

Honduras Losing Steam on Corruption Fight

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WASHINGTON -- Honduras was supposed to have turned the corner on corruption. In 1998, the Central American nation ratified the Inter-American Convention Against Corruption and adopted measures to fight such behavior as money laundering, influence-peddling, embezzlement and obstruction of justice. It also became one of the first countries in the region to deny immunity for former public officials, including presidents, in corruption cases.

Two years ago, Honduras got its reward. It became the first country in Latin America -- and second in the world -- to benefit from President Bush's performance-based development aid program, the Millennium Challenge. Before a country can be considered for the program, it must demonstrate success against corruption.

But now those gains are in jeopardy. A proliferation of corruption cases, along with allegations of even more corrupt practices that have gone unchecked, have left Hondurans with a perception that corruption in their country is omnipresent. According to a U.S.-funded public opinion poll, the percentage of Hondurans who believe the government is combating corruption declined from 40 percent in 2004 to 26.6 percent in 2006.

Juan Ferrera, coordinator for Honduras' National Anti-Corruption Council, said in an interview from Tegucigalpa that corruption is creating such public disenchantment that Hondurans may even "put aside democratic options." The council's first transparency report, issued last month, found that corruption is costing the country millions of dollars -- money lost not only to corrupt officials but also in taxes not paid and investments not made. Perhaps even more disturbing is the social cost of the problem, which the study noted is not only eroding individuals' trust in their institutions but also in each other.

Some U.S. observers such as Otto Reich, former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, warn that because of the deteriorating situation in the last year or so, Millennium Challenge managers will have a difficult time approving the continuation of the program for Honduras next time around.

Honduras might not be facing such a grim future if the judiciary and the news media had been more effective in performing their functions and resisting the corrupting powers that pervade the country.

Despite a 2002 overhaul of the Honduran Supreme Court meant to enhance its independence, there is a widespread perception that the justices are ineffective and susceptible to outside pressures. According to the National Anti-Corruption Council's report, only 2.2 percent of the 1,925 corruption cases that reached the court between 2002 and 2006 ended in a conviction.

Four justices who were in Washington last week for a hearing on Honduran judicial independence held by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission told me that corruption has gotten out of hand because of a lack of resources to fight it. By their thinking, the number of convictions should not be seen as an indication of their lack of

trying but of the lack of economic and technical resources to turn allegations into convincing cases.

Leonidas Rosa Bautista, the principal prosecutor in the country, is not exactly considered a leader of moral authority either. A national association of prosecutors has accused him of obstructing anti-corruption cases to protect allies or pay back favors. And anti-corruption activists sarcastically refer to him as the "most transparent" official in Honduras, because soon after being named to his post, he openly stated that he was accountable only to the politicians who put him there.

The country's news media, which could play a crucial role in holding officials accountable, also suffer from what Honduran Cardinal Oscar Andres Rodriguez Maradiaga laments as a "journalism deficit." Hondurans both inside and outside of government complain that news outlets appear less interested in pursuing the truth than in serving their powerful owners' political or economic interests.

President Manuel Zelaya is largely given credit for shepherding in a new transparency law, but anti-corruption crusaders insist that he remains oblivious to accusations against some advisers and politicians close to him.

"Some public officials operate with such open disdain for the law that they give the impression they are immune from prosecution or even detention," Reich wrote in an e-mail message. He also warned that the growing perception of corruption is discouraging foreign investment.

The situation in Honduras brings to light much about the complexities in fighting corruption -- particularly what can happen when a country adopts the right rules to punish corrupt behavior, but few step up to enforce them.