

POLICE REFORM IN HONDURAS:

THE ROLE OF THE
SPECIAL PURGE AND
TRANSFORMATION
COMMISSION

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INTRODUCTION

On April 12, 2016, Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández swore in the members of the Special Commission for the Depuration (Purge) and Transformation of the Honduran National Police, whose mandate was to purge the Honduran National Police (HNP) force of corrupt and criminal elements.¹ The appointment of the commission came a week after *El Herald*, a Honduran newspaper, published a report alleging that high-ranking officers of the HNP were implicated in the 2009 slaying of antidrug czar Aristides González and the 2011 murder of Security Ministry adviser Alfredo Landaverde. Though the local news organization redacted the names of those presumed to be responsible for the killings, the *New York Times* soon made them public. They turned out to include five former directors-general of the HNP, three of whom supposedly participated directly in the crimes while the other two covered them up.

Within a few weeks, at the Special Commission's behest, Honduras's security minister removed 6 of the 9 top-ranking figures in the HNP from their posts, followed shortly by 23 of 47 active duty police commissioners. This cleansing process (*depuración*) would continue over the next two years, leading to the ouster of more than 5,000 total personnel from a police corps originally composed of an estimated 13,500 people. The scale of this purge—and the exit from the force of powerful officers regarded as notoriously corrupt and implicated in drug trafficking, money laundering, and murder—drew widespread international attention, including that of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, which has three times invited the Special Commission's members to Washington to expound on their achievements and plans.

In addition to presiding over the purge, the Special Commission has played an important role in a process of reforming and transforming the HNP. Although this role was not initially part of its mandate, the commission's efforts to clean house gave it political clout and the ability to newly

energize reform efforts that had begun several years earlier but were making only fitful advances. Three years later, the conjoint result is that the HNP has a new leadership, organizational structure, and career pattern; its recruitment criteria have been stiffened; and police education is being revamped for the ostensible purpose of instilling an ethic of public service in the force. Culminating all the foregoing, the HNP is now committed to implementing a Honduran variant of community policing as its official model.

For the HNP—a body that for years suffered opprobrium for illicit behavior and human rights violations on the part of some of its members, along with an abysmal drop in public confidence in its effectiveness and integrity—these developments are a surprising turn. Whether the HNP's reform can eventually be consolidated is a question that only the passage of time will answer. Generally speaking, fate has not been kind to police reform efforts in Latin America, many if not most of which have foundered due to the twists and turns of politics, resistance from within the police and other institutions, resource constraints, and other factors.² There are no recipes for how to make police reform stick in difficult and hostile environments, of which Honduras is certainly one, and though reform has made some progress there, it is by no means irreversible.

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This Woodrow Wilson Center report examines the work of the Special Commission for the Depuration (Purge) and Transformation of the Honduran National Police, detailing its role, functioning, achievements, and shortcomings. It an-

analyzes the commission's genesis and operation within three contexts. The first is a process of episodic reform of the police institution, which has been under way since 2013, and which has provided certain starting points for the commission's endeavors. The second is the development during the recent government of President Juan Orlando Hernández of an overarching national and citizen-security apparatus, leading to the creation a national police model, of which the HNP is the largest but not the only component. The third is the president's overall political project, which has centered on a controversial reelection bid. These contexts are indispensable for understanding why the Special Commission was formed, who its members have been, how it has functioned, and the pattern of its successes and limitations.

The legacy of the Special Commission, when its work concludes, will be variegated. In pushing reform forward, the commissioners have done more than their mandate originally stipulated, in part, because their mandate has been repeatedly extended by the Honduran legislature.³ These extensions have produced arguably positive results for the continuity of reform. However, the political and institutional dynamics in which the commission's members have found themselves enmeshed, while facilitating certain accomplishments, have also limited the impact of the commission's results. Their actions and a vigorous media presence have generated public expectations for their performance that have not all been able to be met, and criticisms

from important sectors of society that cannot be ignored.

By this point in the process, due to prior reform steps and the work of the Special Commission, the HNP arguably has the potential to develop into a democratic and professional police force. How much progress the institution makes along this road will depend on myriad factors, many of which are beyond the control of its leaders. By definition, the consolidation of a democratic police force in any country requires the surrounding political system to evolve a genuine separation and balancing of the state's powers, allowing the police institution to be subjected to the rule of law. The Honduran political system is evidently far from achieving this goal, and although it has recently been in flux, it does not exhibit a clear trend in that direction.

For the time being, the question is whether the HNP can be consolidated as a reformed and professional police body. The answer will depend squarely on several key factors—the commitment of governmental and police leaders to continue developing the reforms made to date, restraint by those in power in using the reformed HNP for political purposes, the development of a strong and independent oversight mechanisms for the police, ongoing civil society involvement in overseeing the institution, and the continued support of international actors that have supported reform efforts in recent years. As this report shows, there are reasons to be both optimistic but also pessimistic about the ultimate fate of HNP reform.

1 | ANTECEDENTS OF HONDURAN POLICE REFORM

Origins of the HNP Problem

The body that the Special Commission was called upon to clean up and reform was originally part of the Honduran military apparatus and was known as FUSEP (Fuerza de Seguridad Pública, Public Security Force).⁴ Formed in 1975, FUSEP became notorious for disappearances and extrajudicial killings, along with involvement in drug trafficking during the 1980s contra war in Nicaragua, which was partly waged from Honduran soil. In 1996, as part of a reform promoted by Liberal Party president Carlos Roberto Reina, a constitutional amendment removed the police from the military's jurisdiction and placed it under the control of the newly created civilian Security Ministry (or secretariat, as ministries are called in Honduras). The aim of this reform was presumably to create an entirely new civilian police force similar to the one then emerging from El Salvador's peace accords.

In practice, many FUSEP officers with tainted records continued on in the new Honduran National Police, which subsequently proved itself immune from genuine reform. In 2000–2001, Security Minister Gautama Fonseca briefly succeeded in ousting 2,500 officers, some 30 percent of the force, but the Honduran Supreme Court ruled his purge unconstitutional on the grounds that labor rights were being violated and reinstated the personnel. This resistance thwarted the most ambitious attempt before 2016 to cleanse the police of criminal elements, the failure of which would influence the strategy guiding the current Special Commission.

Subsequent to the HNP's founding, there does not seem to have been any moment when the police were not suspected of complicity in drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and other illicit activities. Most of those whom Fonseca purged were let go because of involvement in organized crime of some type. In addition, starting in the late 1990s, the police were once again haunted by alle-

gations that they participated in extrajudicial killings, this time of young people numbering in the thousands. By the mid-2000s, death squads apparently controlled several key divisions within the force. The anti-gang policies of the Maduro years (2002–6) aggravated this dynamic and allegedly provoked abusive behavior toward the citizenry by giving the police wide discretion to detain people arbitrarily, which thus eroded basic rights.

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A gross lack of supervision exacerbated these ills. A 1998 reform law created a Balkanized Security Ministry, whose divisions were described as isolated centers of power without effective coordination from above; this pattern was mirrored in the HNP itself, which lacked a director-general for its first 10 years of existence (police division heads reported instead directly to their Security Ministry counterparts). Fragmentation of authority spawned a proliferation of competing entities devoted to tasks such as criminal investigation and control of drug trafficking, hampering the HNP's overall effectiveness in these key tasks.⁵ The HNP's internal affairs control unit was from the outset almost completely impotent. These organizational weaknesses facilitated corruption and penetration of the force by organized crime.

After another reform of the police law in 2008, President Manuel Zelaya got a chance to appoint the HNP's first director-general. Unfortunately, he chose Salomón Escoto, an official believed to be connected to a 1980s death squad known as the 316 Battalion. Zelaya greatly in-

creased the HNP's size and budget, upped police salaries, and made some attempts to involve the citizenry in the fight against street gangs and criminals, but he did not address the police force's deep institutional deficits before eventually being removed from power in a June 2009 coup d'état.

The Honduran Security Crisis Matures, 2006–12

Meanwhile, citizens' security in Honduras continued to deteriorate. From 2004 to 2011, the number of homicides in the country rose from 32 to 92 per 100,000 people, making the country briefly the murder capital of the world.⁶ The rising tide of violent crime in this period is linked in very significant ways to drug trafficking and money laundering, and also to related activities of youth gangs (*maras* and *pandillas*).

Moreover, risk factors such as rising poverty, unemployment, and increasing rural-to-urban migration exacerbated the rise in violent crime, as did the political crisis surrounding the 2009 coup against Zelaya, which, it is argued, weakened the capacity of the Honduran state to deal with the violence.⁷

Starting in 2006, a shift in transnational drug routes away from the Caribbean put Honduras at the center of narcotics flows through Central America. This trade powered the development of local drug cartels such as the Cachiros and Los Valle-Valle, which became transportation and warehousing intermediaries for more powerful and transnational Mexican and Colombian groups.⁸ As the rivalries among these cartels spawned increasing levels of violence, areas lying along the drug corridor running along Honduras's northern coast to Guatemala soon developed the highest homicide rates in the country.

The evolution of drug trafficking was interlaced with the development of youth gangs, generating patterns of cooperation and conflict in different cities. The mass incarceration of the gangs' members resulting from the *mano dura* (iron fist) policies of the administration of Ricardo Maduro (2002–6) led the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 gangs in the principal cities to take on more diffuse structures, and to become more deeply involved in the marketing of narcotics and associated services for drug cartels.⁹ How-

ever, in certain cities (Choloma, El Progreso, and La Ceiba), the cartels co-opted or replaced the gangs, making local violence deadlier and more unpredictable than previously.¹⁰

While all this was going on, a 2009 coup in Honduras caused the interruption of foreign military and police assistance, created a fiscal crisis, and touched off sustained political confrontation—all of which hampered efforts to combat crime and allowed organized criminal activity to spread and flourish. This development led, in turn, to a growing penetration of the HNP and the country's other institutions by criminal elements. At the height of the crisis in late 2011, a courageous Honduran Security Ministry adviser, Alfredo Landaverde, publicly denounced the penetration, accusing the HNP's director of having direct knowledge of the traffickers and of being complicit with them, for which audacity he was promptly murdered.¹¹

As the security situation in the country deteriorated, public confidence in the HNP plummeted. According to Americas Barometer surveys, those expressing trust in the police force dropped by half, from 56.7 percent of respondents in 2004 to just 28.7 percent in 2012, in which year the HNP was the least-trusted police body in the Western Hemisphere. The conduct sparking this baleful appraisal was caught in an evaluation of violence prevention programs carried out by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) during the years 2011–13.¹² In interviews, local residents and community leaders sketched a gruesome portrait of the poorly trained, ill-equipped, and low-paid HNP officers working in high-crime neighborhoods of the country's principal cities.

By this point, policemen had largely ceased to respond to citizens' calls for help or to public complaints or denunciations of criminal behavior. On the contrary, they were quick to react to the citizenry with violence, especially youth suspected of involvement in gangs, who seem to have been routinely rounded up and thrown into police pickups. At the same time, large majorities in the country's communities expressed a belief that policemen were taking money from drug sellers, hit men, and other criminal actors, making them uninterested in solving local crime incidents.¹³

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In sum, a perceived combination of unresponsiveness, brutality, and corruption had by this point bred a deep-rooted fear of the police and the feeling that there was no authority in the country to which to turn for protection from them.

Crisis Forces a Response: The 2012 Reform Commission

In October 2011, the security crisis in Honduras, which had been in gestation for years, began to cause political commotion and spark public demands for police reform. That month, two university students, one of them the son of National University rector Julieta Castellanos, were murdered by on-duty HNP officers attempting to steal their car.¹⁴ The ensuing public outcry led President Porfirio Lobo to dismiss then-HNP director-general José Luis Muñoz Licona. The following month, unknown assailants gunned down security adviser Landaverde after he denounced the ties between organized criminal figures and Honduras's police chief on Honduran TV.

The scandal led the Lobo administration in February 2012 to appoint a special body, the Commission for the Reform of Public Security (CRSP, Comisión para la Reforma de la Seguridad Pública), which was charged with overhauling the HNP and the rest of the nation's justice and security apparatus. Like the later Special Commission analyzed in this report, the CRSP contained delegates from civil society in its ranks. In contrast to the current entity, these were politically diverse; though a former rector of the National University headed the panel, it also contained a member of the opposition (Víctor Meza, former gover-

nance minister under Mel Zelaya), and was assisted by a panel of international advisers.¹⁵

The CRSP's deliberations generated a searing critique of the deficiencies in Honduran police culture. According to a report summarizing these discussions, the HNP recruited its entry-level police officers (*escala básica*) from the lowest strata of society, making a grade school education, at best, the norm in the force. Instructors subjected the recruits to military-style hazing, inculcating aggressiveness and a predilection for using force against the enemy, whether criminals or suspicious-looking civilians. Though schooled in rote fashion in legal statutes, policemen (they were overwhelmingly male) were given only perfunctory training on respect for human rights and how to act in a responsible fashion toward the citizenry.¹⁶

Analyzing these precedents, the CRSP's participants arrived at two broad recommendations. One was to complete the HNP's demilitarization. Remedies ranged from a profound overhaul of police education to the elimination of the “caste system” that prevented personnel from lower ranks from ascending to officer positions. The second recommendation was to recast the HNP along the lines of the community-policing model, educating and training its personnel to interact with community residents to proactively identify, prevent, and solve local crime problems.

The commission did not produce a report but ended up formulating seven legislative proposals for reform of diverse parts of the security structure, including the justice system. None of these had any impact, however, because they were immediately ignored by the government that had commissioned them. The Lobo administration did, however, take two concrete steps to respond to public anger at police misbehavior. One was to fire Ricardo Ramírez del Cid as police director, replacing him with Juan Carlos Bonilla. The other was to create the Directorate for the Investigation and Evaluation of the Police Career (DIECP, Dirección de Investigación y Evaluación de la Carrera Policial) and to charge it with the task of undertaking a thorough purge of the HNP.

Congress Takes Charge of Security Reform

As soon became clear, the CRSP's failure was due, among other things, to resolute opposition to its proposals from the Honduran Congress. Furthermore, by this point President Lobo had ceded political initiative in the country to his right-hand man and presumptive heir, Juan Orlando Hernández, in the belief that the ruling National Party would need to close ranks around Hernández to fend off a challenge from Mel Zelaya's new Libre Party in the November 2013 elections. As it turned out, Hernández had strong views about how to deal with Honduras's security problems, and they differed radically from the CRSP's approach.

By this point, the president of Congress had engineered a constitutional reform that allowed the Honduran military to participate in public security tasks for the first time since the 1990s and was in the process of creating the Military Public Order Police (Policía Militar de Orden Público) to take over some functions of the hapless and corrupt HNP, at least temporarily.¹⁷ Critics scored these steps as part of a "remilitarization" of public security, one of several that had occurred over a period of decades. In addition, Hernández was busily erecting an overarching security scaffolding in which a new intelligence organ of the Honduran state, the National Investigation and Intelligence Directorate (DNII, Dirección Nacional de Investigación e Inteligencia), would play a decisive role, assuming other functions normally performed by a civilian police force.¹⁸

Just as important, Hernández was determined to seize on the public safety issue as his electoral drawing card. Displaying a fine mastery of national security politics, he shelved the CRSP's proposals, and he then used its ineffectiveness as an opportunity to cast himself as the bearer of an alternative solution. In April 2013, using Congress as his pulpit, he called the nation's top security officials on the carpet, demanding that they publicly explain their failures. These proceedings led to the downfall of Security Minister Pompeyo Bonilla, Attorney General Luis Rubí, and the heads of the new DIECP. Hernández subsequently availed himself of the momentum generated by this episode to beat

the public safety drum in his 2013 campaign and to prevail over Libre candidate Xiomara Castro (the wife of former president Zelaya) to become president. Initial public favor for his new military police, which were seen as controlling crime, assisted his victory.

Purging for Show

The vicissitudes experienced by the DIECP illustrated the intricacies involved in purging the HNP. Created in May 2012, the DIECP was granted "functional, administrative, and financial autonomy," with the expectation that it would completely replace the work of the police's own internal affairs unit in evaluating personnel. In the April 2013 hearings, a congressional deputy charged, however, that the DIECP had relinquished its independence and was allowing HNP director Juan Carlos Bonilla to decide which of his institution's members would be subjected to its vetting trials.¹⁹

A year after its founding, the DIECP had conducted selective vetting of thousands of police officers, including administering lie detector tests to 774 personnel, reportedly by Colombian advisers paid by the US Embassy. But while the entity had recommended that the Security Ministry remove 230 total members of the force, those at a higher level of authority found reason to remove a scant 7 people. Though who was ultimately responsible for its failures remained nebulous, the DIECP was obviously proving to be deeply dysfunctional.

Although various institution heads rolled at this time, progress during the ensuing two years in ridding the HNP of corrupt and criminal elements continued to be slight. The new security minister, Arturo Corrales, who took office in May 2013, replaced Bonilla as the HNP's director-general in October and subsequently made other significant changes in personnel. In January 2014, the government also retired from the force (via "promotions") a total of 35 high-ranking officials stretching back over various police academy graduating classes.²⁰

Retired in this process were former directors Salomón Escoto, who was appointed by Zelaya, and José Luis Muñoz Licona, named by Lobo, along with other officers

suspected of illicit dealings. However, all remained active members of the force, with full honors and emoluments and a guarantee of impunity for whatever misdeeds they may have committed.²¹ The shakeup of the ranks did not convince the members of local civil society organizations, who continued to charge that high-ranking police officials headed up criminal bands.

In December 2013, Corrales ostensibly began to reform a key piece of the police structure. This was the National Directorate of Criminal Investigation (DNIC, Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal), a division of the police that was considered completely ineffective and where corruption was supposedly most deeply rooted. But his purge, limited to 161 officers, was criticized for removing presumably honest officers vetted by the US Embassy.²² In addition, those purged from the DNIC could not be fired from the force altogether, and so were shunted into other divisions of the HNP.

US Policy and the HNP

During this period, the US government slowly developed a strong interest in Honduran police reform and in cleansing the HNP as an essential step in that process. The 2009 coup provoked a temporary interruption in the long-standing relationships between US government actors and the Honduran military. These were gradually restored after the November 2009 election of Lobo, and, thereafter, police aid began flowing under the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). However, the US Congress imposed restrictions on police and military aid due to reports of human rights violations, and after passage of legislation sponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy insisted on widespread human rights vetting of HNP officers.

Under CARSI I (2009–13), US assistance to the HNP, as well as other security and justice institutions, was limited.²³ Various agencies of the US government—the State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the Justice Department’s Drug

Enforcement Administration and Federal Bureau of Investigation, and others—supported vetted units and task forces charged with resolving specific problems and contributing to the strengthening of host institutions. In the case of the HNP, task forces devoted to violent crime and financial crime, and composed of carefully vetted personnel, were shaped into effective units. In addition, the State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs founded the Criminal Investigation School, which offers basic courses for police, prosecutors, and judges, which generates strong demand for its services.

However, though specific units functioned well, the carryover of competencies to their respective institutions turned out to be very sparse. As described, reintegrating vetted Honduran officers into corruption-plagued environments often posed insuperable obstacles, and could even threaten their lives.²⁴ For this reason, the institutional impact of investing in their specialized training was usually scant, something which dramatized the need for root-and-branch cleansing of security and justice institutions to weed out entrenched corruption. News reports during this period suggest that some US actors believed the HNP could not be reformed under its existing leadership.²⁵

Reform of the HNP became more urgent as the US assumed a larger role in police assistance activities. In August 2014, responding in part to the arrival of migrant children at the United States’ southern border, the Obama administration announced the new US Strategy for Engagement in Central America in an effort to promote coordinated (“whole of government”) policies to improve law enforcement and justice system capabilities in order to stem rising levels of crime and violence in the region, which were believed to be spurring the migration. In Honduras, in addition to continuing previous efforts, US agencies subsequently ramped up their efforts and began to engage in more comprehensive training of various divisions of the Honduran police force.

