**Honduras – Drug trafficking to the US, the President and the electoral system**

Last March, in the midst of the trial of Geovanny Fuentes Ramírez, a Honduran accused of conspiring to import cocaine into the United States from Honduras—as well as charges related to illegal possession of weapons—the President of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, was accused of being involved in the Fuentes Ramírez drug trafficking network.

In his testimony on March 9, the assistant prosecutor, Jacob Harris Gutwillig, declared that the Honduran president would have said in a meeting where Geovanny Fuentes was present that they would “[shove the drugs right up the noses of the gringos](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/09/world/americas/President-Hernandez-Honduras-drug-traffickers.html).”

For more or less three years it has been known that President Hernández [is being investigated](https://presidential-power.net/?p=9698) by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), due to possible drug trafficking. This forms part of a trial against his brother, the former deputy (2014-2018) of the Honduran National Congress, Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernández, who was arrested at the Miami airport in 2018. On March 30 this year, Tony Hernández was sentenced to life imprisonment by the Federal Court of Manhattan.

Among other things, during the judicial process against Tony Hernández, [it came to light](https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-03-30/ee-uu-condena-a-prision-de-por-vida-por-narcotrafico-al-hermano-del-presidente-de-honduras.html) that him and his brother would have helped the group of the famous Mexican drug lord Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzmán. In order to transfer tons of drugs to the US, in exchange for a million dollars to finance the electoral campaign of Juan Orlando Hernández, in 2013. The Hernández brothers would have agreed with a Honduran drug cartel known as “Los Cachiros” to move tons of drugs to the United States through Honduran soil.

However, beyond the cases of President Hernández and his brother, the problem of drug money affects the political parties of Honduras. It even touches deputies from the Party Libre, and his leader [Jose Manuel Zelaya](https://www.latimes.com/espanol/internacional/articulo/2021-03-11/eeuu-narco-testifica-que-pago-soborno-a-presidente-honduras). Libre is a political organization that arises from the political cleavage of the 2009 coup against the left-wing President of Honduras, Jose Manuel Zelaya. What explains the recent cases of drug trafficking involvement in Honduran politics? I argue that, among other factors, this could also be related to the electoral system: open-list proportional representation.

*A nation that suffers from (political) geography, poverty and clientelism*

Undoubtedly, various factors contribute to drug trafficking to the United States from and through Honduras. Honduran physical geography has contributed to the constitution of two centers of power and differentiated development processes, between what is known as the North Coast (in the Caribbean), and the capital (Tegucigalpa, located in the heart of the country). Between these, there are large areas of territory where the state presence is little or none and, in addition, there is much poverty. This is taken advantage of by the drug cartels.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America and its geography contributes to this (natural disasters, particularly hurricanes, are inclement against this country, and its topography is very complex). It also contributes its geographical position, so close to the United States.

The pejorative term “Banana Republic” was coined in the US [with Honduras in mind](https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/01/is-the-us-on-the-verge-of-becoming-a-banana-republic/267048/). As the political scientist Michelle Taylor-Robinson [well documents](https://www.psupress.org/books/titles/978-0-271-03750-9.html), the high political clientelism—this is the buying of votes in exchange for political favors—in that country is to a large extent due to US interventionism, to protect the interests of American banana companies that established there in the late 1800s.

But the geographic position of Honduras, so close to the United States, the poverty and, surely, also the clientelism are of interest to the drug cartels that bridge the drug through Central America in direction to the United States.

*Why the electoral system?*

In this post I focus on the system used to convert votes into legislative seats to the National Congress of Honduras (CNH). Since 2004 this is a proportional representation (PR) system with open-lists, where voters have the possibility to choose candidates from different party lists (i.e. *panachage*). The same electoral formula is used in the primary elections of the main parties.

While the arguments that were used to change the system from a closed list system to one with open lists were well intentioned, the unforeseen consequences of the open-list PR were not.[[1]](https://presidential-power.net/?p=11704#_ftn1)

Indeed, civil society organizations in the 1990s exerted pressure to reform the electoral system—then highly centralized in the figure of the president—towards a nominal voting system. This, in principle, to enable the voter to exercise more control over who they were electing[. At the same time](https://scielo.conicyt.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0718-090X2006000100006&script=sci_arttext), within the then two most important parties, the Liberal Party of Honduras and the National Party of Honduras, there was concern about other political forces that were reaching more power quotas in the CNH.

