STUDY ON **CIVIC CULTURE AND COEXISTENCE** IN HONDURAS

Building a democratic society:
An unfinished task?

"EL HOMBRE CREA CULTURA Y MEDIANTE LA CULTURA SE CREA A SÍ MISMO"

FUNDACIÓN INTERNACIONAL · IFES · PARA SISTEMAS ELECTORALES

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SUMMARY

More than four decades after the transition to democracy in Honduras, this study analyzes the political culture of the country. To do so, during 2023, 30 focus groups were conducted in the 18 departments of Honduras and 62 interviews were conducted with people from the world of politics and academia, including social actors and government officials.

Among the findings of the research are the diffuse adherence to democratic principles and the option to vote as a form of political participation; the propensity towards non-observance or selective compliance with laws and rules of coexistence; and distrust of institutions. There is a perception that institutions operate in a clientelist manner, that they are co-opted by political parties, and that the State is discriminatory.

Another salient finding is the high level of intolerance towards other political ideas and towards groups with preferences different from one's own, along with the growing preference for strong leadership, and generalized fear (of institutions, of neighbors, of the future, etc.).

The study shows that Hondurans do not like the State that has been built in these decades and are not optimistic about the future. These findings are similar among the general population and the elites, although there are nuances between territories and between groups.

1 | INTRODUCTION

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) in Honduras supported this research with the purpose of determining the characteristics of the nation's civic culture in order to identify patterns of coexistence among citizens. This data is useful for the formulation of public policies and cooperation strategies for the strengthening of a democratic State governed by the rule of law. It also provides context and inputs for civic education, both in the formal education system and through wide-ranging campaigns of democratic values and principles, and for the formation of democratic citizens who not only demand rights but also actively fulfill the duties inherent to democratic citizenship. Likewise, and as a result of the analysis and interpretation of the findings, we suggest areas or topics that would benefit from further research to deepen, verify, or even correct the conclusions and reflections shared here.

This is a study of Honduran political culture more than 40 years after the transition to democracy in 1982. Why does a country's political culture matter? The institutions of democracy—a system based on power-sharing through competitive, free, and fair elections, in which pluralism and freedom of expression are respected and authorities exercise power within legal frameworks—are expected to coexist with a democratic political culture. This is because the installation and permanence of democracy in a country depends not only on its institutions, but also on the adherence to its principles by a majority of the population. In this sense, political culture provides a framework that, on the one hand, delimits the social norms of coexistence and, on the other, calibrates the individual's expectations and attitudes regarding his or her place in society. Thus, it conditions and is conditioned by the ways in which individuals communicate, make decisions, express themselves and react in relation to the political community.

The work presented here is framed within the identification of the major challenges facing the viability, support, and sustainability of Honduran democracy in a context of global crisis, viewed from the perspective of the citizenry and with a qualitative focus. Through 30 focus groups and 62 interviews with national personalities from different professional and social spheres, the beliefs, values, attitudes, and expectations of the population regarding the political system were

collected. The data collection techniques implemented have allowed a better approach to the subject because political culture is neither homogeneous nor static. Qualitative research— unlike quantitative methods, which are less sensitive to the dynamics and specificities of political culture—makes it possible to capture the diversity and nuanced balances in question, which not only vary over time, but also cut across social relations in a given community (and are conditioned by gender, age, ethnicity, educational and income levels, living in rural or urban areas, etc.).

Among the findings of the research is the diffuse adherence to democratic principles and the possibility of exercising suffrage as a primary and highly valued form of political participation, although this adherence is in decline. There is also a propensity toward non-observance or selective compliance with the laws and rules of coexistence as both a reactive and proactive practice. This element, identified in the research as "informality," would form the basis of a political culture with authoritarian traits in which the acceptance and/or justification and legitimization of the use of non-institutional means to solve problems and conflicts predominates. It is a generalized perception that institutions do not work in the same way for all, or that they discriminate. In the face of this, the citizenry adapts by accepting and exercising this same informality. The findings also highlight the intolerance towards other political ideas and towards groups with preferences different from one's own, the growing preference for strong leadership, and the generalized fear of

institutions, neighbors, the future, etc. The study shows that Hondurans do not like the State, the institutions, and the society built over these last decades, and they hold the political parties especially responsible. As for visions of the future, these are not optimistic; there is fear of organized crime and interpersonal distrust. In this context, it is not surprising that the possibility of migration is an option considered by the majority. Far from what might be expected, these outlooks are similar among the general population and the elites, although there are nuances between territories and between groups (more details below).