As is detailed below, these activities have grown over time to encompass many of the HNP's major components. As a result of its increasingly broad and deep engagement, the US government has developed a strong vested interest in the success of HNP reform and engages in widespread vetting of its personnel. Hence, it will not be surprising that it has played a significant supporting role in the work of the Special Commission.

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Box 1. The Assassination of Aristides Gonzalez

In 2009, Honduran antidrug czar Julián Aristides González uncovered a plot in which National Police officers captured over 315 pounds of cocaine, only to resell it to drug trafficker Wilter Blanco. González acted immediately, decommissioning the drug and arresting the officers.

In revenge, Blanco ordered a hit on González, and commissioned 25 National Police officers, including three generals, to carry it out. The officers planned the assassination in the police headquarters, a meeting that was photographed and recorded by the police's own intelligence service.

"We can't forgive Aristedes: if he catches us, we all go down," one officer was recorded saying. A little more than a week later, the officers met again to distribute a briefcase full of dollars, payment from Blanco. The next day, December 8, 2009, they carried out the hit from a police motorcycle as González was returning from dropping his young daughter off at school.

Just three weeks after the assassination, the investigative police had prepared a report with the transcript of the meeting and eyewitness reports. The report, hidden by the police director, was never delivered to the courts. Just a few months later, one of the men who participated in the killing would become the new director general. He ordered the report buried. When another general came into office in 2012, he too saw the report, then ordered it back under lock and key: "Don't file this document in the control book," he wrote next to his signature, after reviewing the documents.

These reports would stay buried until they were leaked first to Honduran newspaper El Heraldo and, later, the New York Times, which published it April 15, 2016.

2 | THE PURGE OF THE HONDURAN NATIONAL POLICE

Immediate Antecedents

As the introduction to this report makes clear, the 2016 purge of the HNP appears to have been detonated by media revelations about corruption. The April 2016 stories implicated the highest-level officers of the HNP in the 2009 murder of antidrug commissioner González and the 2011 slaying of Security Ministry adviser Landaverde (See Box 1). The reportage in the *New York Times* accused no fewer than the HNP's previous five directors-general of responsibility in the crimes. Salomón Escoto, José Luis Muñoz Licón, and Ricardo Ramírez del Cid supposedly took part in planning the assassinations, while Juan Carlos Bonilla and Ramón Sabillón suppressed or failed to act on internal investigative reports into the killings in their capacity as HNP inspector-general. By this point, none of the implicated police chiefs was still in a top post, but all remained in the force in "reserve" (*reserva*) with the rank of "general" (*comisionado general*).

Hernández's response to the politically explosive revelations was to create the Special Commission, with civil society representation, to purge the police. The existing theories about the exact nature of his motivation are diverse, but generally complement one another. Most obviously, setting a cleanup in motion would protect the president's image by demonstrating to all and sundry that he vigorously opposed corruption in the police force.²⁶ In another view, Hernández would safeguard an intended reelection bid in 2017, which was expected to generate serious popular resistance. Another version sees Hernández responding to US pressures to finally clean up the HNP, so as to guarantee that US aid destined for Honduras under the Alliance for Prosperity would keep flowing.²⁷

Whatever the exact mix of motives, Hernández found himself on the defensive at this juncture for reasons that had nothing to do with the police. In April 2015, he had engineered a Supreme Court ruling permitting him to run

for reelection against the grain of the 1982 Constitution.²⁸ In a country where an illegal reelection attempt in 2009 had provoked a coup d'état, the ruling was widely criticized. Unfortunately for Hernández, however, opposition to his pretensions was interlaced with a vigorous movement against corruption ignited by revelations that roughly \$260 million had been embezzled from the Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS), some of which had made its way into Hernández's National Party coffers. Though most of these funds went to his internal rival, Ricardo Álvarez, Hernández had to admit in May 2015 that his 2013 election campaign had also received money from the IHSS.²⁹

Corruption, reelection, and a gamut of social and economic issues then fused together to fuel four months of protests by diverse groups of citizens known as the *indignados* ("the indignant").³⁰ This wave of public anger forced Hernández to accede to the creation of an international anticorruption body for Honduras. Though the protesters wanted to see a replica of Guatemala's International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (Comisión Internacional contra la Impunidad en Guatemala) installed, the United Nations, the sponsor of Guatemala's International Commission, was cool to the idea. Availing himself of this reluctance, Hernández negotiated a less potent version of the Guatemalan commission with new secretary-general of the Organization of American States, Luis Almagro. The Support Mission Against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH, Misión de Apoyo Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras) was born in a signing ceremony in January 2016 and began its labors on April 12, coincidentally or not the same day as the special purge commission for the police.³¹

A desire to get out in front of the MACCIH's eventual investigations of corruption by installing the high-profile purge commission with civil society support to deal with the police issue may thus have been another motivation

for the president's actions. Whatever the case, it was not the first time a Honduran administration had formed a special commission to head off a political storm. In early 2014, outgoing president Lobo had named an oversight board to investigate malfeasance in the social security institute, appointing former Supreme Court justice Vilma Morales to head the body. The board published two extensive reports detailing multiple abuses, leading to charges being brought against the entire IHSS leadership of 46 officials. However, the resignation of the Public Ministry prosecutor in the case to take up a diplomatic post in France hinted at an official desire to obstruct the investigation.³²

The precedent established by the IHSS affair suggests that Hernández believed he would be able to control a blue ribbon panel set up to deal with the police, limiting any damage to his own reputation. With the social security scandal fresh in people's mind, it was necessary to balance needs for control and credibility in appointing the commission's members. However, solving the police crisis required confronting an additional problem; whereas corrupt civilian officials could put up only limited resistance to being purged, powerful police commissioners suspected of deep organized crime connections could conceivably react violently to being evicted from their positions.

Hernández appears to have solved this conundrum by creating a buffer around him. The majority of the members of the Special Commission he created would come from civil society. However, members of not just any kind of organization were invited to participate. An entity representative of the diversity of Honduran civil society could pose problems like those presented by the CRSP in 2012—that is, threaten to get out of control. Hernández opted instead to form his commission primarily with people of religious background. These were to include representatives of the Protestant and Catholic churches, and a faith-based non-governmental organization (NGO). It is likely that the president believed that with this lineup, he could garner popular support for his moves, protect himself from adverse reactions, claim victory if successful, and shift blame away from himself if things went awry.

Preparations for Purging

Calling the Commissioners

After the Honduran Catholic Church declined President Hernández's invitation to participate, the Special Commission was composed of four members:

- Julián Pacheco, Secretary (Minister) for Security in the Hernández government;
- Omar Rivera, advocacy coordinator with the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ, Asociación para una Sociedad Más Justa), and coordinator of the Alliance for Peace and Justice (APJ, Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia), a group of Honduran NGOs.
- Alberto Solórzano, a pastor of the Centro Cristiano Internacional, president of the Evangelical Confraternity (Confraternidad Evangélica), and an ASJ board member. The Evangelical Confraternity is a coalition of nearly all the Protestant churches in Honduras.
- Vilma Morales, former president of the Honduran Supreme Court and former head of the country's national banking and insurance commission.

The commission later designated three persons who would come to play prominent advisory roles in the group's labors. These were Carlos Hernández (no relation to President Hernández), executive secretary of the ASJ; Jorge Machado, a pastor and executive director of the Confraternity; and German Leitzelar, a prominent labor lawyer, former labor minister under President Ricardo Maduro, and participant in the 1993 process that separated the Honduran police from the military.

Although the Security Ministry paid some of the operating expenses of the commission and lent it the services of several lawyers, the endowment of resources the commissioners had at their disposal appears to have been very small. They did not have an office of their own but instead met in the ministry's headquarters. However, the ASJ created an internal support unit for the commission, which was paid for out of its own funds, and which provided the bulk

of the legal personnel who did the day-to-day work of examining case files. This support highlights the ASJ's key role in supporting the commission's operation, a role that has a lengthy background and special characteristics.

The Supporting Role of ASJ

The ASJ is a Christian nonprofit organization founded in 1998, focusing on issues related to violence and corruption. Its cofounders and current leaders are Kurt Alan Ver Beek, a US citizen, who is the organization's president, and Carlos Hernández, who is Honduran, and is its executive director and an adviser to the Special Commission.

Ver Beek and Hernández have lived for 20 years in relatively humble circumstances in Nueva Suyapa, a Tegucigalpa barrio once notorious for its crime problems. The organization has long worked on projects in the barrio having to do with citizen security, allowing it to accumulate unusual expertise in areas such as at-risk youth and gangs, police behavior and corruption, and the vagaries of the Honduran judicial system. With this experience, the ASJ played an important role in the ill-fated 2012 police reform campaign, working through the APJ, an umbrella group of like-minded organizations.

The lesson from that experience was that the ASJ had to work within the system and influence top-level decisionmakers to achieve results for its intended constituencies. This strategy included a 2014 accord signed by the Hernández government and Transparency International, whose Honduran chapter is the ASJ. At a time when an official secrets law was depriving other civil society organizations of their access to information, this covenant permitted the ASJ to obtain information and data with which to produce important and well-regarded studies of administrative malfeasance in the security, health, and education ministries, as well as the official property institute.

However, working within the system is risky in Latin America, and especially so in Honduras, where, for instance, the title of a recent study asserts that "corruption is the operating system." President Hernández clearly intended for the ASJ's work to serve the purpose of portraying

himself internationally as an enemy of corruption. In recent years, certain Honduran civil society organizations have come to view the ASJ as too closely aligned politically with the Hernández government.

The perspective of this report is that the ASJ's closeness to the Hernández government was an asset in purging the HNP. As is argued more fully below, without this relationship, the purge and transformation process in the police would very likely not have transpired as it did. Whatever faults it may have, the ASJ's long involvement in local-level citizen security issues generated information about police corruption that no other body in civil society possessed, and even the government had to respect. This knowledge and experience positioned the ASJ to play a pivotal and unexpected role in the Special Commission's work. At the same time, its relationship to government has clearly brought the ASJ significant reputational damage during the period of the commission's work.³³

"...ASJ's long involvement in local-level citizen security issues generated information about police corruption that no other body in civil society possessed, and even the government had to respect."

The Special Commission's Mandate

Arguing that the HNP needed a real and effective purge, among other things to recover credibility in the eyes of the populace, the Honduran Congress approved an emergency decree on April 8, 2016, on the grounds of national security.³⁴ The decree established the "Special Commission for the Purge and Transformation of the Honduran National Police," and it authorized the executive branch to terminate the state's labor relationship with any member of the police force affected by the commission's decisions. It implicitly left it to the executive to decide the modalities through which police personnel would be relieved of their duties.

In view of the wide-ranging role the commission would soon carve out for itself, it is noteworthy that its legal powers were distinctly limited. The legislators specified just four functions for the body:

- To determine the suitability of all career police;
- To establish a follow-up and supervisory mechanism for personnel eventually let go;
- To remand to the Public Ministry (Office of the Attorney General) the files of all personnel let go due to the alleged commission of a crime; and to conduct administrative hearings (*audiencias de descargo*), in which personnel thus affected would be able to exercise their legal right to contest the decisions to remove them; and
- To file a report on its activities with Congress every three months.

Judging from this list, Congress intended for the commission to perform nothing more than a small number of technical and administrative functions. Although the text of the legislative act made vague references to the “transformation” of the HNP as part of the Special Commission’s purview, it did not specify any concrete responsibilities for the commissioners with respect to such a process.

As is also apparent from this decree, the legal powers of the special commissioners to purge the HNP were themselves limited and shared with the Security Ministry. In fact, four days after the act of Congress, the executive branch issued a separate decree authorizing the ministry to immediately begin restructuring the entirety of its own personnel, along with those of the police career.³⁵

The decree made clear that restructuring was an administrative act, suggesting that a ministry official or police officer could be terminated due to changes in the institutions’ “professional, technical, and administrative requirements.” This implied, for example, that if a given unit of the HNP were declared superfluous, it could be dissolved and all its personnel could be let go without cause. The wording of the decree implied that decisions based on these grounds would be the prerogative of the minister, not the Special Commission. However, the decree also authorized

the ministry to restructure HNP personnel who did not meet suitability criteria, as stipulated in the legislative decree and as determined by the Special Commission’s evaluations.

In lieu of restructuring, members of the HNP could choose to accept voluntary retirement. In both cases, those exiting the force were to receive severance pay and all other benefits customarily due to public servants.

As is shown below, the great bulk of those let go from the HNP were eventually removed via restructuring, while an important minority decided to leave voluntarily. However, the executive decree stipulated that the ministry could also order the firing of any HNP officer for just cause, based on his or her lack of suitability or loss of confidence, as determined by the Special Commission. All personnel let go in this fashion had the right to defend themselves before the ministry in administrative hearings. The decree implied, but did not state, that fired officers would find their cases remitted to the Public Ministry (Office of the Attorney General) due to suspected participation in criminal acts.

On April 12, 2016, the official Gazette published another, little-noticed decree of the Security Ministry, issued four days earlier. This edict established an internal commission in the HNP to review the files of officers who, during their terms of service, had failed to comply with the institution’s expectations due to a “lack of confidence and suitability.”³⁶ The purpose of this internal commission was to “completely fulfill” Congress’s emergency decree, but how its work would relate to that of the Special Commission was not immediately apparent.

The Purge Commences

The Special Commission’s Debut

If President Hernández believed he would be able to control the work of the commission he had created, reports on its first meeting suggested that he was mistaken. Officially, commission member Vilma Morales emerged from the encounter to deny media reports about a list of officers from different police promotions who were supposedly already being retired from the force at the government’s behest. Morales informed the public that the commission’s work

was just beginning; asserted its commitment to do a deep and thorough examination of the police; and promised the citizenry prompt, effective, and transparent results, which would be transmitted through official communiqués of the Security Ministry.³⁷

“If President Hernández believed he would be able to control the work of the commission he had created, reports on its first meeting suggested that he was mistaken.”

This brief media appearance hinted at a confrontation hiding under the surface. Although accounts of the meeting culled from commission sources differ in details, they concur that at the initial encounter, held April 13, the governmental side (Security Minister Pacheco and Police Chief Villanueva) presented the rest of the commissioners with a list of police officials the government wanted removed. This list supposedly numbered 32 and mostly consisted of mid-ranking officers, omitting all those of higher rank long considered to have links to organized crime. Several of the commissioners flatly refused to accept the government's diktat, threatening to resign if the government was going to interfere politically in the commission's work.

The commissioners' threat to resign worked, forcing the government to back down.³⁸ In very short order, the Honduran public saw them begin to implement what appeared to be their own ideas for a much more thorough and top-down purge of the HNP. In a second communiqué on April 14, the commissioners demanded that a series of state institutions remit the information they possessed concerning the nine top-ranking officers in the HNP, which included three directors-general and six other commissioners-general, most of them still in service but inactive; the entities were given a “peremptory deadline” of two days to respond. They also enjoined Police Chief Villanueva to send them the service records (*hojas de servicio*) of the nine men, of whom he was one.³⁹

On April 21, the commission announced that it had received the information it had requested and asked the security minister to suspend former HNP directors-general Ricardo Ramírez del Cid and Ramón Sabillón, implicated in the González/Landaverde killings, until the investigation of the case was complete. They recommended that the ministry continue its evaluation of another former chief, Juan Carlos Bonilla, mentioned in the same revelations. They furthermore urged that three other commissioners-general be separated from the force via restructuring. Finally, they recommended ratification in the force of the current HNP chief Villanueva, along with commissioners-general Héctor Iván Mejía and Quintín Juárez.⁴⁰

Thus began a process whereby the commission moved rapidly, examining the records of the entire officer corps of the HNP from top to bottom. By April 29, it was ready to recommend keeping 16 of 47 police commissioners (*comisionados*, the next rank in the police hierarchy) in their posts, exclude 23 others via restructuring, suspend 4 temporarily, and allow 4 others to retire voluntarily.⁴¹ In mid-May, it dealt with the 108 subcommissioners, confirming 69, restructuring 30 others, and suspending 6 more while 3 continued under evaluation.⁴² The processing of a grand total of 164 high-ranking officers, ranging from director-general down to subcommissioner, was complete by May 18. Of these, 88 (56 percent) found themselves ratified, 56 (34 percent) were to be terminated via restructuring, 12 would be temporarily suspended, and 4 retired voluntarily.⁴³

As is obvious, the initial stage of the purge undertaken by the commissioners occurred at lightning speed, and was deep and unprecedented in its top-down character. Judging from the events of the first day, the Hernández administration neither desired nor anticipated such a turn of events. Despite this fact, the Security Ministry ostensibly accepted all the commission's recommendations about what to do with the HNP's highest-ranking figures, and in due course it removed those whom the commissioners had decided should go.

“...the initial stage of the purge undertaken by the commissioners occurred at lightning speed, and was deep and unprecedented in its top-down character.”

The purge would inevitably slow as the commissioners and their staff dealt with the more numerous lower ranks of the officer corps (commissars and inspectors), and later on with thousands of entry-level police agents. However, in its initial months the commission's work had a very strong impact on the general Honduran public, which was expecting quick results and justice for the wrongdoers. At least some of the commissioners were proceeding on the assumption that any purge needed public support to have a lasting effect; obtaining that support required doing something previous purges had not dared, which was to quickly weed out the most powerful corrupt officials from the beginning. Creating an instant media splash would have the additional benefits of demonstrating the seriousness of the purge to officers farther down who were not corrupt, and of controlling resistance to the cleansing from the lower ranks.

The Powerful React

Several reactions by high-ranking officers indicated that resistance could take the form of bargaining and blackmail. The case of former director-general Juan Carlos Bonilla presented a special difficulty. This officer, known as “El Tigre,” had removed his service record from the HNP files upon leaving his post in 2013, and steadfastly refused to hand it over to the commission. Instead, the once powerful police chief attempted to negotiate, offering the commissioners compromising information on links between criminal elements and other police officials, private-sector figures, and politicians. In return, Bonilla wanted to be allowed to remain in the HNP in good standing until his retirement five years hence. Honduras did not possess a plea bargaining law at that time, and the commissioners refused to bargain with Bonilla on those terms.⁴⁴

Former director-general Sabillón's response was different. Instead of trying to bargain, Sabillón declared himself a victim of injustice, sought the protection of Honduras's national human rights commission, and denounced supposed death threats against him, insinuating that they came from the government. He proceeded to ply the media with revelations about links between drug traffickers and figures in Honduran politics. Before their extradition to the United States, the Valle brothers, heads of a powerful cartel Sabillón had supposedly helped to break up, allegedly told the police chief that these figures included someone they referred to as “the brother of the big man” (*el hermano del hombre*).⁴⁵ An apparent attempt to gain leverage, this insinuation of complicity on the part of President Hernández's brother and the legislator Antonio “Tony” Hernández did Sabillón little good, and he fled the country in May 2016.⁴⁶

Repercussions for the Commissioners

In the analysis of commission members, top-ranking officers of the HNP occupied a series of fiefdoms, which they personally controlled, paying no heed to the director-general (they ignored his orders and issued counterorders) and enjoying the support of criminal elements both within and outside the force. Some resistance from these groupings was to be expected.

“...top-ranking officers of the HNP occupied a series of fiefdoms, which they personally controlled, paying no heed to the director-general and enjoying the support of criminal elements both within and outside the force. Resistance from these groupings was expected.”

From the outset, Special Commission members assumed that they could be the targets of reprisals by officers ousted from the HNP. Commissioner Alberto Solórzano first disclosed threats against them on May 4, 2016, less than three weeks after the commission's advent. It had

become clear that certain commissioners' cars were being followed, their homes were under surveillance, and they had begun receiving visible messages that they would meet violent ends if they persisted in their work.

As a result of these threats, the government ordered military police details to protect commission members and their advisers. Despite this assistance, Solórzano's family felt it necessary to flee Honduras and adviser Carlos Hernández decided to abandon his home for a safer location. The most violent reprisal was directed against commission secretary Jorge Machado, who suffered what appears to have been an assassination attempt in December 2016, in which one of his bodyguards was killed. Machado's family immediately left for the United States, and the secretary eventually followed, requesting asylum there in 2017.⁴⁷

Threats were continuing at the time the Wilson Center began its project in November 2017, when several commissioners informed the author that if the purge process were reversed after the presidential election, they would be forced to leave Honduras for their own safety.

