhalation after taking part in several protests. A week later, Edwin was at a small neighborhood protest after which he was arrested for kidnapping because he took a child with him on his motorcycle when he was fleeing the tear gas. The mother of the child went over and over to the police station to explain that she had

pleaded with Edwin to take her kid with him. Another time he was jailed for car theft for driving a friend's car.

The first thing that the newly-formed military-trained urban police force did was raid Espinal's house, claiming they had proof that he was a drug trafficker. The police falsely accused him of being involved in the Marriot Hotel fire and right now he is in a maximum security prison on that charge. Journalists and human rights workers are not allowed in to talk to him, his family have not been allowed to see him. This is the first time since the 1980's that a civilian will be tried inside a military base.

**DB:** How would you describe the US role in this situation? We know that Hillary Clinton played a key role in sustaining the coup in 2009.

**JF:** I think that informed people in Honduras realize that changes in political leadership in the US don't make much difference in how Honduras is treated. Decisions are made here at the US Embassy and ambassadors act as de-facto rulers here, as shadow presidents.

The one constant here is the massive military funding from the US. Since the coup, the Honduran military has received more direct funding from the US than any other country in the Americas, despite the fact that they have not been involved in a single military conflict or been threatened with one.

The military is purely used against people inside the country. Although the United States is by far the largest funder of the Honduran military, other countries are also involved because humanitarian and other aid is typically diverted to the military.

**DB:** You said that there is a continuity between the last administration's policy toward Honduras and the Trump administration's policy. In terms of so-called US interests, the real problem is that we push a program of "free trade" and we insist on having our military bases there. So we have every reason to sustain the government as long as it provides us with an opportunity to police the region. Could you talk about the geopolitical part of this?

**JF:** I think the more a country depends on its natural resources, the more everything comes down to who controls the land. In 1961, [John F.] Kennedy launched a program called The Alliance for Progress, which was billed as a kind of Marshall Plan for Latin America. It was a response to the Cuban revolution and an attempt to ward off similar revolutions across Latin America.

We were going to give billions of dollars to countries in Latin America if they promised to undertake land reform, if the oligarchy agreed to give up a portion of their land. When Johnson replaced Kennedy there was much less priority

assigned to this program. Nonetheless, the Honduran government had to pass a number of land reform laws to receive the money, but none of those laws were ever implemented.

If the US intends to keep its business interests here alive—the sweatshop sector as well as bananas and palm oil—and for Canada, gold mining primarily—they need to maintain their alliance with this land-holding oligarchy. It is this alliance that the resistance is asking the countries of the North and the West to break.

With eight and a half years of organizing experience, the people of Honduras could put together a government so fast it would make your head spin. This movement is very organized. They know who to trust, they know who can provide intellectual support, they know who can run the economy. They are just waiting for the international community to change its alliances.

**DB:** So will the resistance to the Hernandez regime go on?

**JF:** The Oppositional Alliance has decided to wage a “peaceful insurrection,” something they are entitled to do under the Honduran constitution, which states that no one owes obedience to a government which takes power by force. The numbers now at the protests have been considerably less than in the past two months, particularly since the inauguration on January 27.

It is hard to predict what will happen but the vast majority of the population do not want this regime. There is a massive corruption scandal developing and we will see what happens with that. Students are planning a strike for next month. But we will have to wait to see what kinds of ideas are going to be put forward in Honduras.

People are looking at Honduras as a laboratory for the ultra-right of the world. Fortunately, there is a well-organized movement here that will be rising up again and again. It is up to those of us in the international community to put pressure on those who claim to represent us to change their allegiances.

**DB:** Would you say that this is a movement inspired by young people in the country?

**JF:** Yes, and that is the key to understanding this new law that the National Party is trying to pass which would regulate social media. It has to do with this young generation that has grown up in this period following the coup.

Someone like Zelaya doesn't necessarily reach them. This new law the government is trying to pass would give them the right to criminalize anyone posting anything they deem “hateful” on social media. And this is a government that labels “racist” people who are defending rivers from dams being built.

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.

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## Regime Change Fails: Is A Military Coup or Invasion of Venezuela Next?

The U.S. has employed all of its regime change tools in Venezuela and although so far they have failed, there is still a chance that a military attack is in store, warn Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers.

By Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers

Several signals point to a possible military strike on Venezuela, with high-ranking officials and influential politicians making clear that it is a distinct possibility.

Speaking at his alma mater, the University of Texas, on February 1, Secretary of State Tillerson suggested a potential military coup in the country. Tillerson then visited allied Latin American countries urging regime change and more economic sanctions on Venezuela. Tillerson is also reportedly considering banning the processing or sale of Venezuelan oil in the United States and is discouraging other countries from buying Venezuelan oil.