The research was carried out by Dr. Julieta Castellanos and MSc. Thelma Mejía, with the contribution of Dr. Carlos Denton, director of CID/Gallup, and the support of an Advisory Board of national and international members: MSc. Yolanda Barahona, MSc. Isolda Arita, Lic. Ashanty Crisanto, Dr. Luis Cosenza, Dr. Eugenio Sosa, MSc. Miguel Cálix, Dr. Flavia Freidenberg, Dr. Yanina Welp, Dr. Harry Brown Araúz, and Prof. Nicolás Fernández Bravo. It was sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID/ Honduras), with the support of Máximo Zaldívar, Regional Director of IFES/Americas and the coordination of the IFES/Honduras team by Ambassador Marcelo Varela-Erasheva. The methodology is briefly presented below. The following three sections summarize the main findings of the focus groups and interviews, conclusions and final reflections, and, lastly, the summary of main findings.

2 | METHODOLOGY

For the study, 30 focus groups and 62 interviews were conducted. The 30 focus groups were held across Honduras' 18 departments and were conducted between April 13 and 27, 2023, following a guide that included, among others, questions related to knowledge, valuation, and assessment of institutions; electoral participation, activism, and involvement in public affairs; coexistence (tolerance, pluralism); and finally, general perceptions and expectations regarding the political system, society, and the future. The meetings were held in person, lasted two hours each, and were attended by nine people.

Participants were selected based on age range (between 18 and 65 years, with a maximum of 60 years for women) and educational level. In the municipalities of Sabanagrande, Lepaera, Choluteca, Yuscarán, Catacamas, and La Lima, participants were required to have completed at least the sixth grade. In the other municipalities, participants were required to have completed at least the third grade. The meetings were led by three moderators.

The 62 individual interviews were conducted between June 12 and August 4, 2023, using a guide of semi-structured questions with themes similar to those raised in the focus groups. Political, social, economic, academic, and trade union stakeholders were interviewed, as well as government officials and former government officials.

3 | WHAT KIND OF DEMOCRACY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

For the presentation of results, the findings of the 30 focus groups were categorized geographically across 5 regions of the country: Northwestern (Santa Barbara, Copán, Ocotepeque, Lempira, La Paz, and Intibucá), Central (Francisco Morazán and Comayagua), Southern (Choluteca and Valle), Northern (Cortés, Yoro, Atlántida, Colón, and Islas de la Bahía) and Eastern (Olancho, El Paraíso, and Gracias a Dios). The main findings are highlighted below.

> CITIZENS VALUE LAWS BUT FEEL THEY ARE NOT ENFORCED

In the five regions consulted, everyone participating in the focus groups had heard of or knew what the Constitution of the Republic was. In general, participants considered laws useful, but criticized their lack of enforcement, with some stating that it is politicians who are the first to disobey them (which implies a criticism of the weakness of the rule of law). There was a perceived disconnect between Hondurans and the legal norm that structure the Republic and the State. This disconnect led to some people not perceiving the usefulness of the Constitution of the Republic, with a majority thinking that "it is just a piece of paper that it is not complied with, and it is the politicians who respect it the least".

> CONSIDERABLE GAPS CAN BE OBSERVED IN THE PERCEPTION AND VALUATION OF DEMOCRACY

The most positive evaluations of democracy included: the classic definition that democracy is the power of the people; linking the concept of democracy with a political system (without defining the type of system) and with the organization of the State; and associating democracy with rights. Negative evaluations included those denoting doubt or distrust of democracy in general, lacking a precise understanding of the concept, having a marked distrust of democratic processes, and expressing disillusionment with electoral results and political clientelism ("people go out to vote because they are given money or aid; only the color of the [party] flag changes").

The responses relating to the characterization of democracy in Honduras are grouped into: 1) Doubts about whether Honduras is or is not a democratic country; 2) Lack of precision in the concept of democracy (claiming not to know what democracy is or not answering the question); and 3) Perception that there is no

democracy because power is held by a single person and because there is an illegitimate National Congress, referring specifically to the election of the 2022-2026 Board of Directors of the National Congress; 4) The opinion that there is democracy because every four years people go to vote and a new president is elected; and 5) Positive evaluation of Honduras as a democratic country because, without democracy, it would be worse.

> THERE IS A PERCEPTION THAT THE PRINCIPLES OF DEMOCRACY ARE UNEVENLY APPLIED

People knew and valued the foundational tenets of democracy (freedom, equality, respect, tolerance) but pointed out that there is a clear gap between the theoretical concept and its application in daily life. People expressed the opinion that the concept of **equality**, for example, is undermined by economic differences and social status, or that the application of justice depends on the socioeconomic level and income levels of individuals. In general, poverty was identified as the origin of inequality. The concept of **freedom** is perceived to be affected by fear of power, politicians, and officials. Participants affirmed that all these circumstances have led and continue to lead to the loss of freedoms and self-censorship. **Tolerance** was only seldom defined in its understanding as a democratic value. For most participants, the use of the concept was synonymous with submissive and obedient people. Finally, the concept of **respect** was associated with the various ways in which the interviewees experience disrespect in daily life.

> ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION AND TERRITORIAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Among the people interviewed, political participation was considered limited to participation in electoral processes. It was common to characterize elections as "a day of celebration." Community participation is very influenced by regional differences. It is likely that the economic underdevelopment of most of the departments in the northwestern region and the more limited presence of state institutions contribute to the fact that political participation is higher, especially in Water Management Boards and among community councils. Some organizations are ad hoc and a product of emergencies. The most structured medium- and long-term groups are manufacturing organizations and environmental and water defense organizations. Community participation seems to be stronger where there are no labor unions and the State is less present.

> AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT RIGHTS AND FEELINGS OF DEFENSELESSNESS

In all five regions, the interviewees agreed that the following rights were recognized: the right to life, to a family, to health, to education, and to live in peace; the right to honorable work and the right to elect and be elected in electoral processes. In four of the five regions, the right to a name and identity and the right to security were mentioned. Only in the northwestern region did participants refer to the right to gender equality. The perception of living in a state of generalized defenselessness was prevalent. The condition of defenselessness most frequently expressed by the participants refers to the violation of human rights, the lack of response to citizen insecurity, and the lack of compliance with labor rights. This condition is perceived as one of the origins and causes of inequality among Hondurans: "Some Hondurans have rights; others are marginalized and excluded from the rights that the State is obligated to protect and defend".

> AGREEMENT ON THE DUTY TO OBEY THE LAW, VOTE, AND PAY TAXES

In all five regions, the interviewees recognized two civic duties: that of paying taxes to improve the city and the country and exercising the right to vote. In three regions, in addition, participants mentioned the duty to respect and abide by the law, take care of the country, be good citizens, educate one's children, pay for public services, and be responsible. Only in one region did participants refer to taking care of State assets and resources, protecting the environment (central region), helping other people, or taking care of the family (northern region).

> LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF THE INDEPENDENCE OF POWERS

The participants in the focus groups were aware of the existence of the three branches of government and identified them correctly. In some groups they identified the preeminence of the Executive Branch and, specifically, the power of the President of the Republic over the other branches. Some interviewees pointed to the Legislative Branch as the first branch of government. Almost none of the focus groups mentioned the judicial branch as having a position of preeminence. There was no mention of the independence of powers or the non-subordination of one power before the other. In contrast, in the five regions, participants knew the positions that are elected in the general elections: president, deputies, and mayors; however, no one referenced presidential appointees or municipal officials as partisan positions. All participants knew the name of the mayor of the municipality in which they live.

> DEEP UNEASINESS WITH THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

The general opinion in all the focus groups was that citizens do not like the State and the society that has been built during these years of life as a republic, and this dissatisfaction is directly linked to the political system and those who have governed. Participants named dissatisfaction, disillusionment, and little hope for change as issues they will have to deal with and endure.

The problems can be grouped into four major areas:

a) Economic and labor rights problems: poverty, unemployment, high cost of living, low wages, job instability, the need to turn to people of influence to get a job, and lack of labor rights.

b) Problems of insecurity, violence, crime, and impunity: insecurity, violence, violence against women, drug trafficking and the perception of the country, and impunity.

c) Problems of politics and the exercise of power: corruption, politics and politicians, and nepotism.

d) Poor performance of state institutions: lack of medicines in hospitals, lack of water services, deficient public education, etc.

Generalization, however, should not overshadow substantive differences. For example, in the department of Cortés, there was no mention of employment and economic issues as problems, a situation consistent with the economic conditions of the area. In the central region, greater emphasis was placed on politics, corruption, and abuse of power by public officials, coinciding with the fact that this is the area where the headquarters of state institutions are located. Participants in both regions mentioned insecurity and violence as fundamental problems, as they are the regions with the highest homicide rates in the country. Except

for the department of Cortés, economic issues were among the main problems identified in the northern region, which includes Yoro, Atlántida, Colón and Islas de la Bahía, where the economy and employment are front of mind. In the northwestern region, participants emphasized problems related to the economy (lack of employment, labor rights, low wages); institutional deficiencies (education, health, energy); insecurity; and discrimination in its different forms, including racial discrimination. Similar issues were brought up in the eastern region, except for the issue of discrimination, which appeared in Gracias a Dios but not in Olancho or El Paraíso. In the northwestern region there is a lack of State institutions and a low quality of health services. Inhabitants of the border regions stated that they travel to municipalities in El Salvador in search of medical attention, whether public or private, but they point out that they are hindered by the security policy of the Salvadoran government. This region is where participants discussed the different forms of discrimination that people experience.