Juan Hernández and the Purge

A still-outstanding question is why President Hernández accepted with good graces the apparent insubordination of some of the commissioners he had recently appointed. This report can offer only speculative answers to this question, but several possibilities suggest themselves.

It was obviously in the president's power to fire the rebellious commissioners or dissolve the commission entirely. But having gone to the extreme of arranging an emergency decree and naming a special executive commission, to immediately disable it would have brought Hernández a tremendous loss of credibility and given the appearance that he was defending police corruption at precisely the moment when he needed to demonstrate the opposite.

Although he had given no public sign of favoring a sweeping purge, Hernández had reportedly received pressure for some time from the US government to undertake such a step. He may thus have believed that, even though it was not his own doing, the commissioners' initiative would

be well regarded in Washington and redound to his political advantage. By the same token, a thorough purge of the HNP would bring political benefits at home, on which the president could capitalize to promote his overarching goal of securing reelection.

Hernández also retained a significant degree of control over the eventual outcomes of the process, given his sway over other powers of state, and thus could limit potentially uncomfortable side effects. As the discussion below makes clear, the commissioners had agreed to a *modus operandi* for the purge in which the police themselves would play a central role, and more generally depended in their work on collaboration from state institutions formally, but not in practice, independent of presidential control. In addition, the purge would affect only the HNP, not other bodies in the larger police model that Hernández had by this point fashioned and on which he depended for political support.

Finally, President Hernández had established ongoing working relationships with the ASJ and the Evangelical Confraternity, the two civil society organizations participating in the commission. If their objectives did not exactly coincide with his, these organizations were at least accustomed to negotiating with him in pursuit of their ultimate aims, and he was not likely to have viewed them as a mortal threat to his rule. Conversely, if he had decided to disband the commission, he would have had to pay a stiff price for angering the heads of the Protestant community in Honduras.

Unanswered Questions

In due course, Honduran and foreign analysts began to raise a series of fundamental questions about the conduct and outcomes of the purge conducted by the Special Commission:

1. How thorough was the purge, especially given the speed with which it was carried out in the initial stages? Did the process miss important figures involved in illicit activities and human rights violations?
2. Were people removed from the force for political reasons rather than their complicity in illicit activities or

due to personal or professional deficiencies? Conversely, were people left in the force for political reasons when they should have been removed?

3. What has the Honduran judicial system done with the purged officers suspected of criminal acts or associations? How has it treated the appeals brought before it by officers who wished to contest the reasons for their dismissal in court?
4. Have purged HNP officers gone on to swell the ranks of organized and common criminals?

Some of these questions are relatively easy to answer, while others are very difficult. This report addresses them below after reviewing what is known about the process.

Behind the Scenes: How the Purge Was Done

The purge of the HNP did not involve a formal intervention of the institution by the government.⁴⁸ Under Security Minister Julián Pacheco, the government finally appeared to have the HNP under a semblance of control; former police directors had been removed in prior years, while others had been shunted aside into largely ceremonial posts such as police attachés. Diverse sources nevertheless suggest that fear existed in the Hernández government over how powerful figures linked to organized crime might react to being ousted from the force and personally discredited. The conflict that erupted at the first commission meeting made evident that Hernández did not initially contemplate taking on the top levels of the police leadership, and intended to limit the purge to people farther down the hierarchy.

Though certain commission members had other ideas, they appear to have shared the assumption that the criminality in which high-ranking officers were involved made doing the purge in a more forceful way risky. Purged officers could mount public protests against the commission or conspire in other ways to thwart its operation. In addition, intervening the HNP would make the purge even more traumatic than it eventually became. Some part of the institution would have to take over the reins once the

thorough cleansing the commissioners intended was complete; involving them in the process would serve as an expression of confidence in the “good” police officers who would eventually survive the purge.⁴⁹

The HNP’s Role in the Evaluation

The cogency of these arguments notwithstanding, this decision meant that the commissioners did not exercise complete control over the purge process. In the first stage of the process, the HNP effectively evaluated itself and sent the commission the results of an internal review for further examination. This process generally transpired as follows.

“...the commissioners did not exercise complete control over the purge. In the first stage of the process, the HNP effectively evaluated itself and sent the commission the results of an internal review for further examination.”

Pursuant to the Security Ministry’s April 8 decree, an internal HNP commission was immediately created to begin examining the records of the officer corps, while some months later a separate commission began to review lower-level personnel. These teams reportedly combed through files from all HNP divisions, gathering information from service records and investigations conducted by the internal affairs unit of the Security Ministry, as well as from police intelligence sources and the criminal investigation branch. In addition, they compiled information found in HNP files from previous vetting procedures carried out by the DIECP, along with lists of officers released from the force in prior purges.

The HNP internal review teams eventually assembled and sent to the commission a PowerPoint résumé on each person evaluated, along with the original case file. Several commission members and staff from the ASJ had prior experience in dealing with HNP personnel records, which were seriously mutilated. Expectations about the quality and quantity of the information they would receive from the

HNP were thus not high. In fact, the histories of officers' postings were often incomplete and disciplinary records were unclear, making it necessary for the commission to insist on further detail. In some cases, whole files were missing or simply fabricated. The problem of fake dossiers was one that would plague the commission continuously.

According to a commission source, the internal police teams sent the commission what can be regarded at least as an implicit recommendation ("conclusion") concerning what should be done about each case.

Institutional Checks

To avoid being prisoner to the police's self-serving appraisals, the commission attempted to cross-check this information against information that it formally request from other sources. Requests for internal documentation and denunciations were made at each stage of the process to the ASJ, the media, and the US Embassy in Honduras. Seven other state institutions potentially possessed important information pertaining to the commission's work (see box 2).

Box 2. Other State Organizations Consulted by the Special Commission

The Special Commission consulted these organizations:

The Directorate for the Investigation and Evaluation of the Police Career (DIECP); results from prior vetting (pruebas de confianza) and reports from intelligence investigations.

The Public Ministry (MP, Ministerio Público, or Office of the Attorney General); lists of police personnel denounced and under investigation for alleged crimes. These included cases under the jurisdiction of the Technical Agency for Criminal Investigation (ATIC, Agencia Técnica de Investigación Criminal), whose remit includes organized crime offenses including drug trafficking and money laundering.

The State Attorney (PGR, Procuraduría General de la República); information on the current state of cases against police personnel pending in either civil or criminal court, and on suits brought by police personnel against the government.

The Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ, Corte Suprema de Justicia); information on the current state of cases against police personnel pending in either civil or criminal court, and regarding suits brought by police personnel against the government.

The High Court of Accounts (TSC, Tribunal Superior de Cuentas, akin to a comptroller-general); reports on investigations into the personal worth of police personnel and into allegations of malfeasance in their handling of public funds or resources.

The National Banking and Insurance Commission (CNBS, Comisión Nacional de Bancos y Seguros, oversees the banking and insurance industry); information on individual bank records and transactions to assist the investigation of illicit enrichment and money laundering on the part of police personnel.

The National Human Rights Commission (Conadeh, Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, the ombudsman); information on denunciations of police personnel for human rights violations and involvement in criminal activity.

The institutions listed in Box 2 supposedly responded promptly to the commission's requests, but not necessarily to its satisfaction. The DIECP was the most useful, as it had some information in its files on most of those being evaluated. The DIECP was the only body that had data on a substantial number of entry-level (*escala básica*) personnel. However, the commissioners had to insist that the entity hand over complete files, not just résumés, and surrender the most recent data in its archives. Possession of this data allowed some check on the HNP's work, as the police had reviewed the same DIECP files as part of its evaluations.

Other state institutions had (or chose to provide) information mainly concerning the officer ranks. The Public Ministry likewise tried to ply the commission with outdated histories and handed over files only in cases then pending trial. Though not fully cooperative, the institution was of some use, given that 18 of the 47 original HNP commissioners turned out to be facing trials at the time. The Supreme Court was more forthcoming with information, and its files revealed that 15 of the 47 police commissioners had faced other, already concluded, judicial processes at some point in their careers. The High Court of Accounts had data indicating malfeasance on the part of 3 or 4 of the same people.

In sum, this information was of value to the commission's work, particularly with respect to high-ranking members of the officer corps, but in general the commissioners could not be sure that the information they received was either complete or trustworthy. The lack of cooperation from the Public Ministry was a serious problem that would continue to crop up. The commission sought the collaboration of the former security minister, Arturo Corrales, who had a digital file of all the HNP's service records dating from his term of office. The value of this file was potentially enormous, as it could have helped the commissioners corroborate much information obtained from the police. But although he met with the commission and gave it information on specific cases, Corrales refused to hand over the entirety of his file, and the commissioners' efforts to get the Public Ministry to force him to do so proved fruitless.

The ASJ's Input

To some degree, the ASJ was able to complement the information obtained by the Special Commission from official sources. Derived from years of experience in dealing with security topics, the ASJ had an internal database on police corruption that included details of individual cases, information that allowed commission members to question the veracity of HNP dossiers on certain officers under review. On June 7, 2016, the Special Commission also launched a platform called "Honduras Denuncia!" which allowed ordinary citizens to denounce police misconduct by phone, smartphone, or email. The facility, which built on a preexisting mechanism established by the ASJ for receiving corruption accusations from the public, reportedly received 80 denunciations of police officers during its first month in operation.⁵⁰

The US Embassy's Contribution

Early on in the purge process, US ambassador James Nealon confirmed publicly that the US government had also provided the Special Commission with relevant information on HNP officers suspected of involvement in human rights violations, drug trafficking, and other serious crimes. Nealon asserted that the information he was referring to had previously been provided to the Honduran government over a period of years through official channels. He did not provide details on the number of personnel involved or mention the name of any individual in particular.⁵¹

According to a commission source, the US Embassy supplied information regarding about 20 percent of the officer corps being investigated. The US information generally only established suspicion regarding a given official and was not in itself sufficient to serve as the basis for a court indictment. The suspicion most often had to do with alleged human rights violations, and to a lesser extent with supposed complicity in organized criminal activities. Even so, information obtained from the US government was key to the commissioners' recommendations in about half the cases of officers accused of

organized crime collaboration. The embassy's indications were disregarded if the commission had no corroborating information from other sources.

The Commission's Internal Dynamics

Juan Orlando Hernández originally envisioned the Special Commission as having five members, three of whom—theoretically a working majority—would be representatives of civil society. When the Catholic Church declined to participate, the number of commissioners was reduced to four, creating the potential for impasses in decisionmaking. Internal regulations adopted at the outset empowered Security Minister Pacheco to call meetings but not to direct the commission's work; though he would need to sign off on and could block the commission's recommendations, his was always only one vote. Consensus would thus be necessary for the work of the commission to proceed effectively.

What appears to have occurred in practice is that commissioners Omar Rivera and Alberto Solórzano, supported by advisers and staff associates from their respective organizations (the ASJ and the Evangelical Confraternity), coordinated initiatives and positions closely with one another and through force of argument often won over former Supreme Court president Vilma Morales to their side, leaving Pacheco isolated. Over time, according to some accounts, the minister withdrew into a posture of neutrality, portraying himself more as an intermediary between the commission and the police leadership than as a full-fledged participant in the commission's decisionmaking.⁵²

This posture did not mean that the commission had *carte blanche* to do whatever it wished. After the opening-day face-off, there appear to have been any number of moments when disagreements between the ministry and police, on one hand, and the nonstate commissioners, on the other hand, had to be negotiated in some fashion. Some of the episodes reflected the desire of the other commissioners to preserve their role against the encroachment of those at a higher level of authority, and/or expand it to influence decisions on things that were not part of their

original mandate. Others are tussles over access to information or documents, suggesting that the Security Ministry and police, not to mention the Public Ministry, were not always cooperating fully with the commission's work.

Three anecdotes are illustrative, not an exhaustive list, of this dynamic. The first anecdote is about police collusion with *Maras*. On September 16, 2016, six months after the commission began its work, *El Heraldo* newspaper, citing an internal police intelligence report, alleged that 38 officers and a total 81 members of the HNP, were involved with the depredations of the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) gang. The accusation was doubly sensitive because 18 of the officers also supposedly figured as intellectual or material authors in the murders of González and Landaverde.⁵³ High-ranking police officials initially denied the existence of the intelligence report, but eventually handed it over when the commissioners insisted. The commission subsequently visited the Public Ministry seeking confirmation, but that body supposedly refused to make its copy of the report available. The commission has since remitted the names of the officers to the prosecutors for investigation, so far without result.

The second anecdote is about promotions. In November 2016, the security minister presented the commission with a list of 62 officers and 223 lower-level personnel whom he wished to promote and wanted the commissioners to approve. The commission insisted that the personnel in question had to be evaluated anew because their DIECP vetting trials dated from 2015 and had expired (they were considered valid for six months). The affair caused friction with Police Chief Villanueva and the human resources head in the HNP, Commissioner Dagoberto Galo, who argued that promotion decisions were an internal police matter. However, the commissioners succeeded in blocking the promotion of 32 people of diverse ranks, 10 of whom were later ousted via restructuring.⁵⁴

And the third anecdote is about forced retirement. Minister Julián Pacheco continued to surprise the commission with unexpected initiatives. In early 2017, other commissioners learned from media reports of his decision to retire HNP subdirector Quintín Juárez. When they asked

Pacheco why he had not consulted them, he again replied that it was an “internal police matter” not under the commission’s jurisdiction. In fact, the commissioners had previously ratified Commissioner-General Juárez and had no argument with which to counter the ministry’s deliberation about his fate, so this time Pacheco’s decision stuck.

What emerges from these anecdotes is the picture of a commission whose defiance was not limited to an opening day encounter, but one that was taking its duties seriously and pursuing its objectives with tenacity in the face of continuing institutional resistance. Why the commissioners had the power at times—not always—to prevail in this ongoing bureaucratic infighting is not entirely clear; but, as is suggested below, the answer may be found in significant part in the prestige the commission garnered for itself in the initial stages of the purge, an asset that gave nonstate commissioners leverage to bargain with their official counterparts.

The Purge’s Result

The Commission’s Value Added

According to a commission source, after a year in operation, the commissioners had evaluated a total of 9,234 people, of whom about 15 percent were officers, 80 percent lower-level agents, and the rest auxiliary personnel. Of this initial cohort, the commission rejected the HNP’s implicit recommendation for action in about 5 percent of the total number of cases. However, among the officer corps, the rejection rate rose to 12–15 percent, indicating that the commissioners had found reason to overrule the judgments emanating from the internal review of police files in a significant number of instances. In these cases, evidence of organized crime collaboration appears to have played a major role in the ultimate decisions to separate people from the force.

At the level of the officer corps, therefore, the special commissioners appear to have had a substantial independent impact by bringing the information they had culled from nonpolice sources to bear on the evaluation process. By contrast, with respect to the vast majority of the low-

er-level police agents reviewed, the HNP’s internal evaluation of suitability was accepted by the commission as the basis of its recommendation to the minister. Except for DIECP vetting trials, the commissioners had limited information on the lower ranks to compare and contrast with the police’s own appraisals. For its part, the internal police review unit also had access to the DIECP files, which may help explain the high level of coincidence between its judgments and those of the Special Commission.

Overall Purge Statistics

By April 30, 2018, after two years, the purge conducted under the aegis of the Special Commission had led to the removal of 4,627 out of about 13,500 members of the HNP (this figure excludes auxiliary personnel). Of this total, 60.7 percent, or 2,809, exited from the force via restructuring; 22.6 percent, or 1,046, by voluntary retirement; and 8.7 percent, or 402, due to desertion. All other categories made up 8 percent of those purged. The officer corps lost 608 personnel, most of them in 2016, and the vast majority by restructuring. The lower ranks lost 4,019, the bulk in 2017; the majority at this level again departed via the restructuring route, but nearly a quarter accepted voluntary retirement (see table 1).

Restructuring versus Retirement

The stance of the commission is that all restructuring took place as the result of the commissioners’ decisions, which were accepted by the minister. The Security Ministry supposedly did not independently remove people from the force through this mechanism, although it had the authority to do so.

Eliminating police personnel on grounds of “restructuring” implied the existence of a new structure or organizational plan. According to a news report, Police Chief Villanueva had at some point presented a new organizational chart to Minister Julián Pacheco.⁵⁵ On April 26, 2016, using the police’s plan as a basis, the Special Commission

Table 1. Police Personnel Purged, April 2016–April 2018

YEAR AND TYPE	HIGH-RANKING OFFICERS	LOW-RANKING OFFICERS	BASE-LEVEL AGENTS	TOTAL
2016	320	146	1,399	1,865
Restructuring	299	127	982	1,408
Voluntary	11	15		230
Retirement				
Desertion	4	2	103	109
Other	10	2	110	122
2017	59	63	2,374	2,496
Restructuring	24	23	1,287	1,334
Voluntary	23	28	728	779
Retirement				
Desertion		3	186	189
Other	12	9	173	194
2018	18	2	246	266
Restructuring	10		57	67
Voluntary				
Retirement	6	1	30	37
Desertion			104	104
Other	2	2	55	58
TOTAL	397	211	4,019	4,627

Note: The category “other” includes firings, forced retirement, confirmed judicial sentences, incapacity, and death.

Source: Comisión Especial para el Proceso de Depuración y Transformación de la Policía Nacional.

approved an alternative organizational structure for the HNP, eliminating certain units of the force and changing the names, structures, and functions of others. However, the new organizational chart was published in the official *Gazette* only on December 21, 2016.

The significant number of lower-level police officers who left the force voluntarily may reflect an unintended side effect of the purge. According to a high-ranking police source, a significant number of these agents had been ratified by the commission and could have remained but decided to leave anyway, feeling that the purge process had stigmatized the HNP in the mind of the public and that

it was better to accept the severance package offered by the ministry. As a result, the institution lost people of value, especially younger personnel.⁵⁶

Effects of the Purge

Over the course of two years, when auxiliaries are included, the HNP lost a total of more than 5,000 people, equivalent to 35 percent of the original 2016 total of about 13,500. The purge initially left the institution woefully understaffed and greatly increased the workload on those remaining in the force. Although the overload continues among the officer corps, an expansion plan begun in 2015 has signifi-

	POLICE HIRED EACH YEAR	POLICE REMOVED BY COMMISSION EACH YEAR
2015	1,408	0
2016	2,501	1,865
2017	2,927	2,496
2018	1,437	266
TOTAL	8,273	4,627

cantly increased the lower ranks, bringing the total number of personnel to 15,000 in mid-2018.

Though the 2016 purge of the HNP has drawn attention for allegedly ridding the force of corrupt and criminal officers, it is clear from the Wilson Center’s interviews that a large number of personnel at the lower levels were removed for reasons that had nothing to do with illegal activity. Many were dismissed on the grounds of “suitability,” including being overage or overweight, illiterate, of poor temperament, or with a history of family problems, not to mention a lack of proficiency in basic policing skills. Although interviewees were loath to cite numbers, the purge begun in 2016 seems to have intended a general cleaning out of the institution, making way for a younger generation of better-educated and more highly motivated recruits to begin its ascent up the ranks.

Criticisms of the Purge Process and Results

Honduran civil society organizations and experts have expressed a number of criticisms of the purge process and/or the Special Commission’s work. Three of these criticisms were often repeated by Wilson Center interviewees.

The first criticism centers on administrative injustice. One of the most common objections concerns the Security Ministry’s use of institutional restructuring to remove police personnel from the force without having to prove just cause or even provide administrative redress. It is argued that such a mechanism is unfair, denying people the right to due process, and that its application in practice was unconstitutional.⁵⁷ Related criticisms are that those affected were not

apprised of the reasons for their separation and that their names were nevertheless listed in the news media, conveying the idea to the public that they were guilty of something.

The commissioners’ counterargument is that restructuring was a legal prerogative and that historical experience (e.g., the aborted 2001 Fonseca purge and the ineffectual DIECP purge) proved there was no other feasible way to conduct a large-scale cleansing of the force; to allow thousands of ejected police officers to make recourse to the Honduran judicial system to dispute the merits of their separation would have paralyzed the purge from the beginning. Publication of the names, a legal requirement, was accompanied by an explanation that separation from the force for administrative reasons did not imply wrongdoing by the officers involved.

