

Canada's Long Embrace of the Honduran Dictatorship

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Peter Kent recently returned from a three day trip (February 17-20) to Honduras, proudly declaring the mission a success. As Canada's Minister of State for the Americas, Kent is the Tory government's point person for Canada's growing political and economic interests in the region. Honduras has become an important focus of those interests, since the military coup last June against the moderately left-leaning president, Manuel Zelaya, swung the country sharply back to the right.

Ignoring the ongoing abuses of human rights in the country under the new coupist presidency of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo, Kent has been following through with his promise to promote the normalization of the country's relations with the rest of the hemisphere. Lobo won fraudulent elections held in November under the military dictatorship in a context of repression and intimidation. The election was boycotted by the anti-coup movement, and the Organization of American States and European Union refused to send official observers. Despite this, immediately following Lobo's inauguration on January 27, Kent declared that Canada will "support President Lobo's efforts as he moves to fully reintegrate Honduras into the international and hemispheric community, including in the Organization of American States."

Canada, Honduras and the OAS

On his way to Honduras Kent met with the Secretary General of the Organization of American States (OAS), José Miguel Insulza, on February 16. Kent used the meeting to push Canada's goal of recognizing the Lobo government onto the OAS agenda. Roberto Micheletti, the dictator that replaced Zelaya after the coup, withdrew Honduras from the organization when it became clear that the majority of member states were going to vote to kick the country out. While some staunch imperial allies in the region, such as Colombia and Peru, have recognized the Lobo government, other countries, notably Venezuela and Brazil, have refused to do so. The re-admittance of Honduras into the OAS will be a contentious and divisive issue, pitting the U.S., Canada, and their right wing allies, against those countries that want less influence from North American imperialism in the region.

Kent's visit to Honduras, following his meeting with Insulza, was thus intended to strengthen the new government's claim to legitimacy and its case for reinsertion into the OAS. Acting as if everything is once again well and good in Honduras also makes it easier for Canada to deepen its economic ties with the country. Canada is the largest mining investor in Honduras, for example, and its interests will increase significantly should Lobo and the right get their way and pass a new mining law that increases the rights of foreign capital.

Peter Kent and the Boys in Honduras

Unsurprisingly, then, Kent was all praise for Lobo and his administration during his latest trip. He was pleased that “President Lobo is beginning the process of national reconciliation, including supporting the formation of a truth commission.” Besides meeting with Lobo, Kent also met with three of the latter’s cabinet ministers. These included Micheletti’s spokesperson, Minister of Planning and Cooperation, Arturo Corrales. Corrales supported the Micheletti government’s refusal to implement the San José-Tegucigalpa Accord, which it had initially signed along with Zelaya and which called for a government of national reconciliation (itself a very problematic feature of the Accord from a democratic perspective). Kent also met with Foreign Minister, Mario Canahuati. Canahuati is the son of one of Honduras’s most powerful capitalists, the maquila magnate, Juan Canahuati. His brother, Jesus, is the president of the Honduran Manufacturers’ Association. Mario, meanwhile, was Lobo’s vice presidential candidate in the 2005 election, which Lobo lost to Zelaya, and is the past president of the Honduran National Business Council, a pro-coup organization.

Kent also met with Canadian business leaders in the country, though he didn’t publicly disclose which ones (requests from his office for the names of companies with which he met went unanswered).

Who Kent Didn’t Talk To

Kent suggested the Lobo government was taking crucial steps toward, “healing the wounds created by the recent political impasse,” steps which will allow “Honduras to regain a sense of trust in their country’s democratic institutions.”

This depiction of political developments in the country is hard to square with facts on the ground – namely, political assassinations, repression, torture, and mass arrests. Kent might have grasped this had he bothered to meet with the [Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared of Honduras](#) (COFADEH), the country’s most prestigious human rights organization, founded in the 1980s.

On January 30, three days after the celebrated inauguration of Pepe Lobo, COFADEH reports that:

Blas López, a Secondary School Teacher and known member of the anti-coup resistance, was discovered dead from multiple gun shot wounds.

On February 2, Vanessa Zepeda, a 29-year-old union activist and active member of the resistance, was killed after she was thrown from a moving vehicle in the streets of Tegucigalpa.

On February 15, just two days prior to Kent’s arrival in Honduras, Julio Fúnez Benítez, a union activist and resistance member who had received multiple death threats by coupist supporters, was gunned down and killed by men on a motorcycle.

