

Fighting for the Right

Community Participation in Latin American Post-Transitional Democracies

Manuel Orozco and Beatriz Slooten

The international community is once again turning its attention to Central America, where challenges to governance are increasingly threatening stability, democratic progress, and economic development. Corruption, abuse of authority, organized crime, weak economic growth, and continued migration and environmental degradation constitute pressing issues that affect daily life in the region. The ways in which Central Americans cope with these challenges reflect an effort to be resilient by confronting problems and dealing with reality in ways that transcend simple survival. This article reviews some of these challenges and identifies instances where resilience among actors is taking shape. It also questions the ability of U.S. policymakers to commit to and collaborate with local actors to improve this region.

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Political Difficulties in the 21st Century. Following the lull that accompanied democratic transitions in the early 1990s, Central America is facing increasingly turbulent times. The societies are confronting the demons of outdated political institutions such as populist *caudillos*, along with rampant social inequality and organized crime. There is a political struggle among modernizing democratic

institutions, elite leadership resistant to democratic norms, and increasingly influential unelected players, whose power surpasses that of government officials who are protected by the countries' constitutions.

When Central American countries transitioned to democracy following the civil wars and political unrest of the early 1990s, they confronted a weak civil society, as well as militaries, political elite, and private-sector players who were reluctant to adopt progressive, democratic principles. Political change has not yet yielded a democratic dividend and instead has become marred by political tension, elite polarization, and violence. In fact, democratic consolidation has been hindered by corruption and limited political participation led by a cadre of individuals, many of whom maintain a firm grasp on the leadership of the political parties, the state, and other institutions. Political

parties and other social sectors, thereby excluding new leaders.

The 2009 military coup in Honduras, in which President Manuel Zelaya was forcibly removed from office following his attempt to amend the constitution to enable a reelection bid, illustrates the internal decomposition that has characterized Central American politics in the post-conflict era.² In the case of Guatemala, political parties remain fragmented and voting turnout is low. Nicaragua has experienced regular ups and downs in its democratic process, as both President Daniel Ortega and Arnoldo Aleman, his predecessor, sequestered political institutions and intimidated civil society, the media, and political dissenters.

The region also exhibits slow and uneven economic development. Economic growth and social policies have yet to complement each other or be effective on their own terms. The global

These societies are confronting the demons of outdated political institutions...

parties are substantially polarized, with relatively few young leaders in a region where the median age is under 25.¹

A political power vacuum is resulting from aging political elites and the alienation of young leaders. Elites who led the political transition of the eighties are reaching the ends of their careers. These politicians, who in some cases were the architects of democratic and peaceful change, have become an obstacle to future modernization and political reforms. By barricading themselves in power, they have hijacked spaces of political authority within their

recession has exacerbated the deceleration of the current growth model based on attracting companies into free trade zones (known as *maquilas*), exploring tourism diversification, and galvanizing international migration. Exports in garment manufacturing have fallen, in part because of international competition and market saturation. Growth in tourism has also decreased from an average growth of 20 percent to 10 percent annually over the past twenty years.³ Though these growth rates are still considerably higher than growth in other sectors, the trend is horizontal

or downward. Foreign aid is also falling, except at times of natural disasters, when calamity garners the attention of the international community. The greatest concern is that these sources of national income are not accompanied by strategies that build long-term sustainability, but rather by practices that consolidate countries into enclave economies. If one third of GDP depends on so few industries, a decline within these select industries would have devastating effects on the economy as a whole. Meanwhile, informal economies persist and taxation is not being raised sufficiently, constraining options for social policy.

