

# **Statistical Power**

Lifting the veil on the statistics-driven re-militarization of  
Honduras

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## Lifting the veil on the statistics-driven re-militarization of Honduras

In 2013, I moved to one of the world's most violent city, Tegucigalpa (CCSPJP 2014). I worked there for almost a year as a human rights accompanier with different visits to the murder capital of the world, San Pedro Sula. In 2017, I returned for three months to Tegucigalpa, meanwhile, ranking as "only" the 35th most violent city in the world presumably having halved its murder rate to a still staggering 48 murders per 100'000 inhabitants (CCSPJP 2018). The main reason proposed for this alleged success by the government was its *mano dura* policies based on the use of soldiers in public security. Nevertheless, the lived reality, mine and the one of my Honduran colleagues, had not changed and public talk about insecurity was still dominant.

In this essay, I will show how the Honduran government discursively built the need for the re-militarization of Honduras around the insecurity narrative and its most prominent manifestation, the above-mentioned homicide rate. I will critically engage with the narrative that the process of re-militarization led to the outcome of a lower homicide rate, but also with how the process itself was legitimized and if its portrayed outcome is believable. To do this, I will make use of both the academic literature on the use of the armed forces in public security as well as further statistical measures apart from the homicide rate. This essay will argue that questionable statistics were selectively used to push through a re-militarization of public security forces in Honduras against national and international opposition by a powerful group for their benefit, i.e. guaranteeing their stay in power.

### Honduras and its Armed Forces – A Short History

To understand the present, it is essential to know about the role of the armed forces in Honduras' history. The military has always been a powerful political actor in Honduras, from its independence to the time it became the quintessential banana republic (Acker 1989) up to the present. Already two years after its independence, the military ousted the government of Dionisio de Herrera in 1827 (Vélez 2011). This coup d'état was followed by dozens more until 1982 when civilian regimes seemed to have taken over power for good (Vélez 2011). In 2009, it became apparent that the idea that the military withdrew from public life was a misconception when they ousted president Manuel Zelaya (Salomón 2009).

Taking a closer look at the literature, it becomes apparent that the idea that the military withdrew from public life in 1982 and only reappeared in 2009 is itself flawed. The year 1982 was significant because the new Honduran constitution formally removed the army from politics (Mani 2016). But Mani shows how they were just moved to other positions of power, e.g. government ministries and public utilities. Furthermore, the underlying "military culture" (Meza 2015: 18) had not changed, and over time, there were even signs of the army regaining more control. In 1998 the Secretariat of

Security was created and gained the oversight of the police, even though it has been directed by former army men almost continuously since its creation.

From this perspective, the coup in 2009 was only the most visible sign that the de-militarization had never been completed. It was the culmination of a process of re-militarization that had shortly started after the end of the official military rule in 1982. Most relevant for the task at hand, since 2009, every government action giving more power to the Armed Forces has to be seen as recognition of their decisive role in 2009 (Barahona 2014: 114). It became the cornerstone of a renewed reciprocal relationship between political and military powers.

## Creating and Maintaining the Need for a Re-Militarization of Public Security

The concise historical overview intends to set the scene in which the re-militarization of public security took place. It showed that the military never truly disappeared from power and how 2009 made the national and international public aware of this. Since then, efforts have been taken to make the re-militarization appear as a natural and necessary process. In this section, I present the narratives used to accompany this development. I will concentrate on the period starting in 2010 when Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) came to power, first as president of Congress and then in 2014 as president of Honduras.

Violence has always played a constitutive role in Honduras' history (Barahona 2014), but after the coup d'état, it reached new levels. The homicide rate almost doubled to over 6000 murders between 2007 and 2010 (IUDPAS 2018). By 2011, Honduras had the highest murder rate worldwide (UNODC 2011). There are manifold reasons for this: a weak judicial system resulting in high impunity rates, a violent development model, changing drug trafficking patterns, etc. (Hernández 2016). The response by the Honduran government, meanwhile, did not intend to find adequate answers to the different underlying causes but instead proposed *mano dura* policies as a general solution.

