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# The Danger of Subversion in Honduras

Submitted by the  
DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE  
Concurred in by the  
UNITED STATES INTELLIGENCE BOARD  
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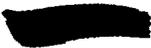
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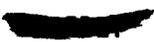
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**The Danger of Subversion in Honduras**





## THE DANGER OF SUB- VERSION IN HONDURAS

### CONCLUSION

In the short run, the only potential threat to the military regime in Honduras would be a falling out among its leaders. There are indications of growing tensions within the ruling group. Isolated terrorist acts will almost certainly continue, but, unless and until the Communists and pro-Castroites improve their own capabilities for subversion and gain the cooperation of the deposed Liberals and other political groupings, the regime can handle any subversive threat they try to mount. The Liberals and the mass labor organizations, for their part, will probably avoid violence so long as they have reasonable grounds to hope for an eventual return to constitutionality—which the regime now promises for mid-1965. Should they lose this hope and conclude that the López regime is bent on indefinite tenure and suppressive rule, they would in time probably join with the extremists in subversive activities.

## DISCUSSION

### I. BACKGROUND

1. Honduras is still a typical "banana republic."<sup>1</sup> Its first real experiment with representative government took place during the past six years under the administration of President Villeda Morales and his Liberal Party; this experiment came to a sudden end when Villeda was ousted by a quick but bloody military coup on 3 October 1963. Even under Villeda, the military forces, traditionally the final arbiters of Honduran politics, retained a constitutionally privileged position above civilian control. While the Villeda regime made only meager progress toward the establishment of a truly representative government, its performance was a considerable improvement over the political despotism, widespread corruption, and inefficiency that characterized earlier Honduran governments.

### II. THE MILITARY REGIME

2. The October coup was led by the Armed Forces commander, Colonel Oswaldo López, now head of the regime, and the Air Force commander, Lieutenant Colonel Armando Escalón. The military leaders expressed concern about the Villeda government's failure to take strong measures against the local Communists. Their primary motivation, however, was concern that their privileged status would have been endangered if, as appeared almost certain, Modesto Rodas Alvarado, the Liberal Party candidate, was chosen as President in the elections scheduled for 13 October. Villeda had a *modus vivendi* with the military leaders, who were traditionally in sympathy with the Nationalist Party, the chief rival of the Liberals. Rodas, however, gave the military reason to fear that he would try to build up further the Liberal-oriented Guardia Civil at the expense of the Armed Forces. Military units had clashed with elements of the Guardia Civil ever since the latter was created in 1959.

3. The military quickly consolidated its power and is now in firm control of the country. The Guardia Civil has been replaced by a Special Security Corps under Escalón, who is now the Defense Minister as well as commander of the air force. The regime has also arrested some Communists and exiled others, and in general has disrupted the activities of the relatively weak Honduran Communist Party. Finally, in response to internal pressures and in the interest of gaining US recognition (which

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<sup>1</sup>Honduras, with some 43,000 square miles, is a little smaller in area than Pennsylvania. The Honduran population, of about two million, is predominantly mestizo (90 percent) and about 65 percent illiterate. The economy is the least developed in Central America (GNP: US\$420 million, \$209 per capita). It depends heavily upon exports of bananas, coffee, and timber.

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was granted 14 December), López has issued a plan for restoring constitutionality by mid-1965.

4. In the short run, the only potential threat to the regime would be a falling out among the military leaders. Important military figures (as well as several civilian cabinet members), resentful of the influence of López' longtime chief adviser, Ricardo Zúñiga, may have requested his ouster. Zúñiga has antagonized them by interposing himself between López and their counsel, and by placing his own supporters in many key positions. Most notably, this has offended Escalón, an ambitious and forceful figure, who eventually might lead a coup against López. If he should do so, he might receive support from some disgruntled Nationalists as well as from some Liberals. There have been indications that several military leaders—including Lieutenant Colonel Enrique Soto Cano, second in command in the air force, who may speak for Escalón—have conferred with Liberal leaders on the possibility of ousting López and establishing an all-party government.

