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# Panama's Noriega has geography, history on his side

By Merrill Collett

What keeps Gen. Manuel Noriega in power in Panama? It's a vexing question for the Reagan administration. All of their huffing and puffing can't seem to blow Noriega out of the barracks. Why don't Panamanians rise up against their drug-dealing dictator? Some have, of course. The middle and upper classes are in revolt. But their demonstrations have failed to turn out the masses. "Pineapple Face," as Noriega is known in Panama, stays in power. Panama's geography and history helps tell us why.

Real estate agents say there are three things to consider when buying a piece of property: location, location, location. By those criteria, Panama is a prime piece of property. For nearly 500 years Panama has been sitting on the crossroads of the world's great nations.

**Rolling with the punches:** Imperial Spain was the first on the scene. In 1513 Vasco Nunez de Balboa and 190 well-armed Spaniards trekked across the isthmus in search of new worlds to plunder. The inter-ocean land route they discovered linked the kings of Castille with the gold-producing colonies in South America. Panama's fate was sealed as the pathway between the seas.

Panamanians adapted to their destiny. Centuries of living in a trade route owned by the empires made them pragmatic survivors. Colonized by conquistadors, pillaged by pirates and occupied by the U.S. military, they rolled with the punches. Panamanians learned how to bargain,

not battle. They became very good bargainers indeed. The late Gen. Omar Torrijos is considered the best of them all. There have been many generals in Panama's history, but Torrijos is the only one still called "The General." While still a colonel in the National Guard, Torrijos booted out recently elected President Arnulfo Arias in 1968. Washington had no regrets. Arias was a right-wing populist who hated the gringos. He supported Hitler and Mussolini in World War II. After Arias was elected for the first time in 1940, U.S. Canal Zone authorities helped depose him. He returned to power by capitalizing on a wave of anti-American feeling. Washington was not sorry to see him go.

Torrijos, on the other hand, had positive potential in American eyes. A graduate of the U.S. Army's School of the Americas, Torrijos was determined to build up U.S. confidence in his regime. He locked up radical leftists and reached out to U.S. banks and multinational corporations. But this soon proved to be the fake to the right that allowed Torrijos to make an end run around the left.

Although he was part of the wave of military rulers who overthrew Latin American democracies in the '60s and '70s, Torrijos was not a neo-fascist like Pinochet in Chile or Galtieri in Argentina, men who saw communist subversion as the enemy. Torrijos believed social injustice was the source of subversion. "The true enemies of our people are hunger, misery and ignorance," said the billboards that were signed simply "Omar." Torrijos attacked those targets. He vastly expanded social spending, increased the influence of labor unions, pushed through agrarian reform and committed the military to improving conditions in the long-neglected countryside. To do this, he rewrote the constitution. He elevated the National Guard to a fourth branch of government and required that all government agencies act in "harmonic collaboration" with the armed forces. This was *torrijismo*.

Six years after the death of Torrijos, *torrijismo* has become military rule devoid of reformist goals. A self-financed military caste rules from barely behind the scenes, accumulating fine cars and fancy houses and passing final judgment on who should be Panama's president. As always, the leadership of one man has a fatal flaw: changing the man changes the leadership. Instead of The General, Panama has Pineapple Face.

**"A dirty country":** Many strata of Panamanian society want to get rid of Noriega. Students clamor for a full-fledged democracy, unrestricted by military veto. Trade union leaders, formerly pillars of support for Torrijos, are angry that the Noriega regime has gutted much of the labor law pushed through by The General. Poor and working people have little enthusiasm for a regime that lets them suffer chronic unemployment and all the ills that go with it.

All Panamanians wince with shame to think their country has become an ally of Colombia's cocaine cartel. "This is a dirty country," a sad-eyed woman told a television reporter in Panama City.

Why can't Washington tap into this enormous reservoir of anti-Noriega sentiment? Of course Washington's leadership is undermined by its years as a partner in Noriega's crimes (see *In These Times*, Feb. 24). But there are more fundamental reasons why so many Panamanians stay neutral in the war on Noriega. Once again, history and geography offer an insight.

Panamanians are not prone to political violence, but there was one issue that pushed national pride to the

## SIDE STORY

boiling point: the Canal Zone. Imagine that the U.S. was split in two by a 10-mile-wide swath cut across its center and controlled by a foreign power. That was the Canal Zone. It was a place where policemen did not speak Spanish and U.S. judges could sentence Panamanians to U.S. prisons. "Panama—the country with a fifth frontier," was the way anti-Canal Zone protesters put it. In 1964 21 Panamanian protesters were shot dead by U.S. Canal Zone troops. Four years later Torrijos came to power determined to get back the Canal Zone.

