

## Political exclusion

The political crisis in Honduras is a manifestation of deep social division. The donor community should put pressure on the country to achieve true democratic normality. Education is a key component of reducing poverty.

[ By Andreas Brunold ]

➔ There have been more than 100 coups in Honduras since the country gained independence from Spain in 1821. On average, at least one coup occurred every two years. On 28 June 2009, an elected government was once again overthrown.

That day, President Manuel Zelaya had planned to hold a non-binding referendum, which had been ruled illegally by the Supreme Court. Indirectly, the referendum would have been about enabling him to run for a second term in the upcoming November elections, an option the constitution does not provide for. The Honduran elite firmly opposes the idea since Zelaya – somewhat surprisingly – aligned himself with the Latin American left during his term in office.

Honduras is a deeply divided country. About one third of its people live on less than two dollars a day. Eleven per cent of the children are considered malnourished, and the adult illiteracy rate amounts to about 20 %. More than half of the Hon-

duran population of 7.8 million live below the poverty line, and around one million have left the country.

The gap between the small oligarchy and the impoverished masses has steadily grown in recent decades. At the same time, dependency on financial flows from the USA increased too. Such transfers have several reasons, including remittances from migrants, profits from capital market speculation and the sales of export-oriented manufacturing. Two dozen families control about 60 % of the capital flows. The names of the presidents in the past decades read like a “who is who” of this small elite.

Zelaya incurred the wrath of these dynasties by raising the legal minimum monthly wage from 3,500 to 5,500 Lempiras (equivalent to about € 206). This move even went against his own party, the Partido Liberal, and upset the finely balanced relationship between the two main parties, who have alternated in power since 1982.

It matters more, however, that the political system had lost credibility anyway. Political exclusion has been growing in Honduras since the 1980s, in spite of regular free elections. Alienation is evident, among other things, in rising voter abstention. In 1985, that share was 16 %, but by 2005, it had risen to 49.6 %.

The recent coup was internationally condemned, and the Organisation of American States (OAS) suspended the membership of Honduras. Donor countries should follow this lead and put pressure on Honduras to achieve true democratic normality.

Teachers unions’ enduring willingness to strike in protest against the coup as well as the high number of teachers involved in rallies indicate that the dire state of the education sector is one of the reasons for the current constitutional crisis. Teaching staff are underpaid and mostly poorly trained, and 70 % of Hondurans do not finish high school. Officially, there is broad consensus in Honduras over the significance of education for sustainable development. None-the-less, considerable shortcomings persist.

Such shortcomings are of direct concern to donor governments. Honduras is one of the five focus countries in Latin America for German Development cooperation, for instance. It is also the second-largest recipient of EU aid in Latin America. In April 2005, Honduras was accepted into the debt-relief initiative for highly-indebted poor countries (HIPC). As a precondition, Honduras had to present and begin to implement a coherent Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP).

In Honduras, as in many other countries, poverty reduction depends on good governance and anti-corruption measures. Improving education policy is indispensable. In the HIPC context, Honduras has also pledged to respect the rule of law – but coup leaders obviously lack the credibility to implement that policy. ←

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