The legality of the restructuring process is an issue for Hondurans to decide. The Wilson Center observes, however, that the discussion of this matter has taken place in a political system where the separation of powers remains weak, and where administrative and judicial redress, even when available, is often of limited value. This reality may be reflected in the fact that hundreds of suits brought before the courts by purged HNP officers against the decisions of the Special Commission have languished.⁵⁸

The second criticism centers on ineffectiveness. In the period from April 2016 to the present, police personnel cleared by the special commissioners and allowed to remain in the HNP have later been involved in committing crimes and/or have joined criminal organizations and *maras*, For example, by November 2017, the Center for Human Rights Investigation and Promotion (Ciprodeh,

Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos) had brought accusations before the Public Ministry involving human rights violations against 10 high-ranking police officers who had been examined and approved by the commission.⁵⁹ For some, cases of this kind mean that the purge failed to remove the contamination that is universally assumed to have permeated the pre-purge HNP.

Honduran analysts, journalists, and civil society organization leaders consulted by the Wilson Center on the whole acknowledge that the purge led by the Special Commission ridded the HNP of a significant number of criminal elements. However, they vary widely in estimating how many of these are still left inside in HNP, ranging from a few to the bulk of the preexisting criminal structures in the police. Numerous sources cited the names of a small number of HNP commissioners who they argued should have been let go and were not. In some cases, the response of the commissioners to these arguments was to assert that specific allegations were based on fabricated information.

A thorough evaluation of the Special Commission's performance in this regard is beyond the scope of this report, and the Wilson Center is not in a position to make a judgment about it. Some observations are nevertheless warranted. Judging from comparative experience, it is impossible for any purge to be completely effective in eliminating corrupted elements from a police force. Hence it is not surprising that cases have cropped up in which vetted HNP officers have been found newly entangled in criminal associations (according to the Security Ministry, about 70 individuals are involved in such cases). In addition, every police force in the world has continuing problems with corruption; some criminal involvement is, hence, more recent than the Special Commission's purge.

“Judging from comparative experience, it is impossible for any purge to be completely effective in eliminating corrupted elements from a police force.”

That said, the speed with which the HNP purge was conducted, with the upper level of the officer corps evaluated in a matter of weeks—ostensibly to maximize public support for and minimize resistance to the cleansing—suggests that there was substantial margin for error in one direction or the other in the commissioners' decisions. This margin is heightened by the limited resources granted to the commission and the political and institutional resistance to the commissioners' work, which, as is indicated above, continued throughout the process and which curtailed the amount and quality of the information available as the basis for doing evaluations.

It is thus not impossible that even “big fish” made it through the commission's sieves. To date, the principal allegation that corrupt high-ranking officers escaped the commission's net stems from a journalistic investigation done by the Associated Press in January 2018, which is dealt with in more detail below. The AP report provides information suggesting that the three top-ranking members of the new post-purge HNP leadership were involved in facilitating drug shipments through Honduras in 2013.⁶⁰ Though several Wilson Center sources doubt the veracity of this report, to date the Special Commission has not published the results of the thorough investigation into the matter it initially promised the public. (See further discussion below.)

Finally, the third criticism centers on a lack of judicial follow-up. A third critique is that the purge has been ineffective because it has not resulted in criminal elements nested in the HNP being brought to justice almost three years into the process. The contention that justice has not been done is beyond dispute; the unresolved issue is who or what is responsible for this alleged impunity.

In August 2016, the Special Commission remanded a list to the Public Ministry with accompanying documentation on a total of 455 police personnel suspected of participation in illicit activities.⁶¹ As of May 3, 2018, a special Public Ministry unit claimed to be investigating, based on the commission's findings, a total of 98 cases involving about 300 purged HNP members. Many of the investigations involve high-ranking officers and center on drug trafficking, mon-

ey laundering, illicit enrichment, and other serious malfeasance.⁶² However, by that date the unit had brought exactly two cases to court; one of these is a big fish, former HNP commissioner Jorge Barralaga, and the other is a lowly policeman from La Paz Department accused of taking a bribe.⁶³

The Public Ministry and the Special Commission trade allegations as to which party is responsible for this lack of progress. The argument of the ministry is that mounting an organized crime case is inherently complex and time consuming, but also that the information provided by the commissioners (which it says consisted mainly of service records and evaluations done by the old DIECP) has been grossly insufficient to bring criminal accusations before the courts.⁶⁴ For their part, commission members allow that in many cases their documentation is insufficient in and of itself, but contend that Public Ministry personnel lack the training and resources to develop these cases on the basis of the leads provided. However, they refrain from suggesting that deliberate obstruction plays a role in the preventing the investigations from going forward.

Conclusion: Did The Commission Fulfill Its Role?

Formally speaking, the Special Commission can claim to have evaluated the suitability of the great bulk of the HNP's 2016 personnel, thus fulfilling the principal part of its mandate. In real terms, the quality of the evaluation was clearly uneven, depending on the nature and quantity of information the commissioners possessed on officials of different ranks, as well as on particular officers. Its most spectacular action, taking charge of the process and conducting a rapid top-down cleansing of the highest ranks, had immediate and palpable effects in ridding the officer corps of corrupt and criminal elements. But farther down the hierarchy, the ability of the commissioners to make well-founded judgments about police personnel declined as independent information or any alternative information became scarcer. At the lowest levels (the majority of those let go), it is likely that the decisions of the HNP leadership about whom to discard and whom to keep prevailed.

The commissioners also complied with their duty to remand the cases of officers suspected of criminal activity to the judicial authorities. Those so named included numerous police figures allegedly involved in organized crime of the kind for which Honduras had become notorious. As mentioned, this action has not resulted in much judicial follow-up, dashing popular expectations that justice would be done. Exactly why such follow-up did not occur is a question to which this report does not attempt to speak, but it clearly has to do with power relationships in the Honduran state over which the commissioners had, and have, no control.

The Special Commission also supervised the administrative hearings required in cases in which accused personnel desired to contest the decision to expel them. However, only about 100 HNP officers pursued this option to its conclusion, and in the end only about 10 hearings were conducted, in 2 of which the outcome was to reinstate the purged officer in the force.⁶⁵ The commission's final substantive task, establishing a supervisory mechanism to follow up on the behavior of purged HNP personnel, was one which the body was not equipped nor given resources to perform. In the post-purge period, the Security Ministry has taken charge of this work on a limited basis, using a counterintelligence unit in the HNP's intelligence division for the purpose.

A Different Reckoning

More important, perhaps, than the discharge of its responsibilities to the legislative authority that gave birth to the Special Commission is the question of how well the commission has responded to popular expectations for its performance and the outcome of its work of purging the HNP of corruption. As is evident, such expectations were initially sky-high, much higher than could be sustained over time, especially because any shortcoming—for example, the officer given a clean bill of health who later on was shown to be colluding with *maras*—had the potential to rapidly deflate them.

As is also evident, by agreeing to serve at all, nonstate actors who became members of the Special Commission accepted a set of legal, financial, political, and administrative constraints as their operating framework. Within this frame-

work, it seems inevitable that the commission and the organizations in its midst would be unable to indefinitely sustain a high level of popular and interest group approval for their actions. Though the commission's mandate was limited, the financing it received from the state was completely inadequate, even for the restricted set of tasks with which it was charged. And as the unresponsiveness of the Public Ministry indicates, its ability to compel collaboration from state agencies that did not want to give it was insufficient.

Once civil society actors assumed the initiative in pushing for a deeper purge of the HNP, they were able to marshal a quantity of private resources, both financial and informational, that sustained the purge's implementation and prevented them from becoming ensnared in what appears to have been a preset purge machinery created by Security Ministry and police officials to keep the process within certain bounds. In the end, the commission was able to do more than those in power desired, but less than enough to satisfy the public.

“Civil society actors were able to marshal a quantity of private resources, both financial and informational, that sustained the purge’s implementation...”

Transcending these limitations to do a more thorough purge would have required more power and information

than the special commissioners could aspire to possess. In effect, it would have necessitated a formal intervention of the HNP and a sequestering of its files, a process that in the Honduran context is scarcely imaginable. Not only was there no visible political will to take such a step; but even if it had existed, the capacity of the Honduran state to accomplish such a feat without causing a crisis was doubtful.

The fact that the commission's purge was limited in its effects does not by any means signify that it has been a failure. Whether a purge is successful cannot be measured by the numbers of police officers expelled, but rather depends on having enough institutional capacity to keep the corruption that remains in the force in check. In the Honduran case, the purge that began in April 2016 became a springboard for an expansion of the role of the Special Commission, which used it to go on to attempt to strengthen that capacity. What it has tried to accomplish in that realm is the next question that this report addresses.

“Whether a purge is successful cannot be measured by the numbers of police officers expelled, but rather depends on having enough institutional capacity to keep the corruption that remains in the force in check.”

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In addition to purging police personnel, the Special Commission took it upon itself to promote changes in diverse aspects of the structure and functioning of the HNP, including its basic philosophy and principles. As noted above, the work of the Special Commission in these respects did not flow from its original mandate, whose instructions did not charge the commission with concrete tasks of “transformation,” although that word appears in the legislative decree establishing the body.⁶⁶ Instead, it seems to have sprung from a realization that the achievements of the purge being conducted could not be protected from erosion and backsliding without a thorough overhaul of the police institution.

How the commission was able to play this role is something this report cannot fully account for, but it appears to have resulted from the political dynamics established in the process of the purge itself. The discussion above suggests that commission members drawn from civil society and governmental actors both in and outside the commission arrived at a sometimes tense but generally effective working relationship. After a short confrontation, state actors concluded that on balance it was politically advantageous to proceed with the deeper purge for which civil society actors were pressing. This calculus likely extended to further changes that would be needed to consolidate the purge’s effects.

In addition, the prestige earned by the Special Commission in ousting corrupt high-ranking officers from the HNP was a political asset to the Hernández government, which could take credit for achievements it did not originally intend. However, this prestige also gave civil society commissioners leverage with which to bargain with the government side over the content of the transformation.

However, the initiatives of the commission did not emerge directly from the heads of its four members. Honduras had discussed police reform for years, and many proposals for change had been advanced, notably in 2012. As Commissioner Omar Rivera put it, “The commission did not invent anything, but rather helped concretize and imple-

ment ideas already formulated by civil society, government and international actors.”⁶⁷ In addition, the commission built on changes introduced in prior years, at times deemphasizing areas where other actors were already pushing reforms.

Early Steps in HNP Reform

As mentioned, the Hernández government was already pursuing certain changes in the HNP before the Special Commission’s formation. Though an exact date for the beginnings of police reform in Honduras is elusive, the appointment of Arturo Corrales as security minister in April 2013 in some respects marks a starting point. During his tenure, which spanned parts of the Lobo and Hernández administrations, changes occurred that laid the groundwork for later, more far-reaching departures. These changes seem to have been designed to bring a chaotic police force under control and to prepare it to play a role in the larger police model, but also begin to reconnect the police to the citizenry in an attempt to reestablish some measure of legitimacy.

Diverse informants have stressed that the HNP had long been out of control, especially in the years after the 2009 coup. Given that his predecessor admitted privately that he did not know how many people the HNP had on its payroll, Corrales first took a census to determine the number. According to the commission and other sources, he would eventually arrange for the digitalization of all HNP personal records and take the database with him when he left office. In the meantime, however, he planted global positioning systems on patrol cars so as to know where they were going, and established an operations center to monitor and coordinate police movements.⁶⁸

Once President Hernández was sworn into office, the organizational structure of the HNP was adjusted to fit into the overall security model in gestation.⁶⁹ Changes included the creation of a strategic police directorate and a new intelligence system, along with divisions to coordinate the work of special units, special operations, and general administra-

tion. March 2014 saw a tactical operations group and a national antiskidnapping force added to the HNP's repertoire. At some point, a statistical system called SEPOL was set up, and a territorial reorganization was begun with the creation in the capital and San Pedro Sula of the first Metropolitan Police Units (Unidades Metropolitanas de Policia).

Finally, starting in 2013, the Security Ministry began to take tentative steps to revive community-policing practices, which had a history of both success and failure stretching back to the Maduro administration.⁷⁰ The most important departure was a series of pilot projects introduced by the US State Department's Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs in three of the most dangerous barrios of San Pedro Sula, Honduras's most crime-ridden city, projects that appeared to be effective in rapidly reducing homicides.

In addition, the Technical Police Institute (ITP, Instituto Tecnológico Policial, a training institution formerly known as the Police Instruction Center, or Centro de Instrucción Policial), began to undergo reform in 2014 with the assistance of foreign donors, notably the Inter-American Development Bank and the Swiss cooperation agency Cosude. As is discussed in detail below, the changes in the ITP have ostensibly sought to alter Honduran police culture, among other things by raising the educational qualifications of police cadets and revising the curriculum to move away from the traditional military model.

Intelligence Officers and Community Policing

If anecdotes are to be believed, Juan Orlando Hernández long toyed with the idea of abolishing the HNP and replacing it with a completely new force organized around the military police, known as the Military Public Order Police, as its core.⁷¹ By the end of 2014 at the latest, Hernández appears to have made up his mind to keep and do something to develop the existing HNP. Key decisions were announced in November, when Hernández appointed Félix Villanueva as the HNP's new chief, replacing Ramón Sabillón. This appointment ended a merry-go-round that had seen five di-

rectors-general of the institution come and go in four years; Villanueva would stay on for a full three-year term, presiding over the force during the purge that began in 2016.

His superior, Julián Pacheco, named to replace Arturo Corrales as security minister, is still in his post four years later, which is unusual longevity. A career military intelligence officer, Pacheco was appointed to head the National Investigation and Intelligence Directorate (DNII, Dirección Nacional de Investigación e Inteligencia), when the body was established in early 2012. An HNP intelligence officer, Gerzon Velásquez Aguilera, was named Pacheco's deputy. Granted the power both have to execute high-level policy decisions of the National Defense and Security Council (Consejo Nacional de Defensa y Seguridad) and direct the work of special investigative units under its control, the DNII soon became the foundation stone of an overarching framework for state intelligence gathering.

Changes in the HNP appeared to accelerate with the appointment of the new security officials. In mid-2015, the Security Ministry presented Honduran civil society organizations with the draft of a new strategic plan for 2015–22 encompassing the whole of the ministry, including the HNP. The plan promised to:

- Improve citizen confidence through an effective reform of the police;
- Implement a model of crime and social violence prevention based on a community police focus;
- Reduce impunity via effective intelligence and criminal investigation;
- police–community Foment citizen co-responsibility through interinstitutional coordination and with other key actors; and
- Institutionalize accountability, respect for human rights and gender equality in the institutional culture.⁷²

On its face, this list of innovations suggests that new, intelligence-oriented security officials had accepted the need for some reforms in the HNP.⁷³ In a key departure, the changes appeared to make the establishment of community link-

ages, central to preventing violent crime and reestablishing trust in the police, on an equal footing with traditional core concerns about intelligence gathering and solving crimes.

The single most important thrust in the strategic plan is arguably the notion that community policing could become something more than an eternal pilot program managed by a marginal division of the police force, as had occurred for many years. In fact, in early 2015 Pacheco charged Gerzon Velásquez, brought over from the DNII, with creating a blueprint for a new model of community policing in Honduras. Velásquez proceeded to assemble a team of six police officials to devise a locally adapted variant of this policing strategy, which came to be called the “Modelo Catracho” (see below for more on this), and was unveiled in early 2016.⁷⁴

These departures appeared to signal that piecemeal changes introduced earlier in the HNP had been systematized and shaped into a new concept and operating plan. In particular, the designers of the “Modelo Catracho” seem to have grasped the potential for community police to contribute to intelligence gathering on the ground, helping the HNP overcome its isolation from the citizenry. As the minister succinctly put it to the author, “It furnishes us with street level information.”⁷⁵ By significantly reducing homicide rates, pilot experiments being run in San Pedro Sula were also beginning to alter the skeptical outlook of senior officials in the force about the ability of community policing to produce results.

Whatever may have been the government’s motivation for adopting community policing as a national-level strategy, its importance should be emphasized, as it logically implied a rejection of prior *mano dura* approaches in the HNP’s core preventive division, even as they lived on in other components of the Hernández security structure.

Other Initiatives

In addition, the new minister deepened the purge begun by his predecessor in the criminal investigations branch, closing the National Directorate of Criminal Investigation (Dirección Nacional de Investigación Criminal) altogether for four months until a new body, the Department of Police

Investigation (Departamento Policial de Investigaciones) emerged in September 2015.⁷⁶ In this housecleaning, roughly 90 percent of the division was removed, leaving about 200 personnel.⁷⁷ The new investigation force was staffed largely with recruits from the ITP, the body responsible for schooling entry-level police cadets. By signaling a recognition that a key branch of the HNP needed to be rebuilt from scratch, the depth of this purge dramatized the parlous state of the whole institution.

By November 2015, the Security Ministry had also introduced a reform of the National Police Organic Law, the fifth since 1998, into Congress.⁷⁸ The draft proposed doing away with the DIECP, replacing it with a Police Investigation and Certification Department (División de Investigación y Certificación Policial) located within the HNP. The draft strengthened the powers of the HNP’s director-general, and created new police divisions for special forces, antinarcotics, information systems, and security details for government officials and diplomats. By this time, the Security Ministry was also planning for a major buildup of the HNP; the Hernández government’s “Strategic Plan of Government 2014” foresaw 2,500 new recruits entering the police force every year through 2017.⁷⁹ The new target ultimately established for 2022 was an increase to 26,000, which would raise the police-to-population ratio to the internationally recommended standard of 1:300.

The Commission’s Role in the Transformation

The commission’s thinking about its role in the process of transforming the police did not spring from a preconceived plan but developed over time as its members became aware of the full extent and nature of police corruption through the very process of conducting the purge. According to a commission source, it was about six months into the 2016 purge before the commissioners sat down for a comprehensive discussion of what more they wanted to do. By November 2016, however, the commission had formulated a long list of goals for itself and a successor (see box 4).

Box 4. The Special Commission's Initial Reform Goals

- Reform of the HNP organic and career laws.
- Selection of a new police leadership (“champions”)
- Professionalization of the HNP's upper management structures (personnel, logistics, finance, legal department).
- Creation of the Division for Police Disciplinary Affairs (Dirección de Asuntos Disciplinarios Policiales, or DIDADPOL) to vet police personnel and investigate allegations of police wrongdoing. Disbandment of the DIECP.
- International certification of the curriculum introduced earlier into the ITP, and the subsequent development of a similar curriculum for the officer training academy, the National Police Academy (Academia Nacional de Policía or ANAPO). All training would embody a new police culture that emphasized the idea of serving society and respecting human rights.
- Retraining and certification of existing patrol officers to instill these principles.
- Specialized training in criminal investigation.
- Dignifying police work by improving working conditions and properly equipping the force.
- International certification of all police personnel.
- Creation of a follow-up Civil Society Commission to oversee the implementation of a five-year plan.¹²²

“The commission’s thinking about its role in the process of transforming the police developed over time as its members became aware of the full extent and nature of police corruption through the very process of conducting the purge.”

Though they may not have emanated from a clear initial vision, the proximate goals listed in Box 4 would appear to embody four ultimate objectives. One was to control the resurgence of corruption and criminal penetration of the force by introducing the continuous evaluation of personnel and mechanisms for investigating allegations of improper

behavior. Another was to professionalize the force to make it more effective by creating rational and efficient structures for its operation, updating its personnel technologically, and instituting a professional police career track in which promotion would be based on merit and merit evaluated by results. The changes would also foment an ethic of public service and respect for human rights in police personnel. Last but not least, the transformation would establish ongoing citizen oversight of the police to follow up on the work of the Special Commission itself.

Not all the commission’s initial goals have been met to date, and a full assessment of the progress toward their underlying objectives would be premature at this point. But the ensuing discussion highlights key areas of police reform in which the commission has attempted to make a

contribution, providing a brief account of the changes that have been implemented in recent years as the result of influences from multiple actors involved in reforming the HNP. This discussion serves to put the commission's work in perspective and broach the topic of the sustainability of the reform efforts made to date.

