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Rebellion and Revolution in Central America: The Honduran Exception

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Explaining Ethnic Violence

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Many theories and hypotheses have been offered to try to pinpoint the causes of national rebellion. Some of these theories focus on the sources of discontent or grievance within a society, such as poverty or inequality, while others focus on the areas of political opportunity, such as weak institutions or the availability of insurgent resources. In this paper, I will analyze Central American cases to draw conclusions concerning the generalizability of these theories. Specifically, I will try to answer the question, why did Honduras largely escape mass political violence, while Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala did not?

I argue that no one theory provides an adequate answer. Instead, a merger of theories combining political-economic approaches with explanations focused on counterinsurgency strategies proves to be the most revealing. In particular, I argue that government responses towards growing discontent within society are fundamental to determining whether or not this translates into mass political violence. At a time when the military governments of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were brutally repressing their opposition – thus radicalizing a large segment of their populations – the Honduran government practiced considerable restraint, convincing the majority of its people to continue to seek reform through institutional means. This exceptional response was rooted in Honduras’ unique political-economic history, which created a political culture much more restrained, inclusive, and, in general, more effective than political cultures of neighboring countries.

In the first section, I will give a brief discussion of the alternative theories and approaches that have been offered to try to explain these events and nonevent. In the second section, I will more thoroughly analyze the Honduran and Nicaraguan case studies and empirical evidence in an attempt to designate which theories or explanations best answer the
question posed. I use Nicaragua as my main point of comparison since it is the Central
American country most similar in history, culture, geography, and population size as
Honduras; however, where appropriate I make comparisons with other Central American
countries as well.

Theories and Explanations of Mass Rebellion in Central America

One interpretation of the cases centers on the level of each country’s socioeconomic
development. Honduras, by most standards, is the least developed country in Central
America, and was “least altered in social and economic structure by the Central American
Common Market.”1 Thus, so the argument goes, by the late 1970s the population of
Honduras was too little affected by the negative side-effects of modernization, and thus too
politically passive, to demand radical change.2 This argument is disproven by the simple fact
that, during the 1960s and 1970s, a large segment of the population did indeed mobilize to
demand reform. During this time period, labor unions, land occupation movements, and
business organizations all expanded and multiplied to press their growing demands upon the
state.3 Therefore, the question should not be why was the Honduran population so politically
passive, but why did such a politically active population remain relatively peaceful?

A second, more influential explanation argues that Honduras has been more
politically stable because its land tenure system is more equitable.4 This argument relates
back to classic theories on rebellion and revolution, which consider land inequality and/or

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3 John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, Understanding Central America, p. 140.
landlessness to be fundamental preconditions for insurgency. However, although land distribution in Honduras was historically more equitable than that of its neighbors, by the 1970s it had become highly unequal. In fact, by 1974, the Gini coefficient for land distribution in Honduras (0.78) was quite similar to that of Nicaragua (0.80), El Salvador (0.82), and Guatemala (0.82). Costa Rica also had extremely high land concentration (Gini coefficient of 0.82) – yet it suffered not a single death from political violence. The extent of landlessness was also quite similar. In Honduras, the percentage of landless rural families in 1974 was 36 percent, while in El Salvador the percentage in 1975 was 41 percent. The latter, of course, suffered a debilitating civil conflict, while the former did not. Thus the land distribution argument, in its pure form, proves inadequate.

A third line of argument attempts to modify the original inequality theories by delving deeper into the specific structures and transformations of the agrarian systems under examination. Ruhl argues that, although Honduras’ distribution of land appears very similar to its neighbors’, underneath the surface there are some very significant differences. For example, in the early 1980s, the landless population of Honduras differed markedly from that of other Central American countries. Among the landless in Honduras were approximately “18,000 well-paid banana workers employed by North American companies, United Brands (Tela Railroad Company) and Castle and Cooke (Standard Fruit). The banana workers [were] unionized and earned about 10 times the average national income. There [was] no

