HONDURAS

Caudillo Politics and Military Rulers

James A. Morris

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DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS

Alvin Francis Morris

Lorraine Elizabeth Morris

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Foreword

Recent experience has taught us that just because a country such as Honduras is small and has never played a major role in hemispheric—much less global—affairs, we cannot assume that it is unimportant. Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and Colombia notwithstanding, most of the countries of Latin America are small and with little weight in international affairs. Indeed, this is the case with a decided majority of the world's countries. Then, too, Honduras has been overshadowed because it is located between Central American countries that enjoy greater prominence for one reason or another: Guatemala on the north, larger and scene of a turbulent revolutionary experience between 1944 and 1954; Nicaragua to the south, locale of a controversial ongoing revolution; and El Salvador on the west, racked by protracted civil war. To the east lies the Caribbean—itself scarcely a sea of tranquillity. Given Honduras's location and the ever-increasing U.S. presence there, the world will certainly hear much more of this nation and its people in the years immediately ahead.

James Morris knows and understands Honduras as do very few persons who have not spent their lifetimes there. His book not only puts the country in comparative perspective but also demonstrates how contemporary military regimes have roots in the *caudillismo* of earlier eras. As with the other studies in this series, this volume is an interpretive essay even more than a compendium of relevant information. It portrays a society undergoing change on many fronts, albeit limited in rate and extent; an essentially agrarian economy that supports a growing urban service sector on a precariously limited industrial base; and a political system riddled with contradictions between partially undermined traditional institutions and processes and as yet extremely fragile and oftentimes rootless features of a modern party and interest-group infrastructure.

The author's approach is basically that of cultural relativism tempered with a residual pluralist democratic orientation, and his most

important analytical concept is that of the "cycle of political frustration" as a pattern repeated several times during a slowly ascending developmental experience. This is now aggravated by the political polarization of Central America between Marxists and authoritarian conservative forces, so the next cycle—perhaps already under way—will be complicated by the end of Honduras's relative international remoteness, with Central America a cold-war cockpit rather than a backwater region. Morris's study leaves the reader well prepared to comprehend the critical events of the mid-1980s in the center of Central America.

If in this book culture receives little attention relative to other books in this series, it is because there is far less that is distinctive or of note in this sphere of Honduran national life. By way of contrast, international affairs, particularly relations with other Central American countries, are treated in detail, a fact of great importance since the Reagan administration has clearly chosen to make Honduras into the major U.S. military base in the area. Indeed, it is this small country's fast-growing role as a base for operations against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and for training of El Salvador's military that makes Professor Morris's well-informed study a particularly timely and significant addition to the Nations of Contemporary Latin America series.

Ronald M. Schneider

Preface

In the classic 1950 study by William S. Stokes, the Republic of Honduras is described as having a highly centralized political structure based on authoritarian propensities and personalistic modes of individual and societal relationships. Despite a variety of changes that have transformed the society, centralization, authoritarianism, and personalism remain as primary characteristics of Honduran society and politics. *Caudillismo,* or political bossism and strong-man rule, has, in some aspects, been followed by the predominance of military rule. Even so, traditional social and political values have perpetuated the concept that control over the state and appropriation of its resources are legitimate means of social mobility or personal gain. It is questionable whether the "ventures of successful pillage" led by the caudillos (the political bosses) of old and the corruption that has accompanied military rule are functionally different or whether new social and institutional conditions have merely determined a new technique.

Continuity of the political order has been preserved, but both old and new elites must now contend with aspects of social, cultural, economic, and political change—all part of rapid modernization and socioeconomic development. Through decades of national fragmentation, dictatorship, institutional weakness, and the consolidation of military rule, elements of traditional caudillo politics have persisted and survived. It is doubtful, however, whether continued military political dominance will provide the institutional formula Hondurans need to forge the consensus required to address the nation's social and economic problems. Both these tasks—political consensus and national development—have been influenced greatly by global and regional phenomena, especially the unfolding crisis in Central America.

Given the contemporary attention focused upon Central America, it is perhaps difficult to understand the previous isolation of Honduras from both world events and the literature of North and South America. My principal question about Honduras in 1970 was whether the country

had *any* organized "interest groups," and, if so, what they were and how they functioned. In the decade or so since, a few scholars have quietly pursued their studies of the country with little or no institutional support. Significantly, this volume represents the first comprehensive study of Honduras to be published (in English) since that of Stokes. In the wake of crisis and revolution in Central America, more essays, articles, and books on the region and the countries within it are destined to appear. However, our understanding of just what is occurring in those countries is uneven, weak, or nonexistent in many respects. This study attempts to partially fill that void, but much remains to be explored and examined.

One of the most significant developments to occur over the last decade or so has been the emergence and growth of studies produced by Hondurans. Trained in Europe, the United States, Costa Rica, and elsewhere in Latin America, Honduran scholars are actively applying new methodologies toward the study of their own society, its history, and various facets of social and economic change. These scholars and their published works represent a critical mass in the evolution of knowledge about Honduras. Future research on the country will increasingly involve the collaboration of both Honduran and North American students. I would expect both communities to benefit greatly.

