

Former US-backed president of Honduras found guilty of drug trafficking

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On Friday, a Manhattan Federal Court found the former president of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, guilty of helping drug traffickers move hundreds of tons of cocaine to the United States, as well as on associated gun charges.

Hernández was arrested and swiftly extradited within three months of ending his second presidential term in early 2022. As a member of Congress affiliated to the right-wing National Party of Honduras since 1998, he was a leading figure in the regime installed by the US-backed military coup that ousted President Manuel Zelaya in 2009. He was selected as president of Congress in January 2010.

After the conviction, several Biden administration officials released statements claiming that they have brought justice to his victims. But, while Hernandez certainly deserves to be exposed for his crimes and jailed, the timing and political character of the US prosecution need to be soberly assessed.

Hernández had become one of the most hated figures in Honduras and was facing frequent mass protests, strikes and roadblocks. Hundreds of thousands were leaving the country in increasingly larger waves amid pressure from Washington to forcibly stop migrants. Moreover, the Honduran ruling class was already moving toward establishing diplomatic relations with China, which took place shortly after he left office.

In this context, he had become more useful to Washington as an example to threaten the ruling elite in Honduras and internationally with the consequences of a failure to comply unreservedly with US demands.

In the thuggish words of Drug Enforcement Administrator Anne Milgram: "This case should send a clear message that no one is above the law or beyond our reach."

Given these objectives, US prosecutors sought to limit the revelations to fit the narrative that a layer of corrupt officials led by Hernández had turned Honduras into a

"narco-state". This conceals the fact that the US government facilitated the expansion of the drug cartels by ignoring, and in most cases abetting, their penetration into the pro-US military-civilian dictatorships during the 1970s and 1980s in Central America, while employing traffickers to arm the Contras against the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

Hernández, moreover, is a murderous autocrat who deserves to be tried for much more than being a drug trafficker, including his socially devastating austerity measures, privatizations, the criminal COVID response, violent repression of protests and other attacks on democratic rights.

However, even within the limits set by the US prosecution, the case is immensely damning for US imperialism, given that the Obama-Biden administration installed the National Party regime and the Trump administration continued to sponsor and legitimize it politically.

The revelations during the trial provide further confirmation that US imperialism is ultimately responsible for the conditions of extreme poverty and violence that have fueled such an exodus from Honduras in recent years.

The case against the ex-president was largely based on the conviction of his brother Antonio "Tony" Hernández in 2019. In both trials, it was revealed that between 2004 and 2020 the Hernandez family received millions of dollars in bribes from the Cachiros gang in Honduras and the associated Sinaloa Cartel in Mexico.

The key witness in the latest trial was Fabio Lobo, the son of Porfirio Lobo. After being installed through elections organized by the coup regime and widely deemed illegitimate, he ruled Honduras as president between 2010 and 2014 with the backing of Washington. Having confessed that he and his father worked for the cartels, Fabio Lobo testified in the latest trial that he gave

the campaign of Juan Orlando Hernández half a million dollars from drug traffickers.

The trial disclosed how the Honduran military and police were used to target rivals and protect loads of cocaine moving through Honduras. According to several witnesses, Hernández controlled death squads associated with the armed forces that killed dozens of rival gang members, officials, prosecutors, journalists and activists.

The ex-president's cousin and former top police official Mauricio Hernández Pineda and the former National Police chief Juan Carlos Bonilla Valladares have pled guilty to participating in the drug trafficking ring.

Regarding the military leadership, this is the second trial that implicates retired General Julian Pacheco, the security minister under Hernández, in assisting traffickers “in exchange for money.” A two-time graduate of the School of the Americas, Pacheco was the key liaison between the coup regime and the US government after 2009.

The pseudo-left president Xiomara Castro, who was elected in 2021, responded to the conviction with both demagogic and caution. She blamed the European Union and the United States for installing the corrupt officials after the 2009 coup, which ousted her husband Zelaya. These elements remain “embedded in all institutions,” she declared, while most of their crimes remain “unpunished.”

But having acknowledged what is now widely accepted, she then called for calm: “My government of Democratic Socialism, with the massive mandate of the people at the ballot box, demands justice, not revenge.”

Such a statement expresses fear that the prosecution could make the political crisis in the country spiral out of control. After all, not only have the main state institutions like the armed forces and courts been found complicit. But the recent cases have exposed the entire oligarchy and political establishment, including her own administration.

The former minister of investment under Hernández, Yankel Rosenthal, and his cousin Yani Rosenthal recently served prison sentences in the US for using their financial-corporate conglomerate to launder money for the Cachiros. Yani Rosenthal was also Minister for Presidential Affairs under Manuel Zelaya and is now chairman of the Liberal Party. His father Jaime Rosenthal, a former vice president and a top advisor of Manuel Zelaya, was also indicted on drug money laundering charges, but died in 2019 before being brought to trial.

The Cachiros leader Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga, who testified about bribing Hernandez, had also confessed

to bribing Zelaya himself. Now Zelaya's wife is president, and he remains chairman of the Libre party, which they founded after leaving the Liberal Party.

In particular, the case of the Rosenthals, one of the richest oligarchic families in the region, demonstrates how drug money, business and politics have become completely intertwined for capitalist rule in Honduras—a reality in most of the region.

Castro is seeking to put a damper on the popular anger towards a ruling class that profits from criminal businesses, whose operations lead to thousands of killings each year, while imposing a police state regime on the basis of lies about fighting crime.

Lionized by the pseudo-left internationally—*Jacobin* called her the “socialist president...trying to revive democracy in Honduras”—Castro has continued to elevate the political profile of the military while building up the repressive state apparatus under repeated states of emergency, ostensibly imposed to combat gangs. She has failed to explain how these policies are compatible with left politics or her statements that the cartels are “embedded” in these institutions, not to speak of the fact that the same military carried out a coup against her husband only 15 years ago.

To secure their democratic and social rights, workers and youth in Honduras must settle accounts not only with Hernández and the National Party, but with Libre, the entire capitalist order in Honduras and US imperialism. This is only possible through a conscious political struggle to unite with workers across the Americas on the basis of an internationalist, revolutionary and socialist program.



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