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8 Ibid., p. 426.
equivalent group” in neighboring countries.\textsuperscript{10} In fact, Ruhl, continues, “Honduran peasants became the strongest and best organized \textit{campesinos} in Central America because they were permitted to organize legally while peasant groups… elsewhere were outlawed and/or repressed …”\textsuperscript{11} This not only relieved rural tensions and land pressures, since many families of well-paid banana workers were disinterested in acquiring land, it also revealed that the government was willing to retain a certain level of dialogue with peasants, which persuaded them to keep pressing their demands within institutional forums.\textsuperscript{12}

A second significant feature of Honduras’ agricultural system regards government policy: In the 1960s and 1970s, the military government carried out a major redistribution program, distributing 207,433 hectares of land to 34,364 rural families, a move that was unparalleled in other Central American countries.\textsuperscript{13} Although the program did little to transform the underlying inequalities of Honduras’ agrarian structure,\textsuperscript{14} its political effects were significant. For one, the program proved highly popular,\textsuperscript{15} bestowing a nontrivial amount of legitimacy on the regime and draining militants of potential recruits. Two, the program’s recipients were essentially co-opted by the government: “Formerly the most mobilized and combative peasants, the reform beneficiaries now somewhat selfishly focus[ed] their demands on improving credit or technical assistance rather than on obtaining land for the landless population.”\textsuperscript{16} Sieder takes this argument one step further, stating that the “inclusionary nature” of state policy “towards a sector of organized labour… engendered

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\textsuperscript{10} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 51. \\
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., pp. 55, 58. \\
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 53. \\
\end{flushleft}
a series of contradictions which ultimately proved highly destructive for the labour
movement as a whole."17 Therefore, the movement never achieved the same level of
militancy as its counterparts in other Central American countries.

Thus, this third line of argument, as advanced by Ruhl and Sieder, points out that
there were significant political effects of the agrarian systems in Honduras and its neighbors
– and that these may have been even more important than the economic effects. More
correctly, the effects were not the products of agrarian systems per se, but rather were the
result of more restrained, inclusive, and reformist government policies towards labor unions
and peasant organizations. Although the levels of inequality in Central American countries
were all quite similar, the perceptions and expressions of discontent were much more
moderate in Honduras because government policies 1) co-opted important segments of the
urban and rural opposition, 2) persuaded these segments, and others attempting to gain
similar benefits, to continue to pursue redress of grievances through established forums, and
3) provided the government with much more support, and the regime with much more
legitimacy, than that held by counterparts in surrounding neighbors, with the exception of
Costa Rica.

This interpretation, although convincing, raises a number of interrelated questions.
One, why was there a stronger union movement in Honduras than in neighboring countries?
That is, was its strength a result of government policies, as argued here, or was it also a result
of Honduras’ unique economic history – such as its development of a banana-, not coffee-, based export economy? Two, which way does the causal arrow run? Was the union
movement stronger in Honduras because the government was less repressive, or was the
government less repressive because the union movement was stronger? And three, to what

17 Rachel Sieder, “Honduras: The Politics of Exception and Military Reformism,” p. 120.
extent were the governments’ policies a mere reflection of political realities, such as Honduras’ unusual lack of a coherent, powerful bourgeoisie,\textsuperscript{18} and to what extent was it an expression of motives explicitly aimed at moderating or co-opting the opposition? I will attempt to answer these questions in the next section.

A fourth line of argument asserts that the historical levels of political violence in Latin American countries have been a direct result of the specific strategies and tactics of insurgency and counterinsurgency forces.\textsuperscript{19} This line of argument finds its roots in resource mobilization theories,\textsuperscript{20} which directly oppose the discontent or grievance theories described above. In regards to Central American guerrillas, Weitz argues that their success or failure depends not on structural variables such as economic performance or inequality, but on the ability of guerrillas to connect rural support with government opposition in urban areas.\textsuperscript{21} The counterinsurgency tactics of the government, as well, help determine the insurgency’s level of success: strategies aimed at garnering popular support are better able to contain insurgency than those aimed at producing mass civilian casualties.\textsuperscript{22} Lastly, the level of support offered by the United States plays a very significant role in determining the success or failure of counterinsurgency.\textsuperscript{23}