The JOH regime created a militarist discourse presenting the army as the primary enforcer of its chosen solution, put their representatives in trusted positions, and presented them as the only defense of democracy against its enemies (Mejía Rivera 2016a). It used the growing insecurity symbolized by the increased murder rate, which was exacerbated by newspaper front pages showing dead bodies on a daily basis, as a fertile ground for this discourse. Instead of proposing profound institutional changes appropriate for the multi-faceted challenges, it approved emergency measures in line with its militarization program creating a new normal (Mejía Rivera 2016b).

Translating findings of Bolduc (2016) in the US to the Honduran reality, we can say that emergence of drug trafficking helped the government creating its discourse. Bolduc shows how the treatment of all clandestine transnational actors as national threats spurs militarization. This is further reflected in the Honduran government's use of the term terrorist. Even though there have not been any terrorist attacks in its recent history, it adopted anti-terrorist laws which are then used against drug traffickers and youth gangs, but also to criminalize protests (El Tiempo 2017).

One pivotal moment was the creation of the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP) in 2013. Accompanied by a discourse of corrupt police agents (Shiplely 2016), JOH presented it as the principal tool to combat violence. He started to push the idea still as president of Congress and then built his presidential candidacy around it (Carvajal 2014). Out of all presidential candidates, he was

the only one denying to sign a promise to push for a profound reform to Honduras' security policies promoting a community police model (Meza 2015).

With the creation of the PMOP and the taking of the presidency by JOH in November 2013, the discourse started to change. Having guaranteed his position in power for at least four years, JOH changed gears to start promoting the alleged success of his security policies. He had the PMOP raid prisons to publicly display guns, drugs and cell phones they found (e.g. La Prensa 2016). Spending on PR by the armed forces rose exponentially, e.g. by 22,900% in ten years at the Secretary of Defense (Carlsen 2017: 83).

The principal focus was still on the murder rate. While the high murder rate initially served to prepare the ground for the re-militarization, its alleged reduction legitimized the maintenance of the military presence in public security. JOH started using public appearance to praise the armed forces, ironically even the Air Force, for the supposed reduction in violence (e.g. ConfidentialHN 2018c). He went so far as to claim that the economy grew thanks to the militarization (ConfidentialHN 2018a). This discursive smoke screen also served to counteract rising international pressure demanding the withdrawal of the army from public security (UPR Info 2018).

The above-mentioned discursive elements promoting the re-militarization of public security in Honduras were accompanied by more concrete benefits for the army. One noteworthy example is the Mining Law of 2013. It makes the army a partner of mining firms by establishing that 2% of the taxes paid by mining companies are destined for them (Meza 2014). This has the added benefit of maintaining the army as a loyal partner in pushing through Honduras' development model against resistance by civil society and indigenous organizations.

Similar to how China always seems to reach its growth goals presented in five-year plans, the homicide rate in Honduras seemed to fall magically to the number JOH presented as his goal at the beginning of the year. In the next section, we first look at the scientific literature on the success of militarizing public security in general, before we take a closer look at the Honduran case and the credibility of these claims of success.

## Scientific Literature on the Militarization of Public Security

### *The Reasons*

There are several Latin American countries that experimented with the (re-)militarization of public security in the recent past. Two main reasons for this development are found in the literature: “[T]he incapacity of governments to effectively prevent and control crime with adequate policies [and] the electoral debate that highlights the need for direct and quick action” (Dammert 2013: 116). Both points can be observed in Honduras, but the causality is less straightforward than it may seem at first sight.

Let us first look at the question of governmental incapacity. I will argue that in the Honduran example, it was not incapacity but rather lack of political will. There have been several opportunities in Honduras' recent past for a profound reform to its National Police Force. One prominent example was spurred by the murder of two university students by the Honduran police in 2011. One victim was the son of Julieta Castellanos, the dean of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH). She was a well-known, and well-connected public figure and the

murder of her son caused a public outcry. She successfully lobbied for the creation of two new state bodies, one for a cleaning up of the National Police Force, the DIECP, and one for proposing reforms to public security, the CRSP (Salomón 2015).

