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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Feb., 1995), pp. 99-127

Published by: [Cambridge University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/158204>

Accessed: 07/04/2012 17:23

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Honduras: The Politics of Exception and Military Reformism (1972–1978)*

RACHEL SIEDER

Abstract. The specificities of contemporary Honduran politics are explored by examining both national historical development and the cooption of popular protest by military reformism in the 1970s. The dynamics underpinning demobilisation of the popular movement after 1976 are explained with reference to both the agrarian reform implemented by the military and certain features of local political culture, such as patronage and clientelism, which – it is argued – were utilised selectively to coopt a sector of the organised labour movement. Divisions within the popular movement, in part a product of traditions of state-labour relations, were also significant in weakening the popular challenge.

In so far as there is a mould of Central American politics, Honduras does not fit it. Although selective repression and a culture of intimidation remain distinctive features of national political life, the republic has little tradition of the ‘oligarchic despotism’ which has characterised the development of the modern Guatemalan, Salvadorean and Nicaraguan states. The patterns of crisis and rupture which culminated in revolutionary challenges at the end of the 1970s in the three neighbouring countries are also largely absent in Honduras. The politico-military insurgent movement which developed in the early 1980s was the least significant in the region; lacking an extensive popular base, it was rapidly extinguished after the implementation of a highly targeted policy of forced disappearances and political assassinations in the early 1980s.¹

* This article developed out of a doctoral thesis defended in 1993 at the University of London. Additional fieldwork in March–April 1993 was funded by the Central Research Fund of the University of London. I am grateful to Victor Bulmer-Thomas and Paul Cammack, and to my thesis supervisor, James Dunkerley, for their comments. I would also like to thank Mario Posas, Rafael Del Cid and Mario Argueta for their input and suggestions and J. Mark Ruhl, whose assiduous comments on a first draft immeasurably improved the final version.

¹ Over 150 people were ‘disappeared’ during this period, most of them between 1982 and 1984. The recent report by the Honduran human rights ombudsman into military involvement in forced disappearances and other human rights violations in the early 1980s puts the number of ‘disappeared’ as high as 184. See Comisionado Nacional de Protección de los Derechos Humanos, *Los hechos hablan por sí mismos: informe preliminar sobre los desaparecidos en Honduras 1980–1993* (Tegucigalpa, 1994); see also the edited

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Honduras provided the key to Washington's regional strategy after 1981, serving both as a theatre for large-scale US troop manoeuvres and as a safe haven for the Nicaraguan *Contra*.² However, the acute levels of polarisation experienced in neighbouring countries were not a feature of domestic politics: whilst far from representing the 'oasis of calm' the incumbents in Tegucigalpa and Washington were so anxious to project, Honduras in the 1980s was not marked by civil war, nor did events within the country mirror the pattern of wholesale violation of human rights so painfully evident elsewhere in the region.³

Honduran difference: traditional explanations

Explanations of Honduran difference traditionally refer to two broad areas: (a) developments between 1870 and 1930, and (b) the experience of military reformism in the 1970s. Revisionist historiography, most notably the work of Edelberto Torres Rivas, has attempted to explain the nation's development in terms of a number of features, including: the absence of a national agro-exporting bourgeoisie in the late nineteenth century, the partial nature of the Liberal revolution of the 1880s, the development of the enclave banana economy in the twentieth century under the control of US monopoly capital, and the chronic weakness of the Honduran state.⁴ Attempts to analyse the reformist period of the 1970s have invariably based their explanations on an assessment of such factors, referring to the

version in English, Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL) and Human Rights Watch/Americas, *The Facts Speak for Themselves: The Preliminary Report on Disappearances of the National Commissioner for the Protection of Human Rights in Honduras* (New York, Washington and Los Angeles, 1994).

² On the 1980s see Donald E. Schulz and Deborah Sundloff-Schulz, *The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America* (Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford, 1994).

³ See for example: Amnesty International, *El Salvador: Death Squads – A Government Strategy* (London, 1988); Americas Watch, *El Salvador's Decade of Terror: Human Rights since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven and London, 1991); Americas Watch, *Messengers of Death: Human Rights in Guatemala, November 1988–February 1990* (New York, 1990); Beatriz Manz, *Refugees of a Hidden War* (Albany, New York, 1988); Amnesty International, *Guatemala: Human Rights Violations under the Civilian Government* (London, 1989); Americas Watch, *Human Rights in Nicaragua: Reagan, Rhetoric and Reality* (New York, 1985); Catholic Institute for International Relations, *Right to Survive: Human Rights in Nicaragua* (London, 1987).

⁴ Edelberto Torres Rivas, *Interpretación del desarrollo centroamericano*, 2nd edition (San José, 1971); E. Torres Rivas, 'Poder nacional y sociedad dependiente: las clases y el Estado en Centroamérica', *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos*, no. 8 (1974); E. Torres Rivas, 'Síntesis histórica del proceso político', in Torres Rivas et al., *Centroamérica Hoy* (Mexico City, 1976). On the 1870–1930 period see also Ralph Lee Woodward (Jr), *Central America: A Nation Divided*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1985).

agrarian and class structures which developed in Honduras after 1870 in order to explain the emergence and comparative success of the military's reformist experiment in containing popular challenges.⁵ While the approach employed here is rooted in such interpretations, this article examines factors other than the specificities of Honduran economic development and class formation in an attempt to explain the nature and dynamics of politics in the 1970s.⁶

Military reformism – a reinterpretation

The coup of 4 December 1972 ushered in a regime, variously referred to as 'populist' or 'reformist'.⁷ Military rule was marked by an initial phase of radicalisation which then gave way to more conservative policies. Changes were driven primarily by shifts in the attitudes of local elites and by the intervention of external actors (principally US capital). However, while acknowledging the centrality of elite politics in determining the nature of military reformism, it is proposed here to concentrate on the effects of the reformist process on the popular movement.

The principal policy innovation of the armed forces was to introduce the most far-reaching programme of redistributive land reform ever attempted in Honduras. Numerous discrete Latin American case studies exist examining the relationship between the rise and fall of *campesino* mobilisation and the political origins and consequences of state policies towards the rural sector.⁸ However, there have been relatively few studies of the land reform implemented after 1972 in Honduras: some authors concentrate on the failure of the measures implemented to achieve the

⁵ Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *The Political Economy of Central America since 1920* (Cambridge, 1987); James Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus: A Political History of Modern Central America* (London, 1988); J. Flora and E. Torres Rivas, 'Sociology of Developing Societies: Historical Bases of Insurgency in Central America', in J. Flora and E. Torres Rivas (eds.), *Sociology of 'Developing Societies': Central America* (London, 1989); Héctor Pérez-Brignoli, *Breve Historia de Centroamérica*, 3rd edition (Madrid, 1990); Leslie Bethell (ed.), *Central America since Independence* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁶ Contemporary analyses which attributed a political logic to certain groups on the basis of their position in the productive sphere provided, at best, only a partial explanation of the reformist experience in Honduras. See, for example, IHDER, *84 Meses de la Reforma Agraria del Gobierno de las Fuerzas Armadas de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 1980); Rafael Del Cid, *Reforma Agraria y Capitalismo Dependiente* (Tegucigalpa, 1977).

⁷ Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*; Leticia Salamón, *Militarismo y Reformismo en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 1982); Mario Posas and Rafael Del Cid, *La Construcción del Sector Público y del Estado Nacional en Honduras, 1876–1979* (San José, 1983).

⁸ See, for example, the excellent study by Leon Zamosc, *The Agrarian Question and the Peasant Movement in Colombia: Struggles of the National Peasant Association, 1967–1981* (Cambridge and New York, 1986); for an examination of the Venezuelan case see John Duncan Powell, *Political Mobilization of the Venezuelan Peasant* (Harvard, 1971); on Chile see Peter Winn and Cristóbal Kay, 'Agrarian Reform and Rural Revolution', *Journal of Latin American Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1974).

military's stated objectives of structural transformation;⁹ others have stressed the cooptive and counter-revolutionary impact of the reform programme;¹⁰ most have tended to infer rather than adequately demonstrate the motives underpinning this case of military-led agrarian reform.