> THE STATE IS PERCEIVED TO DISCRIMINATE

The general perception of State services is one of discrimination, that is, that the relationship between individuals and public service institutions is neither universal nor equitable. Participants identified six categories of discrimination: 1) Discrimination against women ("Women do not have the same rights as men"; "In schools boys and girls are treated differently. Only girls sweep and clean the school; boys do not"); 2) Economic discrimination ("Institutions do not treat the poor the same as the rich;" "Those with money have worth;") 3) Discrimination against ethnic groups ("People think that Indigenous people don't have the same abilities [as mestizos];

they think we can't work well;") 4) Sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination ("Homosexuals aren't given jobs; they're bullied1;"); 5) Age-based discrimination ("You can't get a job after age 35;"); and 6) Political-based discrimination ("You can only get a job if you're part of a particular party;" "The government provides benefits only to people belonging to their party").

The conclusion was that the State discriminates, does not guarantee rights, and that its officials do not treat people equally. Age discrimination was particularly important to many participants and repeatedly brought up as an issue.

> FEAR OF THE STATE, INSTITUTIONS, CIVIL SERVANTS AND OTHER CITIZENS

The focus groups showed that from the participants' viewpoint, fear fulfilled the function of inhibiting, intimidating, and even terrorizing – that is, forming meek citizens. There is a predominant perception that it is useless to denounce malfeasance because the corrupt are protected by the Public Prosecutor's Office; that the rulers are the most corrupt and have the power and that is why those who denounce tare in danger. In particular, the following are mentioned: fear and distrust of the police ("we do not report because we are afraid, there are many corrupt policemen", "the police are the criminals' cronies"); lack of confidence in the justice system ("we do not report people with money because the justice system does nothing against them", "the jails are full of poor people"); fear of other people ("we do not report because we are afraid, then comes revenge, more violence", "if we report, we put ourselves and the family in danger", "the person we denounced will look for us at home, at work, at school, and would kill us", "we

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[1] "Bullying" refers to the physical or psychological harassment to which people are subjected.

don't trust our neighbors"); fear of violence against women ("women are more defenseless"); and fear of denouncing corruption ("you can't talk about corruption, it's dangerous", "they have killed journalists for denouncing corruption").

> TOLERANCE AS A DEMOCRATIC VALUE DISTORTED BY FEAR

Tolerance is a democratic principle linked to respect for other citizens' ideas, political, religious, ideological and sexual preferences. The participants in the focus groups understand the concept from the perspective of respecting others despite their differences, but most of the responses show that tolerance is understood as the capacity for endurance, which translates into an attitude of submission fostered and developed by fear. Fear of the State, of the power of politicians, institutions and officials. "See, listen, and shut up", "Machete stay in your sheath", "Put up with it, put up with it, once, twice, three times...", are expressions that evidence an attitude of forced conformity or impotence in the face of the inability or uselessness of taking action to obtain effective and rights-based responses.

> PROBLEMS ARE SOLVED INFORMALLY AND/OR BY VIOLENT MEANS

The defenselessness of citizens in the face of the institutionalism of the State, either by indifference, a lack of commitment in public functions, corrupt practices, complicity, or negligence has led Hondurans to solve their problems on their own, by their own means and by illegitimate, violent, fraudulent, and favor-seeking or corrupt practices. This is what is said about the ways respondents resolve problems: Violence stands out as the most frequent way of resolving conflicts. The gravity, in a negative sense, or the seriousness of the responses corresponded with the following regions: "With machetes, guns and

knives" (responses from the northern, eastern and southern regions); "If justice does not bring a resolution, with one's own hand" (northwestern region), "Sharpening the machete on both sides" (eastern region).

> RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLES VERSUS HUMAN RIGHTS OF THE LGBTQI+ COMMUNITY

Regarding the LGTBIQ+ community, a difference of focus or contradiction is evident. In responses, without exception, participants state non-discrimination, acceptance and respect for sexual identity. However, they make it clear that respecting sexual identity is not the same as accepting same-sex marriage, and the main argument for the rejection of this is based on religious principles. It is critical to point out that there are no differences in this position across generations, economic status, occupation, and place of residence of participants.

> PRIDE IN NATURAL BEAUTY AND TRADITIONS

There is agreement in acknowledging the natural beauty of the country – "it is a beautiful country; we like the people; being between two oceans; the Copán Ruins; the tourist sites; Lake Yojoa; the reefs; the natural wealth; the climate; the biological reserves" but also "the history; the folklore; the Garífuna culture; the Guancasco; the Misquito dance; the gastronomy". Other elements are added in the northwestern region: "At one time we were proud of the national soccer team; we are proud of the family we have; the national hero Lempira; the national anthem; being a free and independent country".

