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Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández Responds to Calls for Resignation with Calls for Dialogue

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As the regional popular saying goes, Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández apparently "heard the footsteps of a big animal" (oyó pasos de animal grande) coming from neighboring Guatemala.

There, amid a corruption scandal that shook the government, massive, relentless popular pressure forced Guatemalan Vice President Roxana Baldetti to step down—and thousands have also demanded the resignation of President Otto Pérez Molina (NotiCen, April 23, 2015, and July 2, 2015).

Just as in the Guatemalan case and 22 years after Guatemala's then President Jorge Serrano (1991-1993), also involved in corruption, was pressured by the people to resign, going into exile in Panama after a brief stay in El Salvador, where he was not welcomed, angry Hondurans are saying, by the thousands, they've had it with unpunished government corruption and are demanding Hernández’s—and other high officials’—resignation.

Widespread wrongdoing in IHSS

The reason is major-scale wrongdoing in the Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social (IHSS)—which opposition sectors describe as "pillage," "mega-fraud," "embezzlement," and plain "theft" of public funds—involving ruling Partido Nacional (PN) leaders and top government officials.

Forced by massive social unrest, JOH—as Hernández is locally known—hurriedly decided last week to take the initiative and call for a broadly inclusive national dialogue on a system he proposed against corruption and impunity.

Praised by the local academia, the foreign diplomatic corps—specifically the US Embassy—and religious sectors, the measure does not seem to have satisfied the angry thousands, who are going ahead with the massive peaceful demonstrations and their demands.

On March 6, 2014, almost three months after it began an inquiry ordered by then President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2010-2014)—also a "cachureco," as PN members are known—the Comisión Interventora del IHSS produced its report, coinciding with the institute’s 55th anniversary. In the 14-chapter, 151-page document covering the 2010-2013 period, the work group presented the critical general situation reflected in a financial deficit close to 6.4 billion lempiras (some US$290 million).

However lengthy, the report did not detail the corruption voiced by the country’s civil society, opposition forces, and the media, pointing out instead general mismanagement of funds, such as excess spending.

Local press reports as well as accusations made by civil society and political sectors said the IHSS’s financial ruin was caused by large-scale, high-level corruption including the purchase of overpriced medicine—sometimes expired—from different companies, events that have been linked to the ruling traditional Partido Nacional (PN).
Those sources have stated that as many as 3,000 patients died as a consequence of IHSS corruption.

Details of the illegal activities at the institute were revealed early last month on Honduran television’s Globo TV—which along with Radio Globo was among the local media opposed to the 2009 bloody coup that toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2009).

In the program Interpretando la Noticia that he conducts live on the radio and television stations, Globo director David Romero showed copies of checks issued to pharmaceutical companies involved in the irregular transactions.

Reading check numbers, issuers, payees, and amounts, and showing photocopies of checks on camera, Romero said some of the money illegally obtained by companies was transferred to the PN for its 2013 election campaign.

"Those were monthly operations made by each one of those enterprises ... bound by tacit contract or tacit pact, between the Partido Nacional and themselves, as instruments to take the money and make the monthly—monthly—deposits, and the amount varies according to the amount the company received," Romero said. "The account of the Partido Nacional de Honduras where these deposits were made is 1100265154, Comité Central Partido Nacional de Honduras."

Just one of the companies "contributed approximately 17 million lempiras [just more than US $772,000] to the Partido Nacional de Honduras," Romero stated, as an example, in the May 8 broadcast.

Describing the way the companies operated, Romero said that a number of units of a certain product would be purchased by the IHSS from a specific company, the items would be taken to a storage area only to be removed hours later and purchased again, a transaction which was repeated several times. "That’s how they swindled social security," said the journalist, who six days later told local and international media he was being threatened.

"It was a very well-mounted, very well-designed, very well-worked structure," Romero told his audience. "The whole structure was created in an air-conditioned office, with tinted-glass doors, where the most lucid brains of the Partido Nacional de Honduras’ corruption were."

In Romero's view, in a country where corruption has historically run high, "This is just the tip of the iceberg."

Demonstrators demand change

The IHSS scandal sparked massive peaceful demonstrations, which began days after the Globo report, gathering tens of thousands of members of the Movimiento de Indignados in torch-lit marches usually held Fridays at dusk in Tegucigalpa, the nation’s capital, and other cities chanting slogans such as "JOH, out!" "I came because I wanted to, they didn’t pay me!" and carrying signs stating "no more corruption," "JOH, resign," "no more impunity, no more corruption," "dictatorship
will end," "thieves shall not inherit the Kingdom of God," "jail for IHSS thieves," and "IHSS, major plundering."

