

## UPDATE

# Out of the Past, a New Honduran Culture of Resistance



On February 27, activists from the Honduran resistance unveiled a plaque reasserting the original name of a street in San Pedro Sula that had been renamed for coup leader Roberto Micheletti. A quote from Marx reminds us to remember history as we struggle in the present to make a new future.

By Dana Frank

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FOUR DAYS AFTER ROBERTO MICHELETTI TOOK over Honduras in the June 28, 2009, military coup, he appointed his own nephew mayor of the country's second-largest city, San Pedro Sula. His nephew in turn dedicated one of the city's major boulevards to Micheletti as a little gift. Since the 1970s the road had been popularly named after Rodolfo Aguiluz Berlioz, a university professor who identified with progressive causes.

In mid-February, the plaque naming Bulevar Micheletti was mysteriously destroyed. On February 27, activists from the National Front for Popular Resistance (FNRP), popularly known as the Frente, held a formal ceremony replete with red and black flags, speeches, and music, and

unveiled a new, entirely official-looking metal plaque. Mounted in concrete in a big monument on the boulevard, the plaque acknowledges Aguiluz's labor as a teacher and inscribes a quote from "Carlos Marx" reminding us to remember history as we struggle in the present to make a new future. At the bottom, just as on a proper plaque, curves the name of deposed president Manuel Zelaya; below it, "Presidente Constitucional de Honduras, 2006–2010," as if he'd never been deposed and finished his entire term. "FNRP" appears in the bottom right corner.<sup>1</sup>

With its in-your-face defiance and wonderful creativity, the plaque epitomizes today's daring culture of the Honduran resistance. A new Hon-

duras has been born since the coup, full of pride, determination, and hope, surprising observers both inside and outside the country. As the Frente's careful attention to the plaque underscores, activists in the resistance have a clear sense of the importance of historical memory to their struggle in the present. At the same time, they also set the plaque in concrete very consciously for the future, so that generations to come will know exactly who built their country. The resistance itself, moreover, for all its startling newness, didn't spring out of nowhere.

**W**HAT IS THIS NEW CREATURE, the Honduran resistance? The resistance unites a great array of constituencies in what they refer to as their "broad movement" (*movimiento amplio*). The Frente emerged in Tegucigalpa during the first week after the coup. It is distinctive in being a representative body to which discrete organizations send delegates. Its institutional backbone is the labor movement—especially the teachers, public-sector workers, banana workers, and bottling-plant workers—but equally important are social movements from a range of sectors: the women's movement; gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people; indigenous and Afro-indigenous peoples; human rights groups; and the campesino movement, which is closely intertwined with environmental activism. The Frente has also divided the country up into regions, each of which sends delegates to the national coordinating committee.

From a Latin American perspective, the Honduran resistance is historically new on many fronts. It's not, for example, the product of a center-left or left electoral party, although members of the small Democratic Unification (UD) party are part of it. Nor is it organized by a Marxist-Leninist party—

indeed, there's a strong internal commitment to avoiding overt sectarian politics. Perhaps most importantly, women are front and center, not just as office workers and cooks and the majority of demonstrators, but as an organized constituency with its own demands. Many of the top resistance leaders are women, like Berta Cáceres of the Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), Berta Oliva of the Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared and Detained in Honduras (COFADEH), and Miriam Miranda of the Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras (OFRANEH). In contrast to the patronizing, "women are militant and can hold a gun just like a man" rhetoric in Nicaragua and El Salvador during the 1980s, women themselves, of all classes, ethnic backgrounds, and occupations, are defining the collective terms on which they join the movement.<sup>2</sup>

Most astonishing is the real inclusion of gay and lesbian representatives at the very top of the Frente. Walter Trochez, a top GLBT leader who was killed on December 13, has been embraced as one of the most prominent martyrs of the resistance, for example. Land rights are also central to the demands of the resistance, uniting the concerns of campesinos, coordinated nationally through *Vía Campesina* and other networks; indigenous peoples like the Lenca and the Pech; and the Afro-indigenous Garifuna people, whose traditional fishing villages along the Atlantic coast are threatened by land developers from the oligarchy.

The other innovation has been the movement's remarkable nonviolence. Although the pro-coup media have managed to find one or two rocks thrown through windows, the resistance has defined itself as a *movimiento pacífico*. While the Frente's coordinating committee officially ratified the de-

cision to remain nonviolent a week after the coup, it has been more an act of collective will, enacted from below—part conscious eschewal of armed struggle, part sense that the resistance is outnumbered, and part strategic use of the Gandhian tactic of exposing the regime's brutality, thus raising their own moral stature before the public.