Four days after Kent left the country, and only a day after the release of his press communiqué exalting the successes of Lobo’s administration, Claudia Larisa Brizuela Rodríguez, the 36-year-old daughter of a prominent radio journalist and resistance activist

was shot in the face in front of her children after opening the front door to her home.

Such para-military terrorization of peaceful resisters has been a continuous stain on Honduras' human rights record from the moment of Micheletti's coup on June 28, 2009, through the transition to Pepe Lobo, and on until the present day. According to COFADEH, by the end of February, 2010, there had been 43 politically-motivated assassinations of civilians associated with the resistance since the coup. This number is almost certainly a low estimate, the human rights organization acknowledges, as community members and the families of those killed are often too afraid to come forward for fear of reprisal. Many political murders are passed over in the mainstream media as "gang killings." As far back as January, the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (National Front of Popular Resistance, FNRP) claimed that over 130 activists had been assassinated.

In a communiqué released on March 5, 2010, COFADEH argues that the selective attacks against members of the resistance are part of an orchestrated campaign to demobilize and fragment the FNRP. They document 250 violations of human rights since Lobo's inauguration.

According to the report, the government is also engaged in a full-blown disinformation campaign through the domestic, coup-backing, private media, and the mainstream international media outlets, to consolidate the image of Pepe Lobo as a legitimate, democratic, and civilian government open to foreign investment and good relations with North America and the European Union. Disgracefully, the EU fell in line with North American imperialism and decided at the end of February to normalize relations with Honduras.

Imperialism Re-Booted in Latin America

The first decade of this century witnessed mass, extra-parliamentary mobilizations overthrow a series of heads of state in Argentina, Ecuador, and Bolivia, followed by the election of a vast array of self-described left and centre-left governments across South and Central America. Overstretched in Iraq and Afghanistan, the U.S. state has felt its grip on the region loosen.

Recent years have seen renewed efforts by the Bush and Obama governments to reconstitute the contours of a new counter-reform offensive. The Obama administration, today, sees new sources of hope in the consolidation of right-wing governments in Mexico, Peru, Colombia, Panama, and, more recently, Honduras and Chile. New U.S. military bases in Colombia and Panama illustrate the utility of such clients. Washington is also betting on its ability to turn a number of centre-left regimes – Kirchner in Argentina, Funes in El Salvador, Colom in Guatemala, and Mujica in Uruguay, among others – against the relatively more independent regimes in Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, and Ecuador.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spent the first five days of March on a whirlwind tour of the region, denouncing Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez and attempting to pressure various governments into normalizing relations with the Honduran dictatorship.

Clinton met with Lobo in Guatemala City on March 5. "We support the work that President Lobo is doing to promote national unity and strengthen democracy," she told journalists gathered at a news conference. Earlier in the week, during a visit to Buenos Aires, she claimed that the "Honduras crisis has been managed to a successful conclusion." It was also apparently "done without violence."

As Eric Toussaint, president of the Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt, recently pointed out in the [Socialist Worker](#):

“we can see that the Obama administration is in no hurry to break with the methods used by its predecessors: witness the massive funding of different opposition movements within the context of its policy to ‘strengthen democracy’; the launching of media campaigns to discredit governments that do not share its political agenda (Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Manuel Zelaya’s Honduras and so on); maintaining the blockade of Cuba; the support for separatist movements in Bolivia (the media luna and the regional capital, Santa Cruz), in Ecuador (the city of Guayaquil and its province), and in Venezuela (the petroleum state of Zulia, the capital of which is Maracaibo); the support for military attacks, like the one perpetrated by Colombia in Ecuador in March 2008; as well as actions by Colombian or other paramilitary forces in Venezuela.”

Canada’s imperial role in the region has taken on a similar guise as the U.S., although shaped more specifically around Canadian mining and other capitalist interests in the area.

Kent’s last trip to the region, prior to the Honduras visit, saw him in Venezuela. Apparently there was insufficient time to meet with any representatives of the democratically-elected government of Hugo Chávez, although he met with a number of groups associated with the far-right opposition. On January 28, after having returned to Canada, Kent issued a news release declaring that there was “shrinking democratic space in Venezuela” under Chávez. “During my recent visit to Venezuela,” Kent said, “I heard many individuals and organizations express concerns related to violations of the right to freedom of expression and other basic liberties.”

