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Indignados Seek Support from Pope; OAS commends President Juan Orlando Hernández

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Honduras’ tense political scenario—more tense than usual for the past several weeks—with the habitual component of violence, is undergoing changes in an atmosphere within which official optimism and popular skepticism coexist. After weeks of massive nationwide protests triggered by colossal corruption hitting this impoverished Central American nation’s social security system, a government-sponsored, Organization of American States (OAS)-facilitated national dialogue on how to fight impunity is underway.

An investigative commission set up by the previous administration of President Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (2010-2014) said the critical condition of the Instituto Hondureño de Seguridad Social (IHSS), as a result of devastating plundering, was reflected two years ago in a deficit of some 6.4 billion lempiras (approximately US$290 million).

In the work group’s general findings released earlier this year, the critical IHSS situation resulted from blatant mismanagement of funds, which included excess spending, and, according to local media reports as well as accusations by civil society and political sectors, corrupt practices in the purchase of drugs and medical supplies explain why the IHSS went broke.

In a sort of two-nation domino theory following massive anti-corruption demonstrations in Guatemala, which led to the resignation and arrest of former vice president Roxana Baldetti (NotiCen, April 23, 2015), angry Hondurans, fed up with endemic unpunished corruption, took to the streets—first in the capital, Tegucigalpa, later on nationwide.

Popular anger was fueled because, besides having ruined the country’s social security system and killed some 3,000 Hondurans who could not receive medical treatment or drugs because of the crisis, the illegal dealings swelled the funds for the successful election campaign two years ago of the ruling rightist Partido Nacional (PN), which put its candidate Juan Orlando Hernández in the president’s chair for the 2014-2018 period (NotiCen, Dec. 5, 2013, and Feb. 6, 2014).

The scandal ushered in the Movimiento de Indignados, with its massive Friday-night torch-lit, peaceful marches, and a 42-day hunger strike by some 20 persons—including members of indigenous communities—demanding Hernández’s resignation and the creation of an anti-corruption task force.

Indignados want Guatemala-style anti-corruption commission

Inspired by the Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala (CICIG), the Indignados are demanding a Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad in Honduras (CICIH).

In an effort to counter the massive unrest triggered by the IHSS scandal, JOH—as Hernández is referred to by local media and the population—immediately proposed the creation of a Sistema Integral Hondureño de Combate a la Impunidad y la Corrupción (SIHCIC).
During a June 23 radio-television national address, Hernández told Hondurans the government was going beyond the Indignados’ demand (NotiCen, July 2, 2015), proposed the system, and called for a national debate to find a way to tackle corruption and impunity—an actual way of life for some in this country.

With the Indignados skeptically observing, the dialogue took off a few days after the presidential announcement, as a starting point immediately followed by the ongoing second part, with OAS mediation.

The Marcha de las Antorchas (March of the Torches) became a means to express popular rage at the massive-scale plundering of the IHSS, an institution that is vital for this country’s majority living in poverty and extreme poverty.

Starting in May in Tegucigalpa—to eventually cover the nation—12 such massive peaceful marches, held Fridays at dusk, gathered thousands of Hondurans chanting slogans against the government—mainly "JOH, out!"—and carrying signs with phrases including the very popular "JOH resign," as well as "no more impunity, no more corruption," and "jail for IHSS thieves."

A supporting hunger strike was held—at its peak by 20 angry Hondurans, including women as well as members of the Lenca and the Tolupán indigenous peoples and campesinos—for 42 days, also initially in Tegucigalpa—in front of the Casa Presidencial, the seat of government, and spreading to other cities nationwide.

The demonstrations were closely followed by the Policía Nacional—including officers of its elite anti-riot force Los Cobras. The hunger strikers, mainly those outside the Casa Presidencial, were harassed by security forces, according to Indignados sources.

With OAS authorities in Tegucigalpa for the start of the second stage of the talks, an unprecedented violent incident occurred during the 12th demonstration on Aug. 14, after the starting meeting of the second phase, outside the Casa Presidencial and close to the hotel where OAS authorities were lodged.

Local media reported that a group of masked youths clashed with police agents and military troops outside the Casa Presidencial. Quoted by the Honduran online news outlet Criterio, Isha Mercado, a witness of the incident, reported on her Facebook account that the group was brought in by "Merlin Cárcamo, a known [ruling] Partido Nacional activist."

The Indignados immediately interrupted the march and later decided to not hold further demonstrations because of the increasing lack of coordination between organizers of the street protests. Meanwhile, the hunger strike was called off, on day 42, in order to set a new course of action to back the movement’s demands as the dialogue develops without their participation.

