Honduras – Brief History

Pre-Columbian History

The oldest known evidence of human presence in present-day Honduras are stone knives, scrapers and other tools thought to be 6000 to 8000 years old, and uncovered by archaeologists in 1962 near La Esperanza, Intibucá. Central America’s earliest occupants almost certainly were Paleo-Indians from the north, but linguistic and other evidence suggests that many indigenous people present in Honduras today (Pech, Tawahka and probably Lenca) are descended from later migrations of people from rainforest regions of South America, especially present-day Colombia.

The Maya arrived in Honduras by way of Guatemala and Mexico, and settled in the fertile Sula, Copán and Comayagua valleys. Over centuries, they came to dominate the area, as they did much of Mesoamerica. Copán was a heavily settled, agriculturally rich trading zone and eventually became one of the great Maya city-states of the Classic Period (AD 300–900). The Classic Period ends with the rapid and mysterious collapse of most Maya centers, including Copán, where the last dated hieroglyph is from AD 800.

The Maya population declined precipitously, but did not disappear, of course. They were just one of many indigenous groups that made up Honduras’ native population when European explorers began their conquest of the American mainland. Copán has since returned to prominence as an archaeological mother lode, having more hieroglyphic inscriptions and stone monuments than any other Maya ruin. Copán was the first site visited by John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood on their groundbreaking exploration of Mesoamerica in 1839. It was also the first site to be studied by Alfred Mausley (in 1885), whose compendium of Maya stone monuments remains a classic in the field, and whose work prompted the preeminent Harvard Peabody Museum to enter into Maya investigation (and which in turn selected Copán as its inaugural excavation). And it was the first stop for Sylvanus Morley and the Carnegie Institute in the 1920s. More recently, research has focused on Copán’s outlying areas; the site has provided important insight into the lives of ordinary Classic-era Mayas.

Conquest & Colonization

On his fourth and final voyage, Admiral Christopher Columbus made landfall near present-day Trujillo. The date was August 14, 1502, and was the first time European explorers set foot on the American mainland. Columbus named the area Honduras, or ‘depths,’ for the deep waters there. Before the historic landing, Columbus also had had his (and Europe’s) first encounter with mainland indigenous people: a crew of a large canoe he spotted near the Bay Islands. Columbus commandeered the canoe, which was laden with trade goods, and forced its captain (probably a Mayan merchant) to serve as his guide. The expedition continued east around Cabo Gracias a Dios (another of Columbus’ placenames) all the way to present-day Panama, where the admiral dropped his unlucky captive before returning to Spain.

Having been the site of such a historic landing, the Honduran Caribbean coast was all but ignored by explorers for the next twenty years, who focused instead on Mexico, Panama and the
Caribbean islands. Hernán Cortés’ expedition into the Aztec heartland, however, revived interest in Central America. Exploration of the region was marked by feuding among would-be conquistadores: Gil González Davila ‘discovered’ the Golfo de Fonseca and tried claiming it as his own, only to be captured by rival Spaniard Cristóbal de Olid, who had similar designs. González Davila turned the tables, however, by luring Olid’s men to his side, then capturing and beheading Olid. Hernán Cortéz and others tried to quell the feuding, but to no avail.

The discovery of gold and silver in the 1530s drew even more Spanish settlers and, more importantly, increased the demand for indigenous slave labor. Native Hondurans had long resisted Spanish invasion and enslavement, and in 1537, a young Lenca chief named Lempira led an indigenous uprising against the Spanish. Inspired by Lempira’s example, revolt swept the western region, and the Spanish were very nearly expelled. But Lempira was assassinated at peace talks arranged with the Spanish in 1538, and the native resistance was soon quelled. A cycle of smaller revolts and brutal repression followed, decimating the native population. African slaves were introduced in the 1540s to fill the growing labor shortage.

Mining sustained the colony for the remainder of the century, but a collapse of silver prices (and the constant challenges of excavating such rugged terrain) devastated the Honduran economy. Cattle and tobacco enterprises gained some traction, and a change in the Spanish throne in the early 1700s reduced corruption and helped revive the mining industry. However, another upheaval in Spanish rule in 1808 – when Napoleon installed one of his own on the Spanish throne – sparked revolts on both sides of the Atlantic, which irreparably damaged Spanish colonial rule.

