

How Joe Biden's Privatization Plans Helped Doom Latin America and Fuel the Migration Crisis

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On the campaign trail, Joe Biden has boasted of his role in transforming Colombia and Central America through ambitious economic and security programs. Colombians and Hondurans tell The Grayzone about the damage his plans did to their societies.

While campaigning for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination this year, former Senator and Vice President Joseph Biden has touted the crucial role he played in designing US mega-development and drug war campaigns that transformed the socio-political landscape of large swaths of Latin America.

"I was one of the architects of Plan Colombia," Biden boasted in a July 5 interview with CNN, referring to the multi-billion dollar US effort to end Colombia's civil war with a massive surge of support for the country's military. According to Biden, the plan was a panacea for Colombia's problems, from "crooked cops" to civil strife.

But Biden's plan for Colombia has contributed directly to the country's transformation into a hyper-militarized bastion of right-wing rule, enhancing the power and presence of the notoriously brutal armed forces while failing miserably in its anti-narcotic and reformist objectives.

This year alone, more than 50 human rights defenders [were killed in Colombia](#) in the first four months of 2019, while coca production is close to record levels. And as Colombian peace activists lamented in interviews with The Grayzone, the US is still in complete control of Bogotá's failed anti-drug policy, thanks largely to Plan Colombia.

Biden has also pumped up his role in an initiative called the Alliance for Prosperity, which was applied to the Northern Triangle of Central America. The former vice president was so central to the program's genesis that it was informally known as "Plan Biden."

Marketed as an answer to the crisis of child migration, Biden's brainchild channeled \$750 million through a right-wing government installed by a US-orchestrated military coup to spur mega-development projects and privatize social services.

The Grayzone visited Honduras in July and documented, through interviews with human rights defenders, students, indigenous activists, and citizens from all walks of life, how the Alliance for Prosperity helped set the stage for a national rebellion.

In recent months, teachers, doctors, students, and rural campesinos have been in the

streets protesting the privatization plans imposed on their country under the watch of Biden and his successors.

The gutting of public health services, teacher layoffs, staggering hikes in electricity prices, and environmentally destructive mega-development projects are critical factors in mass migration from Honduras. And indeed, they are immediate byproducts of the so-called “Biden plan.”

“Biden is taking credit for doing something constructive to stop the migration crisis and blaming the concentration camps [on the US-Mexico border] on Trump. But it’s Biden’s policies that are driving more people out of Central America and making human rights defenders lives more precarious by defending entities that have no interest in human rights,” explained Adrienne Pine, a professor of anthropology at American University and leading researcher of the social crisis in Honduras, in an interview with The Grayzone.

“So \$750 million US taxpayer dollars that were allocated to supposedly address child migration are actually making things worse,” Pine added. “It started with unaccompanied minors and now you have children in cages. Largely thanks to Biden.”

‘I was one of the architects of Plan Colombia’

In an [interview with CNN on July 5](#), Biden was asked if he favored decriminalizing the entry of Latin American migrants to the United States. Responding with a definitive “no,” Joe Biden stated that he would be “surging folks to the border to make those concrete decisions” about who receives asylum.

Biden argued that he had the best record of addressing the root causes of the migration crisis, recalling how he imposed a solution on Central America’s migration crisis. “You do the following things to make your country better so people don’t leave, and we will help you do that, just like we did in Colombia,” he said.

“What did we do in Colombia? We went down and said, okay, and I was one of the architects of Plan Colombia,” Biden continued. “I said, here’s the deal. If you have all these crooked cops, all these federal police, we’re sending our FBI down, you let us put them through a lie detector test, let us tell you who you should fire and tell you the kind of people you should hire. They did and began to change. We can do so much if we’re committed.”

With the arrogance of a pith-helmeted high colonial official meting out instructions on who to hire and fire to his docile subjects, Biden presided over a plan that failed miserably in its stated goals, while transforming Colombia into a hyper-militarized bastion of US regional influence.

Plan Colombia: ‘They come and ask for bread, and you give them stones’

Plan Colombia was originally conceived by Colombian President Andrés Pastrana in 1999, as an alternative development and conflict resolution plan for his war-torn country. He considered calling it the “Plan for Colombia’s Peace.”

