Honduras Is Well Worth Saving
It Is a Liberal Democracy Surrounded by the Region’s Turmoil

By JOHN NEGROPONTE

There is a vague conventional wisdom about the nations of Central America. Their regimes are supposedly repressive and militarized. Political violence is alleged to be the culmination of years of social and economic inequities, including repression by U.S.-backed authoritarian regimes. And the foreign policies of these countries are presumed to be undemocratic.

Taken as a whole, this stereotype—passively accepted by some, actively promoted by others—is designed to push us to the conclusion that this cruddy region is not worth saving. But let us take a moment to examine the facts. I will use Honduras as an example because I have been stationed there for the past 22 months. Also, Honduras makes a good case study, located as it is in the vortex of Central America and bordered by the troubled countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua.

Honduras is a liberal democracy. There is complete freedom of expression and a healthy labor movement, considered a model in the region. After a decade of benevolent military rule, Honduras held presidential elections for a constitutional assembly in 1980, and again for a congress and a president in 1981. Both elections were widely hailed as fair and free, with more than 95% of the registered electorate participating. Honduras’ elected president, Roberto Suazo Cordova, assumed office in 1982.

Contrary to perceptions prevailing in some quarters, the military in Honduras supports the constitutional process. Given the recent history of direct military involvement in internal politics, it is too easy to say that this fortunate development represents an irrevocable commitment, but the proof is encouraging. First, the Honduran military “guaranteed” both elections. The validity of that pledge was borne out by the conduct of the pre-electoral elections, in which the party traditionally aligned with the military was defeated.

Other positive developments include the facts that 12 out of Honduras’ 14 cabinet seats are occupied by civilians and that Suazo has managed to keep military spending at less than 10% of the national budget. Its own interest, according to the country’s defense minister, is to ensure that the armed forces play a constructive role in the development of the country.

If there is a soft spot in Honduras’ otherwise positive political record, it is in human rights. There have been arbitrary arrests and cruel and unusual punishments of some prisoners. The Honduran press has been free to publish what it wishes about many cases, but doubt is cast on the satisfactory resolution of some of these cases. Moreover, there is no indication that the frequent human rights violations that do occur are part of deliberate government policy. Indeed, disciplinary action has been taken against members of the police and military (including officers) who have abused their authority.

Perhaps most important, in the prevention of future human rights abuses, there has been the recent passage of a new criminal code by the Honduran congress. This code is a much-needed addition to the legal system.

The social picture in Honduras also contains promising elements. Population density is relatively low, although the annual population growth rate is cause for concern. There are no racial troubles in the country’s relatively homogeneous society. And one does not have to look far to find journalism is a fact rather than a luxury, with the country’s 10 daily newspapers and the numerous radio and television stations providing a wide range of perspectives.

In conclusion, the Honduran government is attempting to reduce through a crash literacy campaign. On the other hand, the Honduran economy has been adversely affected by political instability in neighboring countries, the worldwide recession and the general reluctance of commercial banks to lend to Latin America. During the 1970s, Honduras experienced impressive economic growth rates of 7% to 8%. I have been told that in 1975 employment in agribusiness and high and business was good to such an extent that building contractors went out to buy land to be used for construction workers.

Today the picture is considerably bleaker. Growth was estimated at 5% to 6%—under the circumstances, viewed as something of an economic triumph. Unemployment stands at 25% to 30% of the work force, and there has been a significant new foreign investment in the last five years. Honduran businessmen lament the fact that despite a stable political situation, foreign investment, inadequate commercial infrastructure and ready access to U.S. markets—private foreign capital is unlikely to be directed to Honduras in significant quantities so long as there is apprehension about political stability in the region. Nonetheless, both public and private sectors are engaged in a determined effort to point out that the situation in Honduras is distinct, and that sweeping generalizations about Central America, in addition to being dangerous, can also be very unfair.