Generations of Panama City politicians had given lip service to extending national sovereignty into the Canal Zone, but their real concern was keeping their lucrative Canal Zone contracts. Construction of the canal had created an enormous market for businessmen to supply. The volume of goods and services sold to the zone regularly exceeded Panamanian exports abroad. Out of this trade arose a parasitic commercial ruling class dependent on a foreign enclave for survival.

Torrijos used his coup to depose the commercial elite from power and put in their place young National Guard officers. Now the old elite see a chance to get back into power. This is the political agenda the Civic Crusade keeps hidden as it waves its white handkerchiefs for democracy. They didn't wave those white handkerchiefs for Torrijos. It was poor and working Panamanians who filled the 5th of May Plaza to hear The General demand that Uncle Sam return the Canal Zone to Panamanians. Torrijos gave them reason to be proud.

Noriega, with his "Dignity Brigades," is cynically exploiting that pride. But pride is all many poor Panamanians have. And is it so far-fetched to think that Reagan seeks more than democracy in Panama? After all, he once said the Canal Zone was as much a part of the U.S. as Texas. And, as if written into the script by Noriega himself, Reagan has now sent in the Marines. Caught between Pineapple Face and Rambo, what real choice do Panamanians have?

Merrill Collett writes regularly on Latin American issues.

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By Medea Benjamin

**I**N AN IRONY OF HONDURAN HISTORY, IT TOOK THE U.S. government's illegal extradition of Honduran drug king Juan Ramon Matta Ballesteros to spark the anti-American sentiment that has been brewing for years. The Reagan administration, which has regularly denied that such opposition existed, was taken aback by the sight of Hondurans burning the American flag and throwing Molotov cocktails at the U.S. Embassy in Tegucigalpa.

The 2,000 demonstrators who gathered outside the embassy on April 7 set fire to some 25 vehicles and burned the embassy annex, which houses the offices of the U.S. Consulate, the Agency for International Development (AID) and the U.S. Information Service. Damage was estimated at between \$4 million and \$6 million.

The Honduran government reported that four students were killed in the protests, but eyewitnesses have confirmed only two deaths. U.S. Embassy spokesman Michael O'Brien denied charges that U.S. Marines or Honduran security guards employed by the embassy fired on the demonstrators. But witnesses confirmed that shots were fired from inside the embassy compound. As *In These Times* went to press the Honduran government had issued no statement on who was responsible for the killings.

What distinguishes the April 7 demonstration from past protests is the level of violence. Another significant difference is that the protest was not called by the left student groups, but by the FUUD (United Democratic University Front), a conservative student group. The FUUD is allied with the National University's right-wing rector, Osvaldo Ramos Soto, who in turn has close ties to the Honduran military. In an unprecedented unity of left and right student groups, the FUUD was joined in the protest by the university's left-leaning MAT (Broad Transformation Movement) and the leftist students at the National Teachers' School.

**Not drug-crazed:** Both the U.S. and Honduran governments have tried to label the embassy demonstrators as drug sympathizers. State Department spokeswoman Ellen Bork complained, "We think it is terrible that Hondurans would show their support for a notorious drug dealer by attacking a U.S. government building."

It's true that Matta is a popular figure in Honduras. He is seen as a kind of folk hero for his dramatic escapes from jail and for the way he has thumbed his nose at U.S. authorities. He is also well-liked because he spread his money around. His construction, dairy and tobacco businesses employ some 4,000-5,000 people in a country where half the population is unemployed.

Matta also has given a lot of money away. Poor Hondurans, for instance, would line up at his home every day asking for money or jobs. School principals or clinic directors, getting no response from the government, would go to Matta for help with scarce supplies.

But the protest was not pro-Matta. "The outburst has little to do with Matta and nothing to do with drugs," said a demonstrator who requested anonymity. "It is a question of principle. Matta's abduction was a flagrant violation of the [Honduran] constitution, which prohibits extradition. If they could do



Honduran protesters burn the U.S. flag they captured from inside the U.S. Embassy on April 7.

## Anti-American sentiments explode in Honduras

this to Matta, they could do the same to any of us. Second, if Matta is guilty of drug dealing, which most people believe he is, then let him be accused and tried in Honduras. We're tired of the U.S. violating our sovereignty."

Joe Eldridge, a Methodist minister living in Honduras and former director of the Washington Office on Latin America, underscored this point. "The reason behind the outburst was not Matta, but a U.S. policy that has turned Honduras into the center of U.S. military operations in the region. The U.S. deployment of 3,000 troops to Honduras last month only added fuel to the fire. Anyone who tries to deny that is far astray."

