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# Table of contents

1. In Tegucigalpa, the Iron Fist Fails.....	1
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## In Tegucigalpa, the Iron Fist Fails

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**Abstract:** WITH THE RISE OF ZERO TOLERANCE, OR mano dura ("iron fist"), policing in Honduras, the capital city has experienced a kind of metamorphosis. Once home to a thriving nightlife, Tegucigalpa now shuts down by 2 a.m., in accordance with a curfew imposed last year by the city government. Residents must be in their homes by that time, and anyone wanting to host a party in their house must request permission from the municipal government.

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**Full text:** WITH THE RISE OF ZERO TOLERANCE, OR mano dura ("iron fist"), policing in Honduras, the capital city has experienced a kind of metamorphosis. Once home to a thriving nightlife, Tegucigalpa now shuts down by 2 a.m., in accordance with a curfew imposed last year by the city government. Residents must be in their homes by that time, and anyone wanting to host a party in their house must request permission from the municipal government.

Public space, "where society is made visible, where otherness appears," has become an empty space, says Mario Posas, a sociologist at the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH). "This is related to an omnipresent security that keeps people from going into the street or to insecure spaces." The United Nations Development Program's 2006 report on human development in Honduras mentioned this, reporting an increasingly widespread feeling of isolation among the population.

As the streets begin emptying at night, combined military-police units sweep into the city's barrios marginales—the poor neighborhoods surrounding the city, on the slopes of the surrounding hillsides, also known as the "belt of misery"—with the stated aim of disrupting youth gangs and arresting their members. These operations, which have names like Operation Cage, Thunderclap, and Patria, generally occur once a week, particularly in "hot" areas. They constitute the centerpiece of the mano dura policy.

Former president Ricardo Maduro pioneered mano dura in Central America, adopting the policy in 2002. Premised on the idea that gangs are primarily responsible for Honduras's frequent deadly violence and heralded as a "war on gangs" by the media, it promised to make the country safe through sheer force. The presidents of El Salvador and Guatemala followed suit, instituting similar policies (in El Salvador, it came to be called the super mano dura).

Five years later, however, violence in the mano dura's birthplace has only worsened, the policy's only visible effect being the saturation of the country's jails to the point of near collapse. The latest figures show 3,108 killings in 2006, a 44% increase over 2005, according to Observatorio de la Violencia, an NGO.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the number of officially recorded homicides has increased every year since the mano dura's inception, except for a dip in 2004.<sup>2</sup>

The 2006 figure makes for a yearly average of 46.2 violent deaths per 100,000 people, more than five times the World Health Organization's estimated global average. Mima Flores, head of the Observatorio, can only conclude that the mano dura has failed. "The issue of violence and insecurity," she says, "should be seen from a more comprehensive angle, and not only as a problem of gangs." About a third of violent crimes in Honduras are committed by gang members, according to police.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, the numbers on "social cleansing," or extrajudicial killings of young people, have also not budged. About 2,000 youths have died since mano dura was adopted, and about 3,000 since 1998, constituting "a selective policy of extermination," according to Casa Alianza, a Costa Rica-based organization that works with

street children.<sup>4</sup> Last year, after an arduous case brought by Casa Alianza before the Inter-American Human Rights Court, the Honduran state was found guilty of having participated in these killings.

Nevertheless, the minister of security, Alvaro Romero, attributes the majority of crimes against youth to the "war between gangs." President Manuel Zelaya, who took office in January 2006, has avoided addressing the issue, though in a meeting in March with human rights groups, he expressed annoyance at the publicity surrounding youth killings, arguing that it "hurts the country's image" and "repels investment."

Most of the joint military-police operations pit security forces against young alleged gang members, usually aged 15 to 19. For the police, the youths' appearance—baggy pants and T-shirts, tattoos—is enough to signal that they are gang members and therefore subject to arrest, despite there being no law to justify this.

The gang, or mara, phenomenon has for more than a decade spread throughout the countries of Central America, thanks largely to the United States' 1995 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, under which more than 150,000 people—many of them former refugees from the Central American wars—were deported from the United States to their ostensible "countries of origin."<sup>5</sup>

Whereas in an earlier era, the gangs' social structure largely centered on competition over the influence and control of members, in the late 1990s they became much more violent, as LA. gang culture spread throughout the region. Student rivalries gave way to fights over territory and control of arms and drug markets.

Ismael Moreno, a priest who leads the Jesuit congregation in Honduras, says the gang as a social form is linked to the intensification of conflicts and the widespread social exclusion in Honduras, where eight out of 10 people live in poverty or extreme poverty, according to official figures.

"The gangs arrived with globalization and the liberalization of the global economy," Moreno says, "while the state was unable to interpret how this maelstrom was going to profoundly affect social reality."

In Honduras, the two largest gangs are the Pandilla 18 and the Mara Salvatrucha (MS), both of which began in Los Angeles (see "Beyond the Stigma," page 39). They are also found in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico, and maintain strong ties. In Honduras, their members are largely Honduran youth, organized by Honduran and Salvadoran deportees from the United States, according to police spokesman Miguel Amador. Most come from the barrios marginales, and their strongest presence is in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro de Sula in the north.

There are about 69,145 gang members in Central America, distributed in 920 groups—according to a 2006 report from the Commission of Police chiefs of Central America and the Caribbean. More than half of them, the report says, are in Honduras alone.<sup>6</sup>

"In conversations with gang members," says German Reyes, a journalism professor at UNAH, "they say their principal enemy isn't the population but the police. They feel as if they are a business for the authorities, because every time they get arrested, they have to pay the police \$500 if they want to be set free."