In an article published in 1984, J. Mark Ruhl maintained that the Honduran agrarian structure was a significant contributory factor to the country's relative political stability.¹¹ A welcome contribution to the literature, Ruhl's article, rather than stressing the failure of the agrarian reform and downplaying its impact, attempted to signal the political effect of those limited changes that were implemented. Ruhl noted that the reform had coopted rural protest to a considerable extent, observing that the number of remaining reform beneficiaries in 1980 represented 22% of the estimated number of landless and land-poor present in the mid-1970s, previously the most mobilised sector of the peasantry.¹² In addition, he argued that the significance of the reform was not limited to the number of *campesinos* who benefited directly, but that it was also 'important symbolically because the programme demonstrated the continued flexibility and reform potential of the Honduran government and fostered an "incrementalist" policy orientation among the peasant groups'.¹³

Ruhl's article signalled a number of areas for further analysis which are examined in this paper, namely, the nature of military reformism in Honduras; the extent of its cooptive intent; and the response of the popular movement, particularly the *campesino* movement, to the measures advanced by the armed forces during the 1970s. Whilst accepting that a considerable number of landless peasants were coopted by the process of land distribution, an attempt is made here to explore the reasons why and the manner in which the Honduran *campesino* movement was demobilised in the context of the agrarian reform, identifying factors other than land distribution which contributed to the specificities of Honduran politics during and subsequent to the 1970s. Between 1968 and 1978, the hold exercised over the Honduran state by the dominant elites – largely comprised, up to that point, of landowners and multi-national capital – was challenged, momentarily eclipsed, and ultimately re-established. During the period of military reformism (1972–8), class conflict was mediated and rural protest significantly reduced. The approach adopted

⁹ IHDER, *84 Meses de Reforma Agraria*; Del Cid, *Reforma Agraria y Capitalismo Dependiente*.

¹⁰ James A. Morris, *Honduras: Caudillo Politics and Military Rule* (Boulder and London, 1984); Steven Volk, 'Honduras: On the Border of War', *NACLA Report on the Americas*, vol. 15, no. 6 (1981).

¹¹ Mark J. Ruhl, 'Agrarian Structure and Political Stability in Honduras', *Journal of Inter-American Studies* (1984). ¹² *Ibid.* p. 53. ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 55.

here aims to identify the specific features of political practice in Honduras which facilitated this realignment and contributed to the final outcome. The following analysis therefore sets the experience of military reformism in the context of national historical development. While paying due attention to structural factors, an attempt is made to signal evolving ‘ways of doing politics’ in Honduras and to explore the relation between certain aspects of political culture and the mechanisms and consequences of military rule during the 1970s.

The historical legacy

The agrarian reform introduced by the military after 1972 can be seen, in one sense, as a calculated attempt to stimulate national economic development in a country traditionally characterised by its absence. Economic activity during the Colony had failed to establish even the rudiments of a national infrastructure; difficulty in transporting crops across the mountainous terrain combined with chronic labour shortages impeded the development of agro-exports and export activity was dominated by silver mining.¹⁴ Cattle-ranching activities expanded to a significant extent by the mid-eighteenth century but remained essentially local in character. Following independence in 1823, Republican politics was distinguished by intense regionalism, lack of national integration and almost constant foreign intervention. Lack of domestic capital and recurring military conflict proved persistent obstacles to sustained economic development throughout the nineteenth century.

Inspired by the Guatemalan Liberal Revolution of Miguel García Granados (1871–73) and General Rufino Barrios (1873–85), various attempts to dynamise the national economy were made during the administrations of Marco Aurelio Soto (1876–83) and Luis Bográn (1883–91). However, in contrast to events in Guatemala and El Salvador, Honduras’s Liberal Revolution ultimately consisted of a series of administrative reforms rather than a radical transformation of the productive system. Soto and Bográn were largely unsuccessful in their attempts to stimulate agro-export development – for example, coffee exports took off in the rest of the region but, mainly due to persistent transport difficulties, did not become a major export crop in Honduras until the 1940s. The peculiarities of the contemporary Honduran land tenure system also originated during this period; while communal landholdings were under attack elsewhere in the region, the Honduran *Ley de*

¹⁴ Linda Newson, ‘La Minería de la Plata en la Honduras Colonial’, in Luís René Cáceres, *Lecturas de Historia de Centroamérica* (San José, 1989). On the labour question see Linda Newson, *The Cost of Conquest: Indian Decline in Honduras under Spanish Rule* (Boulder, Colorado, 1986).

Fomento de la Agricultura, passed in 1887, had the effect of strengthening traditional agriculture, extending and protecting the *ejidos* in an attempt to lower wage costs and stimulate agricultural production.¹⁵ The extension and protection of national and communal land-holdings continued throughout the early twentieth century.¹⁶ In 1950 only 48% of Honduran territory was classified as private property, while 31% was national land held by the state, 17% was in *ejidos* and 4% was communal.¹⁷

By the 1880s, Soto, discouraged by the failure of agriculture to develop as a source of capital accumulation, turned to promotion of foreign capital investment in mining activities. This proved highly profitable for foreign investors and a sector of the domestic elite. However, although mineral exports increased, mining failed to stimulate sustained national development. Indeed, it facilitated accelerated dependence on foreign (mainly US) capital, fostered division amongst the Honduran elite and favoured the penetration of external interests into the domestic affairs of the state.¹⁸ Foreign investors cemented links with the local ruling class through a mixture of patronage networks and coercion, employing both methods in order to secure favourable concessions. This pattern was first established during negotiations to build an inter-oceanic railway in the 1850s, subsequently extended through the establishment of numerous mining operations in the 1880s, and consolidated by the turn of the century when foreign interests secured rights to cultivate bananas on the north coast in exchange for promises to construct railways. The impoverished fiscal base of the Honduran state encouraged a high degree

¹⁵ For a discussion of the alienation of the *ejido* in El Salvador see Héctor Lindo Fuentes, *Weak Foundations: The Economy of El Salvador in the Nineteenth Century, 1821–1898* (Los Angeles and London, 1990).

¹⁶ The Agrarian Law of 1924 created additional *ejidos* and reasserted the principal of expropriation of private lands for the purposes of *ejido* formation. Between 1924 and 1939, 34 government decrees were emitted declaring certain zones to be set aside as reserves for family lots in accordance with the Law of 1924. William Stokes, 'The Land Laws of Honduras', *Agricultural History*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1947).

¹⁷ Mario Posas, 'Política Estatal y Estructura Agraria en Honduras (1950–1978)', *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos*, no. 24 (1979), p. 41. It should be stressed that the peculiarities of the land tenure system did not guarantee the poor greatly improved access to subsistence lands. In particular, the mountainous terrain meant that a far smaller percentage of Honduras's national territory was suitable for agricultural purposes – in 1962 it was estimated that 60.8% of the total surface area had a gradient of 40 degrees or more. Organización de los Estados Americanos (OEA), *Informe Oficial de la Misión 105 de Asistencia Técnica Directa a Honduras sobre Reforma Agraria y Desarrollo Agrícola*, vol. 1 (Washington, 1962), p. 110. For a meticulous critique of the 'resource abundance' thesis see William H. Durham, *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War* (Stanford, 1979).

¹⁸ Kenneth V. Finney, *In Quest of El Dorado: Precious Metal Mining and the Modernization of Honduras (1880–1900)* (New York and London, 1987); Kenneth V. Finney, 'Rosario and the Election of 1887', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 59, no. 1 (1979).

of dependence on external sources of finance for such ventures.¹⁹ Under the influence of foreign capital, the politics of favours became a defining feature of the political system, aided and abetted by the weakness of central authority, deep-rooted traditions of *caudillismo*, and the chronic instability which plagued the country for the better part of the century following independence. Domestic political elites came to function as intermediaries for foreign concerns, rarely acting with any sense of unity or national interest.

Although a National and Liberal party existed by the early 1900s, institutional party structures remained weak and factionalism was rife, a state of affairs which endemic civil war and repeated foreign intervention in the first three decades of the century did little to remedy.²⁰ Between 1900 and 1929, the Cuyamel Fruit Company, Vacarro Bros. (which became Standard Fruit in 1926) and the United Fruit Company developed an enclave economy which dominated the north coast of the country. Much of the literature on the banana companies is highly polemical, and frustratingly few detailed assessments exist of the long-term effect of fruit company operations, either on the national economy or on the nature of domestic politics.²¹ However, while the precise impact of the enclave

¹⁹ Between 1867 and 1870 the government of José Mario Medina secured three substantial loans to build an inter-oceanic railway. In the 1860s these had a face value of some \$6 million. However, most of the funds disappeared in commissions, corruption and loan servicing charges and by 1872 the railway project collapsed and Honduras defaulted on her loans. By the mid-1920s, capitalisation of the unpaid interest had left Honduras with an external public debt of nearly £30 million, one of the highest in the world on a *per capita* basis. The debt was not successfully renegotiated until 1926 and only finally discharged in 1953. Alfredo León Gómez, *El Escándalo del Ferrocarril: Ensayo Histórico* (Tegucigalpa, 1978); Delmer G. Ross, *Visionaries and Swindlers: The Development of the Railways in Honduras* (Mobile, Alabama, 1975).

²⁰ Between 1900 and 1933, although there were only fourteen changes of government, 159 military engagements were recorded. Posas and Del Cid, *La Construcción del Sector Público*, p. 81.