The change accelerated as a consequence of Hurricane Mitch, which impacted with huge human and economic losses in 1998. The international community made its donations conditional on institutional changes that would guarantee accountability and transparency. In this context, Honduran civil society organizations[—supported by international organizations such as UNDP—](http://radioprogresohn.cedoh.org/Biblioteca_CEDOH/archivos/00879%20HONDURAS%20LOS%20ACUERDOS%20SON%20POSIBLES.pdf)pressed for a vote change from closed lists to a nominal vote. In 2004, the political parties represented in the CNH opted for open-list PR.

The change in the electoral system would have weakened the power exercised by the president and presidential candidates over the deputies, [as argued by Michelle Taylor-Robinson and Joseph Ura](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0951629812453216?casa_token=4MrxwzDFQQgAAAAA:ggWQdqwJbIyjFqUbUsih8VwLIFWrsMwKFZT4d-o6TwnAUw3R5W00_0IsGYf7So5ifH3tF-PgVAEfVhc), of Texas A&M University.

*Open-list PR and corruption*

One may argue that it is plausible that the cases of corruption and drug trafficking that involve deputies and the president of Honduras himself, Juan Orlando Hernández, could be in some way related to the electoral system in place, open-list PR with *panachage*. Again, this is used not only in general elections but also in the primaries of the main parties (at least three).

In political science, the possible link has already been investigated comparatively, although the results in the literature may not be conclusive. For example, Torsten [Persson, Guido Tabellini and Francesco Trebbi](https://academic.oup.com/jeea/article/1/4/958/2280876?login=true) argue that nominal systems, including perhaps open-list PR, contribute to greater accountability, hence, less corruption. Whereas [Eric C. C. Chang](https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2005.00336.x?casa_token=V02Ha7wcv5gAAAAA:_tkdjIJkcJNIxQtMGn3WxQTGztv2VYBESBH9k2wmJX3RGfJDbqz7T5T39ThOeWYwzygkoeZ0OE8lUVg)—and [Chang and Golden](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/4497282.pdf?casa_token=kxfEQGjCkq0AAAAA:vjQrmXLjw1_YV5ztYIN04mf0hsNeDlk359Ethlnw45KmbenU0d32daYOj21sKZSJtLayXBGP7fMLrzlcAsdiYAbO9RLiRYeNDPpcBrfV13AwbT5Gjkcpdg)—contend that open-list PR, especially combined with a large district magnitude contributes to corruption.

The combination of PR with a presidential form of government might amplify the effects, argue [Jana Kunicová and Susan Rose-Ackerman](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4092413?casa_token=xz3QCo89fxUAAAAA%3AdhPZJPsh4WhnIhxDXX19kmhPoHSeUfenqcw4BAg6Vo6PgCmhlxhr9881d29uqhvViG2N5SBknh2ILmymFpKj8t_U64pZ3DFTZxjvKYrs3pkb_z8oTjIMAw&seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents). Katherine Bersch, Sérgio Praça and Matthew M. Taylor, propose something similar about the combination of presidentialism and open-list PR, and [recent cases of corruption in Brazil](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/06/20/can-you-measure-brazils-political-corruption-yes-and-it-explains-a-lot/).

Perhaps a similar logic regarding particularism such as, [constituency service](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00344893.2017.1396240?journalCode=rrep20), [pork barrel politics](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pork_barrel), [clientelism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clientelism#:~:text=Clientelism%20is%20the%20exchange%20of,patrons%2C%20brokers%2C%20and%20clients.), and corruption applies to drug trafficking. “This is ‘coke’ barrel politics,” a colleague jokingly told me.

In Honduras a plausible causal mechanism is that legislators need to finance personalist expensive electoral campaigns, in addition to “buying votes” (clientelism), and do constituency service to compete against co-partisans.