The proposal was quickly hijacked by the Bill Clinton administration, with Joe Biden lobbying

in the Senate for an iron-fisted militarization plan.

“We have an obligation, in the interests of our children and the interests of the hemisphere, to keep the oldest democracy in place, to give them a fighting chance to keep from becoming a narcostate,” Biden [said](#) in a June 2000 floor speech.

When Plan Colombia’s first formal draft was published, it was done so in English, not Spanish. The original spirit of peace-building was completely sapped from the document by Biden, whose vigorous wheeling-and-dealing ensured that almost 80 percent of the \$7.5 billion plan went to the Colombian military. 500 US military personnel were promptly dispatched to Bogota to train the country’s military.

“If you read the original Plan Colombia, not the one that was written in Washington but the original Plan Colombia, there’s no mention of military drives against the FARC rebels,” Robert White, the former number two at the US embassy in Bogota, [complained in 2000](#). “Quite the contrary. [Pastrana] says the FARC is part of the history of Colombia and a historical phenomenon, he says, and they must be treated as Colombians.”

White lamented how Washington had abused the trust of the Colombians:

“They come and ask for bread, and you give them stones.”

Plan Colombia was largely implemented under the watch of the hardline right-wing President Álvaro Uribe. In 1991, Uribe was placed on a US Drug Enforcement Agency list of [“important Colombian narco-traffickers,”](#) in part due to his role in helping drug kingpin Pablo Escobar’s obtain licenses for landing strips while Uribe was the head of Colombia’s Civil Aeronautics Department.

Under Uribe’s watch, toxic chemicals were sprayed by military forces across the Colombian countryside, poisoning the crops of impoverished farmers and displacing millions.

Six years after Bill Clinton initiated Plan Colombia, however, even US drug czar John Walters was [forced to quietly admit](#) in a letter to the Senate that the price of cocaine in the US had declined, the flow of the drug into the US had risen, and its purity had increased.

Meanwhile, a [UN Office of Drugs and Crime report](#) found that coca cultivation reached record levels in Colombia in 2018. In other words, billions of dollars have been squandered, and a society already in turmoil has been laid to waste.

For the military and right-wing paramilitary forces that have shored up the rule of leaders like Uribe and the current ultra-conservative Colombian president, Ivan Duque, Plan Colombia offered a sense of near-total impunity.

The depravity of the country’s military was put on bold display when the so-called [“false positives” scandal](#) was exposed in 2008. The incident began when army officers lured 22 rural laborers to a far-away location, massacred them, and then dressed them in uniforms of the leftist FARC guerrillas.

It was an overt attempt to raise the FARC body count and justify the counter-insurgency aid flowing from the US under Plan Colombia. The officers who oversaw the slaughter were paid bounties and given promotions.

Colombian academics Omar Eduardo Rojas Bolaños and Fabián Leonardo Benavides demonstrated in a [meticulous study](#) that the “false positives” killings reflected “a systematic practice that implicates the commanders of brigades, battalions and tactical units” in the deaths of more than 10,000 civilians. Indeed, under Plan Colombia, the incident was far from an isolated atrocity.

Forfeiting Colombia’s national sovereignty



In an interview in Bogotá this May, The Grayzone’s Ben Norton asked Colombian social leader Santiago Salinas (image on the right, from Ben Norton) if there was any hope for progressive political transformation since the ratification of Plan Colombia.

An organizer of the peace group [Congreso de los Pueblos](#), Salinas shrugged and exclaimed, “I wish.” He lamented that many of Colombia’s most pivotal decisions were made in Washington.

Salinas pointed to drug policy as an example. “It seems like the drug decisions about what to do with the drugs, it has nothing to do with Colombia.

“There was no sovereign decision on this issue. Colombia does not have a decision,” he continued. It was the Washington that wrote the script for Bogota. And the drug trade is in fact a key part of the global financial system, Salinas pointed out.

But Biden was not finished. After 15 years of human misery and billions of wasted dollars in Colombia, he set out on a personal mission to export his pet program to Central America’s crime and corruption-ravaged Northern Triangle.

