

Women: the key to dealing with the ghosts of coups past in Honduras

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At lunch I heaved a sigh of relief. A calm, cordial, atmosphere prevailed at the inaugural seminar of the Academy of Women Parliamentarians. I was pleased that NIMD had played a significant role in securing the attendance of a majority of the recently elected women representatives to Congress. Despite being seated in factions, they had steered clear of the undercurrents of polarization and intolerance that were still strong in Honduran society. They even smiled at each other. So I was looking forward to chairing the next session. Little did I know that this calm was just the proverbial calm before the storm.

Fighting polarization and intolerance to empower women

In the midst of chairing this post-lunch session - a debate between three distinguished women from Bolivia, El Salvador and Honduras - all hell broke loose. The Honduran politician criticized a discriminatory remark made, during the recent elections, by a male candidate of the governing party about the female presidential candidate from an opposing party. A congresswoman from the governing party immediately shot up to object. My heart sank as I witnessed the chain-reaction that followed. A barrage of objections rose from the members of her party as they followed her out of the room in protest. They did not show up for the second day. Without the participation of the governing party the seminar was thrown into complete disarray.

This seminar, held just a few months after the 2013 general elections, was supposed to be the first step toward the ambitious challenge of building a new agenda for the Parliament on gender issues. We were proud that NIMD, together with our partners, had been able to draw the majority of woman Members of Parliament (MPs) to the seminar.

Despite our efforts, the atmosphere of intolerance and polarization in the country had reared its ugly head.

In hindsight, it was not totally unexpected. When we started the NIMD programme in Honduras, one of our main challenges was dealing with the high levels of polarization and intolerance that had resulted from the 2009 coup d'état. I experienced this polarization personally, when NIMD first began bringing political opponents together, some even refused to sit around the same table. This polarization led to most democratic institutions, such as the Congress, lacking inclusiveness. I decided that the most effective way to bridge the gap between these opposing parties and getting them around the same table would be to promote a common goal: the political participation of women and strengthening the capacity of women in the various parties.

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To this end, NIMD and its partners (NDI, UNDP, UN Women, IDEA, National Institute of Women) decided to collaborate on promoting the more equitable and effective political participation of women in the 2013 general elections. We brought together women from the participating political parties to form a multiparty 'Candidate's Academy'. Through this Academy we provided the participants with knowledge about their political rights; strategic tools for their political careers; and the opportunity to share their common expectations and fears as women politicians - notwithstanding their political differences. I was pleased to note that the results of the hard work and lobbying that the academy facilitated, were positive.

In 2012 a 40 percent quota was established for woman in the elections. But I knew that this reform would mean little if the women elected in the elections (due in 2013) lacked a clear and common agenda to promote the exercise and respect of the rights of all

Honduran women.

Making friends in high places

The seminar we had organized aimed to develop such an agenda. And despite how it ended, the investment we had made by cultivating a relationship of mutual trust with the women politicians paid off. Two of them in particular, were to prove pivotal in helping me rescue the process: A Congresswoman who was the chair of the Gender Commission, and a Congresswoman who was the Vice-President of Parliament and President of the governing party.

In order to assist the process of designing the Agenda, the Congresswoman, through the Gender Commission, facilitated the signing of a formal agreement between the Cabinet and all the organizations supporting the Candidate's Academy.

This agreement was signed at the beginning of a second seminar organized by NIMD and its partners in July 2014. At the seminar gender sensitive budgets, gender violence, economic empowerment of women and political participation rights for women, were among the subjects discussed. Thanks to the efforts of all organizations and the lobbying and interventions of the two congresswomen, many of those who abandoned the first seminar were also present. My colleagues and I worked tirelessly, sometimes late into the night or early in the morning, to convince the congresswomen to attend this important seminar. And to my relief, this time there was a positive outcome: a unanimous agreement on the broad Agenda items. Negotiating this agreement helped in building trust between these politicians.

This trust was further cemented at a later workshop, where NIMD helped the Gender Commission with strategic planning. During the seminar a skilled facilitator helped them recognize that their common goals were more important than their political differences and old prejudices.

In September 2015, the 40 percent quota, approved in 2012 for the 2013 elections, rose to 50 percent for the 2017 electoral process. The effective application forms (one of the four pillars of the Agenda concluded at the July 2014 seminar) was also included in the Commission's strategic plan.

I was present at the signing of this proposal,

and was overcome by gratitude and a sense of achievement. It clearly demonstrates that inter-party dialogue and working together on the activities on the gender Agenda had managed to create trust between disparate women, and impact their political behaviour towards each other for the better.

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Undoubtedly, the underlying polarization and intolerance caused by the 2009 coup d'état continues to have an impact on our best-laid plans, and any activity we undertake will have to contend with this.

Working with women in fragile and conflict affected settings

Apart from the value of building trust with political parties, it also made me aware of the importance of investing in building trust between NIMD and our respected 'champions' or strategic individuals within partner parties. Moreover, the strategic importance of engaging in gender issues in a polarized country has become increasingly clearer to me. Women often continue to be discriminated against even after the worst parts of political conflicts have ended. Consequently, they are more inclined to work together to resolve the counter-democratic tendencies or frameworks that inhibit the recognition and enjoyment of their full democratic rights. Their ability to work together on these common challenges generally sets a precedent for political parties. This provided an effective entry point for NIMD to work on other strategic issues in Honduras.

Promoting women's participation is a goal of all NIMD's country programmes. This story demonstrates that women have an exceptional potential to bridge the gaps between political parties in polarized environments; and promoting their participation in politics contributes to inclusive and stable democracies.