Central American criminal organizations, which include drug and arms trafficking networks and youth gangs, have been gradually thwarting democratic political activism and challenging local institutions. What should be normal, everyday decisions are being made under the duress of homicides, coercion, extortion, and intimidation. The number of daily homicides in Central America has reached the levels seen during the civil wars of the 1980s.⁴ The increased power of these organized criminal networks has raised the profile of instability and is becoming a formidable problem as worldwide drug consumption increasingly shifts toward synthetic drug varieties and drug manufacturing moves out of industrialized countries. Criminal organizations are also attracted by the high profits yielded through the production of raw materials for the synthetic drug industry. As a result of both the consolidation of organized crime after bloody battles between Mexican and Colombian cartels and the security vulnerability that

exists in countries such as Honduras and Guatemala, there is an increasing trend to redirect global drug manufacturing to Central American countries.⁵ Solutions that address these challenges must be found.

Understanding resilience and its forms in Central America.

In the midst of these realities, Central American society is grappling with how to cope. There is no uniform set of responses. To some, this is a matter of resilience—a question of how people and institutions manage events in order to sustain their current position. The methods they resort to include adaptation or resistance, but not acquiescence. Resilience is a political expression whereby people, institutions, agents, or structures do not seek to actively transform society, but to sustain and protect their place in it. Resilience posits itself against other expressions of being, such as defeatism or indifference. Resilience in Central America has taken several forms, including rebellion against clientelism, cross-border labor mobility in response to economic adversity, and activism among educated youth, particularly women, to confront the establishment. Such manifestations are akin to Albert Hirschman's thesis about political decisions to exit, use voice, or be loyal to the political system.⁶

Voice: The Case of Clientelism. Throughout the region, the practice of prioritizing political favors over rules has been a historical paradigm. After twenty years of democracy-building, state modernization has established regulations, procedures,

and cultures that are led by a bureaucratic class interested in protecting its own turf. These bureaucracies are not above abusing authority for personal gain, but civil servants who joined the public administration are increasingly accepting the rules of procedures over patron-client interference.

In Nicaragua, for example, government officials have quietly but openly criticized President Daniel Ortega's abuses of authority. Some officials have resigned during the course of the Ortega administration, while others have utilized demonstrations or filtered information to the public. In one case, company officials working for Albanisa (ALBA de Nicaragua, S.A), a privately-owned company that is largely controlled by the Nicaraguan government, disclosed to the public information about the company's mishandling of company funds. Albanisa is a Venezuelan (PDVSA) and Nicaraguan (Petronic) investment scheme designed to utilize revenue from oil re-sales to invest discretionarily in social projects in Nicaragua. The company is not accountable to Congress or government and was allegedly using funds to finance clientelistic activities in support of President Ortega.⁷ The officials' decision to leak Albanisa's accounts, which revealed the mishandling of over one billion dollars in revenue, constituted an act of rebellion against a regime that keeps a tight grip on its cadres and bureaucracy, and brought about political costs for the government.

Similar instances of institutional resilience through the use of bureaucratic voice have occurred in Guatemala. Most notably, the International Commission Against Impunity

in Guatemala (CICIG), tasked with investigating Guatemala's criminal networks and prosecuting their members, has achieved notable successes since its formation in 2007. By 2009, it had removed seventeen hundred police officers and fifty police chiefs who had been involved in organized crime, in addition to its work in advocating for legal reforms.⁸

Accompanying the rebellious bureaucrats, the Central American media has shown resilience through its critiques of clientelism and other abuses of authority in the face of an often-repressive media environment. The media has consistently posited itself as an important watchdog of democracy, creating the space to include dissent whenever its investigative journalism allows it. For example, the details of the Albanisa scandal were leaked to *Confidencial*, a prestigious media outlet that was able to investigate the case further and corroborate government abuses of authority.⁹

The media's efforts, however, have resulted in mixed outcomes in the region as a whole. In Honduras, for example, independent media have been punished with death threats and deadly violence against journalists.¹⁰ Media owners, who are considered part of the country's political elite, have promoted self-censorship. Leading journalists in Honduras were censored during the 2009 coup, but they persisted in their effort to break through the sanctioned reporting provided by the de facto government and the elite-owned, mainstream media.¹¹ In El Salvador, independent journalists have investigated cases of corruption and have been critical of the prosecution of public offi-

cials. Independent journalists have also constructed their own media outlets to promote alternative ways to further free media and inform the public. The cases of *El Faro* in El Salvador, *el Periodico* in Guatemala, *Confidencial* in Nicaragua, and *C-Libre* in Honduras illustrate efforts to remain resilient under state pressure and even repression by some paramilitary groups.¹² Central American media outlets continue to promote democracy in the midst of political adversity, and several have capitalized on opportunities to publicize and prevent further abuses of authority.