²¹ For the fruit company position see Stacy May and Galo Plaza, *The United Fruit Company in Latin America* (New York, 1958); also Thomas P. McCann, *An American Company: The Tragedy of United Fruit* (New York, 1976). For an anti-imperialist critique, Kepner and Soothill's *El Imperio del Banano* (Mexico, 1949) is well documented and still one of the best texts available. More contemporary critiques are to be found in Edmundo Valades, *Los Contratos del Diablo* (Mexico, 1975), and Enrique Flores Valeriano, *La Explotación Bananera en Honduras*, 2nd edition (Tegucigalpa, 1987). For a contemporary critique of the fruit companies effect on Honduras's historical development see E. Torres Rivas, 'El Surgimiento del Enclave Bananero: Su Significación en el Proceso de Desarrollo', in *Interpretación del Desarrollo Social Centroamericano* (San José, 1971). Laínez and Meza take a similarly critical position in 'El Enclave Bananero en la Historia de Honduras', *Estudios Sociales Centroamericanos*, no. 5 (1973). See also Daniel Slutzky and Esther Alonso, *Empresas Transnacionales y Agricultura: El Caso del Enclave Bananero en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 1980). Thomas Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise: The Standard Fruit Company in Latin America* (Louisiana, 1978) remains one of the most

economy requires further exploration, Honduran development was undoubtedly highly conditioned by the overwhelming influence of US capital. The fledgling local industrial sector was dwarfed from its early stages by foreign capital-financed manufacturing and, from the 1910s onwards, the state came increasingly to rely on loans from the fruit companies to cover national budget deficits. The companies vied for influence and advantage, exacerbating local political divisions; traditional *caudillismo* was transformed into a new kind of clientelism dependent on company patronage. The economic dominance (both national and local) of foreign capital and the fractured nature of the domestic polity meant that most attempts to limit the former's power were frustrated. After 1929, when Cuyamel sold out to United Fruit, rivalry among the fruit companies ceased. United Fruit – or '*el pulpo*', as it was known in the region – subsequently consolidated its hegemony over local politics and the embryonic structures of the modern state during the dictatorship of General Carías Andino (1932–48).²² The root, then, of Honduran exception was the country's insertion into the world market and the development of its domestic political apparatus under the aegis not of a national agro-exporting oligarchy, but of US monopoly capital.

The two forces that dominated Honduran politics in the 1970s, trade unions and the military, did not emerge onto the national stage until the 1950s, when the impact of the Cold War ensured US dominance over local and regional developments.²³ Prior to the 1930s the armed forces had functioned essentially as the militia of local *caudillos* but by the end of the 1940s, with the help of US aid, institutional structures were considerably strengthened and a national police force and army were in place.²⁴ A

competent texts on SFCo.'s development. For an examination of the impact of the fruit companies on the development of San Pedro Sula in the early twentieth century see Dario Euraque, *Merchants and Industrialists in Northern Honduras: The Making of a National Bourgeoisie in Peripheral Capitalism, 1870s–1972*, unpubl. PhD diss., Madison, Wisconsin, 1990.

²² Mario Argueta, *Tiburcio Carías – Anatomía de una Época: 1923–1948* (Tegucigalpa, 1989); Marvin Barahona, *La Hegemonía de los Estados Unidos en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 1989).

²³ On the US-backed overthrow of Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954 and Honduras's role in these events see Piero Gleijeses, *Shattered Hope: The Guatemalan Revolution and the US, 1944–54* (Princeton, 1991); Stephen Schlesinger and Stephen Kinzer, *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (New York, 1982); Richard Adams, *Crucifixion by Power* (Austin, 1970); Susanne Jonas, *The Battle for Guatemala: Rebels, Death-Squads and US Power* (Boulder and Oxford, 1991).

²⁴ Steve C. Ropp, 'The Honduran Army in the Socio-Political Evolution of the Honduran State', *The Americas*, no. 4 (1974).

military coup in October 1956 frustrated the continuist attempts of Vice-President Lozano Díaz, replacing him with a military triumvirate which subsequently supervised elections for a new constituent assembly. The country was returned to constitutional rule in 1957. However, the Constitution passed in the same year effectively afforded the armed forces autonomy from the executive. A bilateral military agreement with the USA had been signed in July 1954 and US influence over the military increased in subsequent decades. Between 1950 and 1969, over 1,000 members of the armed forces underwent training either in the USA or at the *Escuela de las Américas* in the Panama Canal Zone. During the same period, the USA dispensed more than \$8,000,000 in military aid to Honduras.²⁵ In October 1963, amidst widespread rumours of United Fruit involvement, the mildly reformist, Alliance for Progress-inspired Liberal administration of Ramón Villeda Morales (1957–63) was overthrown in a coup led by Minister of Defence, Colonel López Arellano.²⁶ With the support of the traditionally conservative, landowner-dominated National Party (PN), López maintained control of government until 1970, becoming President after a PN-dominated constituent assembly rubber-stamped his *de facto* status in 1965.

Trade unions were finally legalised following the 1954 strike on the United Fruit and Standard Fruit plantations, which had immobilised the entire north coast.²⁷ The strike settlement and subsequent formal establishment of trade unions at the height of the Cold War brought Honduran labour firmly within the orbit of the American Federation of Labour (AFL, later to become the American Institute for Free Labour Development, AIFLD) and its Latin American counterpart *Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores* (ORIT). Officially encouraged by the Villeda Morales regime, these US labour organisations set out to marginalise the influence of the Honduran Communist Party (PCH) and promote less radical labour leaders.²⁸ ORIT dominated the United Fruit

²⁵ Robert White, *Structural Factors in Rural Development: The Church and the Peasant in Honduras*, unpubl. PhD diss., Cornell University, 1972, p. 104.

²⁶ *New York Times*, 3 October 1963. Documentary evidence of UFCO's involvement in the 1963 coup is sketchy. However, following the (relatively mild) land reform introduced by the Villeda Morales administration in 1962, the company had brought considerable pressure to bear in the US Senate, ultimately securing significant revision of the law. See Charles D. Brockett, 'Public Policy, Peasants and Rural Development in Honduras' *Journal of Latin American Studies*, no. 19 (1984), p. 71.

²⁷ The best texts on the 1954 strike are: Mario Posas, *Luchas del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño* (San José, 1981); Robert MacCameron, *Bananas, Labor and Politics in Honduras: 1954–1963* (Syracuse, 1983); Víctor Meza, *Historia del Movimiento Obrero Hondureño*, 2nd edition (Tegucigalpa, 1991).

²⁸ On the origins of the PCH see Mario Posas, *Conflictos Agrarios y Organización Campesina: Sobre los Orígenes de las Primeras Organizaciones Campesinas de Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 1981).

workers' union Sindicato de Trabajadores de la Tela Railroad Company (SITRATERCO), formed during the 1954 strike, which in turn held sway within the powerful Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Norteños de Honduras (FESITRANH – established 1957). In December 1958 ORIT extended its influence southwards, sponsoring the formation of the Federación Central de Sindicatos Libres de Honduras (FECESITLIH) to counter PCH influence among trade unions in Tegucigalpa. At the behest of AIFLD, the Instituto de Estudios Sindicales de Centro América (IESCA) was set up in Tela, Atlántida in March 1963, making Honduras a centre for the export of 'free and democratic' trade unionism throughout the isthmus. In 1964, ORIT sponsored the formation of the first national trade union confederation, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Honduras (CTH). Union leaders, including SITRATERCO's first General Secretary, Céleo González, and CTH President, Víctor Artiles, were sent on ORIT training courses in the USA and Puerto Rico. Generous US-government funding meant that the material benefits offered by the ORIT unions far outweighed those which other unions could offer. It also ensured that officially-favoured union *caudillos* such as González, Artiles and *campesino* leader Reyes Rodríguez Arévalo were able to maintain their hold over the movement for nearly two decades. The existence of *caudillismo* within the trade union and *campesino* movement, then, is best understood – like *charrismo* in Mexico – as the product of organised labour's historical development and the nature of its relationship to the state. In the case of Honduras, the intervention of external actors provides the key to understanding the character of the movement.

However, challenges to ORIT's hegemony developed throughout the late 1950s and 1960s. Independent rural organisation grew in the late 1950s in response to a number of factors: after 1957 the fruit companies laid off nearly half their work-force (a consequence of flood damage and the introduction of technological innovations) and former plantation workers were forced into the subsistence agriculture sector, radicalising *campesino* organisation in the process. This occurred within a context of new agro-export development, such as cotton, beef and sugar, in the 1950s and 1960s which stimulated encroachment on *campesino* plots through illegal enclosure, a shift to cash rents and worsening land distribution ratios. By 1965 an estimated 63,120 rural families – 26% of the total rural population – were landless.²⁹ Demands for land rather than

²⁹ CEPAL-FAO-OIT-SIECA-IICA, *Tenencia de la Tierra y Desarrollo Rural en Centroamérica* (San José, 1973), p. 70. It should be noted that this figure included some 16,000 banana plantation workers. Between 1952 and 1966 there was a 20% increase in the number of *minifundios*, but the area of land occupied by this sector shrunk by approximately

for improvements in wages and conditions made the mechanics of ORIT's 'bread and butter' unionism harder to apply in the rural sector, and by the early 1960s a more militant politics was in evidence.³⁰ However, following the 1963 military coup, the radical PCH-influenced FENACH (Federación Nacional de Campesinos de Honduras) was dissolved, its influence subsequently eclipsed by the ORIT-backed ANACH (Asociación Nacional de Campesinos de Honduras), the latter led by Reyes Rodríguez and initially established through the sponsorship of AIFLD and the Villeda Morales government in 1962.³¹ Yet despite the repression which followed the coup, independent *campesino* organisations regained strength throughout the 1960s as conflicts over land sharpened. While the PCH began slowly to rebuild their traditional stronghold within the north coast plantation unions, in the south and later in the east of the country, *ligas campesinas* – inspired, initially, by the community development programmes of the Catholic church and, later, by regional Christian Democrat organisers – had grown to the point where, by the end of the decade, they constituted a direct challenge to ORIT's ideological control.