As the demonstrations continued on April 8, government response was swift and severe. Honduran officials declared a state of emergency, suspending key civil liberties in the capital and the second largest city, San Pedro Sula. The decree banned street demonstrations, and gave the police and security forces broad powers to search premises, make arrests and hold people incommunicado without charges. By April 10, three days before the emergency was lifted, more than 50 people had been arrested.

Details on the arrests and killings remain sketchy due to the government-imposed media blackout. In a display of press censorship not witnessed since the 1969 war with El Salvador, the nation's 140 radio stations were forced into a nationwide hookup run from the president's press office following the crisis. The press office played innocuous music interspersed with communiques claiming the violence was instigated by drug traffickers and terrorists. TV news programs were also suspended. By April 9 press restrictions were lifted, but new reporting continues to be extremely limited.

The government crackdown sent a shockwave through the Honduran opposition.

"We're afraid that the government will use the embassy disturbances as a pretext for repressing all progressive organizations," said peasant leader Teofilo Trejos.

Such fears were intensified on April 9, when men in civilian dress fired into the offices of the independent Human Rights Commission (CODEH). No one was hurt, but the commission's director, Dr. Ramon Custodio, has long been targeted by the right for his stinging denunciations of human rights abuses. The commission's regional director in San Pedro Sula, Miguel Angel Pavon, was assassinated on January 14.

**Lingering questions:** The demonstration leaves many questions unanswered. Why did the right-wing student group—whose mentor has close military ties—lead the demonstration? And who initiated the violence, since Honduran demonstrations have traditionally been peaceful?

Also, why did it take the Honduran government more than two hours to respond to U.S. Embassy requests for assistance? There is speculation that the reason for the delay was a heated debate within the military about their role in Matta's seizure. It appears that the decision to extradite Matta was not made by the military's usual decision-making body, the Superior Council (COSUFFAA), and certain officers not informed about the decision beforehand were infuriated.

Finally, why did the army agree to extradite Matta in the first place? What was it getting in return? A possible answer was reported on Radio America, one of Honduras' leading radio stations. A Honduran official told a journalist at Radio America that he had seen a memorandum from U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams to President Jose Azcona saying that if the Hondurans agreed to hand over Matta, the U.S. would not press charges against five Honduran col-

onels implicated in drug deals and would release AID funds that had been held up.

Radio America later named the Honduran colonels, and they were, not surprisingly, the "biggies": the minister of defense, the head of military intelligence, the head of the joint chiefs of staff, the commander of the navy and the Honduran representative to the Inter-American Defense Board in Washington.

Honduran army officials were enraged by the report, and immediately summoned the director and reporter of Radio America for questioning. They tried to force the reporter to reveal his source, but he refused. Yet officials have not issued any public statement denying the report's validity.

**An unheralded return:** Caught up in the embassy brouhaha, the U.S. media failed to highlight another major Honduran development this month: the return to Honduras from Miami of the exiled former chief of the armed forces, Gustavo Alvarez Martinez. Alvarez, who was trained in the wiles of political repression by the Argentine military, became army chief in 1982 with Pentagon approval. During his reign of terror from 1982-84, he instituted the torture and death squads that continue to function today. Progressive forces in Honduras view the return of Alvarez with great dismay.

"One possibility is that Alvarez' return is meant as a distraction to focus the opposition's outrage on him instead of on the real centers of power," said Eric Shultz, of the Boston-based Honduras Information Center. "Another theory is that a serious crisis has developed in U.S.-Honduran military relations and the U.S. hopes Alvarez—who has been on contract to the Rand Corporation and the Pentagon—can play a role in ensuring that the pro-U.S. forces in the Honduran military come out on top."

Until now, the movement opposing the U.S. militarization of Honduras has not been able to significantly broaden its base. The Reagan administration's handling of the Matta case has accomplished what the opposition had been unable to do: tap the well-spring of discontent. "There has been a fundamental shift, a watershed in Honduran politics," said Eldridge. "The U.S., if it is smart, will pander a bit more to Honduran pride and hope the whole thing will blow over. It certainly could, but I doubt it."

The protests have already sparked the formation of the "April 7th Student Alliance," a coalition of students from the high schools, the National University and the National Teachers' College. Its declared goal is to defend Honduras' constitution and national sovereignty, and it has urged all students to be on alert for renewed calls for demonstrations. Another new group is the "Francisco Morazan Patriotic Front for the Defense of National Sovereignty" (named after Honduras' founding father), which aims to unite these students with worker and peasant groups.

But it's an open question whether the opposition will be able to galvanize this surge of discontent and mold it into a movement strong enough to reclaim Honduran sovereignty. □

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