A limitation of this approach is that it fails to specify just how peasants decide to rebel in the first place. If the question posed at the beginning of this paper asked why did individuals in Honduras and Nicaragua violently oppose their governments, then this would be a severe drawback. However, the purpose of this paper is to attempt to answer the related

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., pp. 408-409.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 406.
but different question, why did government opposition result in mass political violence in Nicaragua, and eventually revolution, while in Honduras it remained relatively minor and isolated? In answering this second question, this line of argument provides an interesting explanation:

Throughout the 1960s and… 1970s, the FSLN received the support of the peasants of the north-central region of Nicaragua. Nevertheless, it was not until four other developments took place that insurgents gained sufficient support… First, the rebels established underground units in Nicaragua’s cities. Second, government repression radicalized groups and individuals who had originally pressed for moderate reforms. Third, the non-FSLN opponents of the government proved unable to oust Somoza. And fourth, the Sandinistas showed themselves – with their daring hit-and-run raids like their 1978 seizure of the National Palace – capable of effectively challenging the regime.24

Indeed, the FSLN proved to be highly intelligent and flexible,25 while the government lost all restraint in its counterinsurgency strategies. Between 1974 and 1977 alone, the “National Guard murdered several thousand mostly innocent people suspected as subversives or possible FSLN sympathizers… [driving thousands more], especially young people, to join the FSLN.”26 This was in stark contrast to Honduras, where the government practiced considerable restraint in comparison to its neighbors, where “basic civil… liberties remained intact and relatively few human rights abuses occurred,”27 and where the few guerrilla groups that did form during the 1970s gained neither wide rural nor urban support.28

The “insurgency/counterinsurgency strategy” story thus seems compelling. However, as with the agrarian structure arguments, questions of causality arise. One, to what extent was the Honduran insurgents’ inability to connect urban and rural operations a result of inferior tactics, and to what extent was it simply a matter of the insurgents’ lack of support...

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24 Ibid., pp. 402-403.
26 John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, Understanding Central America, pp. 74-75.
28 Ibid., p. 53.
among both the rural and urban populations? More precisely, was the guerrilla movements’
failure in this arena a result of strategies and tactics, or was it a result of the structural
conditions and levels of discontent described earlier? Two, why were the militaries in
Honduras less oppressive than those in Nicaragua and surrounding neighbors? Was this a
result of superior counterinsurgency strategies, or was it a result of the relative insignificance
of the guerrilla threat? This leads into three, which way does the causal arrow run? Was the
military less repressive because the insurgency movement was weak, or was the insurgency
weak because the military was less repressive? And four, to what extent were Nicaraguan
peasants and urban dwellers “forced” into the guerrilla movement for security purposes? As
Stoll points out, “People may join the revolutionary movement less because they share its
ideal than to save their lives, because of a set of coercive pressures emanating from both
sides that I will refer to as ‘dual violence.”

Although it is clear that structural conditions and redistributive policies, or rather lack thereof, played a role in the escalation of civil violence, it is less clear whether or not this role was central, or whether it served as merely a backdrop to the role of the state’s massive repression. These questions, and the ones outlined earlier, are the topics to which I turn in the following section.

The Cases: Political Opportunity, Economic Discontent, and Policy Choices

Honduras and Nicaragua possess many socioeconomic and geographical conditions
that have been shown to favor insurgency. In particular, both are poor countries with areas
of rough, mountainous terrain. In 1970, the GDP per capita of Honduras was $725; and the