But police spokesman Miguel Amador thinks differently. He doesn't deny that there have been corrupt police officers, but the problem of violence and crime "goes beyond that," he says. "It's linked to organized crime." Organized crime, meaning drug-trafficking cartels, kidnappers, and others, maintains various gang zones under its control, producing a "perverse relation in the cycle of violence, crime, and insecurity," Amador says.

These groups, for the moment, especially the drug traffickers and the kidnappers, have put the state on alert. The main thrust of mano dura is no longer exclusively toward gang members, but is now also aimed at the drug cartels.

Guillermo Jiménez, former coordinator of a national program for preventing young people from joining gangs, as well as for reinserting ex-gang members into society, says that in his interviews with young gang members, they admit to having changed their strategies, keeping a lower profile and no longer tattooing themselves as much. "And if indeed they are a product of this incessant cycle of violence," he adds, "many of their actions could be prevented with effective state policies that until now have been absent. It would seem no one is interested in young people."

INSTITUTING THE MANO DURA REQUIRED REFORMS TO the Penal Procedural Code, in particular Article

332, which now explicitly prohibits "illicit association" with gangs and sets forth fines between \$525 and \$10,000 for leaders of gangs or "other groups that associate with the permanent goal of executing any act constituting a crime." In Honduras, the policy was met with strong initial support, especially from the media, whose sensationalistic press coverage of violence and crime has long exacerbated social fear in Honduras, according to an April report by the Center for the Investigation and Promotion of Human Rights in Honduras.

Most significantly, the "anti-gang law" (ley anttmaras), as the press called it, dissolved the boundaries between the military and the police, making way for their joint operations. This represented a rollback of policies adopted in 1996, when the civil police were removed from the military's aegis because of charges of corruption, extrajudicial killings, and military links to narco-trafficking.

This separation of military and police roles led to the creation of the Ministry of Security, an ostensibly civilian department, in 1998. But in its decade of existence, it has had only two civilian ministers, and in the past five years it has been led exclusively by former military officials, who have turned it into an informal branch of the Armed Forces.

President Zelaya campaigned on an anti-crime ticket, proposing to double the number of police officers and to jail murderers and rapists for life. But he also favored rehabilitating former gang members, which came across as a move toward a more integral approach to security.<sup>7</sup> This proved impossible. Zelaya left the anti-gang law in force, allowing the military-police incursions to continue. Like Maduro before him, Zelaya justifies the military-police operations on the basis of an army policy that grants it a civil role in "emergencies."

This has proceeded despite strong criticism from humanitarian groups, especially Human Rights Ombudsman Ramón Custodio, who has accused the government of returning the country to the infamous national security doctrine of the 1980s, under which the country's U. S. -trained military police disappeared 184 people for ideological crimes.

According to Custodio, the remilitarization of security that the government has favored in the last five years has generated a "violence that is at the point of unbalancing social peace."

But his and humanitarian groups' concern goes beyond this. Custodio says the ex-military men at the Ministry of Security are doing away with police training for community service and have reduced the functions assigned to the National Council of Interior Security (CONASIN), composed of civil and state organizations aimed at assessing security policy. Moreover, CONASIN may soon be eliminated by a proposal to reform the police laws put forth by the current government, through the security minister, Alvaro Romero, who says the council "has had too many protests over its minister."

The reform proposal, still under discussion, would formally turn the Ministry of Security into a strictly military entity that would likely begin forming police groups similar to the ones that illegally operated in the 1980s, says Bertha Oliva of the Committee of Detained and Disappeared Family Members in Honduras.

"It is not through ironfisted measures or cosmetics that the police can encourage change," Custodio says. "We need a comprehensive policy on citizen security."

#### **Sidebar**

Honduran police conduct an anti-gang raid in a poor neighborhood in Tegucigalpa.

#### **Sidebar**

Premised on the idea that gangs are primarily responsible for Honduras's frequent deadly violence, *mano dura* promised to make the country safe through sheer force. Five years later, however, violence in Honduras has only worsened, the policy's only visible effect being the saturation of the country's jails to the point of near collapse.

#### **Sidebar**

The separation of military and police roles led to creation of Ministry of Security, an ostensibly civilian department in 1998. But in its decade of existence, it has had only two civilian ministers, and in the past five years it has been led exclusively by former military officials, who have turned it into informal branch of the

Armed Forces.

### **Sidebar**

Police record gang members' tattoos In Tegucigalpa. Raids like these are the centerpiece of the mano dura policy.

### **Footnote**

1. Observatorio de la Violencia, co-sponsored by the United Nations, UNAH, the Ministry of Health, and the Honduran police, has since 2005 remedied the problem of unreliability in Honduran crime statistics, collating and analyzing reports from both the police and the media.
2. Washington Office on Latin America, "Youth Gangs in Central America: Issues in Human Rights, Effective Policing, and Prevention," November 2006, p. 16, [www.wola.org/media/gangs/report\\_final\\_nov\\_06.pdf](http://www.wola.org/media/gangs/report_final_nov_06.pdf).
3. Mark Ungar, "Crime and Citizen Security in Latin America," in Eric Hershberg and Fred Rosen, eds., *Latin America After Neoliberalism: Turning the Tide in the 21st Century?* (The New Press, 2006), p. 185.
4. José Manuel Torres Funes, *El libro awl de Casa Alianza (Tegucigalpa, 2006)*, p. 8.
5. "Youth Gangs in Central America," p. 4.
6. *Maras y pandillas en Centroamérica: Las respuestas de la sociedad civil organizada*, Vol. 4, Universidad Centroamericana "José Simeón Cañas" (San Salvador, 2006), p. 240.
7. [http://news.bbc.co.Uk/2/hi/americas/country\\_profiles/1225416.stm](http://news.bbc.co.Uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1225416.stm)

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