



Erosion and violation of the rights of post-secondary students and teachers in Honduras (2009-2016)

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Idea Network graphic file

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Summary:

Through this reflection, we document the erosion and violation of the rights of students and teachers at the post-secondary level over a period of 10 years. It is evident that the methods and mechanisms for exclusion and infringement of rights have become more complex.

Key Works: Post-Secondary Education, Exclusion, Infringement of Rights, Nepotism.

Creating barriers to student participation in the university government

One of the first ways of excluding students from the post-secondary system has been through the Academic Aptitude Exam (PAA) which, as a standardized exam, has become exclusionary. This problem was heightened

by the re-election of the rector of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) through flawed and illegal processes as well as other counter-reformist mechanisms that reduce study options (closing technical careers, decreasing options for Bachelor's careers) and do not recognize the University Teacher Statute. These actions have their precedent in 2006 and the infringement of the right to student representation.

The new UNAH Integrated Law extended the term for the University government from three to four years, but reduced the opportunity of re-election. In the face of the crisis generated and strengthened by the university authorities, the National Congress approved that the University Council, presided over by the rector, could appoint the University Board of Directors which was charged with electing the new rector. In this case, a network of nepotism was formed that allowed the interim rector to run again with the guarantee that those who elected her would have been appointed by her. In this way, the university administration of Julieta Castellanos was prolonged from September 2013 to September 2017 in an illegal manner.

After the re-election of the rector, the other positions that had been vacant and had remained interim, were appointed for four years more in the period of 2014 to 2018.

Violations of the rights of students and teachers in the national education system

In addition to the events that developed at UNAH, in 2012 the rector of the National Agriculture University (UNA) was named as Minister of Education. This generated a conflict due to the fact that both are state institutions and they are separated by a distance of more than 200 Km, which makes it impossible to carry out the responsibilities for both institutions fully.

One of the first actions brought about by the new minister was to hamper and interfere with teacher protest and diminish the role of teacher colleges by taking away the state's role of collecting membership dues for the Teacher Colleges (or unions) directly through payroll deductions. Throughout 2013, 2014 and 2015, initia-

tives to privatize public education were strengthened through the "Businesspersons for Education" initiative. In addition, training for middle school careers was cancelled and replaced by a program that did not prove to be completely successful.

There was also an attempt to promote the Literacy for a Better Life Program, directed at youth and adults. It would be a praiseworthy initiative were it not for the fact that the support and financing of it was passed on from the state to parents and students, thus reducing family's resources since this was a mandatory requisite in order to graduate. Students led many protests in all parts of the country until the intervention of the National Congress finally became necessary.

Just when one conflict was resolved another opened up, this time again at the UNAH where students started a protest against the establishment of UNAH academic standards that excluded all those students who had had to repeat the same subjects on more than three occasions and that raised the academic passing rate to 60-70%, without proposing any compensatory measures to support students.

The crisis lasted from May until September 2016, with the loss of the academic period for many career programs and economic losses for the University in wages and salaries. When a dialogue was finally established, it brought the parties together without resolving the points of conflict. It simply postponed and delayed their being worked out.

Conflict among universities

The Honduran post-secondary education system has traditionally been exclusionary. Add to this the fact that no new higher education institution has been approved since 2007. In more than ten years the approval organization has rejected any new project for the creation of other post-secondary education institutions.

UNAH coordinates higher education and by constitutional mandate has the legal authority to "direct, organize and control the higher education system",



Photo: UNAH Student Manifestations, July 2016 in proposal of the repeal of the Academic Standards approved in 2014.

creating government bodies like the Higher Education Council (CES) and the Technical Consultative Council (CTC). However, the UNAH authorities have questioned programs and institutions that they themselves have approved. For example, the department of medicine at the Honduran Catholic University (UNICAH) was under question between 2010 and 2011 and this included not recognizing degrees awarded by this University. This first episode led to 19 institutions requesting that the National Congress approve a new Higher Education Law that would create a body that would be independent of the UNAH, through the creation of a Honduran Higher Education National Commission (CONADESH). However, Congress never approved this initiative calling for consensus at this level.

In 2016 the Minister of Education, who had from 2012 to 2013 served as UNA Rector and from 2013 to 2016 was both Academic Vice-Rector and also Minister, succeeded in reforming internal statutes to be able to become re-elected for a third term as Rector. In a clear act of revenge he fired his opponent, also a professor at the same university. The aggrieved not only submitted complaint before judicial bodies, but also before the Higher Education Council (CES) which, without having the powers of a Tribunal, received the denunciation and made decisions such as not recognizing the titles signed by the UNA Rector and Minister of Education. This began one of the worst episodes of antagonism ever seen between universities. The conflict worsened due

to student protests at the UNA, the firing of teachers in solidarity with the students and those opposed to the Rector.

Force and violence were used to contain the different protest actions, and this was seen in images that spread across the world, becoming not only national but also international news.¹

These actions were condemned by human rights organizations. In this context, the UNA Rector, making use of powers that were not its own, named a Commission for Academic Audit. UNA officials rejected it. In January, the UNA Rector quit the role as Minister of Education, saying that he would exclusively dedicate himself to the position as Rector. However, the National Congress named an Intervening University Board, preventing him from exercising the position. In all of this conflict between rectors and teachers, the most affected have been the students who have lost academic periods and the parents with eroded finances due to the high cost of living who keep their children in the school through great effort.

1 For a deeper understanding of the impacts of the UNA strike, please see the “Memories of a Struggle” article in this same issue. (Note from the Editor)

In January 2017 the new Honduran Minister of Education was named - Rutilia del Socorro Calderón Padilla, Doctor in Medicine and Master in Epidemiology. She had acted as the UNAH's Academic Vice-Rector from 2006 to the beginning of 2017. This appointment should be interpreted as the establishment of empiricism in state educational administration. In Honduras our institutions provide training in education with technical diplomas, Bachelor's degrees, specialities, Master's degrees and two PhD programs. However, none of these graduates were considered candidates of sufficient merit to aspire lead the country's education policy with scientific methods and techniques and with qualified judgement.

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Photo: Caricature elaborated by a social communicator who is also a Congressman and President of the Education Committee of the Congress that shows the conflict between authorities and students.