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GDP per capita of Nicaragua was $1,388.\textsuperscript{32} Low per capita income favors insurgency because it serves as a proxy for the “state’s overall financial, administrative, police, and military capabilities.”\textsuperscript{33} State frailty was revealed quite clearly during the civil conflicts of not only Nicaragua, where the insurgency was able to effectively establish a “dual power” in the political order,\textsuperscript{34} but also in other Central American countries where insurgency movements were ultimately unsuccessful. Indeed, the major reason why these weak regimes were able to survive, especially when placed under such heavy stress, was that the United States provided them massive military and economic assistance. As one scholar notes, “The principal reason for the extended nature of the war [in El Salvador] was the capacity of the junta to hold its piecemeal military apparatus together…to ward off guerrilla offensives…. It could only have achieved this or, indeed, survived for more than a few weeks, with the resolute support of the U.S., which Somoza was in the last instance denied.”\textsuperscript{35} In addition, rough terrain favors insurgency because it allows guerrillas to hide from superior government forces.\textsuperscript{36} This was plainly reflected in Nicaragua, as a large proportion of the rebels and rebel support came from the country’s mountainous regions to the north.\textsuperscript{37}

Rapid economic transformations and severe declines also created social conditions conducive to mass revolt. In Nicaragua, after a period of impressive growth in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo drove


\textsuperscript{33} James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” p. 80.

\textsuperscript{34} Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, \textit{Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956}, pp. 154-206, 263-301.


\textsuperscript{36} James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” p. 80.

inflation up to almost 11 percent a year between 1973 and 1977. By the late 1970s, the real wages of ordinary Nicaraguans had been driven down to only two-thirds of their 1967 peak.\textsuperscript{38} Unemployment also increased from 4 percent in 1970 to 13 percent in 1978 – the hardest hit being workers who lost their jobs after the devastating Managua earthquake and peasants forced off their land by the growth of agro-exports. Even then, underemployment – the “inability to find full-time work or acceptance of agricultural wage labor because of insufficient farmland for family subsistence farming” – affected five times as many as were unemployed.\textsuperscript{39} And lastly, concentration of land ownership in agricultural areas significantly increased throughout the 1960s and 1970s as the cotton industry expanded throughout the region. In Honduras, economic recession hit during this time as well. After a period of very slow growth – averaging about 0.4 percent from 1972 to 1979 – the Honduran economy stagnated after 1980, contracting by 13 percent in GDP per capita between 1980 and 1990.\textsuperscript{40}

Land hunger, as well, first became a problem during the 1960s, spurred by the rising demand of new agro-exports – such as cotton, beef, and sugar – which “stimulated encroachment on campesino plots through illegal enclosures, a shift to cash rents, and worsening land distribution ratios.”\textsuperscript{41} Rural unemployment also increased, as fruit companies laid off nearly half their work-force in 1957 alone.\textsuperscript{42}

Lastly, the intellectual atmosphere of the period was also supportive of guerrilla movements. Specifically, the Cuban Revolution greatly impacted the attitudes and behavior of intellectuals and parties of the left and center in not only Central America, but in Latin

\textsuperscript{38} John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, \textit{Understanding Central America}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., Table A.1.
\textsuperscript{41} Rachel Sieder, “Honduras: The Politics of Exception and Military Reformism,” p. 108. As noted earlier, by 1974, 36 percent of families in rural Honduras were landless.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p. 108.
America as a whole. Numerous revolutionaries, including those in Central America, cited the Cuban Revolution as their model. And more directly, many guerrillas often traveled to Cuba to receive spiritual and military preparation. As Timothy Wickham-Crowley has noted, the successes of Castro fundamentally changed the region’s “cultural repertoires” and “perceptions of the possible”: “The thought processes of future guerrillas were probably remarkably neat: if Cuba can carry out a socialist revolution under the very nose, and against the resistance, of yanqui imperialism, then why not here as well…?” The university provided a forum in which these new ideas could be disseminated, since it acted as a “protected enclave within which dissatisfied…groups [had] some room to develop distinctive social arrangements…and explanations of the world around them.” It is no wonder, then, that the leadership of guerrilla movements was overwhelmingly drawn from the university-educated middle and upper-classes.