Localisms were also highlighted: for the inhabitants of the department of Ocotepeque, it is a source of pride "to have a customs office; El Poy; to be a border department; to be "Trifinio" (sharing a border with El Salvador and Guatemala); to have a biological reserve; to be a safe department; that the students of

the department have the best results in the university entrance exam (Academic Aptitude Test, PAA) for the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) and when teachers receive good evaluations." In Olanchito, in the department of Yoro, they are proud that their municipality is the birthplace of renowned poets, writers and painters. "We have very capable people, but there is no work for them," they remarked. In the city of Choluteca, in the southern region, they invoked pride in Francisco Morazán, who was president of the Central American Federation from 1830-1839 and is a national hero, and in export crops and aquaculture products.

> EMIGRATING IS THE ONLY COMMON THEME THAT APPEARS IN ALL FIVE REGIONS

The focus groups touched on what topics were discussed in family units and four categories were identified: migration; the future of the country; studying and working; the building of values and social and family relations. Migration is the only common theme that came up in all five regions. Unemployment, insecurity, lack of certainty about the future and lack of rights are identified as causes of migration. The participants in the focus groups talk about migration generally, but mainly about the driving forces and consequences: "in the communities there are only old people left"; they identify those they consider to be responsible for migration: "there is a lot of corruption and it is not dealt with", "we have no hope", "the politicians are responsible for what is happening in the country".

In the northern region, four themes stand out among what is discussed by families: little hope for the future of Honduras; insecurity; emigration; giving children the best opportunities. In the northwestern region, in addition to the above topics mentioned in the northern region, the need to study so that children can later help their parents appears

as a recurring theme, but respondents question whether studying is useless because there are no jobs; to prepare for life, to hope in the values that have been taught to the children. In the central region the following reflection was more prevalent: "with today's youth and their use of technology, we will not exist for them", "young people are being formed by Facebook". Meanwhile, in the eastern and northwestern regions, the themes of "they should watch who they hang out with", "they should have their own little house", and family values and efforts to educate youth were common.

The issues that are not talked about or lead to confrontation, division, and conflict are political, especially since the coup d'état in 2009. It is also noted that there is no tolerance to talk about religious issues or the rights of the LGTBQI+ community. In family coexistence topics, the generation gap stands out as a problem, but it is issues related to the family economy that seem to have the greatest impact on coexistence, together with the management of family finances and the distribution of financial responsibilities. In these matters, women express that they carry the burden of responsibility.

> POSITIVE VALUES UNDER ATTACK BY SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGES

The positive values for coexistence among Hondurans that were highlighted are: respect, honesty, punctuality, humility, courage, empathy. Some also highlighted unity and solidarity, with greater emphasis in the northern region, where the focus groups pointed to actions of solidarity and unity that characterize them in the face of natural disasters, as this is a region frequently hit by tropical storms and hurricanes. The vision of coexistence and values is a transition between past and present times; participants resent the loss of traditions and the deterioration of ways of living together (the

murder of women is seen as something "out of the ordinary"). They emphasize that technology has allowed forms of communication and learning, which, in the midst of shortcomings of the educational system, are positive things. They cite as an example that technology has allowed the migrant community to maintain communication with their families, preserve a sense of belonging and preserve a sense of national identity. However, the focus groups pointed out that technology has also fostered individualism and little face-to-face interaction among people and between individuals and their families.

> A FUTURE MARKED BY UNCERTAINTY AND DISENCHANTMENT

Disenchantment with democracy, the role of political parties and politics, corruption, institutional fragility and low levels of trust, political polarization, and violence and insecurity are factors that give Honduran citizens cause for concern about the future of the country and their families. This perspective of an uncertain future is not only observed in families living on the poverty line, but also present in the middle classes, for whom decisions to emigrate are not necessarily driven by a scarcity of money or a degree of discomfort. For these groups, the motivations to emigrate are related to reduced growth prospects for their children, insecurity, and the lack of certainty about the stability of the country in the medium term.

