

Honduras turns to online censorship and spyware to clamp down on protests

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The Honduran Congress is currently discussing a bill to fine or ban social network companies and Internet providers that don't eliminate "illegal content" within 24 hours or disable "illegal" accounts. If approved, all content that the Internet companies or the Honduran authorities deem as "discrimination, hate speech, insults, threats or incitement to perpetrate violence or crimes" would be proscribed.

The ruling class has decided that its police-state crackdown on dissent is not enough to silence popular opposition. The killings of 72 journalists since 2001 (CONADEH [National Commission on Human Rights]), the 123 environmentalists assassinated since 2010 (Global Witness) and the more than 30 Hondurans killed in the widespread and ongoing protests in working class neighborhoods against the fraudulent and unconstitutional "re-election" last November have taken their toll. But more than intimidating the population, these actions have inspired determined popular demands for an end to the death-squad regime placed in power by the ruling elite and Washington.

The current National Party (PN) administration under Juan Orlando Hernández—a direct extension of the military regime installed after the 2009 coup backed by the Obama administration—has only escalated its use of death-squad activities against workers and youth and its harassment of the press outlets that support the Alliance of Opposition, widely believed to have won the last elections.

On top of the destruction of the transmission lines of UNE TV and Radio Progreso last year, journalists covering the protests leading up to the January 27 presidential inauguration were severely beaten by the riot police as superiors ordered them to "f*ck up" (*montarle verga*) the reporters. The attack was livestreamed on Facebook.

The "incitements" that the government feels compelled to keep from the public, include videos of police and military shooting live rounds at protesters, illegally barging into houses or preventing people from leaving them, throwing tear gas into homes, beating up elderly bystanders in protests, preventing fatally wounded protesters from being taken to medical centers and medical centers refusing to attend them. Such videos and the generalized denunciations online against the repressive acts of the state are legitimate exposures of a tyrannical and

murderous regime.

In terms of economic policies, the new Secretary of Finance, Rocío Tábora, brazenly laid out to *El Heraldo* the government's plans to intensify the current right-wing program after the inauguration. They "will scrape down the budget to have austerity measures," including a new IMF deal, and leave the fate of the impoverished majority in the second poorest country in Latin America to the profit motive of the private sector. Her words are those of a bureaucrat who doesn't care about the masses, portraying confidence in the state's ability to keep them in the dark and silence them.

For its part, Washington and the European powers have backed the electoral fraud and encouraged the turn to police-state measures of rule. A February 8 report in the *Guardian* shows that the British government approved sales of sophisticated military and spy technology to Honduras, including equipment to track online messaging services like WhatsApp.

The director of the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), Bertha Oliva, speaking to *Sojourners* this week, denounced "a level of espionage and infiltration that we've never seen before, that you only get in countries that are at war." The daylight killings, espionage and censorship efforts in Honduras are only a naked expression of the drive to dictatorship by the ruling class internationally in preparation for an intensification of the class struggle and war.

The Honduran social media bill is largely based on the new Network Enforcement Law in Germany, which forces Internet companies to censor "unlawful content" within 24 hours or face fines of \$59 million. Facebook responded by building control centers with hundreds of employees to enforce this, which it has also created and expanded in the US. The entire bourgeois establishment has backed this measure, with the so-called Left Party calling for the protection of citizens from "verbal attacks, hate speech, and character assassination" online.

Last December, the Deputy Chamber in Mexico unanimously approved a ban now enshrined in the Federal Civil Code on any online attack, "true or false, determined or undetermined" to shame any person. While other sections in the Civil Code defend free speech, this seems to be a first, calculated step

towards implementing censorship of online content.

In an eager initiative by the tech giant, Facebook tested a side feed to hide news content last year in Slovakia, Sri Lanka, Serbia, Bolivia, Guatemala and Cambodia, leading to massive drops in viewership to alternative news sites.

In the US, the intelligence agencies, corporate media and Democratic Party have led a hysterical campaign alleging Russian interference in the US elections using “fake news,” in an attempt to criminalize and censor political opposition online, with Facebook, Twitter and Google taking measures to demote or block socialist, progressive and anti-war news and analysis.

In Honduras, President Hernández called on the United Nations on Monday to set up talks with the bourgeois opposition, while calling for an investigation into “how the *maras* [gangs] and organized crime participated directly in the elections to favor the Alliance.” Since his unconstitutional and fraudulent re-election, Hernández has tried to legitimize his regime’s repression by attributing the ongoing working class protests against electoral fraud to gang activity.

Such arguments have extended to online repression, including the bill’s reference to criminal activity. Last Wednesday, the day the debate on the bill was started, the PN legislator who introduced it, Marcos Paz Sabillón, promoted the measure by alleging that he had received death threats on social media, at the same time making the unsubstantiated and seemingly counterproductive claim that “90 percent came from fake profiles.”

In fact, what this government has shown is that the escalating militarization and attacks against democratic rights have been aimed not at drug trafficking and gangs, but against working class opposition. The police chief appointed by Hernández, José David Aguilar Morán, is currently under investigation after the Associated Press published a report revealing that in 2013, as then-chief of Honduran intelligence, he was actively preventing the authorities’ interception of truckloads of cocaine trafficked by the Atlantic Cartel.

Last year, the Rivera Maradiaga brothers, leaders of the Cachiros Cartel, testified in a court in New York that they had collaborated with president Hernández’s brother in a money-laundering scheme and later paid hundreds of thousands of dollars into Hernández’s presidential campaign and directly to his predecessor, Porfirio Lobo. Hernández’s campaign manager, Hugo Ardón, along with other officials in the Lobo administration, were exposed by *InSight Crime* as having approved government contracts for companies run by the Cachiros.

Historically, the regional importance of Honduras for US counterinsurgency efforts and preparations for war against the influence of rival powers has been closely bound up with organized crime and censorship. The constitutional basis for the censorship bill is contained in Article 75 of the 1981 Honduran Constitution, allowing for “*ex ante* censorship to protect the ethical and cultural values of society.” This was a document

imposed by a military junta that was beginning a full-scale war, in collaboration with the Reagan administration, against the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua and the Castroite and other left nationalist groups within Honduras.

During this time, the CIA had set up a streamlined flow of weapons to Honduras, with officials ordered to look the other way when narcotics were loaded onto the airplanes for the return trip to Florida. Gen. Paul Gorman, former Southern Command chief, testified in 1987: “Everything I know from human intelligence [deleted] would suggest that anybody that was in the game of subversion down there was in one way or another involved with drugs.”

The relentless efforts by the Hernández administration to drown protests in blood and suppress opposition online with the full backing of the US and European governments and corporations exposes the bankruptcy of the opposition’s appeals to tools of neocolonial rule like the OAS and UN. The only alternative for Honduran workers and youth is to liberate their struggle from the chains of the national bourgeoisie, including the Alliance and its pseudo-left backers, and organize an independent struggle alongside all sections of the working class, also facing attacks on democratic rights and living standards across the Americas and internationally.

In its call to form an International Coalition of Socialist, Antiwar and Progressive Websites and activists, the *World Socialist Web Site* underscores that such an onslaught “by powerful capitalist states and immense transnational corporations, can be successfully opposed only to the extent that the great power of the international working class is brought to bear in this fight.” The WSWs urges all sites, activists, workers, and students to read and discuss the open letter by the WSWs International Editorial Board for an international coalition to fight internet censorship, and to submit this form to take up this work.



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