Biden eyes Central America, selling mass privatization

In his July sit-down with CNN, Joe Biden trumpeted his Plan Colombia as the inspiration for the Alliance for Prosperity he imposed on Central America. Channeling the spirit of colonial times once again, he bragged of imposing Washington’s policies on the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras.

“We’ll make a deal with you,” Biden recalled telling the leaders of these countries. “You do the following things to make your country better so people don’t leave, and we will help you do that.”

Biden announced his bold plan on the editorial pages of the New York Times in January 2015. He called it “a joint plan for economic and political reforms, an [alliance for prosperity](#).” Sold by the vice president as a panacea to a worsening migration crisis, the Alliance for Prosperity was a boon for international financial institutions which promised to deepen the economic grief of the region’s poor.

The Alliance for Prosperity “treated the Honduran government as if it were a crystal-clear, pure vessel into which gold could be poured and prosperity would flow outward,” explained Dana Frank, a professor of history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and the author of the book, [The Long Honduran Night](#).

“In reality, the Plan would further enrich and strengthen the political power of the very same elites whose green, deliberate subversion of the rule of law, and destruction of natural resources and of Indigenous and campesino land rights, were responsible for the dire conditions the proposal ostensibly addressed,” Frank added.

In Honduras, the government had no capacity or will to resist Biden’s plan. That is because the country’s elected president, [Juan Manuel Zelaya](#), had been removed in 2009 in a coup orchestrated by the United States.

As [Zelaya told The Grayzone’s Anya Parampil](#), the Obama administration was infuriated by his participation in ALBA, a regional economic development program put forward by Venezuela’s then-President Hugo Chavez that provided an alternative to neoliberal formulas like the so-called “Biden Plan.”

Following the military coup, a corporate-friendly administration was installed to advance the interests of international financial institutions, and US trainers arrived in town to hone the new regime’s mechanisms of repression.

Under the auspices of the Central American Regional Security Initiative, the FBI was dispatched to [oversee the training](#) of FUSINA, the main operational arm of the Honduran army and the base of the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP) that patrols cities like an occupation force.

In an October 2014 cable, the US embassy in Tegucigalpa acknowledged that the PMOP was riven with corruption and prone to abuse, and attempted to distance itself from the outfit, even though it operated under the umbrella of FUSINA.

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Date/DTG:	Oct 06, 2014 / 061603Z OCT 14	
From:	AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA	
Action:	WASHDC, SECSTATE <i>ROUTINE</i>	
E.O.:	13526	
TAGS:	PGOV, MCAP, PHUM, SNAR, KCOR, HO	
Captions:	SENSITIVE	REVIEW AUTHORITY: Don Holm, Senior Reviewer
Reference:	A) <u>13 TEGUCIGALPA 143</u> B) <u>14 TEGUCIGALPA 548</u>	
Subject:	Honduran Military Police (PMOP): Recent High-Profile Successes, But Also Significant Concerns	

1. (SBU) Summary: The Honduran Military Police for Public Order (PMOP), established in August 2013, perform civilian law enforcement functions in parallel with the national police. The PMOP, a brainchild of then-President of Congress and now President of Honduras Juan Orlando Hernandez, is operating with four active battalions, with two more battalions scheduled to be operational within the next few months. The PMOP has had some high-profile successes in operations against organized crime, corruption, and drug trafficking, but also suffers from significant shortfalls in personnel, resources, and training. Credible sources report that PMOP soldiers often fail to follow proper investigative and evidentiary procedures in criminal cases. Human rights NGOs are largely suspicious of the PMOP, but the general public appears more supportive of its role. For policy reasons, the USG currently provides no assistance to the PMOP, although it is likely to remain an influential part of the Honduran national security establishment for at least the next few years. End Summary.

This June, the PMOP [invaded the Autonomous University of Honduras](#), [attacking students](#) protesting the privatization of their school and wounding six.

US-trained troops shoot Honduran students protesting privatization@[AnyParampil](#) reports from inside a student occupation at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), where protesters are being shot by military police<https://t.co/HQHX497zPW>

— The Grayzone (@GrayzoneProject) [July 13, 2019](#)

The creation by the US embassy in Honduras of a special forces unit known as the Tigres has added an additional layer of repressive muscle. Besides [arresting](#) activists, the Tigres reportedly [helped](#) a drug kingpin escape after he was detained during a US investigation.

