

Citizens' Rights in Republic of Honduras



By:

Brittany R.
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INTRODUCTION

The Republic of Honduras, commonly known simply as Honduras, is a developing country in Central America bordered by the Caribbean Sea to the north, Guatemala to the West, El Salvador to the southwest, and Nicaragua to the southeast. The estimated total population was 8.5 million in 2013, though the most recent census took place in 2007. The country is growing at a relatively high rate of 1.74% annually, due to a high birth rate. However, emigration from Honduras is increasing, as job prospects are limited. The urban population is growing, with 52.7% of the population currently living in cities. That figure grows by an estimated 3.1% each year (CIA World Factbook, 2014)

Spanish is Honduras' official language. Ethnically, approximately 90% of the population is of Mestizo descent, that is a mixture of European and Native American heritage. The remainder of the population is Native American (7%), black (2%), and white (1%). Moreover, Honduras has a young population, with more than 50% of the population under 18 years of age (CIA World Factbook, 2014).

Honduras is a multi-party democracy whose politics are conducted through a presidential system, meaning the President is both the head of state and head of government. Each President is elected for a four year term. The current President, Juan Orlando Hernández, has been in power since January 27, 2014. Honduras also has an independent judiciary and adheres to international law. The country is further divided into 18 departments and 298 municipalities (National Statistics Institute, 2014).

The country's GDP is 18.43 USD (2012), making Honduras a low middle income country and one of the poorest in Central America. In recent years, the economy has transitioned away from relying primarily on agricultural exports to include the export of apparels and textiles. These are mainly sent to the United States, one of Honduras' largest trading partners (The World Bank, 2014; CIA Factbook, 2014). The country also boasts marine, forest, and mineral resources, including gold, silver, copper, lead, zinc, iron ore, and coal. However, a significant portion of the population continues to rely on agriculture for their livelihood (CIA Factbook, 2014).

HEALTHCARE FOR CITIZENS

Public healthcare in Honduras is centrally organized by the federal government, providing 70 percent of the country's health care services, with 60 percent covered by the Ministry of Health (SS) and 15 percent by the Social Security Institute (IHSS) (World Health Organization, 2009). Though the public sector provides healthcare to the majority of the Honduran population, it is fraught with inefficiencies, including frequent strikes, and a lack of medical supplies. The private sector provides 10 percent of healthcare services, leaving 15 percent of the population without access to healthcare. Moreover, there is little collaboration between the public and private healthcare sectors. This is problematic because the country has a high incidence of HIV/AIDS and maternal deaths (Embassy of the United State, 2014).

Some effort has been made to correct the inefficiencies of Honduras' healthcare system. The Ministry of Health created the National Health Plan to improve the quality and efficiency of healthcare, implemented between 2010 and 2014, as well as a reformation of the healthcare sector that is advancing, albeit slowly (World Health Organization, 2014).

Additionally, the United States has partnered with local Honduran governments in a decentralization project. The goal is to transfer the management of healthcare to the local government level. Healthcare funding will continue to be provided by the federal government, but will be administered by local governments. So far, the Embassy of the United States (2014) reports that local healthcare has delivered positive results, including significantly lower costs for the community, resulting in savings that allow clinics to expand their services.

The Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (2014) also announced in January that it will be supporting the Honduran government in the development of an integrated public health system. Specifically, Canada will provide accurate information which will then be used to better allocate personnel and resources where they are needed most. Canada will also help Honduras implement an information and communication technology system to help the government gather and interpret health data, with a primary focus on maternal and child health .

FREE EDUCATION FOR CITIZENS

Public education has been available in Honduras since the 1950s through the country's Ministry of Public Education. Children aged seven to 14 years must attend school, by law. Since education was nationalized, the number of schools has increased, in turn increasing children's access to education. However, the amount of money actually spent on education is minimal, resulting in crowded classrooms, outdated teaching materials, and dilapidated school buildings that are understaffed. Moreover, *The Guardian's* Lorena Cotza reports that "roughly 10 percent of the population between the ages of 5 and seventeen have no access to the education system. Amongst these children, 75.3 percent live in rural areas."

Of those who do have access to education, the dropout rate is high, demonstrating that the compulsory attendance law is not always enforced. Consequently, Honduras has a literacy rate ranging from 40 to 80 percent, among urban and rural populations respectively. Statistics demonstrate that the situation is worse for secondary students, with an enrolment rate of only about 30 percent, according to World Education Services. The need for school aged children to work for their families, as well as the lack of public funding for schools, and transportation to schools, helps to explain the low level of education attained by most Hondurans.

Private education is available, but access is limited to those who can afford it. Higher education is also available in Honduras, though only between 1 and 8 percent continue on to universities, technical, or vocational institutions. The Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Honduras (UNAH) is a credible institution, and the country's largest. The country's other three private universities do not enjoy the same level of prestige.

In short, public education in Honduras, though free for citizens, lacks quality. However, improving education would help to reduce widespread poverty in Honduras. and should therefore be a focus of the government.

