

Divisions in Honduras also split the church

Joshua J. McElwee | Apr. 15, 2010



Jesuit Fr. Ismael Moreno stands in front of a backdrop of Washington, D.C., at a Univision station there March 3. (Photo courtesy of the Quixote Center)

Since the forced removal last July of President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras, the political situation in that country has remained tense, with demonstrations against the new president and allegations of abuse of those who opposed the ouster. The tension has even permeated the church, with opposing views coming from the archbishop of the country's capital, Tegucigalpa, and a popular radio priest who is also the head of a Jesuit social analysis center.

The divisions within the society and the church take place against a backdrop of allegations of human rights abuses. A March 8 report by an Organization of American States commission cited more than 50 detentions, eight cases of torture, two kidnappings, and two rapes against members of the opposition during the month of February.

Porfirio Lobo, who lost an election to Zelaya in 2005, was elected in a controversial vote Nov. 29, five months after Zelaya had been forcibly removed from his home by the military and put on a plane to Costa Rica.

Through the turmoil, Jesuit Fr. Ismael Moreno has garnered attention and generated controversy. Known by the informal nickname Father Melo, Moreno has used his position as the director of the independent radio station Radio Progreso to become an outspoken participant in the movement against Zelaya's ouster.

This participation has earned Moreno several death threats and has placed him directly in opposition to Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez of Tegucigalpa.

Rodríguez publicly supported Zelaya's ouster July 13, telling the Spanish-language newspaper El Mundo, "The legal authority he lost because he broke laws and the moral authority he lost with a discourse full of lies. The most patriotic thing he could do is stay away."

Moreno told Reuters July 15 that the church had lost all credibility in the country because of Rodríguez's support of the interim regime.

In early March NCR editorial intern Joshua McElwee spoke briefly by phone with Moreno, who was in Chicago on a short U.S. speaking tour. What follows is an edited version of that interview, conducted through a Spanish-language translator.

NCR: How have you been treated? Are you still receiving threats against your life?

Moreno: What I can say is that there are many people who are receiving more threats because of their opposition to the coup. Many of the people in this area are at much higher risk than I am because as a priest and as the director of a radio station I have a certain amount of protection compared to these other sectors and people.

What do you think the church's role should have been when the ouster happened in July? What should the church have done?

The church, especially the hierarchy of the church, should have listened to the voice of the victims of human rights violations. The church should have taken a position of listening to the voices of those who were being beaten and hit during the coup and not that of those in power. It should have taken a position of mercy and not a position in support of abuses.

The church hierarchy at the time of the coup took a position in support of the business, economic and social elite of the country. And afterward maintained a cynical and complicit silence related to the violations of human rights against the people. So, for the church to recuperate its credibility, the church now should and must take a position against human rights violations and speak to the concerns and damage done to the people. It still to this day has not done that.

In your mind what should the church do now?

The church needs to attend to the victims, to recognize that it was in error and to denounce the violators of human rights. And to create human rights organizations as a service of charity so that the slow path is begun that would lead to the recuperation of its mission.

The new president is now in his second month of office. Has he addressed any of your concerns?

The current government has done the following: In words it has expressed a commitment to respecting human rights; nonetheless it hasn't created a truth commission that is truly independent. And the commander in chief of the high command of the military of Honduras [Romeo Vásquez Velásquez], rather than having been brought to trial, has been given the position as head of Honduran national telecommunications.

Furthermore, the government has left free and named to the position of minister of security someone with a long experience in repression and disrespect of organizations and leaders in opposition to government policy. This new minister of security [Oscar Álvarez] has declared that the resistance is unnecessary and for that reason it needs to disappear. And from there you can take your own conclusions as to what the consequences of that mean. No matter what the government says, it's continuing with the logic of violence that was begun on June 28.

What is the next step to address the problems and to talk with the new administration?

That the church and international organizations have the decisiveness to demand that any recognition or aid to Honduras be tied to respect for human rights and to the creation of a truth commission that is authentically independent and whose recommendations have to be implemented by the government. And that the investigations of human rights violations are based on information provided by human rights organizations, both

nationally and internationally.

Based on the recommendations from the truth commission, the government of Honduras should put into place a judicial process to take to court the violators -- both the intellectual authors and the perpetrators of the violations of human rights. The victims of the violations should receive reparations for the damages and reparations for the damage to their dignity.

In the same way international aid should not go either to the military or the police, but rather to programs for development, education, health and housing. These are the next steps I believe should be followed.

You're currently on a short tour of a few cities in the U.S. What are you asking people in this country to do?

First, to spread the truth about what's going on in Honduras. Then, that the churches and the organizations of civil society in the United States demand of their government that, with the same effort it's giving to recognition of the Honduran government, it demand respect for human rights and the judgment of those responsible for the violations of human rights. And that they not support, in any way, any aid to military or police, either for arms or for trade.

The churches and the civil society organizations should also send witnesses to accompany the human rights organizations during the protest and mobilization of the sectors of the country opposed to human rights violations. And to give support to the communication media that are critical of the government with the goal of guaranteeing the freedom of expression in Honduras.

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