

US prosecutors declare Honduras a “narco-state”

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On Thursday, the former leader of the Honduran drug cartel Los Cachiros, Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, testified before the US District Court for the Southern District of New York that he had bribed three successive Honduran presidents in exchange for protection and government contracts to launder drug proceeds.

According to his testimony, the bribes include hundreds of thousands of dollars paid to the current President Juan Orlando Hernández (2015-today) through his siblings, and to his Vice-President Ricardo Álvarez, when he was mayor of Tegucigalpa. He said he paid half a million dollars to President Manuel Zelaya (2006-2009) and carried out several deals with President Porfirio Lobo (2010-2014) during their tenures.

Hernández, Álvarez, Zelaya and Lobo have all published tweets denying any wrongdoing.

Maradiaga had been summoned by US prosecutors to testify in the trial of Geovanny Fuentes, whose partnership with the Cachiros turned into a bloody rivalry around 2013.

Throughout the trial, the prosecution insisted that an alliance with the Hernández administration helped Fuentes’s business to “flourish.”

In his opening statement, prosecutor Jacob Gutwilling said Fuentes “was untouchable, a key part of the Honduran narco-state ... who worked with police, military, politicians, including the president, who made millions helping the president traffic cocaine.”

Evidence includes contact information for the current president as well as for Manuel Zelaya and several high-ranking military and police officials on Fuentes’ electronic devices.

The US indictment against Fuentes names Hernández as a “co-conspirator” who received “tens of thousands of dollars” in 2013, when Hernández was president of the Congress and a presidential candidate, in exchange for promises to provide military protection and other

assistance.

Hernández allegedly told Fuentes that he wanted to shove drugs “right up the noses of the gringos” and to end the extradition agreement with the United States, the indictment says.

The document also indicates that Fuentes used the president’s brother, “Tony” Hernández, as an intermediary. In 2019, a New York jury found “Tony” Hernández guilty of trafficking cocaine “in large scale” between 2004 and 2016.

The current trial has received major coverage by Honduran and international media outlets, whose reports have often mentioned that, during the 2019 trial, a witness testified that “Tony” Hernández received \$1 million from the Sinaloa Cartel leader, Joaquín “Chapo” Guzmán.

While formal charges have not been made public, the open admission by the US Department of Justice that Juan Orlando Hernández leads a “narco-state” not only incriminates the entire government and security forces but constitutes an indictment of the Trump and Obama administrations, which propped up his rule with hundreds of millions of dollars.

Amid the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and hurricanes Eta and Iota last November, such allegations threaten to light the fuse of mass opposition to the Hernández regime. At the same time, it has been a staple policy of US imperialism to scapegoat selected officials in the region when facing mass social opposition to their right-wing policies.

Last year, unemployment nearly doubled to 11 percent, and official poverty jumped to almost 60 percent. The pandemic is surging, and a streak of drought years is expected to continue. On the other hand, Wall Street and the local oligarchy demand social austerity and a regressive economic adjustment, including to pay back the \$3.35 billion in loans requested last year.

A BNamericas report this week cites Ismael Zepeda of

the think-tank Fosdeh, who suggests “the government offer fiscal adjustment, including taxation, rate reforms, and lower education and health spending in the negotiations for an IMF loan in November.” The oligarch Luis Larach cried to the business website, “we have the highest taxes in Central America. The solution is to streamline/slim down the government and stop stealing.”

Presidential elections are scheduled for November 28, and Hernández is not running for re-election. Sitting on a social powder keg, Wall Street and the handful of Honduran multimillionaires and billionaires hope to keep plundering the country by placing corruption and drug allegations at the center of the electoral campaign to cover over social questions. While neck-deep in corruption, Hernández is being thrown to the wolves for this purpose.

This is also the context of Joe Biden administration’s \$4 billion plan for the Northern Triangle—Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador— supposedly to deal with the roots of mass migration.

The presentation of the plan on the Biden campaign website indicates that its first pillar is “attracting greater private investment—both from international sources and from their citizens being willing to invest at home.” The second pillar is “improving security and the rule of law,” which is followed by “addressing endemic corruption” and “prioritizing poverty reduction and economic development.”

However, the Northern Triangle’s place in global capitalism is as a source of cheap labor and cheap natural resources for US imperialism. Massive poverty to keep wages low, tax incentives, the resulting extreme social inequality, police-state regimes and endemic corruption constitute the basis for attracting greater investments. The social catastrophe today that hundreds of thousands are desperately seeking to escape is the result of more than a century of this imperialist oppression.

Regarding the Maradiaga revelations, it is worth noting that Gen. Julián Pacheco Tinoco (ret.), the country’s security minister since 2015 and the official with the closest ties to Washington, has not been mentioned. During trials in 2017 and 2019, the Cachiros leader had testified that he bribed Pacheco. This can only be interpreted as the US government’s assurance of impunity to the Honduran security forces.

According to *The Intercept*, Pacheco graduated from courses on counterinsurgency tactics in 1979 and psychological operations in 1986 at the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia.

Throughout the 1980s, Honduras provided the main

base for the Pentagon’s training and arming of the Guatemalan and Salvadoran militaries to repress left-wing guerrillas, and the CIA’s organizing of the terrorist “Contra” forces to overthrow the Sandinista government. As part of these activities, the Reagan administration consistently protected and financed local officials and Contra leaders who were known drug traffickers.

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the transformation of the guerrillas and Sandinistas into bourgeois parties subordinate to US interests, Washington switched its banner from the “war on Communism” to the “war on drugs” to continue its military presence. Honduras has been key in this campaign, which has been escalated as US imperialism seeks to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the hemisphere.

When Honduran President Manuel Zelaya began to establish closer relations with Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, a close partner of Russia and China, the Honduran military overthrew him in 2009 with the support of the Obama administration. Pacheco, as reported by *The Intercept*, was the envoy of the Honduran military to Washington D.C. to defend the coup and re-stabilize collaboration.

The coup regime launched a wave of privatizations and social austerity that plunged millions into poverty. It has remained in power through murderous repression and fraudulent elections, while the Obama and Trump administrations have backed it with hundreds of millions of dollars in aid—at least \$500 million since 2016, going largely to the military.

This support for a dictatorial regime that speaks for such a venal elite entirely subordinated to Wall Street exposes as ludicrous any claim that the Democratic Party administration has the slightest concern over corruption, democratic rights or the “development” of Honduras or any other country.



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