

Central America's "Failing" Democracies: The Case of Honduras

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Abstract

This paper analyses the various factors which have contributed to the political instability in Central America, especially Honduras. This region consists of several democracies, at least so formally, but in reality most of these grapple with weak and failing institutions that result in the faltering of liberal democratic ideals and values. Amongst the various nations in the region, this paper focuses on Honduras in order to showcase some of the core challenges faced by Central American nations in their bid to preserve democracy. The paper will also outline possible solutions which could be adopted by various agencies in order to maintain and promote democracy in the region.

Introduction

Although formally part of North America, Central America is often considered to be a unique region that connects North and South America through a narrow strip of land. This region encompasses the nations of Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. Apart from geographical similarities, these seven nation-states also share similar political issues that have led to increasing violence and instability across the region. All of the seven nation-states are democracies, although varying between parliamentary and presidential styles.

Since the late 1970's, Central American nations formally transitioned from authoritarian forms of leadership to liberal governments. This transition took place in various stages within the region, including, for instance, the overthrow of General Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979. In Nicaragua, this culminated into a socialist styled government which later transitioned into a democracy through elections held in 1990. Dominguez & Lindenberg (1997) noted a common trend related to the establishment of democracy in most Central American nations, which, they argue, was through the use of force. El Salvador (1979), Guatemala (1982) and Panama (1989) serve as examples of nations in which authoritarian rulers were deposed by the military and where attempts were subsequently made to establish a plural political sphere (Dominguez & Lindenberg, 1997, pp. 1-2).

Dominguez & Lindenberg (1997) believe that democracy served as a means to end the state of war in the region. It was amidst increased international focus and intervention in the affairs of Central America, that political opposition leaders in several Central American nations came

to view democracy as a means of gaining political backing from the international community. In the military coups of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Panama, the ultimate goal was to enlist support from the international community since authoritarian leadership had failed to provide for their citizens. Authoritarian leaders usually commanded obedience from the masses based on the ability to provide economic growth and stability. The failure of various economies across Central America in the 1980s, however, led to a sense of disillusionment and despair amongst their citizens, which helped in the establishment of democracies (Dominguez & Lindenberg, 1997, pp. 3- 13).¹

Regrettably though, Central American democracies have still not managed to mature and face a constant risk of reversal into authoritarian regimes. The biggest challenge to democracies in this region comes from the lack of strong institutions, which would help to consolidate a democracy. Weak institutions give rise to strong elites in the executive branch, who gather power at the expense of the other branches of the government (Converse & Kapstein, 2008). Bull (2014, pp.120) defines elites as:

groups of individuals that, due to their control over natural, economic, political, social, organizational, symbolic (expertise/knowledge) or coercive resources, stand in a privileged position to formally or informally influence decisions and practices that have broad societal impact.

By this definition, elites do not simply refer to institutionally privileged sections, such as parliamentarians, bureaucrats or the military but also to other actors such as drug cartel leaders and other 'strongmen' in the region. According to Puig & Sanchez- Ancochea (2014), the socio-political system of this region continues to be dominated by a small group of elites who undermine the rule of law and state, and are able to succeed in doing so due to the existence of weak institutions. This paper will aim to highlight the factors that generally hinder the functioning of democracies in the Central American region. I will show the manner in which particular forms of political leadership impede the growth and progress of democracy, thereby turning this institution in to a mere tool that is utilized for the personal benefit of a selected group of individuals.

¹ Economic failure in the region was a part of the chain of events related to the global economy starting with the oil price shocks of the 1970's and the implementation of anti-inflation measures by Paul Volcker, then chairman of the US Federal Reserve Board, in 1979, which restricted US money supplies and led to an increase of the dollar interest rate. This made it difficult for developing nations, including those in Central America, to repay their debts. Mexico was the first nation to acknowledge its inability to repay debts.

Features of democracy in the region

Bull (2014) believes that the lack of institutional strengthening in Central America can be attributed to the fact that democratization has occurred due to external pressures, particularly by US involvement, instead of emerging organically from 'within'. According to Robinson (2016), the US indulged in imposing democracy in the region during the 1980's in a bid to maintain its own position as a global hegemon. It is therefore evident that democracy was introduced in the region not due to its feasibility or local desirability, but rather to fulfil the self-seeking motives of the US government. Robinson (2016) points towards a paradox in this, which are historical instances in which the US government oppressed democracy by rendering support to dictators such as Rafael Trujillo, Anastasio Somoza, and Augusto Pinochet.