The comments elicited a response from Chávez on his weekly *Alo Presidente* TV program. The Venezuelan President said he wouldn’t take advice from an “ultraright” government that had just “closed” parliament. Chávez was referring to Canadian Prime Minister, Stephen Harper’s, notorious suspension, or “prorogement,” of the Canadian parliament on December 30 until March 3 to avoid debate surrounding Canadian military abuses in occupied Afghanistan. The Vancouver Sun reported that Roy Chaderton Matos, Venezuela’s ambassador to the OAS, accused the Canadian government of backing “coup-plotters” and “destabilizers” the country.

Last week, Peter Van Loan, Minister of International Trade, made a further show of whom Canada considers its friends in the region, tabling legislation to implement the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Of course, no word was uttered of the infamous record of human rights violations committed by the Álvaro Uribe regime in Colombia, nor of its intimate ties to paramilitary networks operating with impunity throughout the country. “The Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement will provide greater market access for Canadian exporters of goods such as wheat, pulses, barley, paper products and heavy equipment,” the press release from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade declared this week. “An increasing number of Canadian investors and exporters are entering the Colombian market, and it is also a strategic destination for Canadian direct investment, especially in mining, oil exploration, printing and education.”

The effort to consolidate the coupist installation of the far-right in Honduras is, in other words, merely the latest puzzle piece in a much wider and reviving North American imperial project in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Resistance Continues

In Honduras, as elsewhere, the resistance has not been cowed. On March 8, the FNRP released their 51st communiqué. They announced that they would be organizing a poll of the Honduran people on June 28, 2010 to assess the popularity of the call for an Inclusive and Popular Constituent Assembly. The date will commemorate the first anniversary of the coupist regime, and will represent the unbreakable will of the Honduran people to resist, and to build an authentic democracy that transforms at its roots the reigning system of injustice and repression.

The communiqué condemned the U.S. government's efforts to construct a legitimate face for this dictatorship, especially the role played by U.S. ambassador to Honduras, Hugo Llorens.

The resistance also pointed to the role played by the private media in defending the Honduran oligarchy and the coup regime that serves its interests. In particular, the FNRP pointed to the way in which the daily newspapers *La Prensa* and *El Heraldo*, owned by business tycoon, Jorge Canahuati, have portrayed working class families and popular leaders aligned with the resistance as terrorists. The FNRP also highlighted the parallel part played by the TV station *Corporación de Televisión*, property of Rafael Ferrari.

The Communiqué closed with a call to popular movements to attend the Second Gathering for the Refoundation of Honduras, in the city of La Esperanza, between March 12 and 14.

According to Claudia Korol's *América Latina en Movimiento* report, dispatched from on scene in La Esperanza, over a thousand delegates had gathered by March 13th, representing an array of different popular sectors: Lenca and Garífuna peoples' movements; feminists; environmentalists; rural and urban trade unionists; peasants; and different currents of the revolutionary left – many with links going back to the Central American revolutionary struggles of the 1980s.

A mix of popular political traditions focusing on decolonization, anti-imperialism, and socialism converged as those gathered broke off into twenty simultaneous popular assemblies to discuss a variety of themes: the preservation of water, forests, land, subsoil, traditional territories, and air; the political system and popular sovereignty; culture; justice; autonomy; sexual diversity; health; communications; foreign policy and international relations; anti-patriarchal struggles; anti-racism; national security; work and workers' rights; the economic system; indigenous and black communities; youth; fighting corruption and learning about popular accounting.

These different general discussions then fed into issues of strategic orientation: What does refounding Honduras mean, and how is it different than mere reform? What will a refounded Honduras look like? What are the necessary stages to get there? What do we mean by constituent power and the building of popular power from below? How can we strengthen our popular organizations to foment this popular power? What are we really calling for when we demand a Popular and Democratic Constituent Assembly? How can we shape our participation as a resistance movement to ensure that the genuine interests, aspirations, and proposals of the people will be included in the new constitution?

In the coming months these questions will begin to take concrete form through the extra-parliamentary struggles in the streets and the countryside, in defiance of selective

assassinations, intimidation, media obfuscation, and imperialist meddling. •

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Together they are currently writing a book on Canadian imperialism in the Americas in the age of neoliberalism.

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