Reforming Police Laws and Structures

As mentioned above, one of the first acts of the Special Commission was to approve a new organizational chart for the HNP to serve as the basis for the administrative restructuring of its personnel. The chart had far-reaching implications, and reflected the commissioners' growing understanding of how the previous structure had opened the way for corruption and criminal infiltration of the police. The commission was not the first to look upon the Honduran police as an "archipelago" of disconnected islands—in principle, the Balkanized character of the police structure created in the 1990s and the lack of effective central control over its divisions were well understood. But the commission's purge laid bare the full extent and ramifications of these problems.

The archipelago problem was illustrated by the HNP's human resources division, which supposedly centralized personnel files. In reality, many police division heads ran their own recruiting operations and kept their own files, which posed a major headache for attempts to clean out corruption. This errant organization turned divisions into fiefdoms whose heads exercised widespread discretionary authority to hire, fire, and discipline their subordinates at their whim or personal convenience. In a bizarre consequence of this "despecialization," a police officer could be sanctioned for an offense in one division, then be transferred to another with his record wiped clean of any stain.

The potential for corruption and abuse inherent in this system was obvious, and its effects had been glaring for years. To combat it, the Special Commission helped to design a rational-bureaucratic structure for the HNP, in which operative divisions shorn of their former discretionary prerogatives would be supported by effectively centralized divisions for human resources, finance, legal affairs, and so on.⁸⁰

To make such a structure more effective and responsive to higher authority, the commissioners also pushed the idea of unifying legislation so as to create a single organic law encompassing both the police and the Security Ministry.⁸¹

However, a more rational plan of organization would have to be complemented by a revamping of the weak structures for evaluating and disciplining police personnel created by the reforms of 2012 (the aforementioned DIECP), and by a new police career law in which personnel were promoted by merit based in significant measure on their performance, and removed from the force after failing to ascend up the career ladder.

The Commission Goes to Congress

As noted, the Honduran legislature was beginning to discuss a reform of the National Police organic law submitted in the late months of 2015. By the time Congress had a readout ready in late March 2016, the law had expanded to encompass the Security Ministry and the HNP under its purview. The text also split the DIECP in two, with one body assigned to conduct vetting trials of personnel and a separate body to investigate police misbehavior. While vetting checks would be entrusted to a special superintendent, a new entity called the Division for Police Disciplinary Affairs (Dirección de Asuntos Disciplinarios Policiales, or DIDAD-POL) would investigate reports of serious misconduct.⁸²

These antecedents prompted one of the commission's first initiatives to broaden its mandate. On August 18, 2016, the commissioners met with the heads of Congress and leaders of the political party benches to request that action on the organic and career laws for the police be suspended until the commission had a chance to thoroughly review them.⁸³ They feared that without supervision, Congress would pass more limp police legislation that would leave structural problems untouched (pressures from purged officers on the deputies to leave things lie were already in evidence). With President Hernández exercising behind-the-scenes influence over his National Party legislators, the Security Committee of Congress quickly acceded to the request.

The Special Commission would eventually play a key role in lobbying Congress to approve the final drafts of the two laws. According to informed sources, passage was not a foregone conclusion, given that the ruling National Party enjoyed only a minority of 48 of 128 legislative seats and a perception existed that President Hernández was reluctant to spend political capital in an election year by pushing for their approval. But when the joint organic law was finally approved on May 31, 2017, lawmakers voted for the legislation unanimously, which in the Honduran Congress is an unusual event.

Discussing the Laws: Key Issues

Once the legal drafts had left the hall of Congress, their final content became the subject of tussles between and among the minister for security, the other commissioners, and officials of the HNP, with additional roles played, at times, by the leaders of Congress and president Hernández. Although a comprehensive account of these discussions is beyond the scope of this report, major issues appeared to revolve around ministerial control over the police force, control over disciplinary structures, and aspects of the proposed career regulations.

According to several sources, the police leadership resisted the loss of its prerogatives implied by the new structures and attempted to push its own version of a police organic law (in one account, even attempting briefly and unsuccessfully to go around the commission and lobby Congress directly). For his part, Security Minister Pacheco may have sought to play the commission and the police off against one another to maximize his own leverage over the outcome of the bargaining and safeguard his quotas of power in the institutional arrangements that would ultimately emerge from the reform.

Ministerial versus police authority. One issue at stake was the balance of powers between the ministry and the HNP, an issue on which the other commission members accepted Julián Pacheco's desire to keep a tight reign over the HNP as a matter of political necessity. As the whole commission desired, the Organic Law of the Security Secretar-

iat and National Police of Honduras approved by Congress unifies the two entities under one law. At the same time, it establishes very strong civilian (i.e., ministerial) control. The security secretary has the power to freely name and dismiss the HNP inspector-general as well as all heads of divisions, and supervises the execution of the budget. By contrast, the police director-general merely recommends to the minister choices for his principal subordinates, and directly appoints mainly entry-level personnel (*escala básica*). In the same vein, the security minister recommends promotions for most of the officer corps to the president, while the chief of police has promotion power only over the lower ranks.

Disciplining the force. A related issue about which differences cropped up was the new structure for control and supervision of the police force, which was considered vital to ensure continuity in the results of the purge. From the outset, one of the Special Commission's main concerns was to oversee the creation of a transparent and independent entity to exercise control over police misconduct.

A reform in 2012 had conferred this function on the DIECP, which was charged both with doing vetting trials of police personnel and with investigating their infractions of the rules. However, the DIECP did the former work badly and the latter not at all. By September 2015, it became apparent that the Security Ministry was attempting to absorb the body back into the police structure, a pretension that drew fire from Honduras's ombudsman and human rights organizations as a step backward, as the HNP would once again be evaluating itself.⁸⁴ By August 2016, the Security Commission of Congress appears to have accepted the idea of creating a new body to investigate police misconduct but was still contemplated keeping the DIECP to do vetting trials. By contrast, after lengthy internal discussion, the commission recommended putting the DIECP to rest once and for all.

In subsequent discussions, both with lawmakers and within the executive branch, civil society commission members concentrated their efforts on assuring that the new body (the DIDADPOL), wherever it was situated, would enjoy functional and administrative independence. By contrast, Minister Julián Pacheco insisted on maintaining the body un-

der his full control, and the other commissioners had to lobby Congress's Security Committee to get their vision accepted.

This interplay seems to have resulted in a compromise. The joint organic law approved in May 2017 defines the entity as a decentralized agency (*dependencia desconcentrada*) of the Security Ministry, enjoying "technical, operative, administrative, and financial autonomy" to investigate the most serious infractions of the law committed by members of the police. The law enjoins all police and military authorities to collaborate with DIDADPOL when asked, and gives the body power to conduct vetting procedures on police personnel accused of serious offenses (*faltas graves*).⁸⁵ On paper, this conception turns DIDADPOL into a powerful organ for the control of police misbehavior, acting either *de oficio* or on the basis of denunciations.

Since this legislative debate, the Special Commission has played a key role in establishing DIDADPOL. It presided over the examination and vetting of candidates for director of the entity, a task that began in early 2018.⁸⁶ The process went very slowly, culminating in July with the choice of a lawyer, Allan Argeñal, who was also a judge from Danli, but only after other commissioners pressed the ministry and the president to decide on a nominee. DIDADPOL was reportedly soon up and running in some fashion, and by early 2019 it had received 1,266 denunciations of police misconduct, most of them remitted by the Special Commission.⁸⁷

Defining the police career. As mentioned above, together with the joint organic law, the Honduran Congress was by mid-2016 considering a new police career law (*Ley de Carrera Policial*). According to one of its members, the commission recommended significant changes to the proposed law. One such proposal was to incorporate elements previously found in the HNP's regulatory framework into the police career law and thus elevate its legal importance. (In the case of the joint organic law, the commission had proposed the opposite.) In synchrony with the importance it accorded to DIDADPOL, many of its recommendations focused on infractions and disciplinary details in an effort to make sanctions more rigorous.

Other important and controversial emphases had to do with promotion and permanence in the force. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on seniority, commissioners pressed for assignment and promotion to be based principally on merit, with merit defined as a combination of performance, knowledge, and discipline. Security Minister Pacheco also insisted in including the principle that police officers who failed to ascend to higher rank after two opportunities to do so would need to leave the police force (existing regulations included this principle, but it was not enforced). This generated significant controversy, given that it clashed with the institution's traditions, following which ranking police officials normally expected to stay on the force and retire with a pension after 25 years of service.

In addition to the Special Commission, the MACCIH also made significant suggestions for reform of the police career, in particular by strengthening the rights of police personnel.⁸⁸ Although Congress rejected the idea of defining members of the police career as public functionaries of the Honduran state, it accepted many of the mission's practical suggestions concerning transparency in the management of the HNP personnel register. The law now lists the kinds of information to be contained therein, guarantees police officers' access to the files, and imposes on higher-ups the duty to immediately report any changes to those affected and establish procedures for challenging adverse annotations.⁸⁹

The definition of police service. The Organization of American States' anticorruption mission also appears to have persuaded the Honduran Congress to write a socially advanced definition of police service into the career law approved in August 2017. The joint organic law, passed some months earlier, provided a limited conceptual basis for community policing, defining police service as "preventive, deterrent and control-oriented, communitarian in philosophy, and integrated into processes of citizen participation."⁹⁰ Through such service, police officers are supposed to provide the aid that the community demands and collaborate in solving social conflicts, all the while maintaining security and public order. Although this definition incorporates basic aims of community policing, the accent in the organic

law is on establishing trust and community links as additional ways to prevent, deter, and combat crime.

By contrast, the vision recommended by the MAC-CIH—and now enshrined in law as well—defines police service as directly “communitarian” and insists more vigorously both on the need for police–community interaction “when-ever possible” and for social control of police conduct by the “organized community.”⁹¹ In this conception, the objectives of community policing go beyond its potential contributions to crime control and the maintenance of public order to establish, at least in principle, a social-auditing role for the citizenry; this role would encourage better police practices, curbing abuses of power, the excessive use of force, and other traditional ills of Honduran barrio policing.

As a result of lobbying from two sources at different points in time, Honduran laws now contain precepts regarding police–community relations that, though not directly contradictory, are not entirely compatible either. Whether the differences will have any practical importance remains to be seen, however.

Police Education and Training

The conception of police service is crucially relevant in the training of police recruits and the retraining of officers already on the force, areas where the Special Commission aimed to make contributions. At the outset, the commission’s core idea was to help instill in the HNP a new police culture of service to society and respect for human rights, and raise police education and training to internationally certified standards.

In their initial formulation of goals, the commissioners ambitiously envisioned a retraining program for current patrol officers in the new ethos, along with a revision/upgrading of the existing curriculum for entry-level personnel. These objectives proved to be beyond reach, however, and at the end of its first year the commission spoke more realistically of guaranteeing changes that had already been under way in the education of new recruits and using them as a basis for restructuring the schooling of the officer corps as well.

As noted above, reform of the Technical Police Insti-

tute began in 2014 with assistance from the IDB and the official Swiss development agency (Cosude). The ITP’s revamping took inputs from the 2012 CRSP discussions, which produced many suggestions for how to reform the training of police personnel.⁹² Basic aims of this reform have been to make entrance requirements stricter, improve the quality of teaching personnel, and overhaul the curriculum. A new \$20 million facility was built in the Department of La Paz to allow for the technical upgrading of police recruit training and to cope with the expected force expansion to 26,000. According to a commission member, the commission focused its efforts on verifying that the objectives of this reform were being met.

“Basic aims of police education reform have been to make entrance requirements stricter, improve the quality of teaching personnel, and overhaul the curriculum.”

As a result of ITP reform, aspirants to be police officers, who could once enter the force with a grade school education (or less), must now have finished secondary school (11 grades) and completed a vetting process before being accepted. This meant that newly trained, entry-level officers would no longer hail from the most disadvantaged sectors of society but mostly from the ranks of the lower middle class.⁹³ A total of 26 percent of ITP graduates are also women, compared with less than 1 percent initially. In a similar vein, the institution’s instructors are no longer police officials paid by the hour and assigned to teaching duties by their superiors as punishment; all are permanent personnel, and 60 percent are now civilians.

A traditional 3-month basic policing course has moreover expanded to an 11-month program, with four weeks of practical policing experience at the close. The program is ostensibly designed to integrate instruction in criminal law and basic policing skills with human rights and community security as cross-cutting themes. Consonant with the official model (the “Modelo Catracho”), all ITP students have taken coursework in police–community relations and receive a di-

ploma in community policing when they graduate, although their training in practical community-policing skills is limited.

Although informed sources say ITP graduates value the instruction in police–community relations, the principal criticism of the ITP model is that it is too academic and does not provide recruits with hands-on experience. In the graphic words of a USAID official, ITP students are given class time in human rights but no guidance about “how to mace and tase.” Given the depletion in numbers caused by the purge and the needs created by force expansion, the ITP has also come under pressure to deploy new recruits before they are ready, which limits or eliminates practice training sessions. Recent graduates decry the absence of mentors to whom they can repair for help in solving problems for which their training has not prepared them.⁹⁴

The current head of HNP police education asserts that his division is organizing itself to introduce this mentoring. Meanwhile, the division has plans under way to introduce similar reforms in the National Police Academy (Academia Nacional de Policía or ANAPO, the officer training school), financed by a new IDB loan approved in May 2018.⁹⁵ The coming overhaul of the academy will stiffen entrance requirements, because students will already be university graduates and will exit their two years of schooling (compared with the traditional four) with master’s degrees in police administration.

Community Policing

Community policing is an area of police reform in which the Special Commission has not played an assertive role. This did not reflect disinterest, but rather a perception that the issue was one on which a degree of societal consensus had been reached (the government had already accepted it in the 2016 “Modelo Catracho”), and was in some fashion making progress. However, it was concerned that the joint organic law embody basic objectives of community policing, as exemplified in the above-noted precepts and in the functions specified for the HNP leadership. Apropos of the latter, Article 47:7 of this law enjoins the police director-general to “promote the strengthening of citizen confidence” based

not only on results but also on “a community philosophy and respect without restriction for human rights.”

Perhaps unnoticed at the time, the commitment of the 2012 reformers to community-policing ideals carried over, influencing, one source alleges, both the curricular reform of the ITP and the development of homegrown thinking about the subject.⁹⁶ The “National Model of Community Police Service” (Modelo Nacional de Servicio de Policía Comunitaria, also known as the “Modelo Catracho”), sketched a version of preventive policing in which officers would interact with citizens and community organizations to analyze and seek solutions to the problems that exacerbated local crime and violence. In this vision, beat patrol officers would be accessible, proactive, and ethical; would express solidarity with and be respectful of human rights—and would also be competent in all the skills necessary to perform a new and unaccustomed role.⁹⁷

Furthermore, the authors of the “Modelo Catracho” insisted on implementing the model at all levels and in all units of the police structure. In effect, what the HNP now calls its Division for Community and Interinstitutional Affairs (Dirección de Asuntos Interinstitucionales y Comunitarios) has in recent years put the bulk of the preventive police as well as personnel in other divisions through short courses designed to impart the ethos and basic principles of community policing. This has reportedly created resistance in some divisions whose personnel, by the nature of their work, do not interact intensively with the public (e.g., the Department of Police Investigation’s criminal investigators) and who do not see themselves as “communitarian.”

Community Policing in Practice

However, the HNP’s community police division does not engage in the practical training of officers in daily community-policing skills. This task has fallen to foreign trainers, especially a small team from the US State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), which began operating in the San Pedro Sula barrios of Chamelecón, Rivera Hernández, and Ciudad Satélite in 2014. The INL pilot programs followed a “place-based

strategy” designed to help produce a reduction in the staggering homicide rates plaguing these areas, then among the most violent in Honduras.⁹⁸ The training started to put police officers, who generally spent their days in posts, through the paces of doing foot patrols, engaging with barrio residents and leaders, and analyzing and reporting the results.

The programs seemed to have startling effects, as homicides fell between 64 percent and 85 percent in the three areas over the period 2014–17.⁹⁹ One of the changes most important to generating these results was to overhaul the traditional deployment schedule of patrol officers, replacing 24- or 36-hour shifts with rational 8-hour workdays. This utterly simple change allowed the police to cover local hotspots more effectively and uniformly, reducing opportunities to commit crimes. Over the same period, community police training engendered slow changes in attitudes toward the police among residents, many of who were very reluctant at first even to speak with a police officer.

In these and other areas, the INL has usually worked hand-in-hand with USAID programs aimed at winning back local democratic spaces from *maras*.¹⁰⁰ While INL trained officers in how to act, USAID’s Convive program fostered increasingly regular meetings between beat patrolmen and community organization (churches, *patronatos*, etc.) to analyze problems; it also structured opportunities for the police to provide services to the communities, thus gaining popular approval, and on occasion it even built new police posts. USAID claims that altogether these endeavors have gradually engendered “co-responsibility,” that is, the sense, shared by both sides, that police personnel are responsible to community residents.

However, in addition to reestablishing public trust and institutional legitimacy, the slow expansion of community policing in recent years undoubtedly reflects its usefulness to the police intelligence branch, and to the intelligence-centric security model of the Hernández government. According to an informed source, the Police Intelligence Division (DIPOL, Dirección de Inteligencia Policial) has officers embedded in preventive police units, and information from field interviews done by community police officers is fed into a DIPOL da-

tabase. As several interviewees stressed, these linkages are advantageous in fighting crime and controlling the activity of street gangs. But they also harbor the potential for controlling Hondurans’ legitimate political behavior.

Interviewees also expressed praise for the results of the INL’s efforts, but questioned whether they had gone beyond the pilot project stage or were sustainable over time. Adding to this doubt, a 2017 Security Ministry survey found that only 5 percent of community residents knew their local patrol officers’ names.¹⁰¹ In a rejoinder, an INL official insisted that the community police training introduced in San Pedro has been extended since 2015 to most of the metropolitan police units in Tegucigalpa and to departmental units in La Ceiba and other cities;¹⁰² if people do not know their local policeman, it is due to the limited number of patrolmen and rapid personnel rotation, a practice that often limits beat assignments to less than the minimum desirable period of two years.

Due to the lack of data, it is impossible to accurately gauge the impact of community policing, or indeed of all the changes introduced in the HNP in recent years, on citizens’ attitudes. But distrust in the police has dropped somewhat.¹⁰³ Even before the purge conducted by the Special Commission, the Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University discovered in its 2014 survey that overall confidence in the HNP had recovered to 46.8 percent (from 26.8 percent in 2012), and that 52 percent of its respondents expressed satisfaction with the performance of police personnel in their barrios. The above-mentioned study for the Security Ministry, done in 2017, found the same level of overall confidence in the force, but with a larger proportion (74.7 percent) rating the work of the police positively.¹⁰⁴

The New Police Leadership

After seeing the purge process through to the end and assuring its quality, the Special Commission’s second most cherished goal has arguably been to guide the process of choosing a new leadership for the HNP from among the officers who survived the cleanup. As in other areas, the commissioners and their advisers began this process with

ambitious ideas about an ideal leadership selection process and eventually had to scale them down. They compiled an elaborate list of steps for rigorously vetting and evaluating candidates, to whom they referred as “champions”; after these tasks were finished, the commission would offer its recommendations as to who should occupy the key posts. However, the commissioners also envisioned a subsequent period of leadership development, during which those selected would be assisted over a two-year period by expert international advisers referred to as “coaches.”

This approach to leadership selection reflected the commission’s concern that high-quality leadership was vital to the overall success of police reform and transformation. In addition, it recognized that the severity of the purge the body had overseen posed special problems. The purge left behind a much-reduced cohort of high-ranking officers, providing a relatively small and inexperienced talent pool from which to choose a new team of leaders. As noted above, only 16 of 47 HNP commissioners survived the purge (only 8 were left two years later). By April 2018, the number of commissioners had climbed back up to 32, but many of these had recently been promoted from the rank of subcommissioner.