Thus, in Nicaragua and Honduras, and in all of Central America for that matter, the ground was ripe for the development of insurgency movements. Structural weaknesses, in the form of poor, weak states and mountainous terrain, gave potential guerrillas the political opportunity to organize. Rapid socioeconomic change, declining standards of living, and growing concentration of wealth increased societal grievances. The success of the Cuban Revolution produced a new cultural-intellectual framework, providing potential guerrilla leadership with a moral and practical model that it could attempt to emulate. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that insurgent movements developed in every single Central

43 Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956, p. 31.
44 Ibid., p. 36.
46 Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956, p. 23.
American country during this period. Even in relatively stable Honduras, several leftist guerrilla groups sprang up in the 1970s and early 1980s, the most important of which was the Frente Morazanista para la Liberación de Honduras (FMLH). Insurgent violence, of course, remained low in Honduras, while in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, it spiraled into mass civil conflict. Why was this the case?

One major reason was that the guerrilla movement in Honduras, unlike its counterpart in Nicaragua, was unable to connect urban with rural operations. In the previous section, I asked whether this inability was the result of inferior tactics, or whether it was simply a byproduct of the guerrilla’s lack of support among the agrarian population. For obvious reasons, there is insufficient research on Honduran guerrilla groups to allow me to provide a definitive reply; but common sense seems to suggest an answer. Let us say that Honduran rebels did possess ample support in the countryside. If this were the case, why would they not be able to connect this with urban support, when rebels were more than able to in neighboring Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador? There is no inherent reason why Honduran guerrilla groups were unaware of the strategies being practiced by organizations nearby, especially when the sharing of knowledge seemed so central to the guerrilla operations of neighboring countries. Moreover, by the 1980s the Honduran insurgency movement, unlike its counterpart in Nicaragua, had not one but two successful models that it could emulate. The more likely scenario, then, is that Honduran guerrillas indeed tried to copy the tactics of successful organizations, but ultimately failed. Under this scenario, the

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48 For a discussion of the behavioral impact of the Cuban Revolution, see Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956, pp. 30-33.
guerrillas’ inability to connect urban and rural operations stemmed not from the use of inferior tactics, but from the dearth of rural operations to begin with.

The scarcity of rural operations can reasonably be traced to the insurgents’ relative unpopularity among the agrarian population. Again, there is a lack of concrete evidence to prove this point, but through reasoning we can make the connection. For one, agrarian support has been a crucial contributor to the guerrilla movements of every Latin American country with large-scale insurgencies, with peasants comprising a high percentage of armed combatants in nearly every case.49 Two, the FMLH, Honduras’ largest guerrilla group, never numbered more than 300 armed fighters at its height,50 suggesting support was never widespread among all segments of society, agrarian included. The Sandinistas, by contrast, possessed thousands of armed fighters at its height,51 the majority of whom were peasants from peripheral regions of the country.52 Thus, if peasant support was central to the development of large-scale insurgencies in other Latin American countries, and if the Honduran guerrilla groups never possessed widespread support, then it is very likely that the lack of these groups’ success was due to their lack of support amongst peasants.

This then raises another question, why were Honduran guerrillas less popular in the countryside compared to their Nicaraguan counterparts? Sources of discontent, alone, provide an unsatisfactory answer. As discussed earlier, grievances not only existed in both countries, they actually increased during the 1960s and 1970s as economic transformation and recession caused rises in inflation, unemployment, and land concentration. Although

49 Ibid., p. 8, 26.
52 Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956, pp. 232-234.
these problems affected Honduras less severely than its neighbors, they were still enough to cause mass mobilization amongst a growing political opposition as trade unions, peasant movements, and business organizations all expanded and multiplied to increase their lobbying of the state.\footnote{John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, and Thomas W. Walker, \textit{Understanding Central America}, pp. 139-140.} As stated earlier, the major contrast was that this growing opposition, except for the small numbers of isolated guerrilla organizations, continued to pursue redress of their rising grievances through nonviolent means.