While the subject of sweeping generalizations, there is probably none more stigmatizing than the notion that every brown face that walks around with the shoulder of his arm rests on the hands of American fruit companies. It is wrong. The United States has more than 22,000 U.S.-based multinational food companies have fruit-growing, packing and export facilities in Honduras, and they are excellent corporate citizens. Together they employ close to 200,000 workers, workers that earn wages that are far above the per capita average. Both companies have been pioneers in the diversification of Honduran agriculture, introducing new products such as sisal, which is grown primarily by black coffee producers. In addition to being the country’s single most important and best-paying employer, the firms are an asset to the modernization of the agricultural sector. But there are more than 25% of Honduras’ importers who are false, and if there is 30% in the textile sector, the companies in Honduras are not sure for violent revolution. Few Hondurans seem to be tempted by violent solutions. As a matter of common sense, the large majority see political stability and export-led economic growth as the long-term answers to their problems. They cannot see the logic of the Salvadoran rebels destroying their country’s economy in the name of liberation.

Nor does the heavily Cuban-influenced Marxist model of Nicaragua hold any attraction. To be sure, under growing Cuban influence and direction the Honduran Communist Party has been reorganized, and preparations are being made for the reconstruction of revolutionary violence. But, far too many Hondurans have signed up for the revolutionary cause. Perhaps more telling is the fact that the few acts of political violence within Honduras during the last three years have almost entirely been traced to foreign instigation—usually the extreme Salvadoran left. Without external support, advice and encouragement, the emergence of a significant Honduran terrorist or guerrilla movement appears unlikely.

This brings me to the idea that Honduras somehow serves as a test case of U.S. policy in Central America. This erroneous impression continues to exist with such regularity that Honduras is a small country surrounded by trouble. Our two governments share a common view of development in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Honduras fears Nicaragua’s massive military and Cuban military advisor and Nicaragua’s policy of “revolution without fermentation.” Most Hondurans are convinced that if El Salvador falls into commie hands, Honduras will be next. If the United States looks at Nicaragua as its political and economic enemy and supports a government that has a low degree of political stability, it is easy to see why the presence of thousands of Cuban military advisors and Nicaragua’s policy of “revolution without fermentation” would prove so attractive.

Under these circumstances it should come as no surprise that Honduras and the United States have a strong working relationship during the last three years and that there is a strong identity of views between us on regional issues. Hondurans look to the United States as the strongest and most dependable force in the defense of freedom in Central America.

Under foreseeable circumstances they do not seek external support. U.S. military involvement in the Central American conundrum is a sideshow to us for the economic and military assistance necessary to carry through this period of rapidity and defend their way of life. The Hondurans know that the United States will continue to do whatever it can to send aid to Honduras. They have no reason to fear that the United States will not be there when they need it.
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There is a vague conventional wisdom about the nations of Central America. Their regimes are supposedly repressive and militaristic. Political violence is alleged to be the culmination of years of social and economic inequality, including mistreatment by U.S.-based economic interests. And the foreign policies of their neighbors are presumed to be no better or worse.

Taken as a whole, this stereotype partially reflects some actively promoted by others — a design to drive us to the conclusion that this is a region in which it is not worth hanging on. But I have a different moment to examine the facts. I will use Honduras as an example because I have been stationed there for the past 22 months. Also, Honduras makes a good case study, located as it is in the heart of Central America and bordered by the troubled countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua.

Honduras is a liberal democracy. There is commitment freedom of expression and a healthy labor movements, considered a model in the region. After a decade of benevolent military rule, Honduras held elections for a constitutional assembly in 1980 and again for a congress and a presidency in 1981. Both elections were widely hailed as fair and free, with more than 90 percent of the registered electorate participating. Honduras elected civilian president, Roberto Suazo Cordova, assumed office in 1983.

Contrary to perceptions prevailing in some quarters, the military in Honduras supports the democratic process. Given the recent history of direct military involvement in internal politics, it is too easy to say that present fortitude represents an irrevocable commitment, but that is necessary for progress. First, the Honduran military "guaranteed" both elections. The validity of this pledge was examined by the results of the presidential elections, in which the party traditionally aligned with the military was defeated.

