Two powerful forces have swept through Honduras since the June 28, 2009, coup that deposed President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya: one magnificent, the other truly horrible. The first is the resistance movement that rose up to contest the coup, surprising everyone in its breadth, nonviolence and resilience. The second is the new regime’s brutal repression in response. “It’s been terribly painful, and a great awakening,” reflects Ayax Irías, a sociologist at the National Autonomous University of Honduras.

While the conflict continues to escalate, the Obama administration is vigorously supporting the coup regime under Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo Sosa. “We believe that President Lobo and his administration have taken the steps necessary to restore democracy,” declared Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on March 4. But the resistance movement itself, with its demand for a reconstitution of Honduran society from below, is a vivid testament to the country’s need for real democracy. As the resistance faces off against the US-backed oligarchs and military, there’s no question that this is the most important moment in Honduran history, even more important than the immense general strike of 1954, from which all modern Honduran history flows.

I returned to Honduras in February for the first time since the coup to find a country transformed. People involved in the resistance were bursting with political energy, with an utterly new faith in their power. But they were also well aware of how dangerous the situation is—as am I, so I am changing some of the identifying details of those with whom I spoke.

Most obviously new was the graffiti, which was everywhere I went—from Tegucigalpa, the capital; to San Pedro Sula, the big industrial city in the north; to the smaller cities of El Progreso and La Lima in the banana zone; to, most daringly, the walls along the US Air Force base at Palmerola. “¡Golpista!” the all-important epithet that means a perpetrator or supporter of the coup, or golpe de estado, was splayed on storefronts, television stations and houses. Most messages were straightforward: “Militares Acesinos” or “¡Elecciones No!,” protesting the November 29 elections, boycotted by almost all pro-resistance candidates, who objected that no free and fair elections could take place under military occupation. Others were more pointedly personal: “Micheletti Pinochet,” equating the coup-regime president, Roberto Micheletti, with the dictator of Chile after its 1973 coup, Augusto Pinochet. “Erase me, golpista!” taunted one wall.

Even more remarkable was the change in young people. Teenagers and twentysomethings I had known for a decade—largely the children of trade unionists—who before hadn’t been politically engaged at all, were suddenly sitting up in their chairs differently, eager to tell me stories of marches they’d joined, tear gas they’d tasted. One 15-year-old girl arrived in a red T-shirt reading, “I ♥ Honduras Without Golpistas.” Cellphones kept going off with newly popular songs of the resistance as ring tones—“Traidores” or “Nos Tienen Miedo Porque No Tenemos Miedo” (They’re afraid of us because we’re not afraid), the song by Argentine Liliana Felipe and Mexican Jesusa Rodríguez, which has become the informal anthem of the resistance.

Older folks in the resistance, by contrast, had a sober look in their eyes. Unlike their children, those in their 50s and 60s know how much more terrible things can get; they lived through the 1970s and ’80s in Central America. But as veterans of those struggles, they also had a clear sense that this was the main chance they’d been waiting for their whole lives; people were finally coming together and rising up. “All these years I’ve been involved in the struggle, but I’ve never felt that change was so close,” Efrain Aguilar, a lifelong union activist, told me in low, firm tones.

In Tegucigalpa, I mentioned to a cabdriver the name of a Honduran Congressman I had just met in the airport the day before. “Golpista!” he spat out. He rattled off the man’s connections to Micheletti and the most elite of Honduran oligarchs and kept talking with me about the resistance.
Finally I asked him, Aren’t you afraid to speak so openly with an unknown passenger? “After what we’ve been through, it doesn’t matter anymore,” he said.

When the military packed President Zelaya onto a plane to Costa Rica on June 28 in his now-famous pajamas, and the majority of Congress installed Micheletti as president with the collusion of the Supreme Court, enormous semi-spontaneous demonstrations and protests followed, beginning that same afternoon. Hundreds of thousands of people streamed into Tegucigalpa from small villages and cities throughout the country. An ad hoc national coalition calling itself the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular formed within days, uniting the campesino movement; indigenous, African-descent and women’s organizations; human rights groups; trade unions; and, most astonishingly welcome, the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender movement, in what they together refer to as un movimiento amplio, a broad movement. Trade unions make up the backbone of the movement, especially the teachers, public-sector workers, banana workers and bottling-plant workers, whose meeting halls are essential to the resistance.