In understanding the Honduran resistance, it's important to distinguish between the Frente, the institutional coordinating body, and the much larger category of all the people who opposed the coup and want to reformulate Honduran society from below. This broader umbrella includes several key constituencies: first, the tens of thousands of members of the Liberal Party loyal to Zelaya and horrified at what Micheletti, Zelaya's Liberal rival, wrought with the coup. Recipients of patronage jobs, rank-and-file loyalists, and recently deposed office holders, Zelayistas are enthusiastic members of the resistance, but in some cases edgy about joining the more left-allied Frente. Their default setting for the future, moreover, could be a revitalized patronage machine that delivers little to the mass of Honduran people.

The second of these constituencies is the leftist UD. Its electoral base is overwhelmingly loyal to the Frente, but the party's two top leaders, Carlos Ham and Marvin Ponce, sold out to the new government of Porfirio Lobo to serve as director of the National Agrarian Institute and vice president of Congress, respectively. The third and largest of these constituencies, and more amorphous, is the mass of individuals, especially the very poor in the urban barrios, who opposed the coup but who can lack a stable, organized relationship to the Frente.

The most surprising aspect of the resistance, of course, is that all this came together in Honduras—which has had the unfortunate reputation

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of being one of the least politicized countries in Latin America. During the 1970s and 1980s, Honduras didn't produce large guerrilla movements on the left as did its neighbors El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Instead, it served as the "USS Honduras," the base for the Reagan administration's Contra war against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, although it did produce a small armed left. But the country's impoverished general population of almost 8 million has remained largely in the ideological thrall of a few oligarchic families, locked into a two-party patronage system without a viable left or center-left electoral party.

Honduras has a new culture now, forged in the resistance movement. Plazas, monuments, and roads have been popularly renamed everywhere, like Plaza Isis Obed next to the Tegucigalpa airport, renamed after the young demonstrator who was shot to death by a sniper atop the airport when Zelaya tried to land his plane on July 5. Between La Lima and San Pedro Sula, a river polluted with garbage and sewage, known informally before the coup as the River That Stinks, suddenly sported an official green sign, erected by the Frente, announcing Río Micheletti.<sup>3</sup> Although the sign was taken down, the name has stuck.

Through songs, art, posters, giant puppets, ubiquitous and often humorous graffiti—even cheap canvas bags printed with *Fuera Golpistas* (Coup Perpetrators Out), which demonstrators use to carry their water bottle, lunch, and bandana—Hondurans are overflowing with creativity. "It's a cultural awakening without precedent," observes Ajax Irias, a sociology professor at the National Autonomous University of Honduras.

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The country's alternative media are central to this new culture, especially the radio. People enthusiastically listen to and call into local opposition radio stations throughout the country; they learn new songs, hear and report breaking news from all over; and develop their critical thinking about the mainstream media's lies. The landscape of daily life is full of aural and visual clues: not just the radio station a given store owner, cab driver, or street vendor is listening to, but stickers people have over their front doors that read, for example, "We Listen to Radio Progreso Here," or the discreet sticker for *El Libertador*, a resistance monthly paper, next to the door of

a video store that inside reveals resistance posters, videos, and activists.

Within households and on the streets, people are remaking their culture from below. Jesuit intellectual and activist Ismael Moreno (also known as Padre Melo), writing in September 2005, lamented: "The politicians and public officials have their home in the political parties and the state. The businesspeople have their home in their businesses. But what can the people call home?"<sup>4</sup> Now the Honduran people have a home, inside the wide umbrella that is the resistance—in part because of Moreno's own work as director of the anti-coup Radio Progreso.

At the core of this new Honduran culture is a line in the sand between the oligarchs, the military, and the coup government—the *golpistas*—on one side, and the great mass of Honduran people on the other. Who exactly is or isn't included in the "we" of the new Honduras is still unclear. The churches, for example, are hard to gauge. Cardinal Óscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga openly endorsed

the coup in its first week, but many Jesuits and other progressive Catholics have been in the forefront of the resistance. Attendance at mass in the capital is down, suggesting defections at the base by critics of the cardinal's position. The top evangelical Protestant leadership also supported the coup, with a few exceptions; its base, though, is of many views.

The ethnic dynamics of the "we" are also complex. Many Hondurans on the left are quick to underscore that the oligarchs who perpetrated the coup and who control most of the country's wealth are of Palestinian descent, known popularly as *los turcos*, and not, in their view, Honduran; hence the widely seen graffiti demanding *Fuera Turcos!* (They are in fact second- and third-generation Palestinian Christians, not Turks.)<sup>5</sup>

**B**UT OF COURSE THE HONDURAN resistance, for all its startling newness, didn't come out of nowhere. In retrospect all the pieces were in place that would explode together once the coup was launched on June 28 and the movement against it snowballed over the course of the summer and fall of 2009.