I once interviewed a Honduran legislator who at that time owned a construction company. He assured me that he used his company to, with its own funds, pave streets in his constituency and thus help his electoral campaign.  But those who can’t afford this, where do they get the money from? Do presidential candidates have incentives to channel money from drug trafficking to finance campaigns of the legislator candidates who support them? I do not claim to have answers for this on this blog. However, I am going to review some recent cases of corruption and drug trafficking that might suggest a link with the form of electoral system in place.

*Some cases*

Before the Hernández brothers, Jaime Rosenthal, his son, Yani Rosenthal, and nephew, Yankel Rosenthal, were accused of corruption, drug trafficking and money laundering charges in the United States. Yani was a deputy of the Liberal Party of Honduras (PLH) in the period 2010-2014. The US State Department [accused him](https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-honduran-congressman-and-businessman-sentenced-36-months-money-laundering) of laundering money for the Los Cachiros cartel and using drug money for his congressional campaign. Charge he accepted and for which he served 36 months in a US prison. Curiously, after serving his sentence he has returned to Honduras and is the current PLH candidate.

The possible link between Los Cachiros and Honduran politics also implicates the former president for the National Party of Honduras (PNH) —the same as Juan Orlando Hernández — José “Pepe” Lobo (2010-2014). The possible link between Los Cachiros and politics also implicates the former president for the National Party of Honduras (PNH) —the same as Juan Orlando Hernández — José “Pepe” Lobo (2010-2014). [His son pleaded guilty](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2016/05/160516_honduras_declaran_culpable_hijo_expresidente_porfirio_lobo_bm) to having conspired to import drugs into the United States. [Other stories](https://contracorriente.red/2017/05/02/el-diputado-eterno-un-cartel-narco-y-un-valle-inundado-de-palma-africana/), compile testimonies from congressmen from countryside constituencies, who claim to have been present at meetings with drug lords and high-level politicians, precisely who promise to finance expensive primary and national political campaigns.

Before these drug trafficking cases, in May 2015, an embezzlement to the Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS) came to light that would have occurred between 2010 and 2014. The PNH would have benefited from the apparent diversion of funds incurred by public officials and businessmen to shell companies to finance the internal and general campaigns of the PNH in 2012 and 2013.

These events led to citizen protests [“organized by the ‘indignant opposition’ known as ‘the torches’, which called for the resignation of President Hernández and the creation of an international commission against impunity in Honduras.”](https://scielo.conicyt.cl/scielo.php?pid=S0718-090X2016000100009&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en) President Juan Orlando Hernández admitted that the PNH did indeed receive some funds related to that case. Following the social demonstration, the Honduran government invited the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States (OAS) to facilitate a process of national dialogue to build a mechanism to combat corruption and impunity in the country.

In February 2016, the Mission to Support Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) was created, which was made up of officials from different parts of Latin America. One of the results of this process was the approval, in 2017, of an electoral reform to regulate the financing of political campaigns. However, the reform did not prevent that months later, cases of corruption of this type were found. The MACCIH found evidence of the illicit diversion of development funds contained in the budget of the National Congress of Honduras, through NGOs, to the accounts of deputies. These funds would have been used to finance electoral campaigns [in the 2017 elections](https://flacso.unah.edu.hn/dmsdocument/10260-legado-maccih-2020-spanish-pdf).

The administration of US President Donald Trump would have been more lenient with President Juan Orlando Hernández. Joe Biden’s government has promised to [be tougher against the corruption](https://ciep.ucr.ac.cr/informe-sobre-acciones-politicas-realizadasporlos-estados-unidos-hacia-centroamerica-marzo-abril-2021/) of Central American presidents, this in a context of the economic aid he has promised to the countries of the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala). However, how effective will these pressures be, in the presence of the institutional incentives provided by open-list PR? Time will tell.

[[1]](https://presidential-power.net/?p=11704#_ftnref1) Other elements of the electoral system were not altered, such as the district magnitude (between one and 23 seats, distributed in 18 constituencies called ‘departments’) and the mathematical formula to convert votes into legislative seats: simple majority in two single-member constituencies, and the Hare method with largest remainders in the multimember constituencies (where district magnitude is greater than one).