

Honduras student movement harassed but refuses to back down

CIVICUS speaks to Héctor Ulloa, a student of Law and Economics, the vice-president of the Law Students' Association of the National University of Honduras (UNAH) and founder of the Progressive University Movement (Movimiento Progresista Universitario, PRO).



Q: What are the roots of the conflict that has kept university students mobilised for months? What are Honduran students demanding?

The core of the on-going conflict is lack of student participation. In 2004 a reform process began in the university, and a new organic law was passed which eliminated student parity, or equal representation. Instead, it established a 33% student participation in all university governing bodies, from the lowest levels – such as the technical departmental committees, which deal with curricular reforms in each field – and up to the University Council, the highest body, where decisions are made regarding budget, the university's educational model, academic standards, etc. The new organic law, in short, enshrined the right to student participation; nevertheless, up to date no such participation has ever taken place.

In 2012-2013, the current university Rector, Julieta Castellanos, got the National Congress to pass a modification of the organic law that denies us the right to have representatives, and instead gives university authorities the right to select student representatives. Therefore, from 2013 onwards it has been the university authorities that have elected some alleged student "representatives". The authorities handpick these students and then these so-called "representatives" vote for or against every proposed measure without consulting with the student body. Students truly have no participation in any governing body and student organisations are not recognised.

Mobilisation against this authoritarian reform intensified in 2016, as new academic regulations were passed that resulted in the expulsion of more than 10 000 students for their academic performance, which was now rated as low. This reform took place precisely thanks to the vote of those false student representatives that had been imposed by the authorities.

Additionally, there are other pressing issues, such as the precarious situations of regional centres – which have no adequate labs, no supplies, etc. All these deficiencies are the result of a situation in which students have no voice and no vote in any area, be it financial, academic, or monitoring. From the perspective of the current university authorities, students simply do not exist.

In mid-2016, after two months of occupations of university buildings, an [agreement](#) was signed between the University Student Movement (MEU) and the university authorities. However, not only did the authorities fail to comply with any of the components of this agreement, but criminalisation continued as well, and earlier in 2017 three students were [convicted](#) for taking part in student protests. Faced with this situation, the student movement has recently taken a step forward and submitted a Bill to the chamber of representatives so that it is the National Congress rather than the current university authorities that makes a final decision on this matter. We are not willing to re-engage with the rector and her team, who have done nothing but attack and repress the students. In fact, a few days ago they had 19 of our classmates expelled and barred for fifteen academic periods, that is, for the next five years.

Q: How has the state reacted to student protests? Have you also faced additional obstacles from non-state actors?

The problem has been precisely that university authorities have used the judiciary and the repressive organs of the state to prevent students from reclaiming their participation rights. The university authorities had more than one hundred students prosecuted by the Public Ministry. Over the past few years the police have evicted five or six [occupations](#) of university premises, and they have used tear gas against peaceful student protests; as already mentioned, this year three students were sentenced to between three and five years in prison for taking part in the student movement, and there are an additional 26 active on-going cases undergoing judicial proceedings. In addition to these, 75 cases were opened last year and 16 had been opened in 2014 and 2015, but as a result of last year's signed agreement all these are now expired. However, we have accumulated 26 new cases so far this year, along with three convicted classmates. Last month, the National Police evicted from the building of the School of Chemistry and Pharmacy one of the protests held against the criminalisation of the student movement, an operation that ended with six wounded demonstrators. And on 23 June, a student's father who acted as the spokesperson for a group bringing together the parents of 19 UNAH students was [killed](#) the day after he showed public support for his son and the student movement in a number of interviews with the media.

In sum, the state has acted in collusion with the university authorities, which it supported both in legally prosecuting protesters and in evicting and repressing student demonstrations. In addition, we have also faced repression by non-state actors, in the form of private security companies hired by the university authorities. In fact we have a private security firm working inside the university, ESPA (Private Security Company of Aguán), which has been involved in many violent acts of conflict with students. More recently, the university authorities hired a group of those security guys from concerts, known as "gorillas", so they would help in evicting occupied university premises. This resulted in pitched battles; these guys carried pipes and chains, and they wounded several students who ended up in the hospital.

Q: What are the main obstacles that civil society activists face in Honduras?

The main problem in Honduras is the insufficient rule of law. The Honduran state is virtually a failed state, with very low management capacity but great repressive power. A recent reform of the Criminal Code, passed in February 2017, allows for social protest to be criminalised as terrorism. This is because it uses a very broad definition of terrorism, including acts such as setting buses on fire or vandalising buildings; additionally, it offers even greater protections to state security agents. The President has argued that this legal change was necessary to fight crime; on the other hand, the political opposition and civil society groups, as well as the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, have [rejected](#) the legal innovation on the grounds that it will lead to further criminalisation of social protest.

Honduras is currently among the top countries with the highest numbers of assassinated activists, journalists and human rights defenders, as shown by data produced by several civil society organisations. The latest [Global Witness report](#), for instance, documented more than 120 people assassinated in our country since 2010 as a result of their environmental activism. This is also recognised by international organisations such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

Q: Are there any civil society initiatives aimed at overcoming these constraints?

It is mostly non-governmental organisations that safeguard our liberties and guarantees by watching over and taking care of activists to avoid further tragedies. Civil society mobilises to protest against regressive and authoritarian measures, but this is a difficult thing to do because we live in an authoritarian country where dissent is crushed.

Q: How connected is the Honduran student movement with its counterparts around the world? How can external actors support civil society activists and organisations in Honduras?

As a university student movement, we have a lot of contact with student federations in other Latin American countries. We maintain our closest relationships with FEUCA (Federation of University Students of Central America and the Caribbean) and with organisations in the public universities in our country, such as the National University of Agriculture, which in fact has also faced harsh [repression](#). We use our contacts basically to share information, videos and images of what is going on in order to put our issues out there. It is important for us to make sure that statements are issued, news pieces of information are disseminated and interviews are published in order to keep the issue alive. This has been crucial because several international actors have spoken out in view of the various dissemination campaigns that have been undertaken by other Latin American student movements. In turn, many movements from other countries have come in our support once the situation of the UNAH became an issue on the international public opinion agenda.

- **Civic space in Honduras is rated as “obstructed” by the [CIVICUS Monitor](#).**
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