5. *The Security Forces.* The Honduran Army numbers about 4,500 men, the Air Force about 350. The projected strength of the Special Security Corps is about 2,000. There is no naval force. The army maintains a battalion in the capital area, but the bulk of its forces are widely dispersed. The air force's well-trained and disciplined personnel, as well as its 40 planes—which includes 18 piston fighters—are concentrated in the Tegucigalpa area. These forces are capable of maintaining internal security under normal conditions. Shortcomings in communications and mobility would limit their ability to counter effectively any sizable guerrilla activity which might develop. Without outside assistance, they could not cope with well-organized, widespread disorders, nor could they prevent a determined intrusion by Castro-Communist elements.

### III. OPPOSITION FORCES

6. *The Liberal Party (PL).* The PL is the major opposition force confronting the regime, but its leadership is now separated and off balance. Former President Villeda and presidential candidate Rodas have gone into exile, while most of the other Party leaders are still in Honduras. Rodas' plans, as well as those of the radical wing of the PL that strongly supported him, are not yet clearly defined; some radicals in the PL favor subversive activities against the regime. In contrast, Villeda, who had bitterly opposed Rodas' nomination, may entertain some hopes that eventually he can himself return and regain control. The top level PL leadership in Honduras has accepted the regime's plans for a return to constitutionality and has agreed to serve on the Electoral Commission. In April a PL convention will choose the Party's leaders for the next two years. The choices made will be indicative of the Party's future attitude toward the regime, and, in turn, will condition the military's attitude toward the Party.



- International boundary
- Departamento boundary
- ⊕ National capital
- ⊙ Departamento capital
- Railroad
- Road

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7. *Labor.* The labor unions initially condemned the López regime and have refused to serve on the Electoral Commission; Celeo González, President of the North Coast Labor Federation, even hinted strongly at calling a strike. At present, however, he appears to have accepted the more moderate counsels of the Liberals and of Oscar Gale, head of SITRATERCO (the largest union in the United Fruit Company and dominant member in the Federation). Without SITRATERCO, a strike is not likely and would not be effective if it were tried. Even with SITRATERCO, a strike might not be successful because the unions lack organization and control in key transportation and communications sectors.

8. *The Communists.* Before the coup there may have been as many as 2,000 members in the Communist Party (PCH)—including around 1,000 Young Communists (JCH). Of these only around 250 could have been considered hard-core. In addition, there were some 3,000 sympathizers. The Communists control the University Reform Front, one of the two principal student organizations, and have some influence in a newly formed Liberal student group. The PCH also exercises strong influence on *El Cronista*, the daily newspaper with the largest circulation in Honduras. Although the PCH still has influence in the unions, before the coup they had lost control of SITRASFRUCO, the unaffiliated and largest union in the Standard Fruit Company. Since then another union (SIPFA) has ousted the leading Communists from its ranks .

9. The PCH has several weaknesses—practical and theoretical—that militate against an immediate resort to all-out subversion. It has not been a true revolutionary party, having avoided subversive or other provocative action in order to obtain a measure of toleration under Villeda. (Its lack of revolutionary zeal has been criticized by other Central American Communist parties.) Moreover, the PCH has been weakened by internal dissension caused by the personalistic and avaricious tendencies of its leaders, Dionisio Bejarano and Luis Zúñiga (no relation to Ricardo). The Party has also been hampered by lack of funds and of a well-developed communications system, which has hindered effective central control.

10. Nevertheless, even before the coup, there were indications that the PCH—largely because of pressure from the more extremist JCH—was moving toward a more active and independent position: it had increased its activities among the peasants with some success. It had strengthened the quality and militancy of its membership by sending to Cuba over the past two years well over a hundred Hondurans, some of whom received guerrilla training there. Thus far, the results have been more apparent in the field of propaganda than in revolutionary action. Recently, however, a loosely organized group of youths, students,

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Communists, and left-wing Liberals known as the Integrated Movement of Liberation (MIL) has carried out some bombings in the capital.

