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Honduras Has New Plan to Clean Up Its Police Force— Again

by George Rodríguez

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Creating an efficient police force from an outfit with a lengthy record of corruption and impunity at every level is a monumental task. This is proving to be the case in Honduras, where crooked cops—high and low—have been deeply involved in crimes such as drug trafficking, score-settling, kidnappings, and bloody internal feuds ([NotiCen, Feb. 18, 2016](#), [June 23, 2016](#), [Feb. 16, 2017](#)).

Several initiatives have been launched to straighten the Policía Nacional (National Police, PN), and they have invariable failed. The most recent efforts were sparked by two police-related, high-profile homicides that occurred seven months apart.

The first case took place in October 2011, when two university students were fatally shot. One of the students was the son of Julieta Castellanos, the rector of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (National Autonomous University of Honduras, UNAH). Castellanos immediately went to the media to call for the killers to be captured and punished, and for corrupt officers to be expelled from the force.

In the second case, in May 2012, a well-known local radio journalist was kidnapped and murdered, becoming one of the dozens of newsmen who have been killed in Honduras, mostly after the 2009 coup against then-President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya (2006-2009). On May 24, shortly after the journalist’s murder, the Congreso Nacional (National Congress) passed a decree declaring a national emergency in public safety as a means to allow for what was then described as a speedy and reliable process to cleanse the PN.

Short-lived law

The Ley Especial para la Depuración Policial (Special Law for Police Cleansing) obtained congressional approval, and then-President Porfirio Lobo (2010-2014) signed it the following day. Among other provisions, the legislation called for members of the force to submit to “pruebas de confianza” (“trust tests”).

The multiple-purpose tests, which included polygraph examinations, were aimed at finding out whether officers were apt for the job, determining if the officers’ salaries were congruent with the amount of property they owned, and establishing their psychological fitness.

Under the law, any officer failing the tests was to be immediately discharged. Over the six months that followed, 1,000 policemen—out of a total of 26,000 members of the force—actually took the examinations, and approximately 200 were dismissed.

But on Nov. 26, 2012, having studied two appeals against the law, the magistrates of the Sala Constitucional de la Corte Suprema de Justicia (Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice) ruled, by a 4-1 majority vote, that the law was unconstitutional. They argued, among other things, that the text violated the rule of law, the sacked policemen’s presumption of innocence, and their right to a defense. The Congress, then headed by Juan Orlando Hernández, who is now the

country's president, reacted swiftly. On Dec. 12, 2012, shortly after midnight, it dismissed the four magistrates. (NotiCen, Jan. 24, 2013).

At the time, Honduras also created the Dirección de Investigación y Evaluación de la Carrera Policial (Office for the Investigation and Evaluation of the Police Profession, DIECP), officially conceived as the authority that would actually clean up the PN. Between 2012 and 2016, DIECP dismissed 227 mostly low-ranking PN members, a number considered by observers too low to stop the criminal activity of corrupt cops, which continued unabated.

That was the case in two militarized police units promoted by then-Congressman Hernández and created in 2013 as efforts to counter PN corruption: the Policía Militar de Orden Público (Public Order Military Police, PMOP) and the Tropa de Inteligencia y Grupos de Respuesta Especial de Seguridad (Intelligence Troops and Special Response Security Groups, TIGRES, an intimidating acronym spelling the Spanish word for "tigers") (NotiCen, April 2, 2015). In 2015, both were hit by corruption scandals.

First came the arrest of 22 "tigers" charged with having stashed away US\$1.3 million of the US\$12.5 million they had confiscated when they captured the leaders of a drug-trafficking organization. The second was the detention of four PMOP officers during the kidnapping of the owner of a fruit shop in a market in southern Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital.

On April 6, 2016, President Hernández sent Congress a decree "to declare police cleansing a national priority, to declare it an emergency." The Congress fast-tracked the request and created the Comisión Especial para el Proceso de Depuración y Transformación de la Policía Nacional (Special Commission for the Process of Cleansing and Transforming the National Police).

Although it has not managed to actually curb police corruption, the new group has proved to be far more efficient than DIECP, for in just eight months it fired some 2,000 police officers, 46% of them from the higher ranks.

Last Jan. 2, the local daily newspaper La Tribuna had predicted that DIECP was on the way out, and a new structure was about to replace it. Attributing the information to "several sources," La Tribuna reported that "DIECP has convinced neither the authorities nor society in general [of its efficiency], since it spent more than 180 million lempiras (just over US\$7.8 million) and results have not been what was expected, because it focused its efforts on investigating low-ranking police officers, when contamination comes from the leadership."

"DIECP has provided valuable information in general terms, but on emblematic cases it has not performed a deep and solid investigation against many criminals disguised as police officer," special commission member Omar Rivera told the newspaper.

La Tribuna then said that DIECP would be replaced by the Dirección de Asuntos Disciplinarios Policiales (Police Discipline Affairs Administration, DIADIPOL).

"The intention is to establish a new evaluation system by creating DIADIPOL, which will follow a rigorous and constant process of evaluation and investigation within the police, and will have the power to dismiss when it is called for," La Tribuna reported.

DIADIPOL's mandate would be to "keep the members of the police leadership at bay, meaning the police commissioners, deputy commissioners and inspectors, with no fear whatsoever," it added.

But just over two months later, Oscar Vásquez, who was then the DIECP chief, told journalists that “DIECP should have been strengthened instead of eliminated,” a decision that implies “a setback in the task to cleanse the PN.”

Rivera then countered, saying that the facts reveal DIECP’s “lack of efficiency and [its] ineffectiveness,” adding that “the job of those in charge of the purge is to make the National Police decent and identify the future leaders of the public security body.”

On April 5, Rivera told local media that DIADIPOL would be in force soon, and pointed out that it would be a non-police body that would mainly “certify the eligibility of police career members, officers, and support personnel.”

“We hope DIADIPOL will function as Honduras hoped DIECP would work,” he said. “Should any problems exist regarding transgressions of human rights, we’re fully willing to intervene and really hold those concerned accountable.”

Agencies green-lighted

On May 30, after a lengthy and slow debate, Congress passed the Ley Orgánica de la Policía Nacional (National Police Law). In its 133 articles, congressional deputies gave the green light to the Dirección de Asuntos Comunitarios (Community Affairs Administration), the Dirección Administrativa y Financiera (Financial and Management Administration), the Dirección de Recursos Humanos (Human Resources Administration), among other agencies. The legislation also covers municipal police forces, frequently reported for human rights violations and crime-related activities.

“Regulating the functioning of municipal police forces is a transcendental decision, since they ... dramatically influence the safety of citizens in many of the country’s cities,” Rivera told the local news outlet *Confidencial*. “It’s imperative to guarantee that those who make up these municipal police forces fit the required eligibility profile.”

Rivera said Honduras wanted to avoid a scenario similar to that of Mexico, “where municipal police forces were used by drug-trafficking cartels and other organized crime networks.” He said that “many Mexican municipal police forces became hitmen gangs at the service criminal municipal officials.”

Honduras faces an “enormous risk,” Rivera said. “With all those crooked mayors that have surfaced, it’s crucial to certify that municipal police forces are not working for drug traffickers, mareros [members of maras, or youth gangs], or murderers.”

Another legislative effort to clean up the force is the Ley de la Carrera Policial (Police Career Law), also being debated in Congress. This initiative’s main aim is described as the organization, management, and functioning of the PN’s human resources in order to regulate the police service as a profession.

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