Due to a weak mandate and a lack of institutional support, the DIECP did not succeed in its mission (Mejía 2015). The CRSP elaborated plans for a profound change to Honduras public security policies, but because it was centered around community policing, JOH archived them as soon as he became president in 2014 (Salomón 2015).

The lack of political will is also shown when it comes to government spending. Instead of the UN recommended 300 police per 100'000 people, Honduras had only 151 in 2013 (Carvajal 2014). In his first term as president, JOH raised their number only to 156 by 2017 (La Tribuna 2018). The Honduran government chose not to address this problem, but rather spend disproportionately more state funds on 5000 military police agents. A Honduran human rights organization estimates that the cost per day of one military police agent is a 1000 US dollars, a multiple of the cost of a normal police agent (Radio Progreso 2015).

Dammert (2013) presents electoral debates about insecurity as the second reason for choosing to militarize public security. It is true that in Honduras insecurity is high up on the political agenda and more security represents a central demand of the public. As previously mentioned, JOH built his whole presidential campaign in 2013 around this issue. But while the public may expect “direct and quick action” (Dammert 2013), there were also discussions about community policing as promoted by the CRSP. The militarization strategy was a political choice which by no means was without alternatives, even more, when Honduras’ neighbor Nicaragua had great success with a community police approach (Flores 2016).

### *Success or Failure?*

The literature on militarization of public security in Latin America is doubtful about its potential to improve security in the long-run successfully. Possible short-term success comes at a high cost, e.g. in Brazil, it further weakened democracy (Zaverucha 2000, 2008). In the case of Mexico, Meyer and Seelke (2014) find that it failed to reduce crime rates significantly, while Carlsen has shown that it led to an “unprecedented human rights crisis” (2017: 82). In order to achieve a sustainable solution, militarization does not seem to help. Other measures are needed: “[P]ublic security and judicial reforms that deepen and strengthen democratic values by focusing on increasing accountability, enhancing effectiveness through better training and improved technology, and building meaningful community relations” (Pérez 2003: 643). In this section, I will look at the recent developments in three of the areas mentioned by Pérez to investigate the veracity of the claimed reduction in the homicide rate: i) security and judicial reform, ii) accountability and iii) community relations.

I have already shown in the preceding sections, that Honduras has failed to implement a profound security reform up to now. There was an attempt at a judicial reform with the creation of a Judiciary Council, but it not only failed, its members are also currently on trial for over 600 acts of corruption (El Libertador 2018). Between 2013 and 2017, there were 2300 registered femicides of which only 29 cases were investigated, and only one investigation led to a conviction (RI 2018b). The impunity rate is equally high in other cases, and a lot would speak in favor of judicial reform. Nevertheless,

the Honduran government played down the importance of professional criminal investigation and privileged repression (Orellana 2015).

Pérez mentions the importance of increasing accountability. The Honduran government chose to go the other way. While still president of Congress, JOH pushed the Law for the Classification of Public Documents related to Security and National Defense which came into force just days before his inauguration in January 2014 (La Gaceta 2014). The so-called Secrecy Law allows the Honduran government to classify any document it deems relevant for national security for 25 years without any independent oversight. As a consequence, security spending became so opaque that “[e]ven the country’s top security scholars could not identify where all the money was going” (Kinosian 2015b: 3).

The last area we look at in this section is the community relations of state security forces. The most obvious solution to improve them would have been to build a community police force. As shown, the Honduran government chose to ignore recommendations going in this direction. To test if the trust in the security forces still increased, I consulted a yearly poll conducted by a Honduran NGO which asks the participants about their view on different issues. Two recurring questions are the participants’ trust in the National Police Force and the Armed Forces. Between 2013 (the first poll available) and 2017, the percentage of Hondurans without any trust in the National Police stayed the same and even slightly increased in the case of the Armed Forces (ERIC-SJ 2014, 2018). The same polls also show that insecurity remained the top priority of the Honduran citizens over the last five years, further questioning the veracity of the claimed drop in the homicide rate.