11. *The National Liberation Front (FLN)*. The FLN is an amorphous, ragtag group of guerrilla bandits operating in the wild and remote regions around the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. This group, which has received support from Castro, is composed of Nicaraguan exiles, Honduran malcontents and adventurers, Communists, and perhaps a few Cubans. The Cuban support has been primarily in the form of training, propaganda, and some financial aid. FLN activities have been directed almost exclusively at Nicaragua rather than at Honduras. The FLN has had no notable success in undermining the Nicaraguan Government. With the military in power in Honduras, the FLN may be able to recruit disaffected elements and promote guerrilla forays in Honduras.

#### IV. SHORT RUN PROSPECTS FOR SUBVERSION

12. No opposition group now appears both willing and able to mount an effective challenge to the regime. The extreme leftists have already shown themselves capable of some terrorist activities and will almost certainly continue them. In general, however, extreme leftist subversion has scant prospects for success in the short run. The PCH will need some time to regroup its scattered assets and to recast its strategy along subversive lines. Furthermore, so long as the PL and the labor unions refuse to accept subversion as a means of opposition, we do not believe that the radical left can mount a subversive campaign effective enough to weaken the regime in any significant way. For some time at least, the Liberals and organized labor are not likely to cooperate with the extremists, if only because they believe that their prospects for regaining power are best served by nonviolent opposition.

#### V. LONGER RUN THREATS TO THE PRESENT REGIME

13. In the long run, subversion by the extreme left may find more fertile ground. Honduras has many of the classic ills of its area—a large proportion of the population is ill fed, ill housed, and ill clothed—and a rising level of aspirations exploitable by extremists. Moreover, the Communists, though temporarily put off balance, have not been destroyed. With its quasi-legal position gone, the PCH is more likely to resort to insurrection. The deportation of old line Communist leaders has already given the pro-revolutionary and pro-Castro JCH elements dominant positions in the Party. It will certainly intensify its efforts to infiltrate and to influence the labor unions and the radical wing of the PL. It may also cooperate more closely with the FLN in anti-regime activities. These efforts would be facilitated if an inept military regime were to alienate public opinion.



14. The Communists will probably be able to obtain a sizable number of hand weapons, since most Hondurans possess them. There may also be some Communist caches of weapons in the country. There is an increased possibility that, if the PCH gives evidence of being fully committed to subversion, Castro—or possibly extremist groups in Guatemala or Nicaragua—might attempt to provide it with arms and supplies.<sup>2</sup>

15. The military regime will take more forceful action against subversives than did Villeda. Its antsubversive efforts will be handicapped, however, by Honduras' poor transportation and communications system. The countryside affords numerous safe havens for guerrilla forces. Moreover, the new Security Corps is untried and untrained in checking organized subversion and, in combating it, might resort to such repressive measures as would antagonize the general population.

16. The seriousness of the situation in Honduras will depend largely on whether labor and the Liberals continue their nonviolent tactics or turn to cooperating with the Communists. The crucial factor in this situation is the regime's own actions—not those of the Communists. If the regime resorts to excessively repressive measures, the general population would become more susceptible to revolutionary incitements. Furthermore, should the López regime attempt to perpetuate itself in power or to install a Nationalist regime by manipulation or outright violation of the electoral process, the Liberals and the labor forces would probably turn to subversive action and be receptive to Communist assistance and influence. If it chose to, however, a united Honduran military could probably maintain itself in power against that kind of opposition for an indefinite period.

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<sup>2</sup> Honduras is less than 400 miles from Cuba. Its long, largely unguarded northern coast is open to the clandestine introduction of arms, supplies, or even personnel. There is already extensive smuggling, possibly including some arms, into Honduras from other Central American states and Mexico. (See map, facing page 1.)

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