**Birth of a Nation**

On September 15, 1821, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica and Nicaragua declared independence from Spain, and shortly thereafter joined the newly formed Mexican Empire. The relationship didn’t last long, and in 1823, the same countries declared independence from Mexico and formed the Federal Republic of Central America. Though Honduras was the poorest and least-populated of the countries, it produced some of the federation’s most important leaders. Chief among them was the liberal hero General Francisco Morazán, commonly dubbed the ‘George Washington of Central America’, who led the federation from 1830 to 1838. But bitter conflicts between liberals and conservatives proved too divisive for the nascent union, and in May 1838 the Central American Congress freed its members to form independent states – Honduras did so on November 15th of that year.

The liberal and conservative factions continued to wrestle for power in Honduras after independence. Conservatives favored a pro-church, aristocratic-style government, while liberals supported free market development of the kind taking place in the US and parts of Western Europe. Power alternated between the two factions, and Honduras was ruled by a succession of civilian governments and military regimes. (The country’s constitution would be rewritten 17 times between 1821 and 1982.) Government has officially been by popular election, but Honduras has experienced hundreds of coups, rebellions, power seizures, electoral ‘irregularities, ’ foreign invasion and meddling since achieving independence from Spain.
Fighting between liberals and conservatives was briefly suspended in the 1880s when an American adventurer named William Walker launched a bizarre and ill-fated attempt to conquer Central America. He succeeded in gaining control of Nicaragua in 1856, but a joint Central American military effort forced Walker back to the US within a year. He returned in 1860, landing near Trujillo. He was captured by British agents and turned over to Honduran authorities, who promptly executed him. He is buried in Trujillo.

**The Banana Years**

Where William Walker failed, US free enterprise succeeded. In the 1880s the New York and Honduras Rosario Mining Company (NYHRMC) revived Honduras’ promising but underdeveloped mining industry. The company enjoyed almost unfettered (and untaxed) access to the ore-rich mountains near the town of El Rosario, east of Tegucigalpa. In 74 years of operation – the area was turned into a national park in 1954 – the NYHRMC extracted an estimated US$100 million of gold, silver, copper and zinc; little of that money or product remained in Honduras, however.

But it was the banana that would most entangle Honduras with foreign interests and governments. In 1899 the Boston Fruit Company merged with the Snyder Fruit Company to form United Fruit Company. The new company imported most of its fruit from Panama and Costa Rica, but soon acquired seven small banana operations in Honduras. That same year, three Italian brothers named Luca, Felix, and Joseph Vaccaro founded Vaccaro Brothers & Co – the predecessor of Standard Fruit Company – and began exporting bananas from the La Ceiba region to their base in New Orleans. In 1902 Russian émigré Samuel Zemurray established the Hubbard-Zemurray company, which would eventually become the Cuyamel Fruit Company. United purchased Cuyamel in 1929 and made Zemurray company president in 1933. United and Standard – which are today known as Chiquita and Dole fruit companies – have been battling for control of the Honduran (and world) banana market ever since.

Bananas accounted for 11% of Honduras’ exports in 1892, 42% in 1903, 66% in 1913, and 80% in 1929. The spectacular economic success of the banana industry made the banana companies extremely powerful within Honduras, with the rival companies allying themselves with competing political parties. Political, environmental, labor and bribery scandals have marred the industry throughout its existence, including Zemurray’s support of a 1908 coup attempt against a Vaccaro-friendly president, Chiquita’s 1975 and 1976 bribery of the Honduran minister of economy, and in 1998, allegations of repressive labor practices and use of toxic pesticides in Honduras and Colombia. A two-month strike in 1954 – in which as many as 25,000 banana workers and thousands of sympathizers in textile, mining and other trades participated – remains a seminal moment in Honduran labor history.
Rise of the strongmen

The Spanish-American war in 1898 laid the groundwork for increased US involvement in the region. The US averted and mediated a number of conflicts in Central America, including Nicaragua’s 1907 invasion of Honduras and a border dispute between Guatemala and Honduras in 1917. Of course, American involvement in those and other disputes had everything to do with protecting American business interests, especially its banana companies, by force if necessary. When workers struck against Standard Fruit Company in 1920, the US sent advisors – and a warship.