“The purge left behind a much-reduced cohort of high-ranking officers, providing a relatively small and inexperienced talent pool from which to choose a new team of leaders.”

When the time drew nigh for choosing a slate of names to be presented to President Hernández for consideration, a significant difference of opinion had emerged within the commission. Several of its members favored seizing the moment to make a clean break with the past by appointing a new generation of relatively young and inexperienced officers, while figures from older police academy graduating classes would be retired. Opposing this idea, Security Minister Pacheco advocated selecting a “transitional” leader-

ship, in which a number of more experienced officers would continue to serve in top posts while the new generation readied itself to take over the reins.

The minister’s reasoning was that if a younger cohort was placed in positions of power immediately and failed to live up to the commission’s expectations for its performance, the institution would be hard put to find suitable replacements farther down the hierarchy. According to several commission members, Pacheco got his way in this matter by persuading his colleagues of the cogency of this argument. But although the commission agreed on general principles, it failed to reach a consensus on the slate of four names to be submitted to the president, three of whom would be chosen as the HNP’s new high command. As a result, in a quiet display of displeasure, several commissioners did not attend the swearing-in ceremony for the new police leaders.

The New Group

President Hernández announced his decision about the top three posts in early January 2018. José David Aguilar Morán took up the post of HNP director-general, while Orbin Galo Maldonado became subdirector and Orlin Cerrato Cruz occupied the post of inspector-general, after which Security Secretary Pacheco appointed the rest of the new police leaders to their posts as division heads.

Several things are noteworthy about this whole group. The upper HNP leadership turned over almost in its entirety. Of 17 people appointed to occupy the principal roles in the new police structure, only 3 had been in similar positions when the purge began in 2016. This generated a glaring lack of correspondence between jobs and ranks. The great majority (14) of the new division chiefs were only subcommissioners at the time the officer corps was purged. Half of these have since been promoted to the rank of commissioner or above, while the others hold their positions despite not having ascended in rank. Those who have advanced to commissioner rank tend to occupy support roles in the HNP structure, while subcommissioners predominate in the operational divisions.

“In early 2018, the upper HNP leadership turned over almost in its entirety.”

According to informed opinion, the new officers occupying the top 17 posts are, moreover, much more qualified intellectually and technically to do their jobs than were their predecessors, and represent a generational break in this respect; many have advanced degrees and have studied abroad.¹⁰⁵ In addition, there is some concentration among new leaders in the 14th graduating class (usually referred to as a “promotion”), which exited from the National Police Academy (ANAPO) in 1990. This promotion has a recognized leader in Subcommissioner Gerzon Velásquez, who is credited with being the intellectual coordinator both of the Security Ministry’s 2015 Strategic Framework and of the “Modelo Catracho.”

In late 2017, speculation held that Velásquez would become the HNP’s new director-general if the “clean sweep” option prevailed. Velásquez had a problem, however; having made his entire career in intelligence, he had not moved up the HNP career ladder in the normal fashion, and thus he lacked direct policing experience such as would derive from overseeing a major operational division of the force. When the transitional team took over, he was appointed to head the transit police.

Two interpretations of this assignment soon surfaced. One saw minister Julián Pacheco pushing his erstwhile comrade aside to assure his continued control of the HNP, while the other argued that Velásquez had been placed in command of an important division in which he would be groomed to move up later. However, the public image of the transit police remains poor, and the post is considered one in which it is difficult to make one’s mark.

The AP Report

In the wake of the appointments, the Associated Press (AP) published a report on January 26, 2018, alleging that all three of the HNP’s new leaders had participated in meetings in 2013 in which a major drug trafficker hand-

ed out money to police officers to protect cocaine shipments along Honduras’s north coast.¹⁰⁶ The report singled out the head of police intelligence at the time, José David Aguilar Morán, who supposedly intervened to protect a 1,700-pound shipment when a lower-ranking official not involved in the plot impounded the drugs. The AP based its story on a 2014 report from the HNP’s inspector general and a missing page from Aguilar’s personnel file, which it said confirmed its allegations.

The AP’s reporting concerning the HNP’s new leaders is the most important piece of evidence suggesting that something had gone badly wrong in the Special Commission’s purge of the police. The Hernández government immediately disputed the veracity of this reporting, claiming that the inspector-general’s file cited by AP was a fake and demanded that the agency make its documents public. The AP declined to do so, citing security reasons, and later vigorously objected to attempts by a lawyer for the three police chiefs to obtain the records of telephone calls between another official who apparently was a source for the story and one of its journalists. The AP regarded this attempt as intimidation and interference with freedom of the press.¹⁰⁷

For its part, the Special Commission issued a communiqué promising a complete investigation of the allegations, including a reevaluation of the three commissioners-general.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, it said it had ascertained that the number on the inspector-general’s report, on which the AP had based the bulk of its findings, did not correspond to an investigation into drug trafficking but rather was a request for payment of travel expenses. The commission has since consistently maintained that the documentation used by the AP in its report was forged, but has not issued a public report on any internal investigation it may have conducted.

Since January 2018, there have been no new revelations in the case; nor have any similar allegations surfaced about anyone else. Conversations with interlocutors nevertheless suggest that the Special Commission’s failure to follow through on this matter has left lingering doubts about the case, leaving a mark on the commission’s reputation.

4 | THE SPECIAL COMMISSION AND THE SUSTAINABILITY OF HNP REFORM

The changes introduced in the HNP since 2014, and especially since 2016, represent the farthest-reaching effort at reform since the separation of the force from military tutelage in the mid-1990s. Though its quality remains to be fully assessed and tested, a substantial purge has rid the HNP of corrupt and criminal elements, opening the door to professionalization and a new relationship between the police and society. To one or another degree, the transformation accompanying the purge has affected the HNP's leadership, organizational structures, career patterns, education and training, and policing practices at the ground level—that is, it has subjected the force to a dense package of changes in a short span of time.

“The changes introduced in the HNP since 2014, and especially since 2016, represent the farthest-reaching effort at reform since the separation of the force from military tutelage in the mid-1990s.”

In historical perspective, these changes demonstrate how profound the crisis in public security and in the corruption-induced disintegration of the HNP had become by the time of the reform discussions in 2012. Though that interlude was unsuccessful, at least some people in positions of power, others in civil society organizations, and international actors who supported both with money had begun to recognize the need to reorganize the HNP and to reconnect it with the citizenry to recover both effectiveness and legitimacy.

Fear of the political fallout from an all-out purge of the HNP was nevertheless a factor inhibiting political and governmental actors from undertaking deeper institutional reform. The “militarization” of public security under Hernández, with military and intelligence officers placed in many strategic state positions, may ironically have helped reduce

that fear over time, paving the way for the HNP's cleansing and reform while other parts of the larger police model were left to continue their work. Even so, audacity and tenacious prodding by members of the Special Commission were required for a serious purge of the HNP to actually be put into effect.

Since the Special Commission's advent, reform of the police institution has accelerated. The commission has, however, been only one among several influential actors responsible for the recent changes. In addition to pushing for a deeper purge, it appears to have acted as an integrative force, exercising its influence and lobbying to keep diverse reform efforts on track and moving in some sort of unified fashion toward the four underlying objectives discussed above. Perhaps more important than any single specific contribution, the commission can claim credit for giving shape to the overall police reform effort, a shape derived from a coherent underlying vision of the problems that needed to be solved.

Reform of the HNP has been going on for six years now, a not inconsiderable stretch of time and enough to pose the question of whether it will prove to be sustainable over time, or founder, as have many other police reform efforts.

The Reform's Sustainability: A Comparative View

The HNP's reform since 2016 has included an unusual confluence of factors—radical cleansing and significant changes to laws and structures have taken place against the backdrop of a large-scale force expansion and amid the ongoing evolution of a broader security system/model that distributes police functions in multiple agencies of the executive and judicial branches of state. As national-level police reforms go, this one does not appear to have any close parallel in Latin America in recent decades, making judgments about its sustainability unusually tentative.

Police reform efforts in Latin America have *normally* run aground, however, and comparative experience sheds light on how long-lived the current Honduran reform is likely to be.¹⁰⁹ Seen through this comparative lens, reform in Honduras would seem to have some bases on which to accomplish the consolidation of a decriminalized and professional police force. However, there are numerous impediments to progress: resource limitations, internal resistance in the HNP itself, and contradictions created by the larger security framework. Dangers also lurk, including political and policy shifts, the use of the reformed HNP for political purposes, and re-penetration of the force by criminal elements. In view of all these problems, the prognosis for consolidation of the current reform must be regarded as uncertain—the usual case with police reform in the region.

This report does not pretend to advance a systematic analysis of sustainability with regard to HNP reform, but offers a series of observations, drawn from its fieldwork, concerning factors that will impinge on chances for the re-

form to be consolidated. With respect to each of these, there is reason to hope that reform progress will continue, and reason to suspect that it will founder.

Political and Policy Continuity

A frequent pattern in Latin America is for leaders committed to police and citizen security reform to reverse course after a crime spike or dramatic violent event creates public antagonism or panic. By contrast, overall security policy in Honduras has enjoyed stability under Juan Orlando Hernández, albeit the stability of a semimilitary, intelligence-led approach. If national statistics are accurate, this approach has engendered a sustained reduction in homicide levels and perhaps of other crimes (see table 2).¹¹⁰ It has thus taken political pressure off President Hernández and brought him political gains. Judging from the conflict-ridden 2017 election, these gains have not been great enough, however, to offset popular resistance to his reelection bid or stifle criticism of widespread corruption.

Table 2. Number of Homicides and Rate in Honduras, 2005–17

YEAR	NUMBER, SEPOL	NUMBER, UNAH OBSERVATORY	RATE PER 100,000 (OBSERVATORY)	UNDETERMINED (OBSERVATORY)
2005		2,417	30.7	589
2007		3,282	49.9	359
2009		5,265	66.8	446
2011	7,104	7,104	86.5	730
2012	7,172	7,172	85.5	1,082
2013	6,431	6,787	71.5	713
2014	5,891	5,936	68.1	542
2015	5,148	5,148	60.0	643
2016	5,150	5,150	59.1	725
2017	3,864	3,864	43.6	598

Note: The Violence Observatory (Observatorio de la Violencia, OV-UNAH) at the National University of Honduras (UNAH, Universidad Nacional de Honduras), a semiofficial source of homicide statistics, has worked since 2005 to resolve discrepancies between Honduran state institutions with respect to the number of homicides committed each year. Results are published in annual bulletins, available at <https://iudpas.unah.edu.hn/observatorio-de-la-violencia/boletines-del-observatorio-2/boletines-nacionales/>. In addition to identifiable homicides, the UNAH Observatory publishes figures on other violent deaths the exact nature of which is undetermined. One of the UNAH Observatory's data sources is the Sistema Estadístico Policial (SEPOL), whose figures can be found at <https://www.sepol.hn>. Though the UNAH Observatory has not yet published data for 2018, SEPOL claims that homicides fell by 4.7 percent.

Continuity in the overarching model has arguably favored reform of the HNP. The security system in gestation since 2012 has created a framework in which the HNP constitutes one component of a larger national-level police model, sharing roles with the military police, the intelligence branch, and the Public Ministry. A peculiarity of this model has been to locate many of the government's defense functions away from the HNP, lodging them in the above-mentioned entities. It can be argued that this arrangement has created space for the body to be reformed, professionalized, and even "communitized" without subjecting the president to unacceptable levels of political risk.

“The security system in gestation since 2012 has created a framework in which the HNP constitutes one component of a larger national-level police model, sharing roles with the military police, the intelligence branch, and the Public Ministry.”

Judging from recent experience, the Hernández government appears to be conscious of the need to avoid involving the reformed HNP too heavily in actions that would compromise its quest for re-legitimation. It thus called upon the military police to bear the brunt of controlling the violent protests that erupted in December 2017 in the wake of the president's questioned reelection. Although HNP officers played secondary roles in controlling the demonstrators, United Nations human rights investigators found that HNP personnel were responsible for only 1 of 23 fatalities recorded in this episode.¹¹¹ More generally, the government seems to be trying to limit the use of the HNP for repressive purposes in urban areas.¹¹² However, it is still often involved in quelling land occupations and protests against extractive industrial development in the countryside.¹¹³

However, the political position of President Hernández within his own government and party has weakened for other reasons since the 2017 election, calling into

question whether this stable framework for and progress of HNP reform will continue beyond the end of his current term in 2021. Salvador Nasralla, the opposition candidate in the disputed 2017 election, received some support from purged HNP officers, and he originally toyed with, but later publicly abandoned, the idea of reinstating them in the force. The stance that Mel Zelaya and his Libre Party will take toward police reform if they recover power is uncertain, but there is fear that skeptics about the current reform efforts could be appointed to positions in the security apparatus.

In that event, the progress of current reform efforts could be derailed. An especially ironic scenario could develop if a reformist government committed to a new "demilitarization" of public security came to power and proceeded to dismantle the Military Public Order Police and the state intelligence system devised under President Hernández. Such a change in the overall police model would force the HNP to assume greater responsibility for politically sensitive policing tasks, the clumsy handling of which could lead to a new cycle of delegitimation and loss of public confidence.

The Leadership's Commitment to Reform

By throwing out the bulk of the preexisting hierarchy, the Special Commission purge has opened the way for a cohort of younger, less experienced but more qualified officers to occupy the majority of the top posts in the HNP. By the time of the next leadership turnover, in early 2021 if not sooner, the generational ascent will be complete, and one of the current division commanders will in all probability become the HNP's director-general.

In the meantime, the security minister and the current police leaders will need to maintain the progress of the reform process in the midst of a complicated political and security environment, or take responsibility for its failure. Their performance will be a test of whether the cleansing of the ranks of the HNP has been successful, and whether institutional change has been sufficient to promote greater police effectiveness and keep inevitable tendencies toward corruption in check. Good performance will require proac-

tive leadership on all the fronts highlighted here.

One crucial area will be the implementation of the new, merit-based career system. On paper, a modern police career law now puts Honduran officers on notice that they cannot just get by serving time and passing courses, but must perform well professionally to obtain promotion and leave the institution when room for them to move up no longer exists. Many officers who survived the Special Commission's cleansing undoubtedly do not like the new rules, but the purge and reform efforts of the last few years appear to have kept them on the defensive, reducing room for sabotage.

Having a more highly educated and technically-qualified generation at the helm of the institution, instead of marginalized in the middle ranks by superiors fearful of its ascent, should in principle both promote and help mitigate resistance to career change. However, the new organic law lodges promotion power with respect to the officer corps in the security minister, not in the police chief.¹¹⁴ The minister will thus have to exercise his extensive powers in judicious and resolute fashion to prevent the pursuit of the meritocratic ideal from slipping away.

The reform of officer corps education must also go forward to anchor leadership change over the long term. Fortunately, Honduras does not appear to be repeating the tendency in Latin America for police academy directors to be place-holders constrained from introducing new approaches. Reform at entry level (the ITP) is arguably advanced in comparison with others in Central America, and its effects are supposed to be reproduced in the coming overhaul of ANAPO, the officer level training institution. In May 2018, a pedagogic team from the ITP was doing a diagnostic and designing a new teaching curriculum for ANAPO, while the police inspectorate was drawing from the ITP's experience working on a battery of vetting tests for officer candidates.

Police and security leaders will nevertheless have to firmly implement planned changes, and in ways that assure that increased professionalism includes room for the deepening of police–community ties and respect for human rights. The new generation may be more highly qualified, but its academic training took place at a time when the Hon-

duran police were still part of the military, and the biases inherent in the country's traditional military culture could still weigh uncomfortably on the development of police education. Another challenge will be to achieve clarity as to how all the levels of the police education system fit together. One vestige of the military past is the caste system that has historically prevented ascent from the lower ranks to the office corps. It is now envisioned that the upper 10 percent of ITP graduates will eventually enter a reformed ANAPO, but this change, like others, could fall by the wayside.

Institutional Coordination and Rivalry

As indicated, the reform of law and structure has endowed the HNP with a rational-bureaucratic structure designed to curb prior tendencies to fragmentation. Organizationally, this change means that the force has been functionally respecialized in an effort to eradicate what might best be described as a criminally induced “despecialization.” In theory, this change should make the institution more efficient and serve as a bulwark against corruption. Strong ministerial control over the police is supposed to enforce the change and prevent backsliding. Problems of coordination inevitably persist, however, both internally and in the HNP's relations with the rest of the national police model.

As in many other countries, proliferation and rivalry between competing agencies and units charged with policing tasks has been endemic in Honduras and traditionally led to poor coordination and lack of effectiveness. The Military Public Order Police (Policía Militar de Orden Público, PMOP), initially used to control street gangs, has been one source of such problems; for example, indiscriminate PMOP sweeps of *mara*-ridden neighborhoods have impeded the HNP's efforts to improve its relations with local communities. The development, with US assistance, of a special HNP force known as the Tigres with capacity to undertake a similar role, has reduced this problem but complaints are heard that this unit does not coordinate its efforts with the rest of the force.

Systemic rivalry also continues to keep criminal investigation capacity weak and fragmented. Although the share

of homicides that resulted in sentences rose from 4 percent in 2011 to 12 percent in 2017, neither the absolute number of cases brought to court nor of sentences has risen, illustrating continued judicial system weakness.¹¹⁵ Efforts led by the US State Department’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs to train a new generation of detectives in the Police Investigation Department (DPI) of the HNP are progressing but have several more years to run before they yield high-quality results. The DPI is also slated for significant expansion in the next few years.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, progress in solving crimes is impeded by what appears to be a deliberate fragmentation of responsibility for criminal investigative work between the police and the Public Ministry.

In Honduras, the Public Ministry (also called the Fiscalía, equivalent to the US Attorney General’s Office), decides which entity investigates a given crime. Though much smaller and less well-endowed than the DPI, the Technical Agency for Criminal Investigation (ATIC), created by Congress as a specialized office within the Public Ministry in 2013 when Hernández was president of Con-

gress, is entrusted with the investigation of high-profile crimes carrying long sentences such as drug trafficking and money laundering. Officers in the DPI, whose institution is being upgraded more rapidly, are said to resent not being given the responsibility for investigating such crimes, which are going unpunished without the general public knowing which body is responsible for the impunity. The persistence of such problems hampers the HNP’s quest for legitimation and increases the chances for reform effects to dissipate.

Resources and Management

Under President Hernández, spending on public security has risen rapidly in real terms since 2014, although the increase was at first centered in the new military police. With the advent of the purge in 2016, expenditures on the HNP appeared to undergo a stepwise increment of more than one third before stabilizing the following year (see Figure 1).

However, the force is undergoing rapid expansion and, at just over 15,000 active personnel in September 2018, now exceeds its pre-purge size.¹¹⁷ The planned expansion

Figure 1. Budgets of Honduran Security Institutions, 2012–18

HONDURAN SECURITY SPENDING: 2012-2018				
	<i>(all figures in millions \$US)</i>			
	Official budget		Security tax	
	Citizen Security	Defense	Security Ministry	Defense Ministry
2012	185.4	141.2	0.5	2.6
2013	216.7	196.9	25.8	40.7
2014	188.4	224.8	32.9	69.8
2015	186.6	275.9	44.7	66.6
2016	261.9	311.6	60.9	28.7
2017	252.4	331.6	69.7	30.3
2018 (April)	263.9	294.5	61.1	26.6

Security spending in Honduras consists of appropriations from the government budget and disbursements from a special security tax (*tasa de seguridad*) instituted in 2012, which adds significant amounts to both citizen security and defense. Official budget figures are taken from *Expediente Abierto*, April 2018. <http://www.expedienteabierto.org/ea/index.php/datos/presupuestos-de-seguridad#%22>. Amounts for 2018 are projected. Figures for the *tasa de seguridad* can be found at <http://tasadeseguridad.hn/estadisticas.php?p=1>. Lempira (Honduran currency) amounts have been converted to dollars at the official exchange rate.

to 26,000 in 2022 will obviously necessitate higher appropriations, especially as the Security Ministry wishes to increase police salaries and markedly improve the woeful environments in which Honduran police officers have traditionally been forced to work.