4 | THE OPINION OF THE ELITES. ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEWS

> FROM "OASIS OF PEACE" TO VIOLENCE

"Honduras, an oasis of peace" – the phrase coined by the country's last military regime presided over by General Policarpo Paz García (1978-1982) – became a publicity campaign with the aim of marking a difference between what was happening in the countries bordered Honduras that were engaged in international wars. Honduras, which at that time did not have any significant political or social violence, became, during the first decade of the 21st century, the most violent country in Central America. How it reached that point was the first question to be addressed in the interviews. According to some interviewees, Honduras did not have the same level of conflict as the rest of the countries in the isthmus partly because it had passed what was considered "the most powerful agrarian reform law in Central America" in 1962, and later reintroduced in 1972. According to one academic interviewed, "the ratification of the Labor Code did not lead to conflict between labor and national capital because the capital was foreign. The conquests and the confrontations with the unions were with transnational capital and the political parties were the intermediaries between foreign capital and the workers". Four decades later, politics and politicians exist in the context of misuse of power and an unfinished return to democracy – or a permanent transition with advances and setbacks. In the opinion of an academic interviewed, since the 1980s "a transition to democracy has been experienced that never went beyond being a transition in various senses: in the cultural sense, in the political sense, in the institutional sense, it never managed to advance, much less in the political, democratic sphere. Therefore, democratic values began to coexist in society with authoritarian values".

> GENERALIZED DISSATISFACTION WITH THE STATE OF AFFAIRS

The people interviewed agree that social coexistence in Honduras is very complex and difficult. According to an agricultural producer, "Hondurans are cloistered in their

own communities, afraid to speak, even within their own communities there are fears and apprehensions [...] in our sector there are problems of coexistence due to insecurity, even in small communities". There is also a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the social situation that cuts across social sectors. According to the opinion of an academic interviewed, "there is a social, economic and political polarization that has influenced the family, in different social sectors, in the countryside and in the city, people avoid talking to people who are argumentative. There is permanent internal dissatisfaction (...) even people with resources, people with high incomes, are also dissatisfied because they don't have the country they want. Even the rich are dissatisfied".

> POLITICAL PARTIES ARE TO BLAME

Political parties are, to a large extent, seen as the actors responsible for this general situation. A grassroots political leader points out that "the hegemonic parties have supported briefcase parties only to have them as allies and partners in fraud, this practice has had the consequence of not trusting the institutions responsible for strengthening democracy, such as the electoral bodies". It is pointed out that "within the political parties there is confrontation, the laws are not complied with, and this divides the different groups or movements, these discussions are transferred to society" (political leader, Member of Congress, 2014-2018). Also, according to the opinion of another grassroots political leader, "there is a relationship of violence and imposition between the elites and the popular sector. In private there has been a capacity for consensus and coexistence among the political elites, but in public they exhibit confrontation, and they do

it to satisfy their followers. This is feeding social and political hatred". This linkage with a growing trend of polarization, present not only in Honduras but in many other countries, is evidenced by "what is happening in Honduras, this confrontation, is happening in the world. There is widespread dissatisfaction, people are angry with politicians".

> INCREASING SEGREGATION AND POLARIZATION

In relation to the development of values for coexistence, the interviewees point out that "education has segregated society: the poor in public schools that don't work; the middle class and the rich in private schools. This segregation has distanced or eliminated the relationship between socioeconomic classes. There is a separation between the public and private; the poor in the public sphere, the middle class and the rich in the private sphere" (government official between 2022-2026). In addition, according to a feminist leader, it is perceived that "the social fabric is deteriorated; in the family, the conservative thinking of the parents interferes with the more liberal thinking of the children. There is a generational schism. In precarious families it is worse. There is intolerance and religious fundamentalisms exert a great influence" (feminist leader).

> DEEP INSTITUTIONAL DISTRUST

The responses to the question of why democracy has failed to build citizens' trust in institutions showed a lack of systemic trust and a generalized distrust. There is "a propensity to doubt rather than to believe". The lack of trust has affected the relationship of citizens with the State because "people go to vote for a change, for a solution, and because there is no response, people doubt,

they don't trust, they don't have hope". There is not only dissatisfaction and distrust of public institutions, but also a lack of trust in the private sector. The perception that politicians and officials do not comply with the law is widespread. On the other hand, it is pointed out that civil servants do not exercise their duties correctly, particularly because they do not separate the partisan from the institutional. From the perspective of a civil society leader, "an official does not separate the institutional function from the party activism, and his priority is to attend to the partisan activist, not to attend to the citizen. A citizen gains access to a public institution through party connections and knows that a party member will be better served" (civil society leader). This opinion is shared by a former Member of Congress: "governments and civil servants are not ineffective, they are sectarian, and only solve problems for their supporters, their priority is their party members, not citizens in general" (civil society leader).

There is a widespread perception that once political parties come to power, they build a public administration in which the party is reflected in the government and the State; in this sense, the State becomes a State of minorities. This assessment leads to opinions such as the following: "Politicians and governments have failed, the State and the institutions have not connected with the people", "The people do not feel that the State is a protector and guarantor of their rights, they do not feel that the State belongs to them, they feel that the State belongs to others, to those who govern", "the State threatens, it does not protect, rather in circumstances it is a threat to people's lives" (Member of Congress, 2022-2026).

