

Please, Stop Trying to 'Fix' Honduras: Letter to the Los Angeles Times

Written by Jesse Freeston
Thursday, 16 June 2011 13:54



A response to the recent Op-Ed entitled “ [Fixing Honduras](#) ” by Noah Feldman, David Landau and Brian Sheppard that was published in the L.A. Times

“The authors of the op-ed are constitutional lawyers from the United States. They are not Hondurans. They do not understand Honduras. They do not understand the crisis in Honduras.”

This op-ed by US-based constitutional lawyers completely misidentifies the real crisis in Honduras.

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For the authors, the problem to be solved is one of political instability, a power struggle amongst politicians that to be avoided by way of slight tweaks to the constitution. The real crisis in Honduras is the 300,000 rural families without access to land, not counting the thousands that have fled the country entirely. It's the poverty rates as high as 80%, where community after community lacks basic sanitation, much less roads or medical clinics. It's the political system that has failed for decades to address these problems.

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The arrogance of titling their article 'Fixing Honduras' is that Feldman is assuming that fixing Honduras isn't a job fit for Hondurans, and more importantly, that fixing Honduras isn't precisely what Hondurans themselves are already trying to do by fighting for an entirely new constitution.

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Many Hondurans saw the Zelaya presidency, and in particular his proposal to write a new constitution, as the first genuine attempt to address the country's normalized humanitarian crisis. Many people here are demanding more participation in politics as they've lost faith in the traditional political class. They demand evolution from the representative democracy defended by the current constitution, to a more participatory democracy. The details of the new Honduran democracy would be determined through a constitutional assembly that guarantees real participation for all Honduran sectors and geographical regions. Supporters of this bold plan are merely demanding a right to a referendum to see whether Hondurans want to have such an assembly.

In response to this demand, Feldman tells Hondurans that they can't have a referendum without the approval of those very representatives they are rejecting. In their words, such a move would "require the assent of other institutions of government, such as the Congress and the courts, before the executive is able to consult the public for any exercise of direct democracy." Getting assent from the congress and courts has been proven impossible. The members of these two institutions naturally see direct democracy as a threat, given that its practice requires a loss of power for them. In taking this position, Feldman is protecting the same status quo that the Honduran military and oligarchy have defended so violently both during and since the coup of June 28th, 2009.

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Foreign pens already had their chance to define democracy for Hondurans. The current constitution was written in the early 1980s under US-backed military dictatorship with the participation of the US Embassy. For thirty years, Hondurans have waited for this imposed system to show progress in resolving their problems. Today, most Hondurans are arguably worse off, and their territory is notably lacking much of the gold, forests, local businesses, and campesino cooperatives that they once had. How much longer do Hondurans have to wait to decide for themselves what democracy means to them?

Cuban independence hero José Martí, a critical admirer of the United States' own early experiments in democracy, defended peoples' right to determine their own governance in his famous essay *Our America*, “[Latin Americans] understand that there is too much imitation, and that salvation lies in creating. Create is this generation's password. Make wine from plantains; it may be sour, but it is our wine! It is now understood that a country's form of government must adapt to its natural elements...that liberty, in order to be viable, must be sincere and full, that if the republic does not open its arms to all and include all in its progress, it dies.”



In the two years since the coup, many Hondurans have continued to fight for their right to determine their own destiny. Their dream has been costly. There have been more than 100 political dissidents assassinated and more than 200 others forced into exile. The country's teachers, students, industrial workers, indigenous and black organizers, farmers, LGBT rights activists, and feminists, among others, have been routinely tear-gassed, beaten, and jailed for protesting. Eleven of the country's most critical journalists have been assassinated and dissenting radio and TV stations have been shut down by the military on a series of occasions. There have been no charges laid and very little sign of investigation in any of these cases.

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In order to understand why Feldman, Landau, and Sheppard see the crisis as they do, it must be taken into consideration who their employer is. They are hired consultants for the post-coup regime's truth commission. A commission that was formed following the passing of a general amnesty for all those involved in the coup, and which is explicitly prohibited from investigating human rights abuses. Meanwhile, Honduras' six major human rights monitors have formed a competing truth commission, headed by an international panel that includes Argentinian Nobel Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. This commission has placed no restrictions on its mission to investigate both the underlying causes of the coup and the repression that followed it.

By contrast, the regime's truth commission is forbidden from investigating the conditions lived by the Honduran people both before and after the coup. Ignored is the poverty, exclusion, and insecurity that fuels a movement for fundamental change, as well as the violence and impunity required to hold back that movement by force. For the Lobo commission, the crisis is to be considered merely constitutional and thus it is constitutional lawyers with no experience in Honduras that are called on to 'fix' it. Everything happening on the ground is invisible.

The limited focus of the regime's commission helps—though not much—to understand why Feldman refers to the post-coup period of consistent political violence as “the relative calm of the last two years.” This failure alone, the failure to appreciate Honduran reality, should be reason enough to reject the authors' capacity to 'fix' Honduras.

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Jesse Freeston is an independent video-journalist currently based in Honduras. His response is one of many sent by various authors to the L.A. Times on the day following their publication of the Feldman piece. The Times elected not to publish this nor any of the other responses they received.

Videos Reports from Honduras by Jesse Freeston:

Zelaya Returns to Honduras

Massive Turnout for Zelaya Launches New Chapter of Honduran Struggle

Also see [Honduran Teachers Get Shock Treatment](#)

[Land Occupations in Post-Coup Honduras](#)