By a sheer act of collective will, the movement has been overwhelmingly nonviolent, a decision made entirely from below. But part of what makes the resistance so strong is its diversified base, with each social group organized within its own constituency, each with a representative in the top-level coordinating committee—and each with its own stake in reconstituting Honduras.

The women’s movement is just one example. Numerous observers reported that 60 to 70 percent of the demonstrators have been women, who join the resistance not only as individuals but also with long-established groups like the Center for Women’s Rights; they have specific collective demands, linking the coup, the resistance movement and their vision of a new future. “Ni golpe de estado ni golpe a mujeres,” for example, showed up on posters, in chants and in demands that the Frente take on domestic violence.

What unites the resistance is not just opposition to the coup regime but a positive vision of a new Honduras, to be enacted through a national assembly that would, in turn, produce a new Constitution. The slogan I saw everywhere, “Por un constituyente no excluyente” (For a constitutional convention that doesn’t exclude), captures widespread hopes that the new Constitution, modeled after ones recently passed in Bolivia (2009), Ecuador (2008) and Venezuela (1999), could guarantee and expand basic rights of the sectors that make up the resistance, such as land rights for campesinos and indigenous peoples, women’s rights and basic labor rights.

The resistance, broadly defined, has a solid middle-class presence as well, including not just left-wing college students but large numbers of Liberal Party members loyal to Zelaya. During the big marches in the capital, many supporters from the middle class weren’t comfortable joining on foot, so they came in their cars, whole families honking, waving banners and shouting. In one march on August 17, thousands of cars joined at the end, so many that it took them two hours to pass by.

By a sheer act of collective will, the movement has been overwhelmingly nonviolent, a decision made entirely from below, then officially ratified by the resistance coalition after the first week. What supporters call their movimiento pacífico, in classic Gandhian fashion, has served to sharply highlight, within Honduras and all over the world, the brutality of the government.

From day one, the coup government launched a vicious assault on those who dared to challenge it, deploying not just the military but municipal police and newly mobilized paramilitary assassins. Peaceful demonstrations full of old people and children were met with volley after volley of tear gas, the kinds that make you vomit or cry or feel like you can’t breathe, or all three. According to eyewitnesses, media reports and independent Honduran human rights groups that are bravely tracking all this repression, police swept through crowds beating marchers with batons sporting new metal tips, snatching bystanders and protesters alike and throwing them into the back of trucks. Once in custody, many were beaten, tortured and/or raped. According to the Committee of Families of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), more than 3,000 people have been illegally detained since June 28. COFADEH reports that at least forty-one Hondurans associated with the resistance have been killed, including trade unionists and GLBT activists. One of the first was Isis Obed, 19, shot in the head by a government sniper from atop the Tegucigalpa airport at a demonstration on July 5 when President Zelaya tried to return by plane. The great majority of those killed have been rank-and-file activists who were kidnapped or shot in their homes or in the streets by unknown assailants.

While much international attention has focused on the capital, the repression has been nationwide. On the highway in Choloma, outside San Pedro Sula, protesters at twelve demonstrations in July, August and September occupied a strategic bottleneck through which trucks have to pass carrying industrial products to Puerto Cortés. Witnesses reported that the protesters were met with brutal attacks: tear gas and beatings, but also violence directed especially at women, including nightsticks jammed into women’s crotches, rapes in detention and foul insults telling them they deserved it because they weren’t in their proper place in the home. Irma Villanueva, 25, testified on the radio that she was detained and gang-raped by four police officers after a demonstration in Choloma on August 14.

