



## The Return of the Coup: Popular Movements, the Rule of Law, and Human Rights Funding

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IHRFG Semi-Annual Meeting, San Francisco, California  
Monday, January 25, 2010, 1:30 – 3:00 pm

*Facilitator:* **Conrad Martin**, Executive Director, Stewart R. Mott Charitable Trust

*Speakers:* **Almudena Bernabeu**, Director, Transitional Justice Program, Center for Justice and Accountability; **Ibis Colindres**, Program Officer, Danish Church Aid-Honduras, and Advisor, Global Greengrants Fund; **Naomi Roht-Arriaza**, Professor of Law at UC Hastings

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**Ibis Colindres** began by exploring the underlying causes of the coup. Honduras is one of the most unequal countries in Latin America, with approximately 12 families holding the majority of wealth. This is compounded by the world food crisis, resulting in an overall poverty rate of above 65% in the country. Prior governments in Honduras have served the interests of the oligarchy, and private sector organizations are a de facto power, represented within all of the government commissions. From the start, the Zelaya government was viewed with suspicion for its promotion of social policies, including shifting the subsidy structure of petroleum to benefit small-scale consumers, cutting the cost per gallon in half. He also required banks to lower interest rates, providing a stimulus for investing in housing and construction, and increased the minimum salary by 60%. Ibis suggested that the three primary instigating factors for the coup were: (1) the minimum wage increase, (2) a proposal for a popular referendum on the constitution, (3) the construction of a new airport.

Since the coup, the media has launched an aggressive campaign to defame the Zelaya government. Those now in power have cut funding to health and education, taken money from retirement and social security funds paid by workers, and detained and persecuted leaders within civil society. In response to a march in Tegucigalpa, constitutional rights were suspended, curfews instigated, and media repressed. Evidence exists that demonstrates that the private sector directly financially supported the coup.

This has contributed to some positive aspects within Honduran social movements. Where these efforts were previously fragmented, groups have now banded together in a more united force. The mask formerly shielding the de facto powers has been removed, and their true ambitions exposed. Ibis expressed concern that if Honduras does not achieve a reversal of the coup, it could represent a backsliding of democracy in Latin American and promote a model of privatization elsewhere.

**Almudena Bernabeu** provided a broader context for Latin America, arguing that violence during the 1980s is closely linked to violence today. She asserted that 90% of those supporting Micheletti in the coup are former human rights violators.

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She focused specifically on two current cases in the Spanish courts to try human rights violators from the 1980s: (1) the Guatemalan genocide and (2) the murder of Jesuit priests and their housekeeper in El Salvador. In Guatemala, a group of NGOs partnered with international practitioners to gather evidence to support the case in Spain, and Spanish judges issued arrest warrants against some of the main perpetrators of violence. One of the key documents capturing the brutality of the Rios Mont regime, entitled 'Plan Sophia,' was recently obtained by the Spanish court, resulting in an increased demand in Guatemala to also obtain copies of the evidence.

**Naomi Roht-Arriaza** connected Ibis' and Almudena's focuses with the international context of prosecutions of human rights violators. There have been a number of steps forward in recent years to combat impunity: over 130 human rights related convictions in Chile, current court cases in Argentina and Uruguay, and Truth Commissions in Ecuador and Paraguay, where information gleaned during these processes is now being relinquished to the prosecutor's office.

One of the reasons this action is so critical is that many of those within the dictatorships in the 1980s have now morphed in narco traffickers and gang members. If they are finally held accountable for past crimes, it will impact the current level of violence. It is also critical that national courts are trying these cases, as it sets precedent and inspiration for budding processes across the world.

Conrad concluded the session by cautioning that funders have started to ignore Latin America, despite that there is critical work left to be done.

#### **Question and Answer:**

One participant echoed Conrad's comment about funders moving away from Latin America. Ibis agreed, stating that that in Central America as soon as you achieve a certain threshold of income, international aid dissipates. However, while the average is increasing, so is the gap between those with resources and those without, further consolidating the power of those with.

Three priorities for action with regards to the situation in Honduras are (1) strengthening the organizational structure of Frente (the civil society movement); (2) supporting alternative media outlets; and (3) supporting a process towards a constitutional assembly.

Recommendations for ways that funders can contribute include making small grants to coalitions working inside and outside of the country and encouraging South-South workshops and peer learning. Almudena encouraged funders not to abandon Latin America for Africa, as both regions are at different stages in the transitional justice process, and both need support and can learn from one another.