Other positive developments include the fact that 12 out of 16 public utilities are operated by civilians and that Honduras has managed to keep military spending at less than 10% of the national budget. Finally, the Honduran military sees its own interests as promoting the country's economic development and ensuring the public interest. Second, the Honduran military has used its influence to promote a more open media, and to pressure the government to support democratic values in the wake of regional tension.

There is a soft spot in Honduras' otherwise positive political record, it is in human rights. There have been abuses and credible allegations of human rights abuses, including the torture of political prisoners. The Honduran press has been free to publish what it wishes about such cases, no deaths contributing to the satisfactory resolution of some of these cases.

Perhaps more important is the prevention of future human rights abuses, has been the recent passage of a new criminal code by the Honduran congress. This should lead to a more expeditious handling of cases of sexual assault and a substantial reduction in the arbitrary police behavior.

The social picture in Honduras also contains promising elements. Population pressures are slight, though the 2.7% annual population growth rate is cause for concern. There are no racial troubles in the country's relatively homogenous society. And one does not find widespread hunger or a scale that is used elsewhere in Central America.

Land reform has been a reality in Honduras for more than 20 years, and has been fairly successful (not without its problems, but with the country's nine small landlords). If there is a serious problem, it is the high rate of illiteracy (approximately 40%), which the government is attempting to

reduce through a crash literacy campaign. On the other hand, the Honduran economic situation has been adversely affected by political instability in neighboring countries, the worldwide recession and the general resistance of commercial banks to lend to Latin America. During the 1970s Honduras experienced an impressive annual economic growth rates of 7% or 8%. I have been told that in 1978 employment in construction business was so great that building contractors went out to the countryside to employ laborers to come to the cities as construction workers.

Today the picture is considerably bleaker. Growth was estimated at -1% in 1982, under the circumstances, viewed as something of an economic triumph. Unemployment stands at 25-36% of the work force, and there has been no significant new foreign investment in the last five years. Honduran businessmen lament the fact that—despite a stable political situation, willing labor force, adequate commercial infrastructure and ready access to U.S. markets—private foreign capital is unlikely to be attracted.

Honduras is in a significant quandary, as long as there is apprehension about political stability in the region. Nonetheless, both public and private sectors are engaged in a concerted effort to put into the situation in Honduras is distinct, and that it is not unique. The world is looking at Honduras, and it must be made to understand the economic realities of the country.

For the past four years, the author has been a member, member of the police and military (including officers) who have abused their authority.

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At first glance, this stereotype is not far from the truth. Honduras, for example, has a military regime, a long history of civil-military conflict, a record of human rights abuses, and an economy dominated by U.S.-based sugar interests. But the stereotype is not quite accurate. Honduras is a democracy, and its political leaders are determined to prove it.

Like all democracies, Honduras has its problems. Unemployment is high, inflation is rising, and the government is struggling to maintain control over its own military. But these problems are not unique to Honduras; they are common to all developing countries.

In fact, Honduras is one of the most successful democracies in Latin America. Its leaders have made a conscious effort to reverse the cycle of violence that has plagued the region for decades. They have implemented a series of structural reforms, including the privatization of state-owned enterprises and the reduction of government spending. These measures have helped to stabilize the economy and reduce the risk of further domestic instability.

The government has also taken steps to improve the human rights situation. It has signed international agreements on human rights and has made efforts to hold its military accountable for its actions. Despite these efforts, there are still concerns about the treatment of minority groups, particularly indigenous peoples.

Honduras is also a major transit route for illegal drugs, which continues to be a problem. However, the government has taken steps to fight this problem, including the establishment of a national drug control agency and the increase of interdiction efforts.

In conclusion, Honduras is a democracy that is making progress. It faces significant challenges, but its leaders are determined to overcome them. The country is well worth saving, and its success could serve as a model for other countries in the region.