Bull (2014) emphasizes the need to uphold democratic institutions in Central America through regular and strong practices by the key actors, which include the legislature, executive and the judiciary. The actors that make up these institutions need to set a strong example to the public by exercising strict adherence to democratic norms. Unfortunately, elites have continuously undermined these institutions and used them as tools to take on their political rivals. Elites tend to form networks which reconfigure the nature of a state into that of an authoritarian regime that now operates within democratic institutions (Bull, 2014). Dominguez & Lindenberg (1997) believe that political elites use democratic institutions solely for the purpose of maintaining the support of the international community, which lends legitimacy to their rule and results in foreign aid and support. In reality, however, these political elites manipulate and oppress these institutions in order to further their own interests and gain control over the resources of the nation-state.

Bull (2014) discusses the dominant role played by the executive branches in Central America regardless of whether the country has a parliamentary or presidential system. In each of these states, the executive branch exercises disproportionate powers vis-à-vis the legislature and judicial systems. They capitalise on elite networks across various sections of society such as businessmen, academicians, journalists, military leaders, public officials, and even criminal leaders to maintain their iron-grip over state institutions. These networks are built and sustained through either kinship, ethnic or ideological affinities. Bull further argues that the reach of these networks permeates national boundaries and operate at a transnational level too. Elite networks function through the use of money, force, and control over information and ideological institutions.

Converse & Kapstein (2008) attempted to establish a link between the levels of success of democracies and the constraints imposed on executive powers. They comment that countries that impose high constraints on the executive branch are more likely to succeed as democracies. This hypothesis has been tested in the context of democratic reversals in nations such as

Venezuela, Russia, and Bolivia, in which the chief executives have repeatedly tampered with the constitution or democratic institutions.

Converse & Kapstein (2008) highlight the importance of ‘initial conditions’ as crucial to the overall success of any democracy, especially because new democracies tend to be characterized by economic and political volatilities. They point towards the unflattering statistic that Latin America witnessed the reversal of nine democracies into authoritarian regimes since the wave of democratization started in the 1970s. These initial conditions refer to the socioeconomic factors that exist at the time of establishment of a democratic government. Issues such as low per capita income, high economic inequality, ethnic fragmentation, and high poverty rates add to the challenge of sustaining a new democracy. However, democracies do not crumble solely due to poor economic performance. Central and Eastern European democracies continue to exist despite facing severe economic problems. They survived due to the strengthening of institutions in those nations, barring a few exceptions such as Ukraine and Georgia which continued to remain under the influence of non-democratic leaders. The distribution of economic resources plays a pivotal role in determining the survival of democracies. Weak economic performance such as low per capita income can be tolerated by the public if income inequality is lowered (Converse & Kapstein, 2008). The problem with Central American states is that income inequality soars due to the control of resources by a handful of elites, and this has proven to be a major hurdle in maintaining democracy in the region (Bull, 2014).

Challenges to democracy in Honduras

Honduras serves as a prime example highlighting the various challenges faced by democracies across Central America. In Meyer’s (2009) view, the coup d’état of 2009 highlighted the inadequacy of its political institutions and the overpowering role of Honduras’ elites. The serving president, Manuel Zelaya, was removed by the military on 28 June 2009 and sent into exile to Costa Rica. An interim government was formed by the President of the Congress, Roberto Micheletti, with the approval of the Congress. To be noted here is that the dismissal and exile of the President was an illegal act as the Constitution of Honduras does not allow the banishment of its citizens (Meyer, 2009).

Prior to the events of 28th June, Manuel Zelaya had already requested for the intervention of the Organization of American States (OAS) in anticipation of a possible coup.² He had

² The Organization of American States is a regional organization which came into existence in 1948 with the goal of preserving peace and security in the Americas region. It currently consists of 35 nations, including the United States of America.

requested for an emergency meeting of the OAS permanent Council by invoking Article 17 of the organization's charter, which relates to the protection of democracy when a member state is under an immediate threat. Following the removal of Zelaya, the OAS adopted isolation methods along with economic sanctions through agencies such as the World Bank and the European Union. However, the newly formed government of Micheletti refused to concede to these pressure (Legler, 2010).