Exhaustion of the model

The military's reformist experiment was ushered in by a second coup led by General López Arellano on 4 December 1972. This was supported by a unique alliance which developed over the period 1968–72 between ORIT-dominated organised labour, local manufacturing capital and the military. The fast-growing industrial sector became increasingly vocal in its opposition to the terms of Honduras's integration to the Central American Common Market (CACM), the effect of which was to flood Honduras with cheap regionally manufactured imports. As macro-economic indicators worsened after 1965, local manufacturers producing for the fledgling domestic market demanded a revision of official policy towards regional integration and greater state intervention and protection. The stranglehold of the PN on national and local government after 1965

25%, reducing the mean average size of a *minifundio* from 5.5 manzanas in 1952 to 3.5 manzanas by 1965. República de Honduras, *Censo Agropecuario* (Tegucigalpa, 1952 and 1965/6).

³⁰ See Martiniano Lombraña, *Historia de las Organizaciones Campesinas en Honduras* (La Ceiba, 1989); Posas, *Conflictos Agrarios*; Allan Fajardo, 'Conversación con Clemente Gutiérrez: Apuntes para la Historia del Movimiento Campesino Hondureño', *Presencia Universitaria*, Tegucigalpa, July 1977.

³¹ In 1965 a small guerrilla *foco* led by PCH militants from FENACH was wiped out at El Jute, Department of Atlántida. The fiasco of El Jute led to the split of the PCH in 1967 when the Maoist Partido Comunista de Honduras – Marxista-Leninista (PCH-ML) was set up. For a first-hand account see Luis García, *El Jute* (Tegucigalpa, 1991).

led pro-reform industrialists (often themselves allied with the progressive wing of the PL) to use private sector organisations such as the San Pedro Sula Chamber of Commerce (CCIC) to lobby in pursuit of their interests. Doctrinal debate within the left as to the revolutionary potential of this sector of industrial capital became increasingly polarised during this period, indeed the 'national bourgeoisie' question divided the left and was to have significant tactical and strategic consequences for the 1970s.³²

Opposition to the López-PN regime increased after the municipal elections of March 1968.³³ The PL was deeply divided and failed to capitalise on the blatant manipulation of the poll by the PN, propelling government opponents towards other, more corporate forms of representation in order to voice their dissent. A general strike called by FESITRANH in San Pedro Sula on 19 September 1968 in protest at the implementation of the regional San José Protocols united the more progressive elements of the north coast industrialists with the powerful labour organisations, CTH and FESITRANH.³⁴ The violent response to the strike by the government cemented the emergent alliance between ORIT-led labour and industrial capital, signalling a growing rejection of the government's exclusive and authoritarian style.

Conflict within the rural sector increased throughout the decade. Hopes had been raised by the agrarian reform law passed by Villeda Morales in 1962 which, although limited in scope, had established the principle that illegally enclosed national and *ejido* land should be recovered for the purposes of agrarian reform. However, expectations were frustrated when action on the law all but ceased after the 1963 coup. In response to increasing protest and *de facto* land occupations, López appointed agronomist Rigoberto Sandoval Corea to head the Instituto Nacional Agrario (INA) in 1967, granting him considerable latitude in agrarian policy.³⁵ Under Sandoval, INA began to defend *campesinos* being evicted from common land and, under the terms of the 1962 legislation, to survey and recover illegally enclosed national and *ejido* land for allocation to agrarian reform beneficiaries. In an overtly populist move, López decreed

³² The PCH favoured cultivating this sector as part of a progressive nationalist front led by workers and *campesinos*. The PCH-ML rejected this strategy. On the doctrinal debate see PCH, *Línea General Política del PCH*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1975); Longino Becerra, *Revista de la Universidad*, no. 7 (Tegucigalpa, 1973); Antonio Murga Frassinetti, 'La Burguesía Nacional: una Falacia', *Presencia Universitaria* (Tegucigalpa, Oct. 1975); PCH-ML, *Programa: Segundo Congreso Nacional*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1975).

³³ The official result allocated 35 seats alone to the PL out of a total of 380 contested municipalities.

³⁴ The San José Protocols were introduced in an attempt to shore up falling government revenues and imposed a 30% increase on import tariffs, cuts in the commercial supply of credit and additional consumer taxes on a wide range of goods.

³⁵ Personal interview with Rigoberto Sandoval Corea, Tegucigalpa, 27 Nov. 1990.

that the army was not to evict *campesinos* occupying land without the express instructions of INA, thus depriving local landowners of their traditional means of response.³⁶ The latter fought back, abandoning their traditional parochial concerns to lobby the government for changes to the agrarian legislation through the increasingly militant Federación Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos de Honduras (FENAGH), formed in 1966.

After 1967 INA began to award land to groups of *campesinos*, promoting cooperative forms of organisation amongst beneficiaries. This had the effect of further stimulating rural organisation.³⁷ Competition between ANACH and the *ligas campesinas* also led to an upsurge in land occupations: ANACH, previously concentrated in the north, extended its operations to the south of the country after 1968 with the encouragement and support of FESITRANH. In 1970, organisers of the *ligas* formed a national *campesino* organisation, the Unión Nacional de Campesinos (UNC), which was, from its inception, closely linked to the recently formed Christian Democrat party (PDCH). In the same year the PDCH also encouraged the formation of the Confederación General de Trabajadores (CGT), a nation-wide trade union federation which, although much smaller than the CTH, came to constitute an additional challenge to ORIT-dominated labour. In addition, INA sponsored the creation of the small but officially favoured Federación de Cooperativas de la Reforma Agraria de Honduras (FECORAH) in 1970, which presented yet another challenge to ANACH in the rural sector. Increased competition for rural allegiances forced a radicalisation of the position of ORIT-aligned union leaders who were struggling to maintain their dominant position in the labour movement.

The 1969 war with El Salvador generated a vigorous nationalism which was to characterise politics in the ensuing period, providing a basis for unity between military, labour and a sector of industrial capital. The war was largely the result of worsening conflicts over land on both sides of the border and the tensions generated by accelerated migration of Salvadorean subsistence farmers to Honduras in the late 1960s, encouraged by a Salvadorean oligarchy resolutely opposed to any domestic land redistribution. There were approximately 300,000 Salvadorean immigrants living in Honduras by 1969, or one in every eight persons living in Honduras.³⁸ As conflicts over land worsened, Salvadorean *campesinos* were blamed by FENAGH for illegally occupying national and *ejido* lands.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Membership figures of the rural unions are notoriously difficult to calculate accurately; one authoritative source puts the total number at 70,000 by 1972; White, *Structural Factors in Rural Development*, p. 119.

³⁸ William H. Durham, *Scarcity and Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War* (Stanford, 1979), p. 59.

Hostilities were also fuelled by the influx of cheap Salvadorean manufactures to Honduras which, by 1967, were proving acutely prejudicial to local industry. The eviction and expulsion of thousands of Salvadorean squatters in May and June 1969 paved the way to military conflict and four days of fierce fighting in July 1969 left an estimated 3,000–4,000 dead on the Honduran side, approximately 2,000 of whom were civilians. The manifest incapacity of the military high command and the extraordinary mobilisation of the civilian population in support of the war effort transformed the relationship between junior officers and the rural population. Those corrupt and inefficient senior officers who had mismanaged a disastrous campaign were subsequently (and astutely) purged by López Arellano, in turn strengthening the hand of the younger officers who had proved themselves on the battlefield.

After the war, López also moved closer to a tacit alliance with the CTH and the San Pedro Sula Chamber of Commerce. In response largely to their joint demands, a bipartisan PN–PL Government of National Unity was installed in 1971 but this failed to meet demands for reform and inspired little confidence, unable as it was to break the pattern of factionalism and corruption which had become the hallmark of local party politics. The traditional system of political representation seemed unable to extend to include emergent social groups. Conflicts over land continued throughout 1971 and 1972 and became particularly acute after the February 1972 massacre by troops of seven UNC affiliates occupying land at La Talanquera, Department of Olancho.³⁹ The government proved incapable of restoring a minimum level of order in the countryside throughout 1972 and in December, following the threat of a massive ANACH-led march of landless *campesinos* on the capital, the government was removed in a bloodless coup led by General López Arellano.