The key reason for this contrast, I argue, lies in the differing policy responses of the Honduran and Nicaraguan governments towards their opposition – regarding both the nonviolent, though increasingly militant, labor movement, as well the growing insurgency. Concerning the former, the Somoza regime, after World War II, used bribes and personal placements to try to co-opt the fledgling movement in order to secure an ally against the incipient pro-democracy movement.\footnote{John A. Booth, \textit{The End of the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution}, p. 121.} After the regime consolidated its power vis-à-vis the Conservatives and students, it immediately switched to a policy of outright suppression. During the 1970s – as economic recession and declining standards of living were pushing workers towards greater mobilization – Somoza stepped up the suppression even more by declaring a state of martial law, which outlawed strikes and permitted the police an “unrestrained hand” in persecuting and jailing union organizers.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 122-123.} This was in sharp contrast to the regime in Honduras where, as described in the previous section, the military government pursued policies of engagement, restraint, and redistribution towards the growing labor movement. Although the Honduran military practiced limited repression, the major aim of government policy throughout the post-war period was not repression but cooptation. Moreover, this policy, in effect, achieved its goals, as the most militant segments
of the labor movement were essentially bought off, creating deep rifts that ultimately proved destructive for the movement as a whole.\textsuperscript{56} The Nicaraguan policy, on the other hand, was decidedly ineffective, since strikes, now accompanied by anti-regime demonstrations, became more frequent in 1976 and 1977 in spite of martial law.\textsuperscript{57}

Regarding counterinsurgency strategies, the Nicaraguan military practiced increasingly brutal tactics. The National Guard, in response to a successful FSLN hostage-taking incident in Managua, began a massive campaign to “drain the swamp” of potential subversives, a campaign which eventually cost the lives of thousands of mostly innocent Nicaraguans. This was in stark contrast to the situation in Honduras – where despite the numerous successful hostage-takings, bombings, and other guerrilla terrorist activities of the 1980s,\textsuperscript{58} the military committed relatively few human rights abuses. The excessiveness of Nicaragua’s military tactics and the restraint of Honduras’ is further revealed when comparing the sizes of their principal guerrilla organizations: As noted earlier, the FMLH numbered roughly 300 armed fighters by the early 1980s; whereas the FSLN numbered no more than 150 armed guerrillas in December of 1974, the year that it carried out its successful hostage-taking.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, in answer to the question posed in the previous section, the restraint of the Honduran military was caused not by a lack of an insurgent threat – since the size of Honduras’ guerrilla movement was more than double the size of Nicaragua’s at the onset of Somoza’s brutal campaign of repression – but rather, it was a product of superior counterinsurgency strategies. The different effects of these policies were made quite evident: the FMLH topped off at 300 in the early 1980s, and steadily declined thereafter; whereas the

\textsuperscript{56} Rachel Sieder, “Honduras: The Politics of Exception and Military Reformism,” p. 120.
\textsuperscript{57} John A. Booth, \textit{The End of the Beginning: The Nicaraguan Revolution}, p. 123.
FSLN increased its ranks by thousands of fighters from 1975 on, the year in which Somoza began its massive counterinsurgency operations. The causal arrow clearly shows that increased repression caused an increase in insurgent violence, not the other way around.

The policy choices of government officials, therefore, are the principal reasons why Honduras escaped mass political violence. This analysis, however, begs the question, why was only the Honduran government able to develop effective strategies to cope with growing societal discontent – while the governments of Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala were not? Was the political-military elite of Honduras simply smarter? The lack of research on this topic does not allow me to provide a satisfactory explanation; but from the little research that does exist, the answer seems to lie in the notion of political culture.

Honduran politicians, put simply, developed a distinctive “way of doing things,” which can be traced to the country’s early political-economic development. Unlike in the rest of Central America, coffee did not become a major export for Honduras until after World War II. Due to a “geological quirk,” the soil in Honduras does not contain the same volcanic material prevalent in other countries, making it less fertile. This, in combination with Honduras’ chronic labor shortages and mountainous terrain – which greatly raises transportation costs – impeded the development of an agro-export industry until the twentieth century. Honduras, therefore, never developed the same coherent or powerful economic elite as did its neighbors. When Honduras did begin to form an export economy in the early twentieth century, it was built not on coffee but on bananas, and was driven not by

