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In Corruption-Ridden Honduras, Priest Says People Are Sick of It, Opposition Deputy Promotes Bill to Fight It

by George Rodríguez

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In mass the first Sunday of this month at the Catedral Metropolitana, local priest Carlos Rubio told a packed church that Honduras is burdened by numerous concerns ranging from violence to corruption and including social and economic problems, a situation that causes loss of hope in this Central American nation’s people.

Less than a month before, Deputy Jari Dixon Herrera of the opposition Partido Libertad y Refundación (whose acronym LIBRE is the Spanish word meaning free), introduced a bill to combat corruption in the unicameral Congress (NotiCen, June 14, 2012).

The legislator—a member of the party founded by former President José Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), toppled during the bloody 2009 coup and now a LIBRE deputy—told local media the initiative aims at eradicating the deeply-rooted phenomenon.

The text was presented just over two months after Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, in one of his first actions in office, signed a letter of intent with Transparency International (TI) and its local representative to promote transparency and to combat corruption.

The task is an uphill effort at best in a country that has been labeled for years in different international studies and reports as one of the world’s most corrupt countries (NotiCen, July 10, 2008).

US State Department report criticizes Honduras

The US State Department's latest report on human rights practices worldwide, released on Feb. 25, says that corruption is not effectively punished in Honduras. In the country report, Section 4. Corruption and Lack of Transparency in Government, it says, "The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials, but authorities did not effectively implement the law" last year. "Government institutions were subject to corruption and political influence, and some officials engaged in corrupt practices with impunity."

In one case mentioned in the report, "in February authorities charged Hector Guillen, former finance minister and member of the National Congress, with abusing his authority as a public official and committing fraud against the state. More than 1.14 million lempiras (US$57,000) of undeclared money was seized from his wife’s vehicle in July 2012, and an investigation revealed he had leased six government-run shrimp farms at below-market prices for personal gain while finance minister. In July the Supreme Court ordered a provisional stay for Guillen’s case."

In another example, the report said, "In July authorities arrested two Ministry of Health officials in connection with the theft of medical supplies valued at approximately 50 million lempiras (US$2.5 million). As of October the Public Ministry was investigating 27 officials, including 22 prosecutors, on charges related to fraud and personal enrichment via their professional duties."
In the State Department’s view, "A widespread public perception remained that the anti-corruption institutions did not take sufficient steps to contain corruption and were unwilling or lacked the professional capacity and resources to investigate, arrest, and prosecute those involved in high-level corruption. Transparency International expressed particular concern regarding corruption in the judiciary and security forces."

The report said, "The Public Ministry, police investigative services, and the public accounting authority (TSC) are the government agencies responsible for combating corruption. There is an anti-corruption working group composed of the TSC, Office of the Solicitor General, Public Ministry, Supreme Court, Institute for Access to Public Information (IAIP), National Commission of Human Rights, and Anticorruption Council," and it added that the anti-corruption agencies "made some efforts to collaborate with civil society groups" in addressing the problem.

Last year, "The Public Ministry’s Corruption Prosecutor’s Office made some progress in reducing the backlog of cases in which public officials were implicated in acts of corruption and abuse of power," the report said, adding that the corruption cases pending as of September numbered 3,324, some dating as far back as 1994.

"Since 1994 authorities brought 213 cases to court. The Public Ministry stated that the low rate of prosecution related to factors such as a lack of prosecutorial and judicial education and professional development, unclear roles and responsibilities of government institutions, an unclear penal code, and lack of resources," the report said.

Priest advocates turning to God

Referring to the context of basically unpunished corruption, Rubio told parishioners attending mass the first Sunday of May at the Catedral Metropolitana, in downtown Tegucigalpa, that they should turn to God in search of hope. "The country is disillusioned with many of its leaders who have made so many promises which have remained in the world of ideas or in the Honduras of the impossible," he said. The people are "overwhelmed by violence, the many social problems, unemployment, poverty, debt, and we can keep mentioning many others, including corruption by officials that goes unpunished."

"A major part of our Honduran society feels overwhelmed, sickened, disillusioned, hopeless, and pessimistic," said the priest. "There are many expressions of hopelessness and, above all, of the superficial hopes that have vanished and have turned into systematic doubt regarding everything."

Within this context, Hondurans must turn to God, "not to suddenly answer our petitions but in principle ... to return from the absence of hope," said Rubio, who asked the Honduran people to be "protagonists of a new society" and allow God "to remove the blindness from our eyes and the harshness from our hearts, where selfishness has led us, and our individualistic plans that have made of Honduras a polarized and fragmented society."

"God invites us to live in brotherhood to turn Honduras into a global community where, with their own lives and their good deeds, each one builds other people’s lives. ... Let’s globalize solidarity and banish individualism, indifference, pessimisms, and let’s not tire of doing good," he said.

Bill presented to address public and private corruption

Also criticizing corruption by officials, the LIBRE deputy brought the anti-corruption bill to parliament last month, telling local media, "Here, there’s always been talk about combating
common crime and organized crime, but when it comes to combating corruption nobody talks of bigger sentences and of a law against corruption because those who are in government, in most cases, are those who commit the acts of corruption."

In this regard, Dixon Herrera pointed out that the proposed law classifies corruption as public and private, "because the scourge also happens in the private sector, and that is not included in Honduran legislation."

The opposition deputy explained that, among other content, the proposed law aims at creating a national anti-corruption bureau assigned to the Fiscalía General de la República (FGR), with a degree of autonomy.

On the government’s side, on Jan. 28, one day after taking office, JOH –as Hernández is popularly known—and officials of TI and its local representative the Asociación por una Sociedad más Justa (ASJ) signed a letter of intent as a commitment to transparency and public integrity, aimed at defining a strategy for TI and ASJ to accompany all anti-corruption processes during the 2014-2018 period—JOH’s presidential term.

After the signing ceremony, Ti’s director for the Americas Alejandro Salas told reporters that the letter "is closer cooperation than just criticizing or making outside proposals. We’re going one step further, saying: ‘a vote of confidence for the new government.’"

In separate statements to reporters, ASJ president Carlos Alberto Hernández said, "It seems very good to me that President Hernández also decided to open up to the international community—which, to some extent, we represent—to bring us in."

But civil society leaders voiced concern about the agreement in statements to reporters. Ludin Ayala said that, in her view, Honduran civil society could feel "fear for ourselves and even for what the real intentions are, where we might be going. But as Honduran, we mainly have a commitment, and it is for a more just society."

More directly, Omar Rivera said, "I believe that international organizations as prestigious as Transparency International should be careful in their relations with governments, because the purpose of many state entities will surely be to improve the perception indices by means of linking themselves more closely with those who grade them."

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