Military reformism in Honduras

The Honduran variant of military reformism in the 1970s built on traditions of *caudillismo*, clientelism and patronage politics which, it has been suggested here, were intrinsic to the development of the political system in Honduras.⁴⁰ In this sense then, the agrarian reform introduced

³⁹ Jorge Reynaldo Amador, *Los Sucesos de la Talanquera Enfocados por la Prensa Hondureña*, unpubl. Licenciatura diss., Universidad Nacional de Honduras, 1975.

⁴⁰ Little has been written on the role of patronage and clientelism in the formation of the Central American states. There is, however, a wealth of literature on Mexico: for two stimulating discussions see Susan Kaufman Purcell, 'Mexico: Clientelism, Corporatism and Political Stability', in S. N. Eisenstadt and René Lemarchand, *Political Clientelism, Patronage and Development* (London, 1981); Guillermo De la Peña, 'Local and Regional Power in Mexico', *Texas Papers on Mexico*, Working Paper, University of Texas at Austin, Paper No. 88-01 (undated). For an alternative, neo-Weberian interpretation of

after 1972 was a discrete experience but one rooted in an historical continuum of political patterns and adaptations, of ways of doing politics. Mark B. Rosenberg has noted that politics in Honduras have long been characterised by their non-institutionalised and personalistic nature; 'It is a system of relations based upon shifting coalitions that link rulers and would-be rulers with patrons, associations, clients, supporters and rivals.'⁴¹ Clientelism – the principal mechanism through which the discourse and practice of military reformism were articulated – constituted, then, both political structure and political culture. Patron–client relations had long ensured that even the most unequal relations of power delivered some benefit to the weaker party and this, in part, explains their pervasiveness. Between 1972 and 1978, patron–client relationships were restructured, recreated and selectively extended in an attempt to incorporate emergent social actors on the terms of those controlling the balance of power within the reformist state, providing the latter with a limited but nonetheless significant degree of legitimacy.

The presence of a significant reformist strand in the Honduran military distinguished it from its counterparts in Guatemala and El Salvador, whose historic function was to protect the interests of the landed oligarchy, making the advancement of anything more than the most cosmetic of reforms by the armed forces in either country a highly remote possibility. López Arellano was acutely aware of the need to defuse *campesino* discontent and his populist inclinations were, at least in part, attributable to his appreciation of the benefits to be reaped if that discontent could be remoulded into political support. However, it would be a mistake overly to impute logic and coherence to the programme implemented after 1972. The first *promoción* of graduate officers of the Escuela Militar Francisco Morazán, the main force backing the reformist project within the military, were a heterogenous assortment. Generational differences with the older *oficiales de línea* and their experience of the 1969 war had helped to strengthen their sense of corporate identity, yet they were more bound together by conjunctural circumstance and professional *esprit de corps* than by any ideological unity or preconceived agenda for reform.⁴² The military's assurances in 1972 that they would advance the

patronage politics see Nicholas Abercrombie and Stephen Hill, 'Paternalism and Patronage', *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1967).

⁴¹ Mark B. Rosenberg, 'Narcos and Políticos: The Politics of Drug Trafficking in Honduras', *Journal of Inter-American Studies and World Affairs* (Summer–Fall, 1988), p. 146.

⁴² Personal interviews with members of first *promoción militar*, Tegucigalpa, March/April 1993. This point is also made in Schulz and Sundloff-Schulz, *The United States, Honduras, and the Crisis in Central America*, p. 47.

country towards genuine development through structural reform were not entirely without precedent in the region; such a path was also advocated by the military in Peru (1968–75) and in Panama (1968–81). Increasing popular participation through redistributive economic measures was a common theme of these regimes and, in this sense, they were inclusionary. However, they also invariably imposed ‘revolutions from above’, characterised by authoritarianism and top-down relations between state and civil society. For the armed forces in much of Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, order came to be seen as contingent on progress and definitions of national security were extended to include national socio-economic development.⁴³ By 1972, the ascendant sector within the Honduran military was willing to accept a new project for national unity and security based on reform of the productive structure. However, the *oficiales académicos* of the first *promoción* were generally more concerned with professionalisation of the armed forces and individual advancement than with the finer details of socio-economic policy.⁴⁴ The armed forces, then, did not take power in December 1972 with a clear sense of purpose; rather, their political programme was defined by the shifting balance of forces during the ensuing years of military rule.

Three weeks after the coup an emergency measure, DL No. 8, was introduced. This gave landless *campesinos* the right (subject to INA’s approval) temporarily to occupy national and *ejido* land. It also introduced a controversial clause forcing the rental of idle privately owned land to INA for allocation to landless beneficiaries. DL No. 8 remained in force for two years while a new agrarian reform law was drawn up and land occupations all but ceased during this period (those occupying land without official sanction were explicitly excluded from beneficiary status). Little privately owned land was in fact settled under the terms of DL No. 8; most of the land allocated to landless *campesinos* was either national or *ejido*. However, many of these plots had previously been illegally enclosed and their forcible appropriation by the state was significant, demonstrating to the rural poor the government’s resolve to confront landed interests on their behalf at a time when the demands of *campesinos* elsewhere in the isthmus were being, often violently, repressed.

In December 1973, a year after the coup, the Plan Nacional de Desarrollo (PND) was announced. This outlined a programme for national development based on rational exploitation of natural resources, an enlarged role for the state in the economy and industrial development

⁴³ Frederick M. Nunn, *The Time of the Generals: Latin American Professional Militarism in World Perspective* (Lincoln and London, 1992).

⁴⁴ Personal interviews with members of the first *promoción militar*, Tegucigalpa, March/April 1993.

centred on production of basic consumption goods for the domestic market. Redistributive agrarian reform and nationalisation of public and private forestry resources were advocated on the grounds that such measures would achieve not only increased economic efficiency but also greater social justice.⁴⁵ The new agrarian reform law (DL No. 170) was not finally agreed until December 1974 and, like much of the legislation introduced under the López administration, was largely devised by civilian members of the cabinet and advisers rather than by military officers themselves. The declared aim of the new law was to abolish the *latifundio-minifundio*, strengthen efficient capitalist agriculture and promote cooperative forms of production among reform beneficiaries. Ceilings were set on land-holdings and detailed criteria of what constituted 'efficient' land exploitation were specified; holdings in excess of the ceilings or failing to meet the criteria set out would be subject to expropriation. Land-holdings cultivated with certain agro-export crops, including bananas, coffee, sugar and African palm, were exempt from expropriation, irrespective of size. In addition, the law outlawed indirect forms of tenure, definitively expropriated land previously settled under DL No. 8 and ordered those illegally occupying *ejido* and national land immediately to return it to INA.⁴⁶

Initially, popular support for the regime was considerable; despite mounting opposition from both the private sector and interests elsewhere in the region, the government appeared committed to taking action in favour of the impoverished rural majority. (Nicaraguan President Tacho Somoza was apocryphally reported to have offered López work as a *peón* on one of his *haciendas*, implying that pursuit of radical reforms would result in an ignominious end to his *compadre's* political career).⁴⁷ López and his ministers assiduously cultivated the support of organised labour, maintaining close links with the leaders of pro-ORIT labour unions. On 1 May 1973, the cabinet, along with the entire Consejo Superior de las Fuerzas Armadas, attended the May Day celebrations in San Pedro Sula where López addressed the crowd, calling for unity between the armed forces and the popular sector.⁴⁸ The following year, leaders of the CTH, ANACH and FESITRANH mobilised their affiliates in support of the PND (albeit not without substantial government subsidy of their transport costs).⁴⁹ The PCH was able to operate relatively openly after the coup and lent what it termed '*apoyo crítico*' to the new regime: prominent party

⁴⁵ Oswaldo López Arellano, 'Plan Nacional de Desarrollo: Conceptos Fundamentales', speech reproduced in INA-PROCCARA, *Estrategia de Desarrollo y Reforma Agraria - La Opción Hondureña* (Tegucigalpa, 1975).

⁴⁶ República de Honduras, *Decreto-Ley No. 170* (Tegucigalpa, 1975).

⁴⁷ Personal interviews, March and April 1993.

⁴⁸ *El Día*, 2 May 1973.