HOUSING FOR CITIZENS

As a poor, developing country, Honduras lacks quality housing. The country has experienced a growing housing deficit over the past few decades, with the Honduran Chamber of the Construction Industry reporting in 2012 that one million families were without sufficient housing. This is true across much of Central and Latin America, but the problem is particularly grievous in Honduras, which can be attributed to a lack of affordable housing. Since most Hondurans make approximately \$200 USD per month, home ownership is simply not an option. As a result, millions of Hondurans reside in slums or settle for housing that lacks basic infrastructure.

The country's dire housing situation is further exacerbated by its growing population, including a predominantly young population that needs room for families, representing an pressing need for affordable housing. Moreover, the rate of urbanization demonstrates a particular need for housing in Honduras' cities.

In 2006, the Honduran government partnered with the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) to improve the state of housing for Honduras' low and middle income population. The IDB provided investment and assistance to enable the government to meet the demands of the housing market, contributing \$30 million to improve low-income housing conditions. Many more, however, remain without satisfactory housing.

Essentially, Honduras' high poverty levels and its demographic situation have left millions of Hondurans without quality housing. According to a 2012 study by IDB, the government must step in to "foster greater private sector investment to increase the supply of adequate and affordable housing."

EMPLOMENT FOR CITIZENS

As the second poorest country in Central America, the unemployment and underemployment rates in Honduras are high. The labour force is 3.5 million. With an increasing focus on apparel and textile exports in recent decades, which are being sent primarily to the United States and account for almost 50 percent of Honduras' economic activity, roughly 21 percent of jobs can be found in these sectors. Agriculture accounts for 39 percent of jobs, while the remaining 40 percent are provided by the service sector. However, there has been an ongoing shift from agricultural employment to employment in the industry and service sectors. The service sector pays its employees slightly better wages than are earned by those working in industry and agriculture. The average Honduran earns less than \$200 USD per month.

More than one-third of the Honduran labour force are unemployed. This, coupled with high underemployment rates, translates into 60 percent of Hondurans living below the poverty line. The National Statistics Institute reports that, in 2012, Honduras' economy grew by less than 1 percent. The situation is especially problematic for those with families and young people trying to fund their studies. Youth unemployment, specifically, has been linked to high crime rates.

Despite these figures, many Hondurans work informal jobs, on which accurate data is not kept by the government. Hondurans can earn a modest living selling goods, including food staples, clothing, and merchandise. Additionally, the country's Secretariat of Labour and Social Security (STSS) established the Proempleo program in 2007 to offer employment to youth aged 18 to 29, providing more than 9,000 entry-level jobs, to date.

DIGNITY OF INDIVIDUAL

The dignity of Honduran citizens is formally protected by the Constitution, as outlined in Article 59. The U.S. Department of State reports that, in practice, freedom of religion is respected. It should be noted, however, that the vast majority of Hondurans identify as Roman Catholic. Indeed, Article 77 of the Constitution guarantees citizens the right to practice their chosen religion, so long as it does not impede public order or contradict the country's laws (Constitution of the Republic of Honduras).

The Constitution also established an independent judiciary, and entitles all citizens to a fair trial. Accused individuals have the right to an attorney, which the state will provide in necessary circumstances, the right to a public trial, and an initial hearing by a judge, as well as the right to receive bail and the opportunity to plea bargain. However, Human Rights Watch reports that in practice corruption plagues the judiciary, that it is underfunded and understaffed and, in general, ill equipped to meet the demands put on it by Honduras high rate of crime. Indeed, in 2013, Honduras had the highest murder rate in the world (Human Rights Watch, 2014). As a result of the limited judiciary, fair and effective trial cannot be guaranteed.

Similarly, formal equality of opportunity exists in Honduras. Nevertheless, women routinely find themselves at a disadvantage. Women are more likely to live in poverty than men, and they are more often the victims of murder, illustrating the opportunity gap that exists between men and women (Counterpart International, 2013).

Ongoing discrimination against transgendered individuals is also a problem in Honduras. Transgendered individuals are often subjected to harassment and physical violence, including beatings and rape, as well as arbitrary detention and extortion (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Such treatment of Honduras' transgender community is known to law enforcement officials, but action is rarely taken to end the violence and discrimination. Human Rights Watch (2009) reports that the problem lies within Honduran law, as the Law on Police and Social Affairs is written in a vague manner, and is thus open to interpretation by police. Transgender individuals are thus denied opportunity based on their gender identity.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Honduras' extreme level of poverty, corruption and crime contribute to its subpar healthcare, education, and housing systems, as well as its high underemployment and unemployment rates. While the Honduran government has partnered with other governments and non-governmental organizations to address such deficiencies, which have made moderate improvements, the fact remains that many Hondurans experience a poor quality of life. Improving Honduras' education system would bode well for reducing its poverty rate, which would in turn improve its level and quality of employment, as well as its poor housing situation.

While Honduras scores well in providing freedom of religious belief for its citizens, other human dignities, including the right to a fair trial and equal opportunity for minority populations, are denied. The justice system routinely fails to hold perpetrators accountable for their crimes, and those who are arrested are not guaranteed a fair trial. In terms of equal opportunity, women and transgendered individuals have been identified as groups facing opportunity gaps in comparison to the mainstream population. Though the Constitution has been revised many times, violations continue to occur, rendering it meaningless in such circumstances.



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