These objectives highlight the need to assure efficient and transparent use of limited resources. Here the Special Commission's desire to upgrade the management capabilities of the HNP's support divisions is of paramount importance, inter alia, in curbing the potential for corruption to flourish anew, and is an area in which additional leadership training could prove invaluable. Another positive departure would be the implementation, as foreseen in the new organic law, of an Undersecretariat for Police Affairs in the Security Ministry, an entity whose mandate would, in theory, encompass the requisite tasks of administrative consolidation. To date, the principal administrative improvement appears to be the adoption of a German software system for the integrated management of police finances.

Police–Community Relations

Within the constraint of scarce resources, the new HNP leadership will have to continue advancing the institution's commitment to a community-policing focus and philosophy. The development of a locally owned “Modelo Catracho” and its integration into the bulk of the force are essential starting points, and are buttressed by the community-policing instruction imparted to all police cadets. However, much more will have to be done to consolidate the commitment to effective police–community relations and enhance the limited gains made to date in police legitimacy and credibility.

“...Much more will have to be done to consolidate the commitment to effective police–community relations and enhance the limited gains made to date in police legitimacy and credibility.”

On the positive side, promotions in the HNP have recently elevated people involved in implementing community policing to senior-level posts. For example, Commissioner Otoniel Castillo Lemos, police chief in Chamelecón when INL began its work there, was appointed head of the preventive police (Dirección de Policía Preventiva y Seguridad Comunitaria) in January 2018. This promotion is potentially a harbinger of things to come, as being chief of the *preventiva* is usually the last step before ascending to HNP director-general. Subcommissioner Miguel Martínez Madrid, formerly head of the community police division, was simultaneously appointed to the capital's third metropolitan unit.

Subterranean resistance to the model from the current generation of Honduran police officers is nevertheless strong, experts say. Not a few high-ranking officers are biding their time, waiting for the community policing impetus to fade, and they may meanwhile avail themselves of opportunities to sabotage it. Thus a mutiny in the Cobras anti-riot unit in the midst of postelection conflict in December 2017, which led to brief but widespread work stoppage in Tegucigalpa, reportedly provoked quiet criticisms among internal opponents of HNP reform that “community policing” was filling patrolmen's heads with exotic ideas and had undermined discipline.

Other obstacles to the new model are also serious, beginning with the lack of resources with which to expand training at a faster clip. Just as important, and unsurprising in an underdeveloped country, is that the skill sets of preventive police officers are limited in comparison with those found in developed settings. Honduran officers are said to be good at scanning for threats, but are less adept at critical analysis of crime problems or creative resolution of social conflicts. Limited practical skills among lower-level officers reinforce reluctance among their district superiors to grant them autonomy or reward them for taking initiative, qualities considered crucial to the success of community-policing programs.

Biases in traditional police culture can reinforce these operational difficulties. For example, the frequent rotation of patrol officers is not merely due to scarcity, but also reflects an ingrained belief among their superiors that patrol officers

are susceptible to corruption; this at times well-founded suspicion hinders assigning patrolmen to permanent walking beats for two years. Long-standing biases in the Honduran police derived from the “caste” system add a further dimension to the problem; better-educated officers from the intelligence branch still look down upon patrolmen as their social inferiors and are said to be reluctant to share information with them.

Given these limitations and problems, it is safe to say that the implementation of community policing in Honduras is currently limited in depth, and its sustainability uncertain. However, the community police division has pushed amended criteria for evaluating police performance, which now includes indicators like numbers of foot patrols and community meetings attended.

Internal Control Mechanisms

Preventing criminal actors from once again penetrating the Honduran police force, and keeping corrupt elements who have survived the Special Commission’s purge under control, requires the development of a strong and independent supervisory apparatus for the police. On paper, the Security Ministry is committed to support such a body in the form of DIDADPOL, which is situated under its aegis but is supposedly endowed with “functional independence,” meaning that the ministry will in theory not be able to thwart its efforts.

DIDADPOL has begun the process of hiring personnel and initiating operations, but its independence will have to be strengthened for it to function as envisioned. It does not have all the powers some of the commissioners wanted. Under the new organic law, the routine vetting of police personnel has once again been assigned to the HNP itself, ipso facto, an internal police control organ will have to detect and deter police misbehavior until it reaches serious proportions. To carry out this mission, the Security Ministry has spent several years building a center for conducting vetting trials located in the intelligence branch DIPOL.¹¹⁸ Development of this center has been assisted by and staffed with personnel vetted by the US INL, which is said to regard it as a model for other countries.

Some of the commissioners would like to see control of this center transferred to DIDADPOL, but they are aware their request is unlikely to be met. In general, commission members are clear that the DIDADPOL faces an uphill climb to establish its credentials. Its budget will initially be small (about US\$2 million in 2019) and will need reinforcement from international sources. Perhaps the most important looming obstacle is a lack of resources with which to undertake the special vetting activity assigned to DIDADPOL by law in the cases under its jurisdiction. Unless and until it has personnel of its own for this purpose, the new agency will have to repair to the ministry’s center to do vetting trials, in which case the functional independence enshrined in the joint organic law will be put in question.

Despite these limitations, DIDADPOL made a splash in March 2019, raiding the offices of the transit police in Tegucigalpa and sequestering files in an effort to investigate charges that a ring of HNP officers was involving in illegal trafficking in drivers licenses.¹¹⁹

Ongoing Civil Society Oversight

In addition to strong supervision exercised from within the executive branch (“internal control”), development of a democratic police force is customarily thought to require independent oversight from other branches of state. In Honduras, legislative oversight of security and defense matters is regarded as ineffective, and as is evident in the Public Ministry’s inaction, to date, with respect to HNP officers suspected of criminal offenses, the judicial system offers little guarantee for keeping police misfeasance in check either.

Since 2016, the Special Commission has in effect been the body doing external oversight of the HNP. Though such a situation is not ideal, no institutional alternative for performance of this function is on the political horizon in Honduras, making resort to some sort of ad-hoc arrangement unavoidable. Given the slow development of DIDADPOL and other mechanisms of internal control, close oversight by the existing commissioners or substitutes for them will be needed for several more years at least.

From the outset, it was assumed that a “follow-up commission” would at some point take over and continue the Special Commission’s work. The commission’s initial mandate was rolled over by the legislature in January 2017. As that year came to a close, it appeared that the mandate would not be extended a second time, but President Hernández surprised the commissioners by asking them to stay on. This extension was salutary, as it gave the existing commission the opportunity to ride herd on the development of DIDADPOL and on the formulation of numerous regulations needed to implement the new police laws.

Controlling the rules specifying how the new laws are to be applied is a crucial task whose importance needs to be underscored. As the devil is in the details, left to their own devices HNP leaders adverse to the current reforms could dilute the laws in practice. However, a Commission member stated to the author that the body has maintained the upper hand in these discussions, with the security minister’s strong support.

As 2018 wended toward its close, however, voices could be heard arguing that the current Commissioners should relinquish their roles given that their mandate was once again set to expire in early 2019. In fact, it is possible to imagine that the commissioners may have settled into too comfortable a working relationship with the Hernández government, leading reform implementation to slow down, and that new blood and a fresh look could re-energize the process.

Conversely, the Special Commission has accumulated enormous experience and an extensive informal quota of power that a successor body might find difficult to maintain. Its effectiveness has arguably depended from the beginning on the establishment of working relationships between state and nonstate actors which, though not devoid of conflict, have succeeded in keeping disagreements within bounds and sustain progress toward meeting overall reform goals. Whether a successor commission with a different composition could successfully manage these relationships is open to question.

Whatever the case, President Hernández decided in December 2018 to roll over the Special Commission’s mandate for another three years.¹²⁰ This extension will allow the commissioners to oversee completing the process of building DIDAPOL as well as the passage and implementation of a law in process to regulate the activities of private security firms.

International Actors’ Continued Support

As noted above, a series of foreign donors has supported Honduran police reform efforts in recent years. The Inter-American Development Bank and Cosude have both made notable contributions, and are slated to continue them in a new programming phase.

The efforts and programs of US government actors have played by far the largest role in supporting Honduran police reform. Above and beyond the diplomatic support lent to the Special Commission’s purge, US activities have grown over time to encompass many of the HNP’s core components. The INL has worked with the preventive police to implement community policing, build up a special force (the Tigres) to combat organized crime, train recruits to the new criminal investigations branch (DPI), and most recently, begin working with the police intelligence system (DIPOL).

Cooperation would have been more all-embracing if it had not been for human rights concerns, which have hindered engagement with the transit police and certain units of the preventive police in the major cities. According to reliable sources, the United States has nonetheless undertaken massive human rights vetting of Honduran police personnel in recent years, including the entirety of the post-purge leadership (per the legislation sponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy, as noted above).

The extensive involvement of US personnel in HNP training and reform efforts reflects the Hernández government’s close political alliance with the United States, a relationship without parallel in Central America in recent years. Although that relationship has had conflictual elements, as

when the United States refused to fund or train the military police, Juan Orlando Hernández has seemingly cultivated and encouraged US support for reform of the HNP as a way of guaranteeing the continuity of overall US political support for his government. For its part, the US has responded positively in an attempt to achieve one of its cherished security goals in the region, and by now has a strong vested interest in seeing HNP reform succeed.

“The extensive involvement of US personnel in HNP training and reform efforts reflects the Hernández government’s close political alliance with the United States, a relationship without parallel in Central America in recent years.”

The budget for INL programs, which peaked in 2015, has waned in recent years, and the Trump administration has requested reductions in funding from Congress for the Central America Regional Security Initiative. These trends make it highly unlikely that US support for Honduran police reform will expand, and may likely lead to an emphasis on consolidating the gains of existing programs. However, judging from strong US support for the anticorruption

activities of the MACCIH, and President Hernández’s acceptance of a new head for that body in 2018, it appears that the overall parameters of the relationship between the US and Honduran governments are, for better or worse, stable. This suggests that pressure from the US will continue grosso modo to be a force pushing its counterparts to keep HNP reform on track over the next few years.

A Worst Case Scenario

In a longer-term scenario, however, the dependence of police reform progress on US support and assistance could be a source of vulnerability. The scenario most threatening to continuity in the current HNP reform is one in which a political leader gains power in elections in 2021 who puts Honduras on a confrontational course with US interests in the region. In that event, it is easy to imagine Honduran police ties to the US being attenuated or severed. In addition, such a leader could appoint a security minister determined to exercise his powers over the police in blatantly political fashion, a caprice that would be facilitated by the prerogatives contained in the 2017 joint organic law. Using those powers to the hilt, a new minister could remove HNP division commanders at will, putting anyone he liked in their place, and manipulate promotions to reward loyalty to himself and the new government.

5 | CIVIL SOCIETY AND POLICE REFORM: THE HONDURAN CASE

The Honduran experience reviewed in this report is a case in which selected civil society organizations have exerted significant influence over the reform of a specific national-level police institution. The experience of these organizations can potentially be of use to groups in other countries that may be facing a decision about whether to participate in attempts at police reform. This report was undertaken in large part to make that experience more widely known to civil society actors in countries where such reform is on the agenda and to policymakers everywhere who are interested in supporting their efforts.

All police reform stories doubtless have *sui generis* elements. The case of HNP reform is unusually complex, arguing for caution in interpreting its relevance for other settings. Although lessons can be culled from the Honduran experience, drawing them correctly requires analyzing the capabilities of the organizations involved and the environment in which they acted. As in any country, the latter entails examining the nature and evolving interactions among a constellation of civic, political, and institutional actors (including foreign governments and agencies) whose interests are bound up with police reform experiments and shape the reform moment.

Key Starting Points

The reform of the HNP was initiated from power by an established and controversial government, not by a new or “reform” administration. This government is headed by a political leader accustomed to utilizing selected civil society organizations for his own political purposes, whether to advance and legitimize his initiatives or to thwart the designs of others. To all appearances, when he found himself beleaguered by a scandal involving the police in 2016, Juan Hernández sought to make limited reforms to HNP personnel and structures, the precise contours of which

are still obscure, not to effect sweeping change. As partners in this undertaking, he chose primarily religious organizations (Catholic and Protestant) that ultimately self-selected to the Protestant community.

That this reform has turned out to be more substantial than Hernández anticipated is testimony to the penchant for political life to throw up unintended results, and the persistence of reformers from outside government. The outcomes of the Special Commission’s work in Honduras suggest that it is possible to make progress in the difficult task of police reform even against the grain of powerful established interests in specific political circumstances and playing off an existing constellation of forces, if civil society actors are capable of reading the reform moment correctly and then acting with flexibility and a certain amount of audacity.

“The Special Commission’s work in Honduras suggests that it is possible to make progress in the difficult task of police reform even against the grain of powerful established interests...”

Determinants of Success

This report can offer only a first approximation to an analysis and explanation of Honduran organizations ability to have a positive impact on reform of the HNP. The report’s impression is that success in exerting this influence depended on four main factors.

The first factor is unity in action and perspective. The Association for a More Just Society and the Evangelical Confraternity, whose boards of directors are interlinked, generally maintained a united front in the Special Commis-

sion. Homogeneity in the president's choice of churches and a faith-based NGO to “represent” civil society inadvertently assisted this outcome. If the commission had been representative of the diversity of Honduran civil society, it would likely have been subject to internal polarization and division, and its effectiveness would have been reduced.

The second factor is the character of organization leadership. The ASJ and Confraternity leaders were motivated enough to seize a political opportunity to promote reform, even though it meant taking serious personal and reputational risks. Both religious convictions and prior individual experiences probably played a role in shaping this motivation. Organization leaders also appear to have had the political acumen to know when the moment to act was ripe, and to correctly read a national political situation in which a sitting president was vulnerable to having reform of unwanted proportions thrust upon him.

The third factor is prior engagement with power. The two groups had for some years followed organizational and political strategies that had positioned them to be chosen from on high. Both were active on anticorruption issues, the ASJ directly with the government and the Confraternity through the National Anti-Corruption Council (Consejo Nacional Anti-Corrupción). The ASJ in particular sought to change a system stacked against change through a willingness to engage with the Hernández government in the pursuit of limited common objectives. In the process, it became well connected and successful, albeit at the cost of being regarded by certain other organizations in Honduran society as a collaborator with a corrupt and undemocratic regime.

Finally, the fourth factor is the resource base. The unusual set of personal, organizational, financial, and political resources possessed by the ASJ allowed the civil society contingent on the commission to maneuver to prevent itself from being absorbed by and neutralized by the structures created by President Hernández to keep the purge under control. This helped the whole commission to exercise a significant degree of influence over the scope and depth of the purge, then go on to broaden its mandate to influence changes in police laws, structures, and leadership.

The ASJ first of all possessed issue-specific experience, information, and connections. Its practical experience with the issues involved in police reform dated back to 2005, and it had extensive prior knowledge of police corruption, furnishing it with information with which to challenge official institutions' judgments about individual officers under examination. It also had sufficient financial resources to commit to the purge effort when the Security Ministry dragged its feet on disbursing money promptly to pay the commission's expenses.

Its political resources were arguably as important. The ASJ's leaders had extensive lobbying experience and well-developed media skills. Omar Rivera, the organization's advocacy chief, played a particularly key role in establishing and maintaining a media presence for the commission, enhancing its ability to influence public opinion. This ability became an asset in bargaining between civil society and institutional actors, allowing the commission to parlay the public enthusiasm created by the purge into a broadening of its mandate to effect change. However, an intense media presence at times created expectations that could not be met—for example, with respect to the justice system follow-up for HNP officers accused of offenses.

The ASJ's working relationship with US government actors was also beneficial to the reform outcome. It both helped the organization to “read” politically a moment at which its commitment to police reform aligned with that of official US policy, and to obtain practical US help in purging the officer corps and logistical help when commission personnel under threat had to be evacuated from Honduras.¹²¹

Lessons on Doing Police Reform within the System

Not every civil society organization will be equally well endowed with resources, but all will need to judge carefully whether—alone or in cooperation—they have the capacity to respond to the complex demands of the role and the ability to sustain commitment to their reform tasks over time. If they decide they do, the Honduran case suggests

five maxims that it may be useful for civil society organizations to heed to improve their chances for success in the complicated political environments where police reform efforts normally occur:

1. Read the reform moment carefully. Is there a momentary alignment of political interests that offers a leverage point for civil society initiatives to have a positive effect in pushing police reform? Such an alignment occurred in Honduras when the HNP scandal broke in 2016, putting President Hernández on the defensive, but it may not have been easy for casual observers to spot.
2. Maintain unity of purpose to be able to act flexibly and maneuver rapidly. Opportunities to act need to be quickly seized, not squandered in lengthy discussions of ultimate objectives each time a decision must be made. As the ASJ and the Confraternity exemplify, a small set of like-minded civic actors is likely to be more versatile and effective than a larger, representative sample of civil society.
3. Build partial reforms where possible on the basis of already-established initiatives and enlist the support of important actors willing to back these changes (*ipso facto*, do not insist on implementing an ideal model of reform all at once). Honduras's civil society commissioners did this not only with respect to the efforts of international actors backing police reform, but arguably also vis-à-vis Security Minister Pacheco, who appeared to be pushing certain changes with which non-state commissioners could agree, even if they clashed with him on other points.
4. Give actors who are powerful enough to block reform incentives to instead support it, and refrain from threatening their vital interests. In this case, to have the authority to act, the civil society commissioners let President Hernández take some credit for their actions, even at the risk of appearing to be his tools. They also refrained from challenging the rest of his security model. The dangers to reputations that lurk in such compromises require careful management, as the ASJ discovered, but may be unavoidable.
5. Balance the renewal of police personnel with improvements in structures of control and incentives. It is not necessary to purge every suspect officer from a police force, but it is essential to create or strengthen administrative machinery to detect and act against wrongdoing whenever it rears its ugly head; high-level commitment to making the machinery work is also required. In Honduras, the Special Commission has in practice struck such a balance among these elements, though whether this balance will be strong enough to endure is impossible to say at this stage.

NOTES

- 1 The body's formal name was Comisión Especial para la Depuración y Transformación de la Policía Nacional de Honduras.
- 2 For a review of obstacles to police reform, see Mark Ungar, *Policing Democracy: Overcoming Obstacles to Citizen Security in Latin America* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2011), chap. 2.
- 3 In January 2017, Congress extended the mandate of the commission for an additional year, and in January 2018 did so again. In December 2018, the lawmakers voted to extend the commission's mandate by three additional years, to January 2022.
- 4 The material in this section of the report relies heavily on "Honduras," chapter 4 of Ungar, *Policing Democracy*.
- 5 Ungar, *Policing Democracy*, 123–27.
- 6 UNODC, Transnational Organized Crime in Central America and the Caribbean, September 2012, 12, https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/TOC_Central_America_and_the_Caribbean_english.pdf.
- 7 Louis-Alexandre Berg and Marlon Carranza, "Crime, Violence, and Community-Based Prevention in Honduras," World Bank, June 2015, 6–9.
- 8 The development of one of Honduras's principal drug cartels is traced by Steven Dudley, "Élites y Crimen Organizado en Honduras: Los Cachiros, Insight Crime," April 24, 2016, <https://es.insightcrime.org/investigaciones/elites-crimen-organizado-honduras-los-cachiros/>.
- 9 For an in-depth look at the structure and operations of the largest gang operating in Honduras, emphasizing its limited supporting role in drug cartel activity, see Insight Crime and Center for Latin American & Latino Studies, "MS13 in the Americas: How the Most Notorious Gang Defies Logic, Resists Destruction," <https://www.insightcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/MS13-in-the-Americas-InSight-Crime-English.pdf>.
- 10 Berg and Carranza, "Crime, Violence, and Community-Based Prevention in Honduras," 10–12.
- 11 For important background on the how post-coup political dynamics assisted the growth of criminal activity, see James Bosworth, "Honduras: Organized Crime Gained Amid Political Crisis," in *Organized Crime in Central America: The Northern Triangle*, edited by Cynthia Arnsen and Eric Olson (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2011), 62–103, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/LAP_single_page.pdf.
- 12 US Agency for International Development, "Impact Evaluation: Honduras Country Report," August 2014, 126–57 passim, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/carsi/CARSI_Honduras_v1_Formatted_W_02.16.16.pdf.
- 13 Ibid, 131–44.
- 14 *El Herald*, "Vil asesinato que sacudió la corrupción policial," October 26, 2012, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/alfrente/565448-209/vil-asesinato-que-sacudio-la-corrupcion-policial>.
- 15 Interview, Victor Meza, November 17, 2017.
- 16 Ciprodeh, "Análisis de lineamientos sobre currícula de formación policial," February 22, 2013. This report summarizes the discussions on the topic which occurred in the Commission for the Reform of Public Security.
- 17 Hernández argued initially that the PMOP was a temporary stopgap until the National Police was reformed or rebuilt. However, the military police continued to receive funding and new equipment in 2018.
- 18 Victor Meza et al., *La militarización de la seguridad pública en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: CEDOH, 2015), chap. 1. For example, the DNII long had a national anti-extortion force (Fuerza Nacional Anti-Extorsión) under its control.
- 19 *El Herald*, "DIECP perdió control de la depuración policial," April 7, 2013, www.elheraldo.hn/alfrente/565923-209/diecp-perdio-control-de-la-depuracion-policial.
- 20 *La Prensa*, "Autosacudida en la Policía de Honduras, se retiran 35 altos oficiales," <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/tegucigalpa/445112-98/autosacudida-en-la-policia-de-honduras-se-retiran-35-altos-oficiales>. It should be noted that the list of 35 did not include any of the officers alleged to have been involved in the Aristides González assassination, as reported in the *New York Times* and *El Herald*.
- 21 Though retired, these officers were still considered active duty members of the force, had official vehicles, and could carry weapons.