The entire disturbance was started by Manuel Zelaya's decision to hold a non-binding nationwide referendum to solicit peoples' views on the establishment of a new constituent assembly by voting for it in the upcoming general elections of November 2009. Zelaya stated that if people were in favour of establishing a constituent assembly, then a fourth ballot would be introduced in the general elections of November 2009, alongside the three traditional ballots used to vote for the post of the president, national congress members, and mayoral positions. The fourth ballot would then be installed to vote for the establishment of a constituent assembly based on the outcome of the referendum. Both opposition leaders and members within Zelaya's party were opposed to this plan as they viewed it as a deliberate move to consolidate further power in the hands of the chief executive (Meyer, 2010). According to the Constitution of Honduras, the National Congress can initiate amendments to the constitution by a two thirds majority of the Congress (Article 373). However, Article 374 of the Constitution states that articles related to the terms of the presidency, period of presidency, changing the form of government or national territory cannot be initiated by any group or individual.

According to Article 239 of the Constitution, a candidate can be elected to the position of president for four years and cannot seek re-election for a second term at any point of their political career. Detractors of Zelaya believed that he wanted to create a constituent assembly in order to contest elections for a second time. Zelaya defended his actions by justifying the need for a constituent assembly to rewrite the constitution in order to help the country adapt to changing situations and challenges (Meyer, 2010). Zelaya's opponents, however, felt insecure about the president's support towards socialist leaders such as Hugo Chavez and feared that Honduras could also come under the influence of socialism (Legler, 2010).

Legler (2010) opines that in spite of best efforts of the international community and the strong stance adopted by the OAS, the case of Honduras shows how democracy continues to be challenged in the Central American region, despite the existence of several safeguards and institutions in place for its protection. There are numerous factors responsible for the failure of democracy in the region, one of which is the problem of conflicting messages given by the upholders of democracy such as the US. As noted, democracy was established in this region due to self-seeking motives of the US. Paradoxically, however, the US frequently engaged in non-democratic activities in order to uphold the ideals of democracy. The invasion of Panama can be seen from that angle (Legler, 2010). The 2009 coup and the US's support of the

Micheletti government can also be analysed in a similar manner as supporters of Micheletti believed that the ousting of Manuel Zelaya was a move meant to protect democracy in Honduras. The nature of their action may have broken democratic ideals but the end goal was achieved. In nations with weak institutions, it is important for globally established nations to set the tone through consistent actions.

The Micheletti government managed to maintain its control over the country by further polarizing the issue and through gathering the support of members of the US Senate. Legler (2010) sheds light on the role of Republican senate members such as Jim DeMint and Mitch McConnell in urging the then Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to change the government's stance towards Honduras. There are also documented cases of Republican senators travelling to Honduras to meet Micheletti. Furthermore, many Republican members of the US Senate refused to approve diplomatic appointments of Undersecretary of State Arturo Valenzuela and Ambassador to Brazil, designate Thomas Shannon, until the Obama government changed its rhetoric toward Honduras. Despite imposing several sanctions and cutting off financial aid to the country, the Obama administration buckled under the pressure of Republican senators and supported the Honduran election results of November 2009 (Legler, 2010). The Republican Party became involved in this issue as they suspected Manuel Zelaya of being a socialist. They believed that his re-election would lead to political transformation in Honduras, which would then enable the establishment of socialism. The US government defended its stance by explaining their move as being a necessary step towards ensuring stability and order in Honduras (Meyer, 2010). However, this episode highlighted the strength of the elite network. The elites led by Micheletti used their transnational network to garner support for their cause. The Republican senators who were a part of this network turned the Honduras issue into a domestic US issue by withholding appointments of the government to pressure the US administration into adopting a favourable political position versus Micheletti.