⁴⁹ *Tiempo*, 14 Jan. 1974.

members, while remaining sceptical about López Arellano's motives, urged the popular movement to strengthen its influence within the government and build a broad mass front to support the positive elements of the PND.⁵⁰ Organisations with Christian Democrat links, such as the CGT and UNC, were more openly critical of the military regime. However, in practice they also lent their conditional support to certain aspects of government policy, such as the agrarian reform, particularly as the latter increasingly came under attack from the right.⁵¹ Opposition to the military's reforms grew after 1973 and in 1974 the private sector organisation, COHEP (Consejo Hondureño de la Empresa Privada), stepped up its criticism of the proposed agrarian reform after landowner interests displaced the pro-reform sector of industrial capital from the COHEP leadership. The agrarian reform had a considerable mobilising effect on FENAGH, which strengthened its internal organisation and greatly increased membership. By 1974, increasingly vociferous FENAGH leaders publicly accused the López government of being 'soft on communism'.⁵²

Both the PND and the accompanying official rhetoric had announced the government's intention to reduce Honduran dependence on banana exports.⁵³ In April 1974, as part of the Unión de Países Exportadores de Banano (UPEB) initiative to procure more favourable terms for producer countries, the Honduran government raised the banana export tax to the new rate of a dollar a box.⁵⁴ This met with considerable resistance: competition between Standard Fruit (since 1967 part of Castle and Cook Corporation) and United Brands (which had absorbed the Honduran operations of United Fruit) was acute by the early 1970s; United Fruit was financially overstretched and fighting for its survival and Standard was anxious to consolidate its market advantage.⁵⁵ Neither company was disposed to pay increased export taxes to the Honduran government and used all means at their disposal to try and force a reduction of the levy. A war of attrition ensued, Standard Fruit drastically cutting back their exports from Honduras, dumping fruit in the sea and laying off hundreds of workers. Domestic opinion polarised, the right calling for the tax to be revoked, trade union and government officials defending the increased

⁵⁰ See comments made by Rigoberto Padilla Rush, *El Día*, 2 May 1973.

⁵¹ *Tiempo*, Tegucigalpa, 10 April and 27 Nov. 1973.

⁵² *Tiempo*, 2 March 1974.

⁵³ Although the importance of bananas in Honduras's export profile had steadily declined since the 1940s, they still accounted for 42.6% of total export revenues in 1968. Frank Ellis, *Las Transnacionales del Banano en Centroamérica* (San José, 1983), p. 405.

⁵⁴ For more on UPEB see *ibid.*

⁵⁵ McCann, *An American Company*, pp. 187–9. In 1973 Dole held 45% of the US market compared to United Brands 35%. Karnes, *Tropical Enterprise*, p. 294.

rate, their nationalist sentiment galvanised by the companies' strong-arm tactics.

However, the dollar-a-box tax ultimately proved short-lived and was reduced to 25 cents by presidential decree on 23 August 1974. The official explanation was that Honduras could no longer maintain the dollar rate, given that the other member states of UPEB had not taken similar steps towards uniform introduction of a higher duty. However, it later transpired that United Brands had bribed senior members of the Honduran government with over one million dollars to reduce the tax.⁵⁶ The fruit companies' traditional mechanisms of securing official compliance seemed as efficacious as ever, albeit more costly than earlier in the century when banana magnate Samuel Zemurray had declared that in Honduras a mule was worth more than a Congressman.⁵⁷ López Arellano sealed his own fate by refusing access to his foreign bank accounts to a governmental commission set up to investigate the allegations of foul play, and was subsequently removed from power in an internal military coup on 22 April 1975.

For a brief period in the wake of the 'bananagate' scandal, it appeared as if the pro-reform lieutenant-colonels of the first *promoción* had gained the upper hand. However, the exigencies of military hierarchy and internal unity had led them to appoint General Melgar Castro to replace López as Head of State. Melgar, veteran of the 1969 war, was a conservative officer who had long subtly opposed the more reformist elements within the armed forces. The younger officers initially hoped they could control him through the supreme military decision-making body, the Consejo Superior de las Fuerzas Armadas, but the heterogenous nature of the so-called Movimiento de Oficiales Jóvenes meant that they failed to consolidate their position and the advantage within the government subsequently shifted to the right. After mid-1975, government policy became more conservative and the strength and influence of anti-reform elements steadily increased. The PN and PL increased their profile, engaging in an informal alliance with commercial and landowning sectors to lobby for a return to constitutional rule. In May 1975 Melgar announced that the military would return the country to elected government; however, conspicuously perhaps, a date for the transition was not set.⁵⁸

The new administration dragged its feet on implementation of the

⁵⁶ 'Informe de la Comisión Investigadora al Pueblo Hondureño', *Tiempo*, 16 May 1975. See also Flores Valeriano, *La Explotación Bananera en Honduras*.

⁵⁷ Edward Boatman-Guillan, 'In Honduras a Mule is Worth More than a Congressman', in Nancy Peckham and Annie Street, *Honduras: Portrait of a Captive Nation* (New York, 1985), pp. 38-43.

⁵⁸ *Tiempo*, 2 May 1975.

agrarian reform law, prompting *campesino* groups to mobilise in protest. In June 1975, as UNC affiliates were preparing for a mass march on the capital, several *campesinos* belonging to the UNC were massacred by troops in Juticalpa, Olancho and two priests, two women and six *campesinos* were abducted, tortured and murdered at the nearby *hacienda*, Los Horcones.⁵⁹ Whilst these atrocities were officially attributed to ultramontane elements in the traditional ranching stronghold of Olancho, the subsequent crackdown on Christian Democrat organisations throughout the country signalled the Melgar government's growing determination to quell rural agitation. The murder of the priests, along with allegations from the right that the clergy were fomenting rebellion in the countryside, led the Catholic church to pull back from its active support of the *campesino* movement. The belligerence of the UNC, the most independent of the rural unions, was significantly lessened by this backlash.

Opposition to the agrarian reform continued to mount, and by October 1976 FENAGH and COHEP threatened all-out investment and production strikes if significant changes to the legislation were not conceded.⁶⁰ A concerted campaign by the right eventually succeeded in hounding out the more progressive civilian elements of the government, accusing them of orchestrating an '*escalada comunista*' in Honduras.⁶¹ Throughout 1976, the agrarian reform became increasingly bureaucratized, sympathetic public officials replaced by appointees who slowed down implementation. One notable effect of the reformist process was to transform the nature of the dominant class in Honduras: galvanised by the threat of expropriation, a rural elite previously dominated by an intense regionalism became a formidable power block which employed anti-reformist discourse to considerable unifying effect. Those sectors of the private sector initially favouring reform increasingly turned against the government's agrarian programme after 1975, subsequently reaccommodating themselves within the anti-reform camp.⁶² In December 1976, after a last-ditch attempt to regain their power over the high command via an ill-conceived coup resulted in failure, the increasingly marginalised reformist officers of the first *promoción* were removed from the command structures of the armed forces. Military reformism, which had never been a coherent project in Honduras, collapsed as much due to its own internal contradictions as to external pressures.

In contrast to the López administration, the Melgar government began to adopt an openly anti-labour stance. After 1974 the AIFLD *caudillos* were increasingly challenged within the trade union movement. Both the PCH

⁵⁹ *Tiempo*, 26 June 1975 and 24 July 1975. ⁶⁰ *La Prensa*, 26 October 1976.

⁶¹ *La Prensa*, 19 October 1976.

⁶² See the reaction to the CAHSA sugar mill expropriations, *Tiempo*, 20 July 1976.

and the independent left had extended their influence within the two largest unions. SUTRASFCO and SITRATERCO, which between them held the majority of votes in the powerful northern federation, FESITRANH. The reaction against the old trade union bureaucracy was more the result of an increasingly mobilised and articulate rank and file's growing dissatisfaction with a corrupt and conservative leadership than a function of PCH efficacy; nonetheless, the threat to traditional mechanisms of labour control was evident. A concerted campaign by the US fruit companies, AIFLD and the government against the more radical elements of the labour movement took place in the early months of 1977. In February the flagship agrarian reform settlement in Isletas, where PCH influence was significant, was the subject of direct military intervention by the IV Infantry Battalion at La Ceiba, its leaders imprisoned and a new *junta directiva* more sympathetic to Standard Fruit (the main buyer of Isletas bananas) 'elected' under military supervision.⁶³ After repeated and unsuccessful attempts by Artilles and his stalwarts to regain control of the SITRATERCO and SUTRASFCO by mounting parallel 'democratic fronts', SUTRASFCO was the subject of direct military intervention in March. The militant executive led by Napoleón Acevedo was deposed and subsequently replaced with a more supine leadership.⁶⁴ A bitter confrontation the following May at the FESITRANH conference led to division of the federation but AIFLD, with the support of the military government, ultimately maintained its control.

Decomposition of the military government gathered pace towards the end of 1977, with reports of corruption and drug-trafficking among the officer corps becoming increasingly frequent. After an abortive right-wing coup attempt in October (allegedly linked to Nicaragua's Somoza), the Melgar regime moved closer to its Central American counterparts, in February 1978 initiating joint operations with the Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional against Sandinista guerillas operating in the border region.⁶⁵ Melgar himself was lobbying for the PN presidential nomination and his continuist ambitions, combined with the increasingly repressive and ineffectual nature of his administration, alienated the rest of the officer corps. The regime was eventually overthrown in a palace coup in August 1978 led by Head of the Armed Forces, General Policarpo Paz García. The Paz government subsequently developed closer links with the PN and

⁶³ Porfirio Hernández, *Historia de Isletas* (unpublished; undated). Hernández was one of the leaders at Isletas imprisoned following the military intervention in February 1977. See also Mario Posas, *La Autogestión en el Agro Hondureño: El Caso de la Empresa Asociativa Campesina 'Isletas' (EACI)* (Tegucigalpa, 1992).