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Hondurans, but by U.S. multinationals. Thus, Honduran development became heavily dependent on U.S. capital. As Sieder notes, “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 U.S. monopoly capital.”\(^{64}\) Furthermore, since the banana industry developed along Honduras’ sparsely populated northern coast, few peasants were displaced. Thus there was virtually no land shortage until after World War II, which meant that the military did not have a need to quell an angry, dispossessed rural working class. The fact that the military did not even develop as a significant institution until the 1950s further attests to this.\(^{65}\)

The Honduran military, therefore, never developed strong political, social, and cultural ties with a conservative economic elite.\(^{66}\) So when societal discontent and opposition mobilization began to rapidly increase in the 1960s, the military government had significantly more policy options at its disposal. The point is not that structural conditions created a situation that forced the political elite to act in certain ways; but rather, the unique political-economic history created a different political-cultural repertoire than what existed in neighboring countries. This was highlighted by a conversation between General Oswaldo López Arellano – the president of Honduras who oversaw the bulk of the military’s redistributive policies – and Anastasio Somoza-Debayle. During that exchange, 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 compadres’ political career.”\(^{67}\) Given this comment, Somoza appears unable to conceive of

the idea that an alternative policy approach may actually prove beneficial. Never mind the fact that, during the 1970s when these reforms were being carried out, the “non-radical” policies of Somoza were in reality dramatically inflaming the insurgency. Indeed, Somoza’s attitudes seem to be based not in political reality, but in a simple belief in the “way things are supposed to be done.”

Conclusion: Tipping the Scale

I have shown that weak structural conditions are not sufficient causes of mass political violence. Although conditions such as poverty, weak institutions, and mountainous terrain may “set the stage” for revolt by creating windows of political opportunity, they do not provide people with concrete motives to rebel. And although economic transformation – especially in the form of recessions that increase inequality, inflation, landlessness, and unemployment – provide people with feelings of “relative deprivation,” they cannot separate populations that choose not to resort to massive political violence from ones that do. This can be seen in the Honduran case, where levels of poverty and rough terrain would be expected to make Honduras more prone to civil conflict than Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s, and where sources of discontent were just as present as they were in Nicaragua.

Instead, government choices from above, especially in the Central American context, provide the necessary weight that tips the scale in favor of either civil conflict or relative peace. In Honduras and Nicaragua, government policies created powerful incentive structures that channeled opposition into particular behaviors. The Honduran government’s restrained, inclusive, and redistributive policies did little to change the underlying economic structures of the country; but they greatly impacted public perceptions and actions by leaving

68 Based on statistical results provided by Prof. James Fearon.
open a significant political space for the opposition to operate, persuading it to keep pressing its demands within institutional forums. In Nicaragua, on the other hand, massive repression effectively closed off these spaces. Moreover, the military’s unrestrained counterinsurgency practices created security concerns that greatly reduced the costs of joining the rebel movement. And lastly, the corrupt practices of the Somoza regime stripped it of any remaining legitimacy, allowing the insurgents to form a dual center of power within the state.

It is important to note that the political legitimacy of the Honduran regime also came under fire in the late 1980s and 1990s. But unlike its counterpart in Nicaragua, the government eventually allowed for democratic reform, effectively pulling away any remaining moral support for the insurgency movement.

I have also argued that these differences in policy are rooted in differences in political culture, the development of which can be traced to the political-economic history of the state. Unlike in surrounding neighbors, Honduras never developed a unified, powerful agro-export elite, and thus its military and government were not bound to the same political, economic, and social ties of governments in other Central American countries. The unique political-economic structures that this created, aside from literally constraining state actions, provided a distinct cultural framework under which policies could be adopted. Hence, policies of inclusion and redistribution were acceptable within the Honduran system, whereas they were not in other Central American countries.69 This story, though logically tenable and consistent with available evidence, is not definitive. Thus, further research should be conducted towards examining the impact of political culture and political-economic history in not only the Central American context, but in other regions that have undergone large-scale rebellion and revolution as well.

69 Costa Rica provides a notable exception.