While violent crime surged across Honduras, unemployment [more than doubled](#). Extreme poverty surged, and so too did the government's security spending.

To beef up his military, President Juan Orlando Hernández dipped into the social programs that kept a mostly poor population from tumbling into destitution.

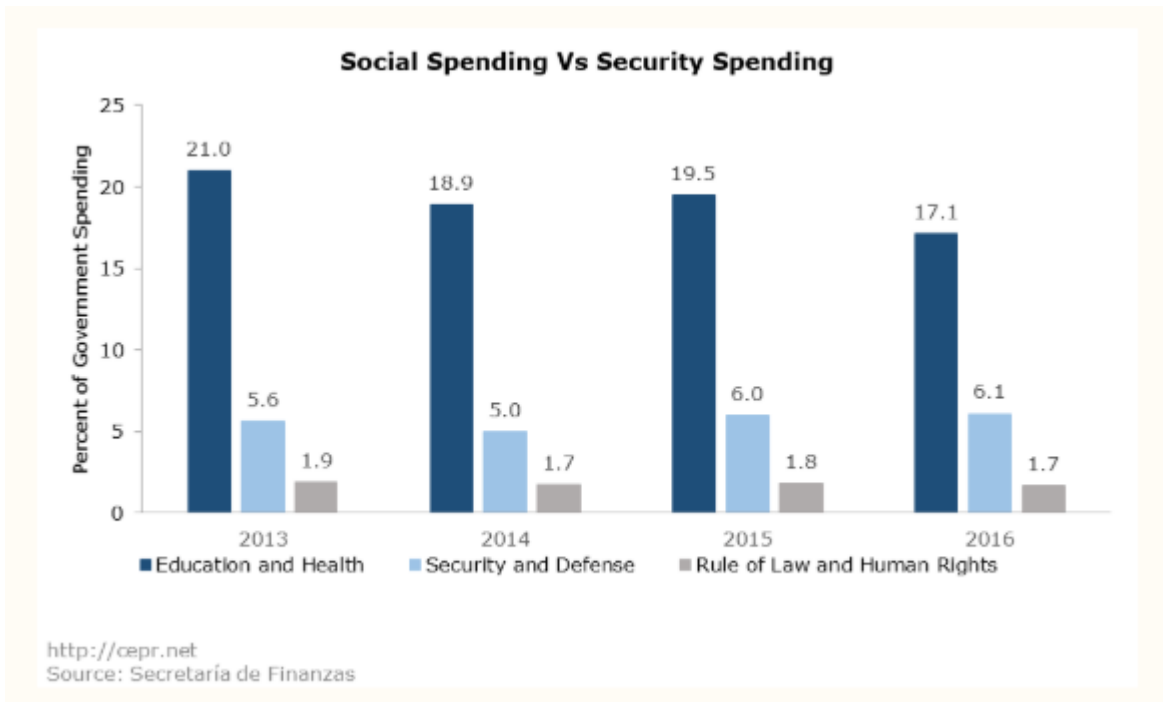


Chart on Honduran budget priorities by the Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2017