As the movement grew stronger the government began to question the Indignados’ legitimacy, and has tried to take away their anti-corruption banner. On June 17, Hernández said there are "legitimate expressions of outrage" in the demonstrations and pointed out that "groups that had committed acts of corruption wanted to use these marches, but those who legitimately feel outrage are already setting the difference," thus, "the outlook begins to become clear."

Two days later, presidential adviser Ebal Díaz said, "We’re surprised that in these marches thousands and thousands of torches are carried," adding that, according to fiscal authorities, most of them were illegally imported, while "less than 4,000 paid taxes. Wouldn’t that be corruption as well?"

Díaz went on to point out that "those are things we must think about. I believe this struggle against corruption must be pretty coherent, because it’s about Honduras being a coherent country, it’s about all of us being committed to the struggle against corruption."

On June 22, Díaz further attacked the legitimacy of the demonstrations, stating that leaders of the opposition Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE) and the Partido Anticorrupción (PAC) as well as corrupt entrepreneurs were behind the protest movement, aiming at destabilizing the government.

"We’ve been watching the torch marches, and now it’s something different. Those marches have already lost force," Díaz said. "They’re not the outraged people who came out with a clean feeling to demand that corruption be fought, but they've been totally captured by the LIBRE and PAC political structures."

"This is now a political movement clearly aimed at tangling the country and achieving instability for better attaining their political interest," said Díaz. "What we’re seeing is an escalation, a process to destabilize the country, the government, and cause chaos. They’ve lost their patriotic sense. At first, they gave hope that it was a genuine movement, but not anymore. Corrupt entrepreneurs are funding these campaigns. We’re not going to allow them to set the country on fire, we’re not going to allow chaos to rule the country."

In the presidential aide’s opinion, tax evaders are promoting the protest marches. "There are enormous amounts of money of people who’ve done business in the past and at this moment feel at risk because the inquiries have made progress and it’s cheaper for them to bet on these movements," Díaz said. He thus coincided with a statement made shortly before by the president, who warned that "tax evaders and drug traffickers" are behind the marches.
Government calls for integral system against corruption

Regardless of the government’s point of view, the massive demonstrations keep taking to the streets in Honduran cities, with the added strength of a hunger strike, in Tegucigalpa, backing the demand for a Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Honduras. The young hunger strikers seek a body such as Guatemala’s Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad in Guatemala (CICIG), which has been functioning since 2007 in a country also badly hit by endemic corruption (NotiCen, May 28, 2015). Initially two, later three, and, more recently, seven, they were described by Díaz as people who "don't believe in God, don’t respect anyone, and are willing to create chaos."

The added peaceful protest, which began June 22, was meant to be held outside the Casa Presidencial—the government’s headquarters in Tegucigalpa—but security forces intervened to prevent it, leading Ariel Varela and Miguel Briceño to set up camp a few yards away.

Indignados spokesperson Darwin González then told reporters that the measure demanding the CICIH is because "the government is afraid to request it, but there are people out on the streets, fed up with corruption."

The following evening, Hernández went on nationwide television to tell fellow Hondurans he also has had it with corruption and that he was going beyond what the hunger strikers were demanding and what the UN had suggested. Referring to the demonstrations, he said participants "are legitimately tired of waiting, they’re honest citizen who are exasperated—like me—by the often sluggishness of the judicial system or by decisions that blatantly go against our society’s interests."

"But just as we’ve been decided and forceful against organized crime and common crime ... we’re going to be successful against corruption and impunity," the president added in his June 23 address, accompanied by members of the Consejo de Defensa y Seguridad. "In 2010 and 2011, the Honduran government asked the UN to create a committee against impunity, and they replied with an offer of technical support and institutional strengthening for the Ministerio Público in its struggle against organized crime and impunity. I’m convinced we must go way beyond that, way beyond that."

The president added that discussion within the council led the government to bring before Hondurans the proposal to create the Sistema Integral Hondureño de Combate a la Impunidad y la Corrupción. The system is based on what he described as "five fundamental components," including creating anti-corruption supervision and support units within both the Ministerio Público and the judicial system, and a special security unit for judges, attorneys, and their families.

Hernández described the other two components as an Observatorio del Sistema de Justicia for "permanent evaluation of the justice system," and a Sistema de Integridad Empresarial to watch over the private sector, "ruled by internationally accepted principles of transparency and integrity."

On June 27—only four days after the presidential proposal—Varela and Briceño decided to abandon the hunger strike, having reported harassment and aggression by security forces. That evening, another massive Marcha de las Antorchas lit Tegucigalpa at sunset.

-- End --

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