> GROWING INTERPERSONAL DISTRUST

Another widespread perception points to the decline of interpersonal trust. "A generalized suspicion has set in, we are suspicious of and towards our neighbors, of politicians, civil servants, bosses, co-workers"; social and work relations are based are largely based on doubt and distrust. There are phrases that have become commonplace, such as: "it is better not to trust anyone", "it is better not to trust anyone", "it is better to be cautious", "don't be trusting", "be suspicious of everything". The increase in distrust has been a continuous process that, from the point of view of the elites interviewed, has been exacerbated by internal migration, insecurity, and crime: "insecurity and drug-traffickers have broken the social fabric of solidarity, undermined interpersonal trust. It is not that solidarity has been lost, it is that there is fear". Family values also have an influence: "there is a loss of civic principles, of responsibility and commitment, which originates in the family and is brought to the State when a person becomes a civil servant"; and the emerging stigma of "economic precariousness leads to moral precariousness" (testimonies of different interviewees).

> WIDESPREAD, CROSS-CUTTING FEAR

The leaders consulted in the interviews include three generations: those who lived their childhood after the end of the dictatorship of General Tiburcio Carías (1933-1949), those who were adolescents and young adults during the military regimes of the 1970s, and those who were born during the governments elected after 1980. Here are their answers on this topic of fear. A politician, former Member of Congress, public official

from 2022-2026, states that "fears have been built up at every moment. Since I was a child I was afraid. Our family is liberal and was a victim of the repression of Carías' administration. We were afraid of the military – they came to the towns, took away weapons and kept them, and took people under arrest. In the seventies, in my family, we used to talk about the Liberal Party in secret". Along this same line, a former minister points out that "Hondurans are fearful, the 3-16 was the battalion of death2, many young people were lost, they disappeared, and everything had impunity. The State taught us to be afraid" (politician, former minister).

Fear of institutions and officials is based on distrust, related to concerns that officials are linked to or participate in acts of corruption, or are linked to or protected by criminal groups. There is a perception that authorities and officials succumb to the powers that appoint them and also to the power of union leaders, especially when they vulnerable to being denounced and feel threatened or obligated to make concessions, "they comply and are tolerant, they are even afraid of some sectors and prefer to please them to avoid conflicts" (politician, former minister). In the same vein, a former minister points out that "there is no trust in the police. The security system does not work. There is no trust in the authority to denounce. People do not report for fear that the police will betray the claimant" (civil society representative, former minister). "There is even fear of claiming a right," says a migrant resident in the United States. "There is fear of expressing oneself because of reprisals from the authorities, because of lack

of justice. There is fear of communicating," says a leader of the production sector.

The latest generation of fears is defined as those provoked by violence and crime, whether coming from organized criminal structures or not, palpable in a growing incidence of violence and crime that has been going on for more than two decades. This new generation of fears also includes fear of attacks on social media, sometimes coming from identifiable actors and other times received anonymously. Violence and criminality also generate fear of going out for a walk, of being criminally assaulted, and cause confinement, isolation, and mistrust and also decrease confidence and solidarity. Fear of organized crime leads to greater self-imposed restrictions: fear of circulating in areas controlled by criminal groups, fear of speaking publicly on the subject, and even fear of speaking in private. As one academic interviewed stated, "years ago we used to give a ride to anyone we saw on the road, but not anymore. Fear has settled in even in rural areas, towns are not like they used to be, and when we go to another country, we take that fear and distrust of people with us".

> PROBLEMS ARE SOLVED OUTSIDE THE LAW

The ineffectiveness of the State, which translates into the real or perceived defenselessness of citizens, causes people to act and solve problems on their own, outside institutional frameworks, both at the local level, which should be addressed by municipal authorities, as well as at the national level, which should be addressed by the national government. Trade union

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2 Unit of the Honduran Army in charge of the kidnapping and disappearance of political opponents between 1970 and 1984.

organizations also resort to the use of pressure and force to achieve their objectives and demands. The interviewees consider that "the State has taught them that with force and violence they can achieve what they want, that violence is effective, that violence works" (leader of the productive union sector). The strongest temperament has more imposition, violence wins because it generates fear; generating fear works, people begin to distance themselves. In the community it is the same, people don't go to file a complaint, they can't find a solution in a police court, so they resolve it in a personal way, with violence. And, on the other hand, people become frozen, they tolerate everything" (community leader).

At the individual level, when problems occur between people, the reasoning is the same; the victim, the aggrieved person does not report because they know that no results will be achieved, that the institution will not solve the problem; and the aggressor is also convinced that nothing will happen to them; and so violence gains strength as a way of solving problems outside the institutions, outside the State. And the State loses credibility. "Violence and the use of force have their origin in the dysfunctionality of the State, in the lack of confidence in the institutions. The State does not comply with the basic objectives of the organization and the social contract between the State and society, it is a huge failure of democracy" (politician, constituent representative, former civil servant).