- 22 Aaron Korthuis, “The Central American Regional Security Initiative in Honduras,” Woodrow Wilson Center Working Paper, September, 2014, 8.
- 23 This is discussed by Korthuis, “Central American Regional Security Initiative,” 28–39.
- 24 Korthuis, “Central American Regional Security Initiative,” 35.
- 25 *El Heraldito*, “The New York Times dice que es difícil reformar la Policía Nacional de Honduras,” April 18, 2016, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/951366-466/the-new-york-times-dice-que-es-dif%C3%ADcil-reformar-la-polic%C3%ADa-nacional>. William Brownfield, then deputy secretary of state for Latin America, apparently defended aid to the HNP in 2013, saying it was the least bad of three options—the military and the PMOP being the other two.
- 26 The internal HNP reports were referred to in the New York Times on April 15, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2016/04/15/un-informe-revela-nombres-y-hechos-relacionados-con-asesinatos-cometidos-por-la-policia-en-honduras/>, along with another story concerning the participation of HNP leaders in drug trafficking; see <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2016/04/15/tres-generales-y-un-cartel-violencia-policial-e-impunidad-en-honduras/>.
- 27 Another hypothesis sees Hernández as anxious that extradited drug traffickers facing trial in the United States would come forth with revelations implicating him, his family, or his associates.
- 28 *El Heraldito*, “Entra en vigencia fallo que permite la reelección presidencial en Honduras,” April 24, 2015, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/834267-214/entra-en-vigencia-fallo-que-permite-reelecci%C3%B3n-presidencial-en-honduras>.
- 29 *El Heraldito*, “Denuncia de cheques del IHSS movió olla de corrupción,” May 28, 2015, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/844143-209/denuncia-de-cheques-del-ihss-movi%C3%B3-olla-de-corrupci%C3%B3n>.
- 30 For background on the *indignados* movement, see Eugenio Sosa, *Democracia y movimientos sociales en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa: Guaymuras, 2016), chap. 4.
- 31 For background on MACCIH, see “Avances y Desafíos: Informe Sobre Los Primeros Dos Años de la Misión de Apoyo Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad en Honduras (MACCIH),” CLALS Working Paper 16, Center for Latin American & Latino Studies at American University, June 2018.
- 32 Thelma Mejía, “La corrupción en el IHSS,” in *El manejo político y social de la corrupción en Honduras*, edited by Victor Meza (Tegucigalpa: CEDOH, 2016), 208–9.
- 33 According to ASJ leaders, the organization anticipated this reputational damage but decided that the chance to contribute to a major police reform was worth the risk.
- 34 Decreto 21-2016, *La Gaceta*, April 8, 2016, <http://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2016/10611.pdf?file=fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2016/10611>.
- 35 Decreto Ejecutivo Número PCM-029-2016, April 12, 2016, *La Gaceta*, <https://tzibalnaah.unah.edu.hn/bitstream/handle/123456789/3214/20160412.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>.
- 36 Secretaría de Seguridad, Acuerdo Número 0936-2016, *La Gaceta*, April 8, 2016.
- 37 *El Heraldito*, “Comisión para la depuración policial se compromete a brindar resultados,” April 13, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/949657-466/honduras-comisi%C3%B3n-para-la-depuraci%C3%B3n-policial-se-compromete-a-brindar-resultados>.
- 38 The resignation threat scuttled a government ceremony honoring the officers to be retired, which would have occurred on April 16, a day after publication of the *New York Times* report implicating some of them in illicit activities.
- 39 *El Heraldito*, “Comisión para la depuración policial solicita información de altos mandos,” April 14, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/949964-466/honduras-comisi%C3%B3n-para-la-depuraci%C3%B3n-policial-solicita-informaci%C3%B3n-de-altos-mandos>.
- 40 *El Heraldito*, “Comisión pide suspender a exdirectores . . .,” April 21, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/952437-466/comisi%C3%B3n-pide-suspender-a-exdirectores-ram%C3%ADrez-del-cid-y-ram%C3%B3n-sabill%C3%B3n>.
- 41 *La Prensa*, “Fuera de la Policía 23 comisionados . . .,” April 29, 2016, <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/954909-410/fuera-de-la-polic%C3%ADa-23-comisionados-de-la-polic%C3%ADa-hondure%C3%B1a>, supplies the names of all the officers.
- 42 *La Prensa*, “Comisión depuradora cancela a 30 subcomisionados . . .,” May 17, 2016, <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/960925-410/comisi%C3%B3n-depuradora-cancela-a-30-subcomisionados-de-la-polic%C3%ADa-nacional>, supplies the names of all the officers.

- 43 *El Herald*o, “Más de la mitad de los policías sometidos a depuración han sido ratificados,” May 18, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/961028-466/honduras-m%C3%A1s-de-la-mitad-de-polic%C3%ADas-sometidos-a-depuraci%C3%B3n-han-sido>.
- 44 Bonilla was soon removed from the HNP via restructuring.
- 45 *El Herald*o, “Narco me preguntó por qué no hacía nada con el cartel del Partido Nacional,” April 19, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/951579-466/ram%C3%B3n-sabill%C3%B3n-narco-me-pregunt%C3%B3-por-qu%C3%A9-no-hac%C3%ADa-nada-con-cartel>.
- 46 The Special Commission subsequently removed Sabillón from the HNP on grounds of desertion. On November 23, 2018, Antonio “Tony” Hernández was arrested in Miami on charges of drug smuggling; <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2018/11/26/dea-announces-arrest-former-honduran-congressman-and-brother-current>.
- 47 Interview, Jorge Machado, October 13, 2018.
- 48 Such a step would have implied appointing a point a board of directors to assume administrative and operational control of the police.
- 49 The need for the commission to develop empathy with some parts of the HNP is expounded on at length by Carlos Hernández and Kirsten Garrison, “Civil Society’s Solutions: Citizens Transforming the Honduran National Police,” ASJ, unpublished manuscript, n.d.
- 50 Cf. <http://www.asjhonduras.com/webhn/tag/denuncia-policias-honduras/>.
- 51 *La Prensa*, “Embajada de EUA entregó información de corrupción en la Policía de Honduras,” April 21, 2016, <http://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/952307-410/embajada-de-eua-entreg%C3%B3-informaci%C3%B3n-de-corrupci%C3%B3n-en-la-polic%C3%ADa-de-honduras>.
- 52 In a May 4, 2018, interview, Julián Pacheco described his role as “striking a balance between the commission and the police.”
- 53 *El Herald*o, “81 oficiales y policías vinculados a la Mara Salvatrucha,” September 16, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1003154-466/honduras-81-oficiales-y-polic%C3%ADas-vinculados-a-la-mara-salvatrucha>.
- 54 Among those eventually promoted were subcommissioners Leonel Saucedo, Orlin Cerrato, and Fredis Lagos Sánchez, all of whom are now part of the upper police leadership.
- 55 *El Herald*o, “Así es la nueva estructura organizacional,” January 5, 2017, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1032381-466/as%C3%AD-es-la-nueva-estructura-organizacional-de-la-polic%C3%ADa-nacional-de-honduras>.
- 56 Interview, Honduran National Police, February 16, 2018.
- 57 Interview, Mario Díaz, executive director of the Asociación de Jueces Democráticos, November 17, 2017.
- 58 *El Herald*o, “Casi 700 demandas de policías depurados se resuelven en los Juzgados,” <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1228752-466/casi-700-demandas-de-polic%C3%ADas-depurados-se-resuelven-en-los-juzgados>.
- 59 Interview, Carlos Sierra, security issues coordinator, Ciprodeh, November 15, 2017.
- 60 Associated Press, “Honduras’ National Police Chief Helped Cartel Move 1,700 Lbs. of Cocaine, Report Says,” published in the *Chicago Tribune*, January 26, 2018.
- 61 Primicia Honduras, “Comisión Depuradora de Policía cumple un año en funciones,” April 12, 2017.
- 62 Interview, Luis Echeverría, Unidad Fiscal de Apoyo a la Depuración de la Policía Nacional (UF-ADPOL), May 3, 2018. Shortly after this interview, the special commission remitted the names of 1,300 other HNP personnel, but the public ministry demurred in acknowledging receipt of the list. According to a commission source, the new list contained infractions detected during the purge but also others dating from the pre-purge period.
- 63 Accused of money laundering, Barralaga was actually a retired commissioner who had left the HNP in 2011, not a person removed in the commission’s purge. *La Tribuna*, “Quién es el comisionado Jorge Barralaga, detenido por lavado de activos?” <http://www.latribuna.hn/2017/07/30/quien-comisionado-jorge-barralaga-detenido-lavado-activos/>. The UF-ADPOL has subsequently prompted action against several other high-ranking officers, including subcommissioner José Orlando Leiva Natarén, arrested in Miami on drug charges in June 2018, and commissioner Lorgio Oqueli Mejía Tinoco, formerly police chief in Choluteca department, on grounds of corruption. The special commission had ratified the latter officer’s permanence in the HNP in May 2016. Cf. *La Prensa*, “Oqueli Mejía Tinoco facilitó el tráfico ilegal de ganado, según el MP,” October 9, 2018, www.laprensa.hn/honduras/1223121-410/oqueli-mejia-tinoco-facilito-trafico-ilegal-ganado-choluteca.

- 64 Interview, Ricardo Castro, Agencia Técnica de Investigación Crimina, Ministerio Público, May 2, 2018.
- 65 Interview, Jorge Machado, October 13, 2018.
- 66 *La Gaceta*, Decreto 21-2016, <https://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2016/10611.pdf>.
- 67 Interview, Omar Rivera, October 5, 2018.
- 68 Korthuis, "Central American Regional Security Initiative," 10.
- 69 Meza et al., *La militarización*, 92–94.
- 70 See Ungar, *Policing Democracy*, 156–68.
- 71 In one variant of this idea, the PMOP's role would have been transitional and come to an end once a new civilian police force was up and running.
- 72 Secretaría de Estado en el Despacho de Seguridad, "Marco Estratégico Institucional SEDS 2015–2022," n.d. The secretariat presented the plan to the APJ in August 2015. Cf. "Policía presenta plan estratégico a organismos de sociedad civil," *Criterio*, August 12, 2015.
- 73 According to an informed source, parts of the new approach sketched here were inherited from previous security minister Corrales, blurring the question of who exactly wrote what changes.
- 74 Interview, Gerzon Velásquez, April 25, 2018. The word *catracho* is a colloquial way to say Honduran.
- 75 Interview, Julián Pacheco, minister of security, May 4, 2018.
- 76 *El Herald*, "DPI inicia funciones con el reto de avanzar en la investigación científica," September 1, 2015, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/875116-214/dpi-inicia-funciones-con-el-reto-de-avanzar-a-la-investigaci%C3%B3n-cient%C3%ADfica>.
- 77 Interview, Subcommissioner José Hernández, Dirección Policial de Investigaciones, May 3, 2018.
- 78 *El Herald*, "Quinta reforma de la ley orgánica policial aleja la depuración," November 24, 2015, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/904978-466/quinta-reforma-de-la-ley-org%C3%A1nica-policial-aleja-la-depuraci%C3%B3n>. From 2010 to 2015, there had been 20-odd partial reforms through legislative or executive decrees, without assuring a real purge of the HNP.
- 79 Secretaría de Estado en el Despacho de Seguridad, "Marco Estratégico," 10.
- 80 Adapted from ASJ, "Purging and Transformation of the Honduran National Police Force: Context, Progress and a Vision for the Future," November 2016.
- 81 These changes supposedly provoked opposition from HNP leaders.
- 82 This was not a new idea, but had been broached as early as 2014 in a draft organic law prepared for the Security Secretariat by INL consultants.
- 83 *El Herald*, "Quién asumirá la depuración policial en Honduras?" March 31, 2016, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/945390-466/qui%C3%A9n-asumir%C3%A1-la-depuraci%C3%B3n-policial-en-honduras>.
- 84 *El Herald*, "Eliminarán 59 artículos de la Ley de la Policía," August 18, 2016, <http://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/991176-466/honduras-eliminar%C3%A1n-59-art%C3%ADculos-de-la-ley-de-la-polic%C3%ADa>.
- 85 *La Prensa*, "Alistan zarpazo legal para desaparecer la DIECP," September 2, 2015, www.laprensa.hn/honduras/875766-410/alistan-zarpazo-legal-para-desaparecer-la-diecp.
- 86 "Ley Orgánica de la Secretaría de Estado en el Despacho de Seguridad y de la Policía Nacional de Honduras," Articles 18–19, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/HND/INT_CCPR_FCO_HND_32133_S.pdf.
- 87 According to an informed source, the vetting of candidates was rigorous and included polygraph tests.
- 88 *El Herald*, "Unos 1,266 policías han sido denunciados en cinco meses," January 7, 2019, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1248111-466/honduras-unos-1266-polic%C3%ADas-han-sido-denunciados-en-cinco-meses>.
- 89 OEA-MACCIH, "Hacia Una Nueva Policía Nacional: Recomendaciones sobre el Proyecto de Ley de Carrera Policial, Reporte MACCIH #4," May 2017; interview, Virginia Contreras, head of MACCIH public security division, April 25, 2018.
- 90 Ley de Carrera Policial, Articles 33–34, https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/Treaties/CCPR/Shared%20Documents/HND/INT_CCPR_FCO_HND_32132_S.pdf.
- 91 "Ley Orgánica," Article 38.

- 92 “Ley de Carrera Policial,” Articles 3–4.
- 93 Cf. Ciprodeh, “Análisis de lineamientos,” 21–27.
- 94 This results from the limited reach of the Honduran educational system, which does not guarantee high school education in rural areas.
- 95 According to an informed source, many of these complaints have to do with organizational constraints and corrupt practices the new officers encounter in the police posts to which they are assigned.
- 96 Interview, Commissioner Mesil Aguilar, rector of the HNP Police Education System, April 26, 2018.
- 97 Interview, Giovanni Gómez, HNP adviser, April 26, 2018.
- 98 Modelo Nacional de Servicio de Policía Comunitaria, 24–27.
- 99 Place-based strategies target the geographic locations where crime and violence occur. For a review of their effectiveness, see US Agency for International Development, “What Works in Reducing Community Violence: A Meta-Review and Field Study for the Northern Triangle,” February 2016, 10–12.
- 100 Data from INL, April 24, 2018. However, the implementation of other programs during the same period makes disentangling the precise effect of community policing difficult. For a fuller view of the approaches taken in Rivera Hernández, see Sonia Nazario, “How the Most Dangerous Place on Earth Got Safer,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2016. It should be underscored that all these approaches have not fully solved the security problems in Rivera Hernández, which in 2019 continues to be plagued by the deprivations of drug gangs, causing people to join migrant flows northward to the United States.
- 101 Interview, USAID official, April 24, 2018.
- 102 Secretaría en el Despacho de Seguridad, “Encuesta de Línea Base,” draft report, November 30, 2017, 23–24.
- 103 Over time, officers who oversaw the successful experiences in San Pedro Sula have been systematically rotated to other cities to replicate the model. Interview, INL official, April 24, 2018.
- 104 Latin American Public Opinion Project at Vanderbilt University, “Cultura política de la democracia en Honduras y en las Américas,” 2014, 186, https://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/honduras/AB2014_Honduras_Country_Report_V3_W_010715.pdf.
- 105 Secretaría en el Despacho de Seguridad, “Encuesta,” 21.
- 106 Foreign police advisers interviewed by the Wilson Center were generally impressed by the choices. Interview, IDB official, February 14, 2018; interview, INL official, April 24, 2018.
- 107 Christopher Sherman, Martha Mendoza, and Garance Burke, “Honduras’ National Police Chief Helped Cartel Move 1,700 Lbs. of Cocaine, Report Says.” Associated Press, January 26, 2018.
- 108 Jake Pearson, “AP Objects to Honduran Police Bid to Identify Story Sources,” Associated Press, February 22, 2018.
- 109 *El Herald*, “Comisión depuradora investigará informe divulgado por la Agencia AP que vincula a director de la Policía con narcotráfico,” January 26, 2018, <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1146684-466/comisión-depuradora-investigará-informe-divulgado-por-la-agencia-ap-que-vincula-a>. This article includes the text of the commission’s communiqué as well as a photocopy of the what the police says is the real IG file.
- 110 Ungar, *Policing Democracy*, chap. 2.
- 111 National homicide statistics, though not identical to independent observatory numbers, nonetheless follow similar trends. For example, in 2017, the official homicide rate was 42.8, while the National University’s Violence Observatory determined the rate to be 43.6, registering 75 more deaths than official sources.
- 112 Interview, UN Human Rights Commission Office in Honduras, May 2, 2018. Although the HNP was officially in charge of controlling the demonstrations, UN human rights officials believe the military police were actually in command. HNP officers reportedly attempted to dialogue with the protesters in efforts to get them to disperse, but if unsuccessful gave way to the PMOP.
- 113 Interview, Thelma Mejía, veteran Honduran journalist, August 2, 2018.
- 114 Even there, according to UN High Commission for Human Rights personnel, HNP officers at times attempt to facilitate dialogue rather than act simply as local agents of repression. Interview, August 3, 2018.
- 115 See “Ley Orgánica,” Article 6, clause 17, and Article 47, clause 18.

- 116 Alianza por la Paz y la Justicia, "Informe de Impunidad de Homicidios en Honduras, 2018," unpublished study. The increasing percentage of cases solved has thus resulted almost entirely from the drop in the number of homicides.
- 117 By 2022, the DPI is slated to have 3,000 personnel, or about 12 percent of the entire force.
- 118 Data from Honduras security secretariat. New recruits were 2,501 in 2016 and 2,927 in 2017.
- 119 The entity is called the Centro de Control de Confianza Preventivo, and is foreseen in Article 64 of the 2017 organic law .
- 120 *La Prensa*, "Intervienen oficinas de Tránsito en busca de traficantes de licencia," March 1, 2019, https://www.laprensa.hn/honduras/1263427-410/didadpol-red_de_traficantes_de_documentos-trafico_documentos.
- 121 *Proceso Digital*, "Amplian período de Depuradora de la Policía hasta enero de 2022," December 13, 2018. <http://www.proceso.hn/nacionales/9-nacionales/amplian-periodo-de-la-comision-depuradora-de-la-policia-a-enero-de-2022.html>.
- 122 Commission sources assert that the United States asked in July 2016 for five low-ranking HNP officers believed to be involved in the plots against the commission to be extradited to the United States, and they were eventually handed over.