Fear and loathing in Honduras: the impact of illicit networks on politics

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“It is not possible to go further with this,” said our researcher, JS¹, in a very low voice. After four months of researching illicit networks in Honduras JS’s research reached a premature end when he called for a meeting with me and said: “I finish here. I will send the preliminary report to you from a different e-mail address, with a different name. I won’t ask for more payments. If you need me to send the first payment back, I will, without any hesitation. I don’t want to know more about this issue.”

Taken aback, I asked him what was happening. “You provided me with good informants and they took me to others who knew more and more” he replied. “I don’t want to give you details”, he said, “but you need to know this: the more I dug, the less I wanted to know”. “I am a researcher - this is what I love to do, but I was not prepared for what I found,” he added, speaking softly throughout the conversation.

Uncovering the virus within

It all started a few months before when I received an email from NIMD’s headquarters, asking if we could contribute to research on the influence and impact of illicit networks in politics in Latin America. Honduras was a suitable case study because of the increased drug trafficking in the region and the evidence of illicit networks in the country.

In Honduras, drug lords and criminal networks had spread their influence over time and started to secretly co-opt political, financial and social institutions. The problem was growing and cases of corrupt politicians, public officials (primarily from the justice and security sectors) and people who had inexplicably become wealthy overnight - allegedly through illegal activities - slowly began to attract public concern.

I realized that the impact of this on politics, and

political parties in particular, would run counter to everything that NIMD was attempting to achieve with Honduran political parties. If this influence were allowed to persist and increase, criminal networks would hold sway in political parties, dictating policy choices favourable to their own networks rather than party members or the citizens. This would decrease the already diminishing trust that citizens had in political parties, driving down participation in them and politics in general. As a result democratic governance itself would come under threat. Hence dealing with the issue was a fundamental challenge for any democracy-support organization and the research that JS was conducting was vital.

Despite operating in the shadows, the influence of these networks had been denounced and discussed in the country by experts on public security and organized crime. According to some foreign investigators and journalists, most of their local sources spoke openly about organized criminal activities. But when the issue of how organized crime had penetrated the political landscape came up, they always asked their interviewers to switch off the recorders and talked only ‘off-the-record’. Such was the fear of punishment for talking about this.

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So I needed to find an experienced social investigator, eager to dig carefully into the issue. I found one in JS. “It is an interesting subject,” he had said at our first work meeting, “...and little explored, unfortunately, for reasons we both know” he had said as he winked at me knowingly.

1 Protected source

During the first weeks of the research I helped JS to schedule meetings with sources and find official documentation. And up until our meeting that day I felt like we were making good progress.

A threat to security and governance

Sitting in his office, I found myself surprised at his resignation. JS did not sound paranoid to me - simply honest. He continued: "I visited a source who welcomed me and gave me some good information. I felt that I was getting a great story and wrote page after page, enthusiastically. Before I left, the informant stopped me at the door and asked me to be careful in quoting the information. He then revealed that he had given the same advice to someone who had not heeded his warnings. Taking my arm, he had added: 'Please, don't do what Alfredo did'. Alfredo Landaverde, a local expert on the issue and a well-known public figure, was shot and killed, after exposing the existence of broad networks of local authorities, police and the judiciary involved in illicit activities.

JS finished by saying: "Read the research thoroughly and if you decide to publish it later, please don't quote me". Looking at me, he said: "I no longer feel safe to pursue the research". Later as I sat in my office and read the document JS had sent me, I had to agree with him. The research provided information on drugs and illicit networks, together with names and events. Their influence reached high levels of the Government, Parliament and the Judiciary - very close to the formal economic and political power in Honduras. I closed the document, wishing I had never opened it.

It was not difficult to convince the coordinating team that we could not finish the research. They understood and respected JS' decision. However, the lessons learned from this investigation were included in the final publication because it demonstrated that working with this issue threatens security and lives, and undermines democratic governance and development in Honduras.

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Research on eradicating the scourge

The efforts JS made were not in vain. Six months after the sudden end of the research (August 2013),

JS was invited to share his experience with the other researchers who had conducted similar studies. Here, his experiences were collected for future initiatives in order to avoid the risks in interventions aimed at addressing the influence of illegal networks in politics. And three years after JS quit his research, the United States began prosecuting and requesting the extradition of members of the highest political and financial spheres in Honduras: allegedly for laundering money for drug traffickers. JS would not have been surprised, and neither was I.

As a result of the rising public awareness on this issue, a new law to control transparency on the financing of Honduran political parties and campaigns is expected to be drafted by the end of 2016. NIMD is going to contribute to promoting its implementation.

Furthermore, this issue is more relevant than ever to NIMD's work. The influence of illicit networks on political institutions in fragile and conflict affected states (FCAS) cannot be ignored by political party assistance providers like NIMD. It became clear that NIMD needs to tackle this invasive threat to democracy in FCAS states. One way would be for NIMD to invest in more research to map the nature, extent and modus operandi of this influence in politics, in order to facilitate the development of strategies to effectively deal with it.

This research could also form the basis for awareness and education campaigns in political parties, legislatures, the public service and the general public. Support for intra-party democracy would possibly be a good entry point: but it would need to be customized to specifically target this practice. Finally, full transparency on the funders of parties would go a long way toward eradicating this scourge.

The influence of Illicit or criminal networks can be powerful and illusive on politics in fragile and conflict-affected settings. While this story shows just how challenging it is to grasp its precise impact on politics, NIMD is aware of its influence. Promoting inclusive, transparent and programme-based politics contribute towards mitigating their detrimental effects on democratic development.