Exit: Cross Border Migration and Remittances. Under such difficult conditions, some people are voting with their feet. Labor migration has turned into a salient aspect of daily life.

tion of familial obligation to look after relatives demonstrates resilience even in times of adversity. As the recession hit the pockets of remittance recipients, the share of remittances as a percent of overall income increased despite a decline in total remittances. During the recession, migrants, even after losing their jobs or earning less, continued to send money back home.¹⁴ Many Latin Americans started receiving less money from relatives working abroad, but rather than using their savings, people have sought to cope with these challenges in a variety of ways, such as reorganizing their finances. Many remittance recipient households decided against spending their savings.¹⁵ The end result is a population has become adept at managing their financial resources, even in times of hardship.

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Migration from this region is a result of poor economic performance, growing violence, and better economic opportunities elsewhere. Over the past thirty years, over five million people from Central America have left the region,¹³ and an average of ten thousand are likely to emigrate per year to come. Emigrants endure severe conditions while abroad, earning less than average income and facing health risks because of lack of access to medical insurance and anti-immigrant sentiments.

Despite this, they continue to show signs of resilience. Upholding the tradi-

Loyalty to New Norms in Central America: Youth and Women. The number of college-educated individuals is growing, which may have important political and economic implications. While the number of Central Americans with a primary education has remained at 15 percent of the population, the percentage of college graduates has grown from 1 percent in the 1990s to 4 percent in 2008.¹⁶ There is also an emerging generation of young professionals who are choosing to opt out of the mainstream political

populist tradition. They are part of a critical mass of the middle class that has consolidated in this region. University graduates account for 10 percent or more of the workforce, indicating disproportionate opportunities for youth with higher levels of education.¹⁷ In the coming years, the number of professionals will continue to grow and

leaders who have advanced a debate and agenda about Honduran migration, particularly in light of human rights violations of migrant workers. The *Foro* has been proactive in demanding government policies that protect migrant rights, and has increased its pressure on policymakers after the killings of cross border migrants at the hands of the

Groups are increasingly... pushing back against attempts to bend the political spirit of democratic institutions.

their position in their respective countries will become more relevant, fueling hopes that their economic status and interest in responsible political participation will also increase.

Central to this young cohort are women leaders who have sought to champion many issues and causes, from social policy reform to labor rights. Women's influence in civil society has left a footprint on the country's political agenda, as women have advanced various social debates within the political mainstream. This cadre of women leaders is connected to the emerging educated generation. Women in the region are more likely to hold a tertiary education than men and are taking on more activist positions.¹⁸ The work of women in Honduras exemplifies this trend. Women lead several of the major organizations that are driving the debate over social reform, investment in education, migration rights, and citizen security. The *Foro Nacional para las migraciones en Honduras* is a coalition of civil society organizations led by women

Zetas, a criminal organization operating in Mexico.²⁰

More voice: Resilience among Marginalized Civil Society. Civil society organizations have increased in size and number across Central America and social movements continue to be resilient in spite of the challenges they face from states reluctant to listen to their demands. Within social movements, there are migrant organizations both in the United States and Costa Rica that are seeking to assert their rights.