In a snowballing process of collective awakening and self-discovery, though, this ongoing process of protest, repression and even greater subsequent protest has changed ordinary people’s sense of themselves and their power—all the more astonishing because none of this was supposed to happen in Honduras. “Hondurans always had the reputation of being
cowards,” reflected Irías, the sociologist. “I never imagined that Hondurans had the ability or disposition to struggle like this.” Before the coup, Honduras was largely known as the political black hole of Central America: during the 1970s and ’80s, it didn’t produce large guerrilla movements on the left as did its neighbors Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Instead, it served as the “USS Honduras,” the base for the Reagan administration’s Contra war against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas.

Honduras did, in fact, have a small armed left in the ’80s and government-sponsored death squads led by the notorious Battalion 3-16, which killed more than 100 activists. But the country’s population of 7.8 million, despite a poverty rate above 60 percent, has remained largely in the ideological thrall of a few oligarch families locked into a two-party patronage system, never able to mobilize a third party from the left and not, in general, engaged in meaningful debate.

Now, if nothing else, the country is politicized down to the bone. “What I love is that everyone—men, women, old people, little kids—is talking about politics,” said Zoila Lagos, a veteran of the 1980s struggles who lives in a poor barrio near Choloma. In Tegucigalpa especially, activists discussed the resistance openly with me, in stores, in cabs and on crowded streets downtown. One young man told me it was a deliberate strategy: “We’re normalizing the resistance, normalizing the concepts of struggle, so they’re something familiar.” There’s a new moral line in the sand between the resistance, representing the vast majority of the Honduran people, and the golpistas—the oligarchs, their media and the military.

The alternative media have been essential to this rapid politicization at the grassroots. When the coup was launched, every metropolitan daily newspaper except one, every big-city television station except one and the great majority of the mainstream radio stations overtly supported the new regime, spouting bald lies that even the most neutral could see through: that the protesters were just violent riffraff; that Hugo Chávez was about to invade Honduras. *La Prensa*, a San Pedro Sula daily, even airbrushed out the blood dripping from the head of Isis Obed in a photograph taken just after he was killed at the airport. The outrageous collusion of the mainstream media, owned by the same oligarchs who have controlled the government for decades and who perpetrated the coup, contributed to the growth of popular consciousness and a higher level of critical thinking about the power structure within Honduras. “It opened the eyes of the people. The media are exactly the same, but the people aren’t,” observed Padre Melo, an esteemed Jesuit priest who directs Radio Progreso, an alternative radio station in El Progreso.

Critiques of the press were everywhere I went, like the big white banner sporting the logo of one of San Pedro Sula’s leading dailies, promising “Get Stupid in Three Days. Read *La Prensa.*” People kept repeating their favorite chant from the marches: “No somos cinco, no somos cien, prensa vendida cuéntanos bien!” (We’re not five, we’re not a hundred, sold-out press, count us well!).

Alternative radio has been particularly important in breaking through what those in the resistance call the “media fence” around the coup. Two powerful stations, Radio Globo in the

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capital and Radio Progreso in the north, have fully developed studios, transmitters and websites. Others are low-wattage operations run by indigenous groups, or Radio Uno in San Pedro Sula, run by teenagers in their school uniforms out of a journalism school. The programming on these stations is highly participatory—full of call-ins and local news reports—and it fills the streets, as vendors, cabdrivers and store owners play them day and night.

The coup government is well aware of the importance of the resistance media and has repeatedly clamped down on these outlets as well as opponents in the print media, often brutally, accusing them of “media terrorism.” On the day of the coup, for example, the military surrounded Radio Progreso and shut it down for several hours. Since then, “we’ve gotten bomb threats almost daily,” reported Radio Progreso director Padre Melo. Most recently, on January 6 unknown assailants burned down Radio Faluma Bimetu, a station run by Afro-indigenous Garífuna people in Triunfo de la Cruz.

