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## Political Trial That Toppled Paraguay's President Is Inspiring Idea in Honduras Three Years after Coup

by George Rodríguez

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Hours after the June 22 political trial that removed Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo ([NotiSur, July 13, 2012](#)), and just over three years after a bloody coup toppled Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya ([NotiCen, July 2, 2009](#)), the head of Honduras' unicameral Congreso Nacional Juan Orlando Hernández began promoting a constitutional reform to introduce the same mechanism in this Central American nation.

The bill is being written and hopefully will be brought for debate in a matter of months, Hernández, a ruling, rightist Partido Nacional (PN) deputy, told journalists on the day of Lugo's removal from office, which governments, civil-society organizations, observers, and political parties throughout Latin America have denounced as nothing less than a coup.

The PN legislator's announcement sparked warnings against the idea on the grounds that Honduras is not ready for such a mechanism and that its eventual implementation could damage more than strengthen this country's battered democracy.

"This has to be done not because it's happening in South America," said Hernández, but also because "it will help us in crises stemming from actions by presidents. It resolves the issue of abuse...by high officials, because we're human. For months, we've been analyzing recommendations made by the Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación (CVR), and one of them is to create the political trial. We need this in Honduras, and we hope to put it to debate in a matter of months."

The commission, set up in 2010 by incoming Honduran President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo to investigate events leading to and following the 2009 coup, finished its 14 months' work releasing a lengthy report whose findings basically come to the conclusion that both sides involved are to blame ([NotiCen, July 28, 2011](#)).

Reactions to the congressional leader's announcement did not take long to surface, mostly against the idea.

### *Critics see threat to fragile democracy in proposal*

Former Honduran President Rafael Leonardo Callejas (1990-1994), a PN leader, described the initiative a major risk for the country and called for the project, which he described as unacceptable, to not be seen as important. Its eventual implementation "would require a constitutional change, and it would be highly risky for the country, thus something that is unacceptable."

To go through with the proposal "would be a mistake for the country, and I ask that political trial not be given any importance," said Callejas, who voiced disagreement with last month's events in the South American nation.

On a similar note, local political analyst Eduardo Martell warned against "imitating what goes on in another country and implementing it in Honduras, because it could damage and hurt democracy."

"Paraguay's Constitution, in Article 225, established a procedure for the Senate to demand responsibility from the president, vice president, ministers, and magistrates," and such is not the case in Honduras, Martell said. "This must be thoroughly studied, and measures should be taken that are convenient for the country, not because it happened in Paraguay...because it's in our interest to strengthen procedures."

"I believe the Paraguay issue had a political ingredient, but it's legitimate because the Constitution establishes it, and President, or former President, Lugo made it clear when he said he would not resign but would submit himself, with utmost obedience, to the Constitution and the law," Martell said.

To be passed, measures aimed at protecting democracy must "be based upon a serious proposal," otherwise political trials could lead to removing a president "each time there's a clash between branches of power," Martell cautioned.

"The problem is that democracy in Latin America hasn't taken root, and there are traces from the recent past," said the expert, who added that democracy in Central America goes back to the 1980s, and it is a process that should be pushed forward, "mainly mentally." Public officials "must subject themselves to the law," to avoid "politically getting even, or meaningless or fruitless confrontation."

### *Human rights leader says US, local elite working together*

Strongly critical of the proposal, local human rights activist Bertha Oliva, head of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), believes the political-trial strategy is part of what she describes as a jigsaw puzzle being assembled by the country's political and economic élite as well as the US. The aim is to revamp the repressive structure of the 1980s to consolidate power, and the political trial is a mechanism suited for this purpose, since any president not adhering to this could easily be removed, said Oliva.

"I believe the announcement made in Congress about taking presidents...to political trial...clearly shows that [the power élite] have evaluated the June 28, 2009, coup," Oliva told NotiCen. Instead of "starting a process of democracy, which in a country like Honduras doesn't exist, what's being consolidated are the ideas of those who staged the military coup, who are a powerful, inside force, complying with an external mandate."

"This tells us that, on a day-to-day basis, we're going to be subjected to external interests and be obedient to them, because nowadays this country is a country which I really consider intervened by US policy and in a way that's not even hidden," Oliva said. One example of US intervention in Honduras is the presence of advisors with expertise in all areas—the military field among them—in local institutions, including the presidency.

One of the main examples is the participation of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) in operations against drug trafficking, such as the May 11 incursion in the Ahuás community in La Mosquitia, a region in the eastern Caribbean department of Gracias a Dios. Four people were killed and another four were injured, according to press reports, which quoted Ahuás mayor Lucio Baquedano and local indigenous Misquito community members as denying that the victims were drug traffickers.

Regarding economic interests, Oliva pointed out that the violence-ridden Bajo Aguán area, where local campesinos and latifundistas (wealthy landowners) are clashing on land issues—with the former being regularly attacked by Army, police, and private security personnel on the landowners' side—is being considered as a site for mining, something the campesinos are opposed to ([NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011](#), and [May 24, 2012](#)).

The activist said the latifundistas claim the campesinos are armed, a false allegation that could eventually lead to declaring the area a state of emergency to stave off an alleged rebellion. The same could happen in La Mosquitia, where oil is said to be under the area in vast amounts, Oliva said.

Bajo Aguán and La Mosquitia are in the departments of Colón and Gracias a Dios, which border each other.

Meanwhile, a new, élite, militarily trained police force is about to be created, Oliva said. The bill for the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (TIGRES), an acronym meaning "tigers," was presented to Congress on July 26 by its president. The force is to be an institution with military discipline, ranks, structure, training, and specializing in providing citizen safety by fighting crime in its different forms, according to the proposed bill.

"So, one sees how things are headed toward returning to the old times," Oliva said, referring to the 1970s and 1980s in Honduras, when paramilitary squads such as Batallón 3-16 operated throughout the country, kidnapping, torturing, and killing people opposed to dictatorships then in power. The activist said Batallón 3-16 was eventually legalized into an official force.

Thus, political trial could prove to be an effective tool against any socially and politically sensitive president, Oliva said, adding, "This law must be passed in order to say, 'Listen, you have to be tough, otherwise, you're out.'"

Oliva says that, through the political-trial system, violently toppling a president, as has repeatedly happened in the past and more recently in Zelaya's case, would not be necessary because the proposed mechanism is itself a coup.

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