In 1932 General Tiburcio Carías Andino was elected president amid a deep worldwide depression. Carías strengthened the armed forces, thus gaining favor with banana companies by opposing strikes, and with foreign governments by strictly adhering to debt payments. He also consolidated his own power, outlawing the Honduran communist party and restricting the press. The Honduran constitution did not allow reelection so Carías had it amended, extending the presidential term from four to six years. He served as a virtual dictator, and did not step down until 1949, and only under pressure from the US.

In 1956 a power grab by the country’s vice president prompted a military coup, the first (but not the last) in Honduran history. The military soon stepped aside for civilian elections, but a new constitution ratified in 1957 made the head of the armed forces – not the president – the country’s top military authority. In 1963, ten days before the next presidential election, the military again seized power. Colonel López Arellano suspended elections for two years, then ran himself (and won). He served the full six-year term, notable for his authoritarian excess and disregard for bureaucratic process. He stepped aside for civilian elections in 1971, only to be reinstalled a year later following another military coup.

A succession of military leaders, each as corrupt and ineffective as the last, ruled the country from 1972 to 1981. Arellano was removed following allegations he had accepted a US$1.25 million bribe from United Brands Company (formerly United Fruit Company); for his part, United Brands chief Eli Black committed suicide by jumping from his New York City office window when the accusations surfaced. Arellano was succeeded by General Juan Alberto Melgar Castro, who succumbed to a scandal implicating members of the military with murder and drug trafficking and was replaced by General Policarpo Paz García. Paz García was the only one to follow through with a long-standing promise to return Honduras to civilian rule. In 1980, voters elected a congress, and in 1981, a president. Honduras’ era of military rule was over.

The 1980s

During the 1980s, Honduras found itself surrounded on all sides by political upheaval and popular uprisings. In Nicaragua, the Somoza dictatorship was overthrown by Sandinista rebels in 1979, its guardsmen fleeing across the border into Honduras. The following year, full-scale war broke out in El Salvador as the government cranked up its repression of opposition leaders (Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated in March 1980) and the new Nicaraguan
government provided insurgents with a fresh supply of weapons. Meanwhile, the civil war in Guatemala continued unabated.

Although Honduras experienced some unrest, the country never broke into out-and-out civil war, a fact that is puzzling to many observers. Certainly the conditions for civil unrest were there: military rule, a repressed (but organized) working class, a history of foreign meddling and exploitation, especially by the US, not to mention the example set by its neighbors.

Historians and political scientists point to a variety of factors to explain Honduras’ emergence from the 1980s revolution-free. The long-standing domination of the banana companies seems to have prevented the development of a native-born economic and political elite. Honduras did not have the Somozas, whose excesses of wealth and power in Nicaragua were legendary, or the ‘fourteen families’ of El Salvador whose control of the coffee industry and connections with the military turned the country into an agricultural oligarchy.

This in turn opened political space for genuine agrarian reform, the lack of which had heightened working-class frustration and militancy in other countries. Honduras has long had one of Central America’s most effective and organized labor movements. Despite the overwhelming power of banana interests, Honduran campesinos and other workers have consistently managed to wrest concessions (and accept compromises) without resorting to violence. Notably, labor disputes in Honduras have rarely included a call for upending the government, rather the enforcement of existing laws. The Honduran military, more democratic and less beholden to the nation’s elite than in other countries, played a more stabilizing, not repressive, role.

Of course, the US had a powerful interest in keeping Honduras stable. With Marxist revolutions erupting on all sides (and Cuban and Soviet influence plain to see) the US viewed Honduras as a crucial battleground in its effort to halt the so-called ‘domino effect’ and the spread of communism in the Americas. Economic aid poured into Honduras, quickly making it one of the top-ten recipients of US military and economic aid. In return, the US used Honduras as a staging ground for counterinsurgency efforts throughout the region. Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras were used as bases for a US-sponsored undeclared covert war against the Sandinista government, which became known as the Contra war. At the same time the US was training the Salvadoran military at Salvadoran refugee camps inside Honduras.