No one really knows how deep all this popular politicization runs. Many Hondurans are keeping their heads low, quietly cheering on the resistance. Others still believe the mainstream media and are grateful that the government is “restoring order.” We do have a few crude quantitative measures. While the government keeps revising its initial figures downward, it appears that the November 29 election, boycotted by the resistance, had only a 35 or 40 percent voter turnout. For another measure, 450,000 to 600,000 Hondurans, a very low estimate, participated in demonstrations on the two biggest days of protest: July 5 and September 15. As a percentage of the population, that’s the equivalent in the United States of more than 20 million people.

On February 17 I was interviewed on Radio Uno by Pedro Brizuela, a wily and witty veteran communist in his 70s, who for many years has been working with the Garífuna along the Atlantic coast. Exactly one week later, assassins gunned down his 36-year-old daughter, Claudia, as she opened her front door in San Pedro Sula. It was a clear message to Pedro and to anyone else in the movement: keep fighting, and we’ll kill your children.

Under the new Lobo administration, the repression isn’t over, and it’s getting more insidious. Lobo has reappointed the same military leaders who perpetrated the coup, with the exception of Gen. Romeo Vásquez Velásquez, who was dismissed only to be named head of Hondutel, the state-owned telephone company, which the oligarchs are itching to privatize. Paramilitary-style violence against the resistance has escalated since Lobo’s inauguration on January 27. On February 15, two masked men on a motorcycle gunned down Julio Fúnez Benítez, of the sanitation workers’ union. On March 14, two vehicles shot forty-seven bullets into the car of Nahún Ely Palacios Arteaga, news director of Canal 5 in the Aguán Valley, killing him instantly. Both men had protested the coup government.

The government, military and media want to pretend that this is all common crime, which is, in fact, rampant in Honduras—violence has touched both sides. On March 1, one outspoken pro-coup journalist was shot at, and her driving companion, a TV reporter, was killed. But no one in the movement believes there is anything random about the recent murders of resistance members, including one campesino activist, two trade unionists and a rank-and-file activist, which appear clearly intended to terrorize the grassroots resistance.

What happens next? The Lobo administration faces the task of suppressing a movement that is truly popular, with great determination, organizational capacity and hope. The Frente is still consolidating and expanding its regional base. It has announced that it does not recognize the Lobo government and plans to continue to destabilize what it views as a weak and illegitimate regime. It has denounced the impunity that continues, including the so-called “amnesty” in which the generals who perpetrated the coup—and who, with the exception of Vásquez Velásquez, remain at the top of the armed forces—were swiftly charged, tried and exonerated in January. The Frente’s plan is to continue to challenge the government at the grassroots, forcing in the next year a National Assembly that would, in turn, lead to a constitutional convention and a new Constitution. It is already moving forward with plans for its own National Assembly on June 28, the anniversary of the coup. The Frente has announced it will eventually become a political party, but not for some time, in part because of the risk of co-optation as it tries to hold together its diverse base.

“The struggle has only begun,” observed Zoila Lagos, my friend from Choloma.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration has swiftly recognized Lobo’s new government and is pretending everything’s just fine in Honduras. US aid, both military and humanitarian, is flowing once again, shoring up an unstable government with little legitimacy. Inside our own media fence, Honduras has largely dropped from the headlines.

Progressives in the United States need to make sure the Obama administration doesn’t get away with shoring up the coup regime of the Honduran oligarchs and military. We need to demand that the United States withdraw its recognition of the Lobo government, halt all aid, as the Frente has explicitly requested; cut ties to the Honduran military, including ongoing training at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (formerly known as the School of the Americas); and close the US base at Palmerola. Obama and Clinton should denounce the ongoing human rights abuses and the outrageous impunity granted the Honduran armed forces, police and paramilitaries—along with the Congress members and Supreme Court justices who backed the coup. If we’re going to achieve any of these goals, though, we need to build our own movimiento amplio in support of the Honduran people. We can begin by building up grassroots pressure on members of Congress, district by district, working through our own unions, faith communities, immigrant organizations, GLBT and women’s groups.

Whatever happens next, the Honduran people are not going back to sleep. As Carlos Humberto Reyes, the grand charismatic figure at the head of the resistance, who ran for president as an independent but pulled out in protest, said to me, “The important thing is that the people have changed.”