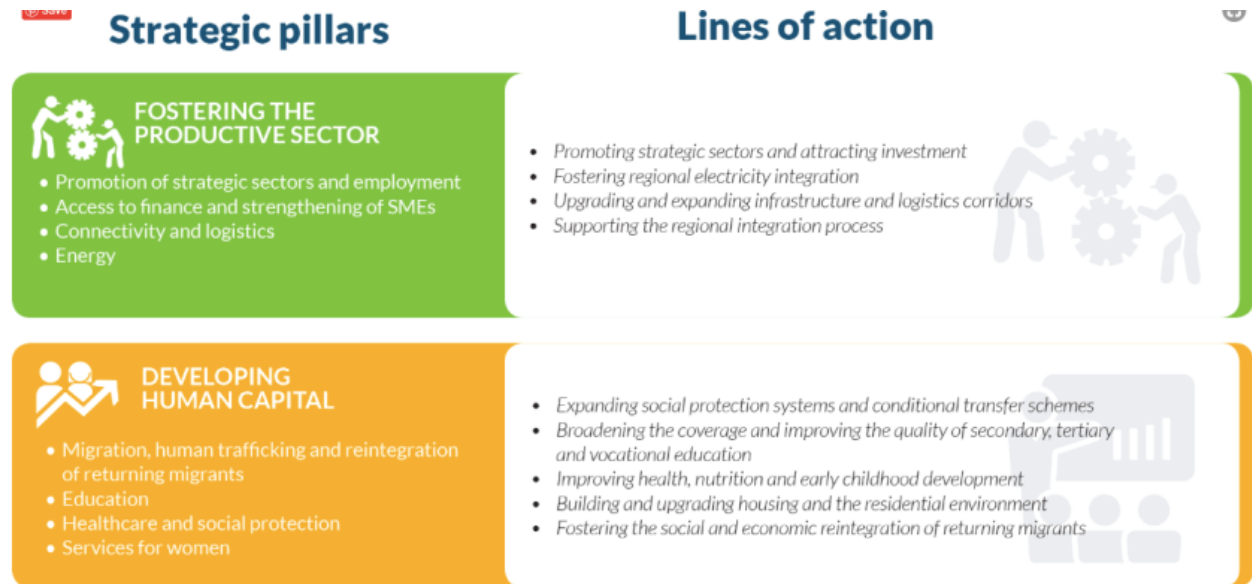
As [Alex Rubinstein reported for The Grayzone](#), the instability of post-coup Honduras has been particularly harsh on LGTTBI (Lesbian, Gay, Trans, Travesti, Bisexual, and Intersex) Hondurans. More than 300 of them [have been killed](#) since 2009, a dramatic spike in hate crimes reinforced by the [homophobic rhetoric](#) of the right-wing Evangelical Confraternity that represents the civil-society wing of the ultra-conservative Hernandez government.

As the [social chaos enveloped Honduran society](#), migration to the US-Mexico border began to surge to [catastrophic levels](#). Unable to make ends meet, some Hondurans sent their children alone to the border, hoping that they would temporary protective or refugee status.

By 2014, the blowback of the Obama administration's coup had caused a national emergency. Thousands of Hondurans were winding up in cages in detention camps run by the US Department of Homeland Security, and many of them were not even 16 years old.

That summer, Obama went to Congress for \$3.7 billion in emergency funds to ramp up border militarization and deport as many unaccompanied Central American minors as possible.

Biden used the opportunity to [rustle up an additional billion dollars](#), exploiting the crisis to fund a massive neoliberal project that saw Honduras as a base for international financial opportunity. His plan was quickly ratified, and the first phase of the Alliance for Prosperity began.



From the IADB's sanitized survey of the Alliance for Prosperity

Energy industry rush dooms indigenous communities and human rights defenders

The implementation of the Alliance for Prosperity was overseen by the Inter-American Development Bank (IADB), a US-dominated international financial institution based in Washington, DC that supports corporate investment in Latin America and the Caribbean.

A [graphic](#) on the IADB's website outlined the plan's objectives in anodyne language that concealed its aggressively neoliberal agenda.

For instance, the IADB promised the "fostering [of] regional energy integration." This was a clear reference to Plan Pueblo Panama, a region-wide neoliberal development [blueprint](#) that was conceived as a boon to the energy industry. Under the plan, the IADB would raise money from Latin American taxpayers to pay for the expansion of power lines that would carry electricity from Mexico all the way to Panama.

Honduras, with its rivers and natural resources, provided the project with a major hub of energy production. In order for the country's energy to be traded and transmitted to other countries, however, the International Monetary Fund mandated that its national electricity company be privatized.

Since the implementation of that component of "Plan Biden," energy costs have [begun to surge](#) for residential Honduran consumers. In a country with a 66 percent poverty rate, electricity privatization has turned life from precarious to practically impossible.

Rather than languish in darkness for long hours with unpaid bills piling up, many desperate citizens have journeyed north towards the US border.

As intended, the Alliance for Prosperity's regional energy integration plan has spurred an influx of multi-national energy companies to Honduras. Hydro-electric dams and power plants began rising up in the midst of the lush pine forests and winding rivers that define the Honduran biosphere, pushing many rural indigenous communities into a life-and-death struggle.