Migrants make up 15 percent of Costa Rica's population, and although many of them are temporary and illegal workers, they have sought to organize in order to defend their social rights. These migrant associations have participated in policymaking despite anti-immigrant sentiment within both the government and the general public. In 2009 various organizations joined together to create the Migrant Council. The Council is a decision-making body

that engages five government ministries and two civil society organizations, one of which is a Nicaraguan-led association, in debates on migration policy.²¹

Female migrant domestic workers, who make up substantial portions of the migrant population, are a particularly important group that has mobilized against abuses of their labor rights. Female migrant workers make up 30 percent of domestic workers in Costa Rica, and 25 percent of Nicaraguan migrants.²² Employers often abuse these workers; they are underpaid, do not receive social security contributions, and are fired without access to due legal recourse. In 2010, the *Asociación de Trabajadoras Domésticas de Costa Rica*, representing thousands of migrant workers, was able to change the law on labor rights to include domestic work as a protected occupation.²³

Labor unions are another important group that is often neglected or disregarded. Trade union membership in Central America has dropped in recent years. In El Salvador and Costa Rica, for example, union membership is below 5 percent. Governments and a growing number of private-sector entities have been directing antagonism toward unions in an effort to weaken them further.²⁴

Increasingly, the private sector is limiting democratic participation by reducing the role of unions in the workplace and speaking out on policy matters without the involvement of labor movements. Labor unions continue to be resilient despite these pressures, which sometimes come in the form of intimidation and assassination of union leaders, or efforts to replace unions with other kinds of social enter-

prises, as is the case of the *Solidarista* movement in Costa Rica. In Honduras, after the army claimed that teacher strikes were instigated by outside forces, the courts sent eighteen teachers' union leaders to prison on charges of sedition. The measure reflected a repressive anti-union tactic to portray the organizations as destabilizers and a threat to the regime.²⁵ Labor unions continue to be active despite government efforts to minimize their role. According to a FLACSO poll, citizens rank labor unions as the institution that best supports their needs when confronting governments.²⁶

A Role for U.S. Policy? Is a political crisis likely to arise in the midst of slow economic growth, continued violence, and deficient public policies that fail to respond to development needs, or can this critical mass of professionals and a transnational middle class thwart future deterioration of institutions in Central America? The answer is uncertain.

The extent of resilience to confront these problems does not yet suggest that these actors are achieving the growth necessary to combat the deterioration of political institutions. Economic policies that deepen development opportunities for the majorities are limited in scope, violence continues to affect most people in rising numbers (see chart below), and cronyism has not receded despite the efforts of rebellious bureaucrats to counter it.

The region's problems must be actively addressed before the deterioration reaches a critical point. The Obama administration has neglected to consider its options in Central America

carefully. Instead, it adopted a perfunctory approach, mildly increasing foreign assistance on security issues, disregarding a wide array of challenges, and ignoring many of these resilient actors who can effectively serve as triggers of political change. While Central America is not a priority in the U.S. foreign policy agenda, attention to these issues would serve the U.S. national interest. The U.S. government can nurture the needs and wants of the emerging bureaucracy, young professionals, and women leaders by providing incentives to support the rules of democracy. A policy that is directed toward critical areas such as security, but that devotes few resources to train-

ing, is a patchwork policy. With the exception of the military coup in Honduras, the United States has remained uninvolved in the region. It has failed to condemn human rights violations and abuses of authority in Nicaragua, among other countries, indicating reluctant U.S. diplomacy in the region. It is in the American national interest for the Obama administration to take the region seriously, to tackle the links between migration and development, to push the envelope on much needed political reforms, and to nurture individuals who are seeking to assert their position in a slowly emerging political vacuum.

Main Sources of Economic Growth in Central America, 2008 (US\$,000,000)

Sector	Guatemala	El Salvador	Honduras	Nicaragua	Costa Rica
Remittances	4315	3788	2707	1056	624
Exports without Maquila	5375	2620	2639	1487	9312
Maquila	1683	1928	3344	1152	1683
External assistance	551	243	1677	2043	129
Tourism	1275	733	630	267	2160
GDP	34020	22110	14220	6360	29490

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2010. Maquila exports data is obtained from the Central Bank of each country. It is obtained from the balance of payment units of each Central Bank in the region.

Daily Homicides in Central America Source: UNDP, Freedom House.