Two recent struggles in particular prefigured the coup resistance and set the stage for its emergence. In April and May 2008, seven federal prosecutors staged a dramatic 38-day hunger strike on the first floor of the Honduran Congress, protesting the government's refusal to pursue corruption cases. Their struggle eventually drew in the Lenca people, progressive Jesuits, and other allies, highlighting the bankruptcy of the Honduran state while suggesting the promise of broader alliances.<sup>6</sup> On a more massive scale, Honduran teachers staged an enormous strike in fall 2008 demanding payment of their wages—just one of their many strikes and demonstra-

tions in the previous decade. At the time, the teachers were widely criticized in the mainstream media and by some progressives as merely self-interested. But since the coup, their struggles have been recast as heroic—in part because of their astounding bravery in new, prolonged strikes protesting the coup, in part because of their clear commitment to a larger good in doing so, and in part because of their careful work with parents and communities.<sup>7</sup>

During the 1980s and 1990s, precisely when Honduras was so supposedly quiescent, the country's indigenous peoples were mobilizing rapidly as part of a global process through which indigenous peoples asserted their rights and formed new coalitions. In Honduras, the Lenca, Garifuna, and Miskito people first formed advocacy bodies in the 1970s; by the late 1980s, the Tolupán, Pech, and Tawahka people joined them in the first national conference uniting the nation's indigenous organizations, and they have been strengthening their alliances and sharpening their demands ever since.<sup>8</sup> GLBT people in Honduras, similarly, were also attentive to the worldwide growth of the gay movement in these years and began to form their own groups like *Colectiva Violeta* and *Arco Iris*, identify themselves publicly, and even march in the streets.<sup>9</sup>

The Honduran women's movement, meanwhile, was thriving, from left-allied groups like the Honduran Women's Committee for Peace "*Visitación Padilla*," which fought for the closure of U.S. bases in the 1980s, to campesino women's groups, to more urban organizations linking middle-class women with the urban poor around domestic violence and women's poverty, like the Center for Women's Rights (CDM) or the Center for Women's Studies—Honduras (CEM-H). The organizational history

of all these groups does not begin to capture the individual transformations wrought inside gays and lesbians, indigenous and Afro-indigenous people, and women, who increasingly understood themselves as part of a larger, global movement of oppressed peoples rising up all over, with claims on a newly defined national polity.<sup>10</sup>

Other organizations, in place well before the coup, began to link constituencies. Since the 1980s, when more than 100 Hondurans were killed by paramilitaries and other agents of the elites, human rights groups have been tracking, reporting, and denouncing disappearances and killings, along with a great range of other human right abuses. They include COFADEH, the Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Honduras (CODEH), and the Center for Human Rights Research and Promotion (CIPRODEH).

On another front, *Bloque Popular*, a direct-action coalition led by Carlos H. Reyes and Juan Barahona, both trade union leaders, has been persistent in recent years in defining broad, collective demands against the state, against the Central American Free Trade Agreement, and against privatization; on August 27, 2007, it successfully blockaded all roads into the capital. *Bloque Popular*, in turn, spearheaded the National Coordinating Committee of Popular Resistance (CNRP); both were important in backing up the prosecutors' hunger strike. The CNRP, in its tireless work trying to bring together a mass movement uniting all the popular movements of Honduras, is the direct predecessor of the post-coup *Frente*.<sup>11</sup>

The more economically defined organizations at the bedrock of the resistance date even further back, to the 1950s and 1960s. For the labor movement, all roads lead back to the enormous Honduran General Strike of 1954, which lasted 69 days

and involved 23,000 banana workers and 42,000 other workers all over the country. The AFL-CIO, working with the U.S. State Department, quickly moved in and controlled much of the Honduran labor movement for the next three decades, keeping it out of politics and pushing it toward a pro-U.S. and virulently anti-Communist position. By the late 1970s, though, left activists of many stripes had claimed many of those unions or founded new ones; the AFL-CIO eventually shut down its anti-Communist operations in the early 1990s. Out of that decades-long conflict emerged the strongest labor movement in Central America, led by many of the trade unionists central to the resistance today.<sup>12</sup>

The Honduran campesino movement was forged in that same cauldron. While the AFL-CIO founded its own anti-Communist campesino organization, ANACH, in 1962, it was never able to completely control it, nor its more militant Christian Democratic rival. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s campesinos staged land invasions, many of them successful, which the government sought to contain through careful concessions and co-optation. By the eve of the coup, Honduran campesinos were united in two more recent federations, Coordinating Committee of Honduran Campesino Organizations (COCOCH) and the National Campesino Council (CNC). The resistance draws on this long tradition, including tightly organized local campesino organizations affiliated with neither federation.<sup>13</sup>