This July, The Grayzone traveled to Reitoca, a remote farming community located in the

heart of the Honduran “dry sector.” The indigenous Lenca residents of this town depend on their local river for fish, recreation, and most importantly, water to irrigate the crops that provide them with a livelihood. But the rush on energy investment brought an Italian-Chilean firm called Progelsa to the area to build a massive hydro-electric dam just upstream.

Image below: Reitoca community leader Wilmer Alonso by the river threatened by a major hydro-electric project (Photo: Ben Norton)



Wilmer Alonso, a member of the Lenca Indigenous Council of Reitoca, spoke with The Grayzone, shaking with emotion as he described the consequences of the dam for his community.

“The entire village is involved in this struggle,” Alonso said. “Everyone knows the catastrophe that the construction of this hydro-electric plant would create.”

He explained that, like so many foreign multi-nationals in Honduras, Progelsa employs an army of private thugs to intimidate protesters:

“The private company uses the army and the police to repress us. They accuse us of being trespassers, but they are the ones trespassing on our land.”

US reinforces ‘factors that generate violence the most in our society’

The Alliance for Progress also provided the backdrop for the assassination of the renowned Honduran environmentalist and feminist organizer Berta Cáceres.

On March 3, 2016, Cáceres was gunned down in her home in rural Honduras. A towering figure in her community with a presence on the international stage, Cáceres had been leading the fight against a local dam project overseen by DESA, a powerful Honduran energy company [backed by the United States Agency for International Development](#) (USAID) and run by powerful former military officers.

The representative that DESA sent to sign its deal with USAID, Sergio Rodríguez, was later [accused](#) of masterminding Cáceres’ murder, alongside military officials and former company employees.

In March 2018, the Honduran police [arrested](#) DESA’s executive president, Roberto David Castillo Mejía, accusing him of “providing logistics and other resources to one of the material authors” of the assassination. Castillo was a [West Point graduate](#) who worked in the energy industry while serving as a Honduran intelligence officer.

This July, The Grayzone visited the family of Berta Cáceres in La Esperanza, a town nestled in the verdant mountains of Intibucá. Cáceres' mother, Doña Berta, lives there under 24-hour police guard paid for by human rights groups.

Image on the right: Laura Zuniga Caceres of COPINH in the home where Berta Caceres was raised (Photo: Ben Norton)



The Cáceres household is bristling with security cameras, and family members get around in armored cars. In her living room, we met Laura Zúñiga Cáceres of the Civic Council of Indigenous and Popular Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), the human rights group that her mother Berta founded.

"The violence in Honduras generates migrant caravans, which tears apart society, and it all has to do with all of this extractivism, this violence," Zúñiga Cáceres told The Grayzone. "And the response from the US government is to send more soldiers to our land; it is to reinforce one of the factors that generates violence the most in our society."

"We are receiving reports from our comrades that there is a US military presence in indigenous Lenca territory," she added. "For what? Humanitarian aid? With weapons. It's violence. It's persecution."

Gutting public healthcare, driving more migration

The Alliance for Prosperity also commissioned the privatization of health services through a deceptively named program called the Social Protection Framework Law, or la Ley Marco de Protección Social.

Promoted by Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández as a needed reform, the scheme was advanced through a classic shock doctrine-style episode: In 2015, close associates of Hernández [siphoned some \\$300 million from the Honduran Institute for Social Services](#) (IHSS) into private businesses, starving hospitals of supplies and causing several thousand excess deaths, mostly among the poor.

With the medical sector in shambles, Hondurans were then forced to seek healthcare from the private companies that were to provide services under Hernandez's "Social Protection" plan.

"The money that was robbed [in the IHSS scandal] was used to justify the Ley Marco Protección Social," Karen Spring, a researcher and coordinator for the Honduras Solidarity Network, told The Grayzone. "The hospitals were left in horrible conditions with no human capital and they were left to farm out to

private hospitals.”

“When Hondurans go to hospitals, they will be told they need to go to a private company, and through the deductions in their jobs they will have to pay a lot out of pocket,” Spring said. “Through the old universal system you would be covered no matter what you had, from a broken arm to cancer. No more.”