The Honduran coup showed the power of, what we may call, 'domestic coup coalitions' in jeopardizing the functioning of a democratically elected government. The coup of 2009 was backed by the attorney general, the ombudsman, members of the Supreme Court, members of the armed forces, leaders of the Catholic Church, and media outlets. The legitimacy of the actions of the Supreme Court and the Congress, in ousting Zelaya, has been questioned by political analysts and the international community, but the otherwise widespread support of the coup lent an aura of legitimacy to the actions of Micheletti government (Legler, 2010).

The coup also highlighted the impunity with which the Micheletti government adopted authoritarian practices by justifying them as necessary measures for the protection of democratic ideals. Activities such as intimidation and the shutting down of radio and news channels became

common practices. Rival political leaders went into hiding and a 45 days long ‘state of siege’ was declared, which curtailed individual freedoms of the citizens and the press (Meyer, 2010)³.

Whilst international analysts view Central American democracies to be in a fragile state, it is important to also look at the view of people living in the region. According to a poll conducted by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) in March 2010, the 2009 coup was not predominantly viewed as a setback to democracy by the people of Honduras since 27.4% of the respondents felt that the country had become more democratic after the coup while 37.9% felt that there was no change to the status of their democracy (Argueta, et. Al. 2011).

However, such public views may not correctly signify the impact of the coup on democracy in Honduras. The Micheletti government appointed Captain Billy Hoya Amendola as its chief security advisor. Amendola was responsible for leading a Honduran army unit in the 1980s, which was responsible for political assassinations and the torture of political opponents (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, 2010). Haugaard and Kinoshian (2015) refer to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights’ report titled *Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup D’état* (2010) to draw attention to the increased violence that followed the coup. Political detentions, arbitrary arrests, violations of women’s rights, persecution of minority groups, and abuse of children’s rights were on the rise and posed a serious threat to the country.

The Honduran coup is one out of several examples available in Central America. The case of Honduras shows how democracies are unravelling in the region. At the time of writing this paper, Honduras had recently finished its presidential elections in which the incumbent, Juan Orlando Hernandez, was able to contest for re-election due to a Supreme Court verdict which imposed a stay order on the constitutional article that limited the term of presidency. On this occasion, there was no coup since the elites backed the decision, but it does bring back memories of the Coup d’état of 2009 when Manuel Zelaya was ousted on suspicion of planning to run for re-election (The Economist, 2017). The ever changing nature of political institutions shows that it is individual actors who are managing institutions, more so than the rule of law.

The case of Honduras raises a very pertinent question about Central America, which is: does democracy exist? According to Colburn & Cruz (2007), democracy does exist in the region if we view it as a system that ensures free and competitive elections. Central American citizens, after all, exercise their right to vote in high numbers as election turnouts in the region are on par with developed nations such as the United States of America, France, and Japan. The elite

³ State of siege refers to a situation in which constitutional guarantees are suspended due to a situation of emergency arising from an external threat or internal disturbance. State of siege is a translation of the provision *estado de sitio*, which is commonly used in Latin American constitutions to signify the granting of all executive and legislative authority to the president. The president can also suspend judicial independence in this situation.

actors also respect the sanctity of elections, as they view it as the only route to power. However, Central America's problem lies in its interpretation of the terms democracy and liberalism. Most political theorists combine these two terminologies together with liberalism, which is seen as ensuring the rule of law, delineating and limiting the power of the government, and protecting individual rights. Unfortunately, in Central America, the existence of weak political institutions hinders the functioning of liberalism. This has allowed elites to come to power legally but subsequently manipulate institutions to their personal benefits and uses (Colburn & Cruz, 2007, pp. 32- 35). The existence of presidential system of governance also poses a challenge to democracies in this region since the chief executive is not directly connected with the legislative body due to the independent voting procedures for both institutions, which often leads to political conflicts (Lehoucq, 2012 cited in Biekart, 2014).

Puig & Sanchez-Ancochea (2014) postulate that most political institutions lack credibility in the eyes of the public. Many Central Americans view the church and armed forces as superior and more legitimate institutions due to the weak state of the legislatures and judiciaries, which are, moreover, often prone to corruption. The support for a powerful armed force and the lack of separation of powers can be attributed to the existence of illiberal democrats in the Latin American region as a whole. Carrion (2008) defines illiberal democrats as national actors that prefer democracy but also endorse unconstitutional usages of power. Such groups might be understood as still grappling with the transition from dictatorship to democracy.