⁶⁴ NACLA, *Report on the Americas*, vol. xi, no. 8, 1977.

⁶⁵ *Tiempo*, 31 October 1977; *Inforpress*, no. 248, 6 March 1978.

right-wing economic elites. The agrarian reform had all but disappeared from the government's agenda by 1978. While this was primarily a result of shifts within both the armed forces and local elites, it also indicated the strategic failure of pro-reform sectors to recapture the political initiative. In order to understand the reasons behind this failure, the way in which disarticulation occurred within the popular movement is examined in the following section.

Effects on the popular movement

The divisions which split the Honduran popular movement after 1976 were attributable to many factors, amongst them the military's tactics for controlling popular protest, long-standing imperialist intervention in local labour organisations, emerging divisions within the Honduran left and a growing rejection by many grass roots activists within the labour movement of the traditional clientelist *modus operandi*. State-labour relations had been characterised by a pattern of limited repression and cooption since the 1950s; however, between 1972 and 1975 the inclusionary nature of state policy towards a sector of organised labour (principally that allied to AIFLD) engendered a series of contradictions which ultimately proved highly destructive for the labour movement as a whole.

Government agrarian reform policy favoured some *campesino* groups above others. Beneficiaries organised in the officially sponsored federation of cooperatives, FECORAH, received preferential access to land and financial resources: of the total amount of land suitable for agricultural production distributed up to December 1978, 32% was allocated to ANACH affiliates, 32% to FECORAH, 16% to the UNC and 20% to independent groups;⁶⁶ however, while the 32% allocated to ANACH was divided between 518 groups, land allocated to FECORAH was shared between only 150 cooperatives, implying a considerably more advantageous land-to-group ratio.⁶⁷ Indeed, of nearly 175,000 hectares distributed by 1978, some 50,000 hectares were given to the 5,000 members of FECORAH, while a little over 53,000 hectares was shared between over 12,000 ANACH affiliates.⁶⁸ In addition, FECORAH cooperatives, dedicated primarily to agro-export cultivation, received preferential access

⁶⁶ Instituto Nacional Agrario, *Resumen de Datos Generales del Sector Reformado*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1978), p. 22.

⁶⁷ Instituto Nacional Agrario, *Listado de Grupos Campesinos Beneficiarios de la Reforma Agraria*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1978).

⁶⁸ Approximately 6,900 UNC members received some 31,000 hectares, while independent groups (numbering some 5,400) received 35,000 hectares. The EACs (less than 2,000 members) received nearly 5,000 hectares; Instituto Nacional Agrario, *Plan Operativo Anual*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1978), p. 4.

to state credit and infrastructural support, which favoured commercial crops above subsistence agriculture.⁶⁹ Beneficiaries affiliated to the largest organisation, ANACH, received some official credit from the Banco de Fomento (BANAFOM) via the structures of their union, which continued to depend on ORIT and AIFLD for political and financial backing. However, the UNC – which was not granted *personería jurídica* for nearly a decade – was denied access to official credit and was therefore dependent on church-based development programmes and international Christian Democrat organisations to provide credit and services to its agrarian reform settlements (known as *ligas campesinas*).⁷⁰ The funding relationship between external actors, national *campesino* leaderships and local agrarian reform settlements was complex and often proved the source of considerable friction. Overall, the effect of these linkages was a negative one, fostering dependence of the beneficiary groups (both political and economic), reinforcing verticalist channels of communication within the rural unions, and contributing to inter and intra-organisational rivalry and mistrust. In addition to existing ideological differences between the organisations, then, funding arrangements as they developed throughout the decade were a significant factor militating against unity within the Honduran *campesino* movement as a whole.

All three *campesino* organisations opposed, to varying degrees, official plans for the organisation of reform beneficiaries, referred to in the 1975 agrarian reform law as *empresas asociativas campesinas* (EACs). These *empresas* were constituted as legally autonomous units and therefore able to establish direct relationships with state credit and service agencies rather than, as in the case of the other settlements (ANACH groups, UNC *ligas*, FECORAH cooperatives), being reliant on their parent unions to act as a channel for credit and inputs. *Campesino* leaders accused the military of wishing to foment the dependence of agrarian reform settlements on the state, a charge consistently levelled by the leadership of the UNC which, by the mid-1970s, had adopted the Christian Democrat party's highly critical stance towards the military government. However, while such a criticism was not without validity, it is also worthy of note that success of the EAC model would significantly have reduced the instrumentalist logic for joining a rural union – the obtaining of land, credit, etc. – weakening the clientelistic, albeit highly functional, link existing between *campesino* leaders and their grassroots supporters. Perhaps this partly explains the vociferous reaction of the national *campesino*

⁶⁹ See Instituto Nacional Agrario, *Plan Operativo Anual: 1977 and Plan Operativo Anual 1978*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1977 and 1978).

⁷⁰ For more detail see Benjamín Santos, *Datos para el Estudio del Movimiento Social Cristiano* (Tegucigalpa, 1981).

leadership to the EACs, which in any case never constituted more than a small proportion of the reform sector overall.⁷¹

The opposition of ANACH's leadership to the *empresas asociativas* was partly explicable in terms of the internal politics of the organisation itself. From 1974 onwards, a number of dissident groups within ANACH, some close to the PCH, made repeated attempts to wrest control of the organisation from the pro-ORIT clique controlled by Reyes Rodríguez, accusing the latter of corruption, undemocratic practices and of having been bought off by the military regime.⁷² These sectors were particularly identified with support for the EACs, indeed in 1974 ANACH groups under the leadership of Fausto Orellana Luna were among the first to set up a network of *empresas asociativas* (known as an *empresa asociativa campesina del area*) at Guaymas in the north. Although a large number of ANACH's grass-roots affiliates initially supported the formation of *empresas asociativas*, the majority of the national leadership opposed the project, threatened as they were by the unprecedented degree of independence the EAC structure promised to afford their members at a time when their own hegemony was under attack within the organisation. The attempt to challenge Reyes Rodríguez's leadership at the 1974 annual conference proved unsuccessful; Reyes used all the means at his disposal to maintain his control of the presidency and dissenters were subject to threats, intimidation and expulsion.⁷³ At the time, AIFLD involvement in the expulsions was alleged by many within the ANACH regional leadership.⁷⁴ Reyes maintained his hold over ANACH throughout the decade. His tactics included the formation of pacts with regional ANACH leaders, many of whom operated as virtual *caciques* in their areas, marshalling the votes of their affiliates for national congress. Other methods frequently used ranged from petty bribery to the wholesale purchase of delegates and votes. Confrontations were repeated and by 1978 divisions within the leadership came to resemble open warfare. The military government of Policarpo Paz García continued to lend its support to Reyes: despite the ill-disguised use of fraud in the 1978 leadership elections and the withdrawal of nearly half the delegates from the congress, the Ministry of Labour refused to order a re-run of the ballot, indicating the regime's disposition to play one faction off against another.

⁷¹ In 1978 50% of land allocated under the agrarian reform was organised in cooperatives, compared to 4% in EACs; Instituto Nacional Agrario, *Resumen de Datos Generales*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1978), p. 22.

⁷² Personal interviews with Pedro Brizuela, San Pedro Sula, 30 March 1993; Allan Fajardo, Managua, 20 March 1993; and Oscar Aníbal Puerto, Tegucigalpa, 5 April 1993.

⁷³ *Tiempo*, 4 December 1974.

⁷⁴ Personal interview with Víctor Calix, Tegucigalpa, 2 November 1990. At the time of interviewing Calix was president of ANACH.

In 1980, Reyes was finally replaced by another ANACH *caudillo*, Julián Méndez, who enjoyed the joint distinction of AIFLD backing (Reyes having finally been decided *persona non grata*) and significantly greater support amongst the grassroots. However, the change in leadership did little to alter the culture of clientelism and personalism which continued to dominate ANACH.