The assessment is conclusive: the political system and its elites, across different historical eras, except for a few periods of governments elected by direct vote, resorted to mechanisms of violence to generate fear and terror, to exercise social control, to

impose themselves, to have control of power; practices that fulfilled their purpose. Simultaneously, a system of impunity was consolidated, impunity for the State itself and its officials responsible for violence and death, and impunity for people without State or government appointments, but who, because of their power, found their place above the law.

> FREEDOM, INEQUALITY AND DISCRIMINATION

The people interviewed from the different sectors recognize the conditions of inequality and discrimination in which Hondurans live; they agree on the causes and identify the shortcomings of the State with regards to discrimination. They agree there is a lack of equality, discrimination and loss of freedoms. Individuals from different points of view, some who have lived or had to coexist with inequality and discrimination, or who in their professions try to address this condition of life, identify the flaws or ineffectiveness of institutional performance as the main cause of the persistence of a political and civic culture that fosters and perpetuates inequality and discrimination – values antithetical to democracy. As in the focus groups, the interviewees identify the different types and manifestations of discrimination: economic, social, political, by age, gender, physical or mental disability, occupation, ethnicity, etc. There is a cultural heritage that weighs heavily and which the State has not set out to deconstruct.

> 2010 – 2023 ACTIONS THAT HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO CHANGES IN THE POLITICAL CULTURE

All the interviews conclude that 2010-2023 has been a period characterized by a

regression in the evolution of democratic progress, a setback marked by the end of the 2006-2009 period, and that the institutional and political crisis of that year was not able to be resolved democratically. Authoritarianism took root in large swaths. This diminishing democratic progress comes at a time of greater degrees of democratic backsliding and a lack of advancement in political and institutional reforms to get back on the path of progress that had previously been achieved.

> EMIGRATION AND EXPECTATIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

The causes that motivate emigration, both in the interviews and in the focus groups, include unemployment, low wages and family economic problems; insecurity, violence and crime; protecting children from being recruited by organized crime; population displacement from vulnerable areas and floods, droughts, and the consequences of extractive economic activities; domestic and intra-family violence, violence against women, threats to women by men who belong to gangs, sexual abuse; to escape trafficking and sexual exploitation, and for family reunification, among others.

These multiple crises and the absence of long-term policies to address them create the perception of unsustainability and cause despair for the future. The message from all

sectors is pessimistic in the face of an exclusionary economic development model. The answers from respondents hint that an inclusive development model will only be possible from a national project that is inclusive and long-term, in which the axes of socioeconomic development can be identified and that is a result of dialogues and consensus from different political, economic, and social sectors. Uncertainty with different causes and nuances affects everyone, or almost everyone. The State is demonstrating its inability even for basic administrative management, and there is a perception that even the ability to obtain basic services is at risk, hence the phrases "failed state", "failed democracy" and "we are hitting rock bottom".

> THE ELEMENTS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND PRIDE

Regarding pride in being Hondurans, the people interviewed, as in the focus groups, make no reference to personalities of the twentieth century; their references remained in the nineteenth century, thus suggesting weak ties to national identity. National identity is a value of the older generations. Rather than identifying what makes them feel proud, they identify and explain the causes that have weakened national pride and identity, and at least five interviewees expressed not being able to point to anything to be proud of.

5 | FINAL REFLECTIONS

Far from being homogenous and static, political culture changes over time and from country to country, but also within them, across geographies and social groups. Ideally, democratic political culture provides a framework for the peaceful resolution of conflicts (democratically) and in this sense provides both guidelines for action as well as for legitimacy and trust. In the opinion of the participants in the focus groups and interviews, both aspects have declined in Honduras in recent decades. When this framework ceases to function, a country may run serious risks of falling into authoritarian traps, endorsing authoritarianism and/or, among others, giving rise to different forms of violence. Thus, it is not only a matter of understanding the functional components of political culture, but also of analyzing its contents and drivers. The findings and analysis of the research presented in the previous pages show the lack of connection between the political system and the citizenry. The electoral event prevails – going to vote is a synonym of democracy – but most of the participants in the study do not associate democratic institutionality with the guarantee of rights, thus demonstrating the distance between the citizen and the political system that upholds the Constitution and the laws.

The study shows a diffuse legitimacy between democracy as a political regime of values and principles, respect, rights and tolerance, and democracy as a system limited to the act of voting. This is aggravated when considering the dissatisfaction with institutional performance, with the quality of services received, and the deep distrust and fear expressed by a large number of the participants in the study. Politicians are seen as the problem and not the solution, and the clientelism, corruption, and