The case of Manuel Zelaya can be explained through Carrion's (2008) analysis since the Honduran Supreme Court supported the, safer though illegal, option of allowing the military to depose the president from power, instead of establishing a judicial enquiry to initiate the impeachment procedures as prescribed by the constitution (Puig & Sanchez- Ancochea, 2014 cited in Biekart, 2014).

The Central American tryst with democracy has been a classic case of one step forward, two steps backwards. In order to ensure the success of democracies, regional and international agencies have to combine their resources and assume a more proactive role. The OAS charter requires immediate revision so that it can integrate solutions for new challenges and situations in which illegitimate coups are organized by legitimate institutions and orchestrated by corrupt elites for their personal gains. Legler (2010) asserts that the OAS must improve its ability to engage effectively in preventive diplomacy, rather than serving as an organization aligned towards 'fire-fighting.' Beyond that, the economies of these nations need restructuring in such a manner that poverty rates and income equality decrease, which is then expected to bring down the currently excessively high crime rates. This can be done through more stringent checks by donor nations by monitoring the utilization of the aid provided by them. Transnational companies can also play a big role in the resuscitation of the economy. However, foreign investments can only be attracted by countries first ensuring political stability and a safe social

environment. The practice of strengthening democratic institutions has to be expedited with an emphasis on building durable institutions such as free press and an educational system that promotes diverse ideas. These institutions play a big role in shaping attitudes and perceptions towards liberal democracy. This seems necessary because Colburn & Cruz (2007) point towards the skewed perception of democracy, which exists in the minds of many across Central America. Democracy, after all, is more than just a system that promotes free elections. Free elections merely serve as the stepping stone to many other important aspects enshrined within the charters of democratic institutions, such as ensuring welfare, following the rule of law and promoting equal opportunities in all fields.

The re-election of Juan Orlando Hernandez as the Honduran President in December 2017 has served as another reminder of the control exercised by elites over weak political institutions of the region (Malkin, 2017). The opposition candidate, Salvador Nasralla, has continued his protests over the flawed electoral system in the country. Malkin (2017), in turn, highlighted the challenge of ensuring 'fair' elections in the nation as the 2017 elections laid bare the incompetence of the Honduran Election Commission, which was mired in controversy over the counting of votes.

The future of Central American 'democracies' will continue to remain bleak unless the international community is able to exert unrelenting pressure on the elites of this region to respect the rule of law and assist in building strong political institutions. The masses will also have to play a critical role in determining the final outcome of this situation. Growing political consciousness on their part can help in reforming the political institutions. The failure to achieve this will only perpetuate the growth of incomplete democracies that oscillate between weak and failed states.

Concluding Remarks

Critics may argue that democracy may not be an ideal fit for this region. The reality, however, is that democracy has become globally normative. There has definitely been an attempt by the US to impose normative democratic ideals in the region (Robinson, 2016). While that may be viewed as an incorrect method, it is also important to understand why other methods may not be suitable.

The idea of seeing democracy as a 'polythetic' category, one that assumes different shapes in different places, could be used as an example to explain the 'uniqueness' of democracies in Central America. Wouters (2015) discusses democracy through a culturalist outlook, as opposed to exercising strict adherence to normative democratic values. The historical background and unique cultural characteristics of a group should be taken into consideration while developing and practicing democracy, which may conflict with universalistic and normative projections of

'liberal democracy.' While this could be a beneficial idea to understand how democracies work locally, it must be emphasized that this approach may not prove to be effective in Central America. This region experiences a lack of proper political consciousness due to the existing political and economic inequalities, as a result of which people tend to accept inequality as a norm and adopt an incomplete idea of democracy. Carrion (2008) sheds light on the constant struggle between instrumental and normative ideas of democracy amongst the people of this region. Instrumental ideas of democracy invoke the conviction that support for democratic ideals hinges on the material and economic achievements of the democratic government. A government's failure to do so can make instrumental supporters abandon the idea of democracy. The existence of this thought process allows elites to manipulate and undermine political institutions. Thus, it becomes imperative to solidify normative values in order to maintain democracy in the first place. A polythetic approach can therefore only be adopted at the grassroots level once the core institutions begin to function in an efficient manner.

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