Economic aid slowed local opposition, but it wasn’t long before Hondurans began agitating against US militarization in their country. Demonstrations drew 60,000 demonstrators in Tegucigalpa and 40,000 in San Pedro Sula, and a few nascent revolutionary groups appeared. In reply, military commanders ordered the kidnapping and killing of hundreds of opposition and student leaders – a first for Honduras. The tactic backfired, swelling the ranks of demonstrators and alienating many in the military establishment, who were themselves growing uneasy about the army’s complicity with increasingly brutal US-sponsored conflicts in the region. In March 1984 the military’s pro-American commander was toppled in a bloodless coup by his fellow officers. General Walter López Reyes was appointed the successor, and the Honduran government promptly announced it would reexamine US military presence in the country. In August 1984 it suspended US training of Salvadoran military within its borders.
In 1986 Washington was rocked with revelations that the Reagan Administration had secretly and illegally used money from the sale of arms to Iran to support anti-Sandinista Contras operating out of Honduras. The scandal rekindled demonstrations in Honduras; in November 1988, the Honduran government refused to sign a new military agreement with the US, and then-president José Azcona Hoyo said the Contras would have to leave Honduras. With the election of Violeta Chamorro as president of Nicaragua in 1990, the Contra war ended and the Contras were finally out of Honduras.

The 1990s

Elections in 1989 ushered in Rafael Leonardo Callejas Romero of the National Party, who had lost in 1985, to the presidency in Honduras; he won 51% of the votes and assumed office in January 1990. Early that year, the new administration instituted a severe economic-austerity program, which provoked widespread alarm, unrest and protest. Callejas had promised to keep the lempira stable; instead during his tenure the lempira’s value jumped from around two lempiras to eight against the US dollar. Prices rose dramatically to keep pace with the US dollar, but salaries lagged behind. Hondurans grew poorer and poorer, a trend that continues today.

In the elections of November 1993, Callejas was convincingly beaten by Carlos Roberto Reina Idiaquez of the center-left Liberal Party, who campaigned on a platform of moral reform, promising to attack government corruption and reform state institutions, including the judicial system and the military. Reina had inherited an economically depressed country and a currency that seemed to be in an unstoppable slide. By 1996 it had fallen past 12 lempiras to the US dollar and was heading for 13; today it is at nearly 20.

On January 27, 1998, Carlos Roberto Flores Facusse took office as Honduras’ fifth democratically elected president. A member of the Liberal Party, like his predecessors, he was elected with a 10% margin over his nearest rival – National Party nominee Nora de Melgar – in elections that were considered fair and clean. He instigated a program of reform and modernization of the economy. The arrival of Hurricane Mitch on October 1998, at that time the strongest Atlantic hurricane on record, dashed those plans. In fact, President Flores would later say the storm had erased 50 years of progress in Honduras.

The 21st century

Honduras’ tourist industry was just recovering from Hurricane Mitch, when the September 11, 2001 terror attacks slashed the number of travelers once more, especially the all-important American diver market. Later that year Hondurans elected Ricardo Maduro as their president, on promises to promote tourism and, more importantly, to reduce crime.

Gang violence was then – and still is today – the prevailing preoccupation of average Hondurans. Rival gangs (maras) have spread to Honduras from El Salvador, where gang members deported from the US, especially Los Angeles, had taken root. (Central American countries have long called on the US to stop deporting known gang members but to no avail – some 20, 000 felons
were sent to Central America between 2000 and 2004.) Maduro’s own son was kidnapped and murdered in 1997, and he promised a get-tough approach to gangs. Maduro proposed legislation called ‘Mano Dura’ (Hard Hand), which dramatically increased penalties for gang-related crimes, and broadened the definition of ‘illicit association’. The gang violence has been curbed and convictions have risen but with these changes come disturbing allegations of government-sponsored ‘death squads’ and prisoner abuse.

Maduro was succeeded in November 2005 elections by Manuel Zelaya, a cowboy hat-wearing rancher from Olancho. On April 1 2006, Honduras became the second Central American country, after El Salvador, to implement the Central America and Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement, or CAFTA-DR. The trade deal, signed into law in 2005 by US President George W Bush after a bitter congressional fight, will end tariffs on as much as US$33 billion in goods and services when in full effect. The pact covers the US, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic. All but Costa Rica have ratified the pact, but were required to make legal and regulatory changes before implementing it. Advocates say it will open markets to US businesses, especially farmers and ranchers, while providing manufacturing jobs to Central Americans that would otherwise go to Asia. American labor unions fought the plan, saying it will take jobs from Americans and did not provide enough protections for Central American workers. In Central America opposition came from the left which predicted the plan, like NAFTA before it, would lead to increased disenfranchisement of small farmers and business owners.

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