Country	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Belize	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Costa Rica	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
El Salvador	7	7	6	7	8	10	11	10	9	9
Guatemala	9	9	10	12	13	15	17	16	18	19
Honduras	9	10	12	12	6	7	9	10	12	12
Nicaragua	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Panama	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2
Central America	28	29	32	34	31	37	41	40	44	46

Central America: migration and remittances

Migrants in total	1980		1990 Mi-grants	2000		2008	
	Migra-tion	Remit-tances (ooo, ooo)		Migra-tion	Remit-tances (ooo, ooo)	Migration	Remit-tances (ooo, ooo)
Costa Rica	2,333	4	20,671	43,47	120	225,333	624
El Salvador	6,347	10	139,578	557,821	1,750	1,206,960	3788
Guatemala	15,167	26	46,193	158,956	563	1,217,339	4315
Honduras	1,167	2	21,666	184,888	409	1,221,909	2043
Nicaragua	17,051	11	90,145	326,172	320	1,075,801	1056
Panama	37,917	65	47,666	69,333	160	140,833	
Central America	84,632	118	382,312	1,399.947	3,351	5,283,778	
Central American population	22,785,735		28,536448	35,607,239		40,777,815	
Central Americans abroad	0.37%		1.34%	3.93%		12.96%	

Source: Figures on remittances are obtained from the Balance of Payment unit of each Central Bank in Central America. Figures on migrants are estimated by the author from the volumes in remittances.¹

¹ The estimate on migrants are obtained from survey data about the percent of migrants who remit, the average amount remitted and the frequency remitting yearly. The annual amount per capita remitted divided by the volume yields a total number of transactions that reflect those migrants who only remit. For more information, see Orozco, Manuel and Bryanna Millis. MINING REMITTANCE DATA: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON SURVEY DESIGN AND ADMINISTRATION. (microREPORT #119. United States AID, 2008)

Country	People with tertiary education in Central America 2008	(% of pop.)
Costa Rica	354,690	7.8%
El Salvador El Salvador	249,781	4.1%
Guatemala Guatemala	370,741	2.7%
Honduras Honduras	196,955	2.7%
Nicaragua Nicaragua	159,516	2.8%
Panama Panama	383,892	11.3%
Región Region	1,715,575.59	4.2%

Source: World Bank. *World Bank Economic Indicators*, 2010. Washington, DC. The World Bank, 2010. CD version.

**Women leaders of civil society organizations in Central America
(%, 2009)**

Country	2001	2009
Belize	47	51
Costa Rica	52	51
El Salvador	40	37
Guatemala	37	40
Honduras	38	42
Nicaragua	40	37
Panama	43	47
Total	43	44

Source: Author's tabulation based on an analysis of almost 300 NGOs in Central America in September, 2009; more than 1,000 NGOs in Central America in November, 2001. The review of NGOs was based on fieldwork in Central America by the author and includes meetings, interviews, and data collection of directories and databases on NGOs in the region.

Institutions Seen As Most Attentive to the Needs of Central Americans

Organization	Costa Rica	El Salvador	Guatemala	Honduras	Nicaragua	Panamá	Region
TV	32	16	17	11	14	34	21
Trade unions	20	13	11	12	16	13	14
Political parties	9	13	13	16	12	11	12
Religious authority	5	13	6	15	13	10	10
Business, private sector	9	10	14	15	5	9	10
Youth led organizations	5	10	8	7	13	5	8
All are equally heard by the government	6	12	4	7	6	4	7
None is heard	4	5	7	4	7	2	5
Women organizations	5	3	5	3	8	3	5
Newspaper	3	3	4	3	2	3	3
Minority, indigenous organizations	1	2	7	2	1	2	2
Radio	2	1	2	2	1	3	2
Army	0	2	2	2	1	1	1

Source: FLACSO, *Gobernabilidad y Convivencia Democrática en América Latina*. San Jose: FLACSO, 2010.

NOTES

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