A similar phenomenon of factionalism affected the Christian Democrat movement by 1976. Ideological and tactical schisms had become acute after the June 1975 massacres in Olancho, which had prompted the withdrawal of the mainstream of the church from association with the grassroots of the Christian Democrat movement, considerably reducing both the support and protection previously afforded to UNC affiliates by their relations with local clergy.⁷⁵ Many UNC activists accused the PDCH leadership of having promoted the June 1975 *campesino* mobilisation for their own political ends, some even held the party leadership responsible for the subsequent loss of life and demanded that an internal investigation be carried out to establish individual responsibility.⁷⁶ Relations within the party worsened as a result of these recriminations. In addition, from mid-1975 onwards the division between the electoralist strategy pursued by the PDCH leadership and the more direct action favoured by some party activists within the *campesino* sector led to increasingly acrimonious debate. The strategy of the PDCH leadership centred on securing registration to compete in the 1980 elections and party members began to work within church-funded development agencies for proselytic ends, using their influence over certain programmes to build an electoral base of support. A number of grass roots UNC leaders challenged what was essentially a clientelist strategy to control the church-based Consejo de Coordinación para el Desarrollo (CONCORDE) on which the UNC's *ligas campesinas*, given their ineligibility for official credit, were particularly dependent for funds.⁷⁷ By mid-1976 divisions became acute as a group of militants on the left of the PDCH openly questioned the close ties of the popular organisations to the party. A split developed between the national leadership of the PDCH (which included UNC president Pedro Mendoza) and those pushing for a more radical, less top-down and electorally-led strategy. The conflict provoked a backlash by the PDCH leadership, which accused their challengers of communist sympathies. Many regional

⁷⁵ According to Robert White's authoritative study, church leaders had begun to move away from their alliance with the *campesino* movement as early as 1974. See *Structural Factors in Rural Development: The Church and the Peasant in Honduras*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1977, p. 296.

⁷⁶ Personal interview with Marcial Euceda, Tegucigalpa, 2 April 1993.

⁷⁷ These were channelled through CONCORDE's credit institute, the Fundación Hondureña para el Desarrollo (FUNHDESA).

leaders of the UNC enjoying widespread support at the grassroots were expelled from the party in 1977, further dividing the movement.⁷⁸ In the same year, a number of these expelled activists set up the Movimiento al Socialismo (MAS), a radical but non-communist body influenced by liberation theology which enjoyed considerable support amongst the UNC membership. By the end of the decade many MAS activists, influenced by radical strains of liberation theology, regional events and the shift right-wards of Christian Democrat parties throughout the region, came to favour the option of armed struggle, particularly in response to the selective repression increasingly visited upon them by the military. These internal divisions weakened the Christian Democrat movement; by the end of the 1970s the UNC, previously the most radical and dynamic sector of the Honduran *campesino* movement, had lost much influence and, like its counterpart ANACH, was beset by factionalism. Ideological and tactical differences, together with government intervention, contributed to increasing division within the *campesino* movement by 1977,⁷⁹ further weakening its capacity to press for reform from an increasingly intransigent military regime.

Schisms within the organised labour movement in the latter half of the 1970s were mirrored by and often directly linked to divisions within the ranks of the Honduran revolutionary left. These were in turn increasingly bound up with events elsewhere in the region, as those advocating a strategy of armed struggle came to dominate the left in El Salvador and Nicaragua. PCH leaders continued to pursue a broad frontist, electoral strategy and as late as 1977 continued to make overtures to 'progressive' elements within the armed forces.⁸⁰ For many party activists, particularly those at the sharp end of military repression, such a strategy seemed increasingly irrelevant and futile. Together with significant sectors of the non-communist left, many of the younger PCH cadres were inspired by the example of the Nicaraguan Frente Sandinista guerillas and advocated pursuit of a strategy of armed struggle. Sectarianism became more pronounced as a result of these divisions.⁸¹ Not until 1980, in line with its sister party in El Salvador, did the PCH change its tactical line to support

⁷⁸ Personal interviews with Marcial Euceda, Tegucigalpa, 2 April 1993; Luciano Barrera, San Pedro Sula, 30 March 1993; Allan Fajardo, Managua, 20 March 1993.

⁷⁹ Divisions led to the formation of new rural unions, including the Unión Nacional Auténtica de Honduras (UNCAH), a left-wing grouping formed in 1977 and the right-wing Alianza Campesina de Honduras (ALCONH), formed by Reyes Rodríguez in 1980 when he was finally ejected from ANACH. Today there are over a dozen *campesino* organisations in Honduras.

⁸⁰ PCH, *III Congreso: Informe de Balance de la Actividad del PCH*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1977), p. 37.

⁸¹ See, for example, the attack made on the 'ultra-left' by the PCH in 1977; PCH, *Programa del PCH: III Congreso*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1977), p. 26.

armed struggle. After 1980 a multiplicity of guerilla groups emerged in Honduras.⁸² However, unlike its regional counterparts in Nicaragua and El Salvador, the Honduran insurgent movement – lacking an extensive popular base, subject from its inception to a highly targeted policy of state repression, and functioning largely in response to regional, rather than national events – never constituted a serious challenge to state power.

The declining influence of the popular movement after 1976 was primarily related to the political shift to the right at national and regional level. The distribution of land to landless *campesinos* under the agrarian reform also undoubtedly reduced rural militancy. However, the decline in the collective influence of the popular movement was also a consequence of activists becoming increasingly embroiled in protracted in-fighting, in part fomented by the military itself. At a time when the popular movement in El Salvador was acquiring greater unity in response to a drastic reduction of political space and accelerated levels of violence, and when both elite and popular opposition to the increasingly exclusive *somocista* dictatorship was coalescing in Nicaragua, the Honduran popular movement became ever more divided. This was primarily a consequence of the tactics of cooption, division and limited repression employed by the military governments of the 1970s, which built on historically high levels of state and US intervention in the labour movement.

Conclusion

The structural characteristics of Honduran agriculture were little altered by the agrarian reform; most of the land distributed by the state during the 1970s was national or *ejido* land which was, in effect, privatised. However, such an option for land redistribution was not available in Guatemala, Nicaragua or El Salvador, where communal land had been privatised a century earlier during the Liberal revolutions. In addition, many of the national and *ejido* lands allocated under the agrarian reform had to be recovered from large landowners who had previously occupied them illegally. The political significance of this government action was not lost on the *campesino* and popular movement. While agreeing with the existing literature that the socio-economic impact of the Honduran agrarian reform was decidedly limited, it has been argued here that its political effects have been significant and at least partially explain the relative political stability of Honduras in subsequent decades.

⁸² The main groups were the Frente Morazanista de Liberación Nacional (FMLNH); the Fuerzas Populares Lorenzo Zelaya (FPR); the Movimiento Popular de Liberación Cinchonero (MPL); and the Honduran branch of the Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos (PRTC).

Between 1973 and 1978, 164,129 hectares of land were distributed or allocated to 30,376 beneficiaries, including a significant proportion of those without land in the mid-1970s.⁸³ However, most beneficiaries became a new class of *minifundista*, forced to sell their seasonal labour power because they lacked sufficient land and official support to enable them to meet the minimum conditions of subsistence; others producing crops for export became subsumed to the marketing circuits of international capital.⁸⁴ The majority of state support services continued to be oriented towards the non-reform sector, in particular large producers. Land distribution peaked in 1974–5 and declined after 1977. Agrarian reform beneficiaries represented only about 10% of the rural EAP in 1978. Yet land was the primary objective of most *campesino* families and the granting of beneficiary status did significantly modify their political behaviour. By 1978 the majority of both ANACH and UNC affiliates were located within agrarian reform settlements, with obvious implications for the militancy of both organisations, which now had to cater to their memberships' demands for credit and services, becoming increasingly involved in bureaucratic lobbying rather than mass mobilisation in support of demands for land. To a certain extent then, the process of land distribution did 'buy off' rural protest – however, the decline in overall mobilisation must be seen within the context of the above discussion on the nature of the popular movement and its evolving relationship to external actors and the state.

Military reformism in Honduras was a somewhat shambolic and incoherent affair, yet its effects have proved significant and enduring. The process ensured that the popular challenge to the status quo was at least partially absorbed, bringing about a higher degree of political stability in the 1980s in Honduras than that which characterised the rest of the region. The way in which the popular challenge was absorbed was intrinsically linked to clientelist and patronage networks which had evolved as a consequence of local and national patterns of historical development. These were extended and transformed during the process of military reformism, resulting in significant demobilisation of the popular movement as a whole but also, importantly, facilitating a degree of negotiation in national politics which was largely absent elsewhere in the

⁸³ INA, *Resumen Básico de los Grupos Campesinos Beneficiarios de la Reforma Agraria*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1985), p. 5.

⁸⁴ One 1981 study claimed that 66.7% of all beneficiaries had received less than 3.5 hectares each (the 1975 agrarian reform law set a lower limit of 5 hectares). IHDER, *La Tenencia de la Tierra en Honduras* (Tegucigalpa, 1981), p. 14. For details of conditions on the flagship agrarian reform settlements see INA-IICA, *Diagnóstico de los Proyectos La Masica, Guaymas, San Bernardo, Monjaras-Buena Vista, San Manuel*, mimeo (Tegucigalpa, 1980).

region during this period. Protest in Honduras was treated with reform at a lower stage of polarisation and the challenge from the left demobilised well before it constituted a significant challenge to ruling elites. It has been argued here that the key to understanding this process lies in the relationship between military reformism in the 1970s and the Honduran popular movement.