## A Honduran Exemption? Expanding the Statistical Landscape

The previous section has laid bare the discrepancy between what the scientific literature has to say about the effectiveness of militarization and the success story presented by the Honduran government. As shown before, its story is based primarily on the homicide rate. In this section we expand our view to other statistics serving as further proof to question the veracity of the government’s dominant narrative.

Before we do that, it is important to emphasize the importance of this section. Even if the homicide-statistics were reliable, which many independent observers doubt (Beeton and Watts 2016; Kinosian 2015a), the statistics presented here caution us from speaking of success. This section challenges the hegemonic focus promoted by the Honduran government on the homicide rate and calls on us to take into account many variables when investigating the Honduran case.

To expand the statistical landscape, I put together information from several sources on various variables, e.g. the number of murdered human rights defenders every year, the number of assassinated journalists, or Honduras’ ranking in the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit. A complete list of the variables can be found in the annex. If available, the information goes back to 2006 to allow for comparison with the pre-coup d’état and pre-JOH era.

The scope of the essay does not allow for a detailed analysis of all variables, so I will only summarize the main observations. For a detailed approach, I refer to the complete data set in the annex. The first finding supports the conclusion drawn from consulting the literature on militarization, i.e. that the government’s success story is based on questionable homicide statistics. The independent Observatory of Children and Youth Rights in Honduras of the NGO Casa Alianza

finds that the number of murders of Hondurans younger than 30 years is 15% higher than the official number between 2010 and 2013 and even 30% higher between 2014 and 2017 (Casa Alianza 2018).

There are further findings that question the image of a safer Honduras. The number of murdered LGBTI activist rose by over 150% in the four years of JOH's presidency of Congress compared to the four years before and it remained at an average over 30 assassinations per year during his first term as president (CONADEH 2018). The average yearly murder of human rights defenders (HRDs) rose from 2-3 per year to over 20 and up to 33 per year making Honduras the most dangerous country to be a human rights defender, with the highest murder rate of HRDs per capita (Front Line Defenders 2016, 2017, 2018, Global Witness 2015, 2018). National and international human rights organization denounce the closing space for human rights defenders (Eguigure Borjas and Leissing 2017; LAWG 2018). Similar observations can be made with the number of murdered lawyers and journalists.

Honduras did not fare better on various international rankings. Last year, it was ranked on the 143rd place on Press Freedom, the worst place since the coup d'état in 2009 (Reporters without Borders 2018). Even worse, last year a record number of journalists and social communicators had to flee from Honduras due to threats (RI 2018a). As with Press Freedom, Honduras ranked worst in 2017 in the Democracy Index since 2009 (EIU 2018). On corruption, Honduras fared only worse, compared to 2017, in 2013, when a huge corruption scandal became public (Transparency International 2018).

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that the then president of Congress Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) has used an insecurity narrative to present the militarization of public security as the sole viable response. Once he grabbed the presidency on a campaign based on this discourse, he changed gear to tell a success story of an improved security environment thanks to the use of the armed forces based on the selective use of statistics. I have shown using the literature on militarization as well as additional data that the presented success story is highly questionable. Nevertheless, it allowed JOH to built up the military as his strong ally which helped to guarantee an unconstitutional second term for him in November 2017.