Meeting with US ambassador disappoints protesters

Before the OAS-backed phase of the national dialogue began, a five-strong delegation representing the movement briefly met on July 17—closing the eighth Marcha de las Antorchas—with James Nealon, the US ambassador to Honduras. Their hope was to get US backing for the popular demand for the CICIH, but they were in for a strong surprise and major disappointment. Speaking words definitely not in line with the traditional US influence in Honduran politics, Nealon told the group it was not up to the US to determine how Honduras should fight corruption.
"A the request of the leaders of the march who came to the US Embassy I met with those who introduced themselves as the leaders," the diplomat stated in a communiqué. "We met briefly and I told them in private what I have stated in public: it is not up to the US to dictate what mechanism is suited for confronting corruption. The solution has to be something constructed for Honduras and it has to be an Honduran solution. The US will help the efforts by Honduras to try and combat impunity and corruption and encourage transparency. I have clearly stated to those who have introduced themselves as this movement’s leaders that only I speak on behalf of the US Embassy in Honduras, and they are not authorized to speak on my behalf."

After the meeting, Ariel Varela, one of the movement’s coordinators, told reporters that he had "expected more," and said the movement would seek support from Pope Francis. "The Honduran people are outraged, the Honduran people are fed up and each day more upset because the president, who's an employee of the people, simply ignores the people," Varela stated. "We’re going to ask the Vatican for support. The letter will be delivered at the Apostolic Nunciature for the pope to receive the letter, which will state that we’ve been ignored by the government, and that’s why international help is needed to create a mechanism to combat corruption."

Varela said the pope knows about the overwhelming levels of Honduran corruption and about the people’s demand to end it, adding that "the news has spread worldwide, there’ve been marches in Rome, in other countries in Europe, in the US, and he has stated that corruption is an unforgivable sin."

Six days after Hernández, under pressure from the growing and increasingly strong popular movement, announced the national dialogue and made the SIHCIC proposal, talks with different Honduras sectors began.

The Indignados, as well as opposition political parties such as the Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), led by ex-President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2005-2009), toppled during the bloody 2009 coup (NotiCen, Aug. 13, 2009), and the Partido Anticorrupción (PAC), headed by popular television host Salvador Nasralla, have declined to take part.

As an unidentified Indignado participating in one of the marches told local reporters shortly after the dialogue began, "We can’t sit down to talk with the government because it has implemented disorder in this country, corruption has been engendered inside the government, so, we can’t trust it."

And PAC leader and former presidential candidate Nasralla said, regarding the ongoing talks, that Honduran politicians are experts in creating dialogue structures. "That’s how our political class deceives the international community," he pointed out.

**UN, OAS pledge support for Hernández’s efforts**

Also shortly after the talks got underway, in a letter addressed to OAS Secretary-General Luis Almagro, who on May 26 replaced José Miguel Insulza for the 2015-2020 period, the former Honduran president requested diplomatic action by the continental organization against Hernández’s government.

Fulfilling its commitment, the OAS appointed John Biehl, a Chilean lawyer, diplomat, and political scientist working in the OAS Department of Political Affairs. Biehl has acted as an advisor to several Latin American governments, including the first of two Costa Rican administrations headed by
Óscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010) and was instrumental in Arias’ successful effort to obtain the 1987 Nobel Peace Prize. With Biehl’s introduction as the OAS mediator on Aug. 17, the second phase of the Honduran national dialogue was launched.

While the Indignados and other civil-society sectors keep up the demand for Hernández to resign and government corruption to end, the ceremony held at the Casa Presidencial was an opportunity for the OAS to praise the president’s decision to hold the national dialogue and to call for international support.

"President Hernández has the courage to invite persons from abroad to take part in the dialogue, and he tells us, 'There’s nothing hidden here, come and see what we want to do to strengthen democracy through dialogue,'" Biehl said. "This is an intimate, precious, and historic process, which is yours," he told Honduran authorities.

After being introduced by Biehl, Almagro—a former Uruguayan foreign minister under leftist former President José "Pepe" Mujica (2010-2015)—said, "I’m going to accompany the National Dialogue proposed by President Juan Orlando Hernández." The process "has come to strengthen democracy and create conditions of legitimacy, transparency, and tolerance in order to counter corruption."

And Hernández took the opportunity to say, "We’re going to start building something good. It will be recorded in the history of Honduras. This is a new phase in the dialogue, now with international facilitators taking part, and it’s the moment to build our best institution against corruption and impunity."

Commenting on the Indignados’ demand for the CICIH, Hernández said, "Having seen the experiences in Guatemala and other places in the world, we Hondurans can dialogue among ourselves and come up with something better than that of Guatemala."

Referring to his SIHCIC proposal without specifically mentioning it, Hernández expressed confidence about the creation of "an Honduran integrated system with international support to be able to have success, much more success, in the struggle against corruption, impunity, and to instill a culture of transparency."

But outside the Casa Presidencial, reality kept manifesting itself. As optimistic speeches were being delivered, an Indignados leader in Bonito Oriental, a town in the northern department of Colón, in the Honduran Caribbean region, was murdered. The human rights organization Defensores en Línea said that on Aug. 17, at noon, Elmer Avila—a local organizer of the marches—was at his home with his young daughter when two masked assailants entered and fatally shot him twice in front of the child.

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