While it's useful to distinguish these more "traditional" left elements from the newer "social movements," they are, in fact, interwoven, both intellectually and organizationally.<sup>14</sup> Since 1985 a powerful women's movement has transformed the country's banana unions, for example, integrating feminist concerns like domestic violence

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and gender roles in the family into more conventional trade union concerns. The women and men who came of age in that struggle are now among the key leadership of the Frente on the north coast.<sup>15</sup>

Since the coup Hondurans have drawn on all these resources to forge a new national culture with its own heroes, martyrs, collective memory, and sense of its own powers. Francisco Morazán, the Liberal founder of the nation, has been recast as a progressive resistance hero; the 1954 General Strike now provides a heroic, uniquely Honduran precedent for 2009. And yet that national culture draws on transnational identities like the GLBT movement, specific regional histories such as women's struggles during and after the Nicaraguan Revolution, and indigenous peoples' successful uprisings in Bolivia, Ecuador, and beyond.

**A**ND THE HONDURAN FUTURE? Whatever comes next, tens of thousands of ordinary Hondurans will meet it with nerves of steel, forged in the terrible repression that has followed the coup. At least 40 people in the resistance have been killed, more than 3,000 illegally detained, and hundreds raped, beaten, and/or tortured in detention; thousands have lost their jobs for political reasons. For every person who has bravely come forward to testify about human rights abuses, there are five behind him or her terrified to speak out for fear of reprisals. And yet Hondurans have emerged from all this with a new sense of their own personal and collective powers.<sup>16</sup>

The new *movimiento amplio* of the resistance is still growing and strengthening itself from below. Visiting Honduras in February, I witnessed numerous encounters in which activists from quite diverse sectors met and learned about each other's struggles.

In San Pedro Sula, for example, Dulce Villanueva, 28, a middle-class lawyer active for years in the Liberal Party, brought me documentation of how she was being fired for her activism in the resistance. We got a ride back to La Lima, a smaller city outside San Pedro Sula, with José María "Chema" Martínez, communications director for the Coalition of Honduran Banana and Agroindustrial Unions (COSIBAH).

The whole way there Dulce rattled off details of her new friends all over the country and her new life in the movement, including how she'd learned for the first time to sleep on a bench or to eat sitting on the ground. She'd known Micheletti's son in Liberal Party youth circles, she said, but after she got involved in the resistance, he erased her from his Facebook page. When we got to La Lima, it turned out that her family lived right behind Chema's office with the banana unions. They had never met before. Now, in a nationwide process of cross-fertilization, they are part of something much larger than either the banana unions or the left wing of the Liberal Party—both of which are formidable.

Since the coup Hondurans are already moving forward to claim their new society. On December 9, five months after the coup, 3,500 campesinos from seven cooperatives organized as the Unified Movement of Campesinos of Aguán (MUCA) staged a land invasion of African palm plantations in the Aguán Valley. The lands are owned by Miguel Facussé, the most elite of Honduran oligarchs, who is considered by many to be the big mover and shaker behind the coup. As of this writing the campesinos are surrounded by military forces, and the situation threatens to escalate into a massacre.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, Hondurans' new culture of resistance, marked on all those plaques, bridges, and stickers, is mod-

eling a new society within the shell of the old. Indeed, the Frente leadership isn't waiting for the future to arrive but rather claiming it in the present. The Frente does not recognize the government of Lobo, inaugurated on January 27, who has continued, even escalated, the repression of resistance activists and journalists. Lobo's government is a continuation of the coup regime, the Frente underscores, the product of a fraudulent election conducted under anything but free and fair conditions. The Frente plans to hold immense demonstrations on the anniversary of the coup, as well as a giant national assembly to lay the groundwork for a new constitution. Before the end of the year, it hopes to force Lobo to accede to a constitutional convention as the only recourse of an illegitimate and weak government.

The risks are enormous: Will the fractured Liberal Party rise again and co-opt the Frente's demands? Will repression kill the movement at the base—or the top? And what about the Obama administration, which continues to support the coup government and will presumably not tolerate democracy from below in Honduras, which for so long was the United States' one sure captive nation in Central America?

Hundreds of thousands of Hondurans are now, for the first time in their history, daring to imagine a better future, if remaining sober in their assessment of what it will take to get there. Whatever happens, they will have a new history to be proud of. Even if that plaque disappears from the boulevard in San Pedro Sula, it is now forged deep within Honduran culture—along with the collective memory of everything Hondurans have done since June 28, 2009. Generations to come will tell and retell its story to their children and grandchildren. **□**

NOTES

**A New Honduran Culture of Resistance**

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