## Annex

Statistics	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Homicide	3018	3262	4473	5265	6239	7104	7172	6757
Homicide pccmh	46.2	49.9	57.9	66.8	77.5	86.5	85.5	79
Non-Intentional H.	818	629	800	801	697	551	592	468
Undetermined H.	361	359	439	446	503	730	1082	872
Homicide under 30	3891 between 2010 and 2013 (15% higher)							
Homicide under 30	0	1419	2220	2637	3076	3435	3580	3435
Homicide under 25	0	874	1379	1576	1901	2061	2302	2316
Age 00-04	NA	23	17	12	27	24	33	58
Age 05-09	NA	12	13	8	18	17	13	17
Age 10-14	NA	35	40	39	47	51	81	72
Age 15-19	NA	239	436	529	681	652	811	791
Age 20-24	NA	565	873	988	1128	1317	1364	1378
Age 25-29	NA	545	841	1061	1175	1374	1278	1119
Death by Police	NA	NA	54	95	73	84	71	62
Homicide SPS	NA	NA	735	971	1063	1218	1290	1458
Homicide SPS pccmh	NA	NA	106.2	137.5	147.8	166.4	173.6	193.4
Homicide DC	NA	NA	675	802	1039	1149	1035	1028
Homicide DC pccmh	NA	NA	62.5	72.7	92.2	99.9	88.2	86
Femicide	202	295	313	363	385	512	606	636
Murder HRDs	2	1	3	1	21	33	25	10
Murder LGBT	NA	NA	4	24	23	36	43	32
Murder LGBT	NA	NA	NA	28	18	35	40	36
Murder Lawyers	NA	NA	NA	NA	16	24	15	21
Murder Journalists	1	1	1	4	12	6	9	6
Ranking Press Freedom	87	99	128	143	135	135	127	129
Ranking Corruption	121	131	126	130	134	129	133	140
Democracy Index	6.25	6.25	6.18	NA	5.76	5.84	5.84	5.84
Returned Unaccompanied Minors								
Returned Migrants								
% feeling insecure							23.2 (UNDP)	
Rank of insecurity as problem	2 (IUDPAS)						1	
% in favor of Community Police								

Statistics	2014	2015	2016	2017	Sources
Homicide	5936	5148	5150	3866	IUDPAS
Homicide pccmh	68	60	59.1	43.6	IUDPAS
Non-Intentional H.	545	583	675	680	IUDPAS
Undetermined H.	805	643	725	598	IUDPAS
Homicide under 30	3210 between 2014 and 2017 (30% higher)				Casa Alianza
Homicide under 30	3002	2636	2389	1899	IUDPAS
Homicide under 25	1995	1720	1417	1253	IUDPAS
Age 00-04	35	34	26	32	IUDPAS
Age 05-09	12	12	16	7	IUDPAS
Age 10-14	66	60	45	38	IUDPAS
Age 15-19	697	621	598	407	IUDPAS
Age 20-24	1185	993	732	769	IUDPAS
Age 25-29	1007	916	972	646	IUDPAS
Death by Police	98	54	36	33	IUDPAS
Homicide SPS	1084	820	807	402	IUDPAS
Homicide SPS pccmh	142	110.5	107	52.5	IUDPAS
Homicide DC	987	873	994	596	IUDPAS
Homicide DC pccmh	81	73.3	82.3	48.7	IUDPAS
Femicide	531	478	468	389	CONADEH (2006-2015), IUDPAS (2016-2017)
Murder HRDs	17	7	33	7	Front Line Defenders (2014-2017), Global Witness (2006-2013)
Murder LGBT	28	37	23	34	CONADEH 2015, 2016, 2017: La Tribuna
Murder LGBT	26	37	23	34	CATTRACHAS
Murder Lawyers	11	17	13	6 (June)	CONADEH (2010-2016), El Tiempo (2006-2009, 2017)
Murder Journalists	10	11	4	7	CONADEH
Ranking Press Freedom	132	137	140	141	Reporters without Borders
Ranking Corruption	126	111	123	135	Transparency International
Democracy Index	5.84	5.84	5.92	5.72	The Economist Intelligence Unit (Higher equals better)
Returned Unaccompanied Minors	3807	8355	10652		CONADEH
Returned Migrants	45674	33478	69370	48022	CONADEH
% feeling insecure	32	33	30.7	22.6	ERIC
Rank of insecurity as problem	1	1	1	2	ERIC
% in favor of Community Police	84.2				ERIC

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