In response, Hondurans poured out into the streets, launching the March of Torches – the first major wave of continuous protests against Hernández and his corrupt administration.

In March 2015, in the middle of the crisis, Joe Biden rushed down to Guatemala City to embrace Hernández and restore confidence in the Alliance for Prosperity.

“I come from a state that, in fact, is the corporate capital of America. More corporations are headquartered there than anywhere else,” [Biden boasted](#), with Hernández and the presidents of Guatemala and El Salvador standing by his side. “They want to come here. Corporate America wants to come.”



Joseph Biden embraces Juan Orlando Hernandez in Guatemala City, February 2016

Emphasizing the need for more anti-corruption and security measures to attract international financial investment, Biden pointed to Plan Colombia as a shining model – and to himself as its architect. “Today Colombia is a nation transformed, just as you hope to be 10 to 15 years from now,” the vice president proclaimed.

Following Biden’s visit, the privatization of the Honduran economy continued apace — and so did the corruption, the repression, and the unflinching support from Washington.

Hondurans take to the streets, wind up in US-style supermax prisons

By 2017, the movement in Honduras that had galvanized against the US-orchestrated 2009

coup saw its most immediate opportunity for political transformation at the ballot box. President Hernández was running for re-election, violating a constitutional provision on term limits. His opponent, Salvador Nasrallah, was a popular broadcast personality who provided a centrist consensus choice for the varied elements that opposed the country's coup regime.

When voting ended on November 26, Nasrallah's victory appeared certain, with exit polls showing him comfortably ahead by several points. But suddenly, the government announced that a power outage required the suspension of vote counting. Days later, Hernández was declared the victor by about 1 percent.

The fraud was so transparent that the [Organization of American States](#) (OAS), normally an arm of US interests in Latin America, declared in a [preliminary report](#) that "errors, irregularities and systemic problems," as well as "extreme statistical improbability," rendered the election invalid.

But the United States recognized the results anyway, leaving disenfranchised Hondurans with protest as their only recourse.

"Hondurans tried to change what happened in their country through the 2017 elections, not just Hernández but all the implementation of all these policies that the Biden plan had funded and implemented all these years since the coup," explained Karen Spring, of the Honduras Solidarity Network.

"They tried to change that reality through votes and when the elections turned out to be a fraud, tons of people had no choice but to take to the streets."

At the front lines of the protests in 2017 was Spring's longtime partner, the Honduran activist Edwin Espinal. Following a protest in November of that year where property damage took place, Espinal was arrested at gunpoint at his home and accused of setting fire to the front door of a hotel. He fervently denied all charges, accusing the government of persecuting him for his political activism.

In fact, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights had placed a protective measure on Espinal in 2010 in response to previous attempts to legally railroad him.

The government placed Espinal in pre-trial detention in La Tolva, a US-style maximum security prison normally reserved for violent criminals and narco-traffickers. Last October, Espinal and Spring [were married](#) in the jail while surrounded by masked guards.



Karen Spring and Edwin Espinal marry in La Tolva in October 2018 (Photo: Karen Spring)

“Since the Biden plan, contractors have been coming down to build these US-style maximum security prisons,” Spring said. “That’s where my husband Edwin Espinal is being held.”

“They say the company is Honduran but there’s no way Hondurans could have built that without US architects or US construction firms giving them the plans,” she added. “I’ve been in the prison and it’s like they dumped a US prison in the middle of Honduras.”

Reflecting on her husband’s persecution, Spring explained, “Edwin wanted to stay in his country to change the reality that caused mass migration. He’s one of the people who’s faced consequences because he went to the streets. And he’s faced persecution for years because he’s one of the Hondurans who wanted to change the country by staying and fighting. Berta Caceres was another.”

“Hondurans wanted to use their votes to change the country and now they’re voting with their feet,” she continued. “So if Biden’s plan really addressed the root causes of the migrant crisis, why aren’t people asking why migration is getting worse? Hondurans are voting on the Biden plan by fleeing and saying your plan didn’t work and it made our situation worse by fleeing to the border.”

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