This book indeed represents the labors and thoughts of scholars and others in Honduras and North America. Invaluable guidance and introductions to the Honduran "family" were provided by Teresa Castilla Blanca, Rosita de Velásquez de Vare, and Mario Posas. To them, and many other Hondurans who gave of their time, energy, hospitality, and insight, I express my gratitude and hopes for the future.

My appreciation is extended to the many colleagues who either read portions of the manuscript or offered their ideas and suggestions gained from their own trips to Central America. In particular, I wish to thank Edward Boatman-Guillán, Cal Clark, Rosemary Davis, former Ambassador Mari-Luci Jaramillo, Stuart Lippe, Martin Needler, Neale Pearson, Karen Remmer, Mark Rosenberg, and James Torres, as well as Steve C. Ropp and José Z. Garcia of the Central American Working Group at New Mexico State University.

In the end, however, this book was made possible by the "bread and shelter" and emotional support extended by the Ropp family of Las Cruces, the Garcia family of El Paso, the Morris family of Santa Cruz, and all those who remembered in Albuquerque.

James A. Morris

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Caudillos, Enclaves, and Political Uncertainty, 1876–1956

While exploring the New World during his fourth voyage (1502–1504), Christopher Columbus touched upon the Caribbean island of Guanaja off the northern coast of Honduras. Landing on the Central American mainland at a point now called Cabo de Honduras near the present city of Trujillo, he claimed the territory for the Spanish Crown. Later, when the explorers rounded the Cape of Gracias a Dios near the Honduran-Nicaraguan frontier, a storm threatened the fleet's safety, and Columbus is reputed to have expressed his thanks to God after they had escaped the storm-tossed watery depths (or *honduras*), thus giving the cape its name. The region left behind, then known as Higueras, was sparsely populated with nomadic Indian tribes, and it was nearly twenty years later before Spain renewed its interest.

As part of the Captain-Generalcy of Guatemala, Honduras was located on the fringes of the Spanish colonial empire. It was not until 1786 that Spain created the Intendancy of Comayagua. This marked the beginning of a regional rivalry between Comayagua and Tegucigalpa. The former was the seat of colonial authority and then the republican capital until 1880 when Tegucigalpa, riding the crest of a revived silver-mining boom, became the political capital of Honduras. The latter city was first settled near the end of the sixteenth century, when silver deposits were discovered nearby.[1] Though the silver mines were the most important in Central America, scarcity of labor and the exhaustion of the veins had left them practically dormant at the end of the 1700s. The colonial experience of Honduras was one of neglect due to such things as lack of interest by the Spanish Crown, administrative inefficiency, and more urgent concerns elsewhere within the colonial realm. Geographical isolation and the physical ruggedness of Honduras also limited penetration into the region. Scarcity of labor, lack of appropriate

technology, and nonexistent infrastructure hampered the development of mining and other types of industry. To further weaken Spanish influence, the Catholic church never acquired extensive wealth or power in Honduras.[2]

The colonial provinces of Central America declared their independence in 1821. The region never became involved in a war of liberation, but merely took advantage of Mexico's revolt against Spain. The United Provinces of Central America were unable to consolidate a confederated system of government, and after several years of intraregional rivalry the union collapsed. In January 1839, Honduras became the second province (after Nicaragua) to declare itself a separate state. There followed a series of frustrating attempts at reunification, mostly with Nicaragua and El Salvador. Guatemala, however, dominated regional affairs, and events in Honduras were influenced by Guatemalan intervention and support for rival factions. The transfer of power in Honduras more often than not was disorderly and violent, except in 1852 when José Trinidad Cabañas peacefully assumed the presidency. The first half century of independence was a period filled with turbulence, regional disunity, and the absence of national perceptions. An ephemeral nationalism and the lack of a strong and cohesive ruling class (oligarchy) left Honduras open to outside interference and exploitation by international intrigue and economic interests.

ERA OF LIBERAL REFORMS

During the 1870s, the Liberal-Conservative battles of Central America were resolved in favor of the Liberals. In Honduras, the era was launched with the presidency of Marco Aurelio Soto (1876–1883). New ideas about economic development were introduced, the state became more supportive of entrepreneurial ventures, and public lands were made available for private purchase or homesteading. New economic policies were decreed to stimulate both domestic and foreign investment in Honduras, as Liberal leaders sought to modernize the country's economic structures. Technology and capital were needed, and most would have to be imported one way or another.[3]

By 1880, a new constitution had been put together, and codes had been decreed regulating commerce, customs, mining, penal affairs, and the military. The separation of church and state was reinforced by the expropriation of church property and banishment of tithes. Control of the cemeteries was transferred to local governments (*municipios*). Monetary stabilization policies were drawn up, and President Soto established the Casa de Moneda. Tax exemptions were granted, and national lands were often granted as part of investment agreements. Foreign investors, especially mining and banana-plantation developers, were to obtain generous concessions. The long-range strategy of Honduran leaders was to promote agricultural development. With the export of agricultural

Statue of Honduran military hero Francisco Morazán, who governed the Central American Union from 1829 until 1838.