In a series of tweets, Senator Marco Rubio, the Republican from Florida, where many Venezuelan oligarchs live, openly called for a military coup in Venezuela. “The world would support the Armed Forces in #Venezuela if they decide to protect the people & restore democracy by removing a dictator,” the former presidential candidate tweeted.



How absurd – remove an elected president with a military coup to restore democracy? Does that pass the straight face test? This refrain of Rubio and Tillerson seems to be the nonsensical public position of U.S. policy.

The U.S. has been seeking regime change in Venezuela since Hugo Chavez was

elected in 1998. Trump joined Presidents Obama and Bush before him in continuing efforts to change the government and put in place a U.S.-friendly oligarch government.

They came closest in 2002 when a military coup removed Chavez. The Commander-in-Chief of the Venezuelan military announced Chavez had resigned and Pedro Carmona, of the Venezuelan Chamber of Commerce, became interim president. Carmona dissolved the National Assembly and Supreme Court and declared the Constitution void. The people surrounded the presidential palace and seized television stations, Carmona resigned and fled to Colombia. Within 47 hours, civilians and the military restored Chavez to the presidency. The coup was a turning point that strengthened the Bolivarian Revolution, showed people could defeat a coup and exposed the US and oligarchs.

### **U.S. Regime Change Tactics Have Failed In Venezuela**

The U.S. and oligarchs continue their efforts to reverse the Bolivarian Revolution. The United States has a long history of regime change around the world and has tried all of its regime change tools in Venezuela. So far they have failed.

#### *Economic War*

Destroying the Venezuelan economy has been an ongoing campaign by the US and oligarchs. It is reminiscent of the US coup in Chile which ended the presidency of Salvador Allende. To create the environment for the Chilean coup, President Nixon ordered the CIA to "make the economy scream."

Henry Kissinger devised the coup noting a billion dollars of investment were at stake. He also feared the "the insidious model effect" of the example of Chile leading to other countries breaking from the United States and capitalism. Kissinger's top deputy at the National Security Council, Viron Vaky, opposed the coup saying, "What we propose is patently a violation of our own principles and policy tenets ... If these principles have any meaning, we normally depart from them only to meet the gravest threat ... our survival."

These objections hold true regarding recent US coups, including in Venezuela and Honduras, Ukraine and Brazil, among others. Allende died in the coup and wrote his last words to the people of Chile, especially the workers, "Long live the people! Long live the workers!" He was replaced by Augusto Pinochet, a brutal and violent dictator.

For decades the US has been fighting an economic war, "making the economy scream," in Venezuela. Wealthy Venezuelans have been conducting economic sabotage aided by the US with sanctions and other tactics. This

includes hoarding food, supplies and other necessities in warehouses or in Colombia while Venezuelan markets are bare. The scarcity is used to fuel protests, e.g. "The March of the Empty Pots," a carbon copy of marches in Chile before the September 11, 1973 coup. Economic warfare has escalated through Obama and under Trump, with Tillerson now urging economic sanctions on oil.

President Maduro recognized the economic hardship but also said sanctions open up the opportunity for a new era of independence and "begins the stage of post-domination by the United States, with Venezuela again at the center of this struggle for dignity and liberation." The second-in-command of the Socialist Party, Diosdado Cabello, said, "[if they] apply sanctions, we will apply elections."

### *Opposition Protests*

Another common US regime change tool is supporting opposition protests. The Trump administration renewed regime change operations in Venezuela and the anti-Maduro protests, which began under Obama, grew more violent. The opposition protests included barricades, snipers and murders as well as widespread injuries. When police arrested those using violence, the US claimed Venezuela opposed free speech and protests.

The opposition tried to use the crack down against violence to achieve the U.S. tactic of dividing the military. The U.S. and western media ignored opposition violence and blamed the Venezuelan government instead. Violence became so extreme it looked like the opposition was pushing Venezuela into a Syrian-type civil war. Instead, opposition violence backfired on them.

Violent protests are part of U.S. regime change repertoire. This was demonstrated in the U.S. coup in Ukraine, where the U.S. spent \$5 billion to organize government opposition including U.S. and EU funding violent protesters. This tactic was used in early US coups like the 1953 Iran coup of Prime Minister Mossadegh. The U.S. has admitted organizing this coup that ended Iran's brief experience with democracy. Like Venezuela, a key reason for the Iran coup was control of the nation's oil.

### *Funding Opposition*

There has been massive U.S. investment in creating opposition to the Venezuelan government. Tens of millions of dollars have been openly spent through USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy and other related US regime change agencies. It is unknown how much the CIA has spent from its secret budget, but the CIA has also been involved in Venezuela. Current CIA director, Mike Pompeo, said he is "hopeful there can be a transition in Venezuela."

The United States has also educated leaders of opposition movements,

e.g. Leopoldo López was educated at private schools in the US, including the CIA-associated Kenyon College. He was groomed at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government and made repeated visits to the regime change agency, the National Republican Institute.

### *Elections*

While the US calls Venezuela a dictatorship, it is in fact a strong democracy with an excellent voting system. Election observers monitor every election.

In 2016, the economic crisis led to the opposition winning a majority in the National Assembly. One of their first acts was to pass an amnesty law. The law described 17 years of crimes including violent felonies and terrorism committed by the opposition. It was an admission of crimes back to the 2002 coup and through 2016. The law demonstrated violent treason against Venezuela. One month later, the Supreme Court of Venezuela ruled the amnesty law was unconstitutional. U.S. media, regime change advocates and anti-Venezuela human rights groups attacked the Supreme Court decision, showing their alliance with the admitted criminals.

Years of violent protests and regime change attempts, and then admitting their crimes in an amnesty bill, have caused those opposed to the Bolivarian Revolution to lose power and become unpopular. In three recent elections Maduro's party won regional, local and the Constituent Assembly elections.

The electoral commission announced the presidential election will be held on April 22. Maduro will run for re-election with the United Socialist Party. Opposition leaders such as Henry Ramos and Henri Falcon have expressed interest in running, but the opposition has not decided whether to participate. Henrique Capriles, who narrowly lost to Maduro in the last election, was banned from running for office because of irregularities in his campaign, including taking foreign donations. Capriles has been a leader of the violent protests. When his ban was announced he called for protests to remove Maduro from office. Also banned was Leopoldo Lopez, another leader of the violent protests who is under house arrest -serving a thirteen year sentence for inciting violence.

Now, the United States says it will not recognize the presidential election and urges a military coup. For two years, the opposition demanded presidential elections, but now it is unclear whether they will participate. They know they are unpopular and Maduro is likely to be re-elected.

### **Is War Against Venezuela Coming?**

A military coup faces challenges in Venezuela as the people, including the military, are well educated about US imperialism. Tillerson openly urging a

military coup makes it more difficult.

The government and opposition recently negotiated a peace settlement entitled "Democratic Coexistence Agreement for Venezuela." They agreed on all of the issues including ending economic sanctions, scheduling elections and more. They agreed on the date of the next presidential election. It was originally planned for March, but in a concession to the opposition, it was rescheduled for the end of April. Maduro signed the agreement even though the opposition did not attend the signing ceremony. They backed out after Colombian President Santos, who was meeting with Secretary Tillerson, called and told them not to sign. Maduro will now make the agreement a public issue by allowing the people of Venezuela to sign it.

Not recognizing elections and urging a military coup are bad enough, but more disconcerting is that Admiral Kurt Tidd, head of Southcom, held a closed door meeting in Colombia after Tillerson's visit. The topic was "regional destabilization" and Venezuela was a focus.

A military attack on Venezuela from its Colombian and Brazilian borders is not far fetched. In January, the NY Times asked, "Should the US military invade Venezuela?" President Trump said the US is considering US military force against Venezuela. His chief of staff, John Kelly, was formerly the general in charge of Southcom. Tidd has claimed the crisis, created in large part by the economic war against Venezuela, requires military action for humanitarian reasons.

War preparations are already underway in Colombia, which plays the role of Israel for the US in Latin America. The coup government in Brazil, increased its military budget 36 percent, and participated in Operation: America United, the largest joint military exercise in Latin American history. It was one of four military exercises by the US with Brazil, Colombia and Peru in Latin America in 2017. The US Congress ordered the Pentagon to develop military contingencies for Venezuela in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act.

While there is opposition to US military bases, James Patrick Jordan explains, on our radio show, the US has military bases in Colombia and the Caribbean and military agreements with countries in the region; and therefore, Venezuela is already surrounded.

The United States is targeting Venezuela because the Bolivarian Revolution provides an example against U.S. imperialism. An invasion of Venezuela will become another war-quagmire that kills innocent Venezuelans, U.S. soldiers and others over control of oil. People in the United States who support the self-determination of countries should show solidarity with Venezuelans, expose the U.S. agenda and publicly denounce regime change. We need to educate people about

what is really happening in Venezuela to overcome the false media coverage.

**Kevin Zeese and Margaret Flowers co-direct Popular Resistance. [This article originally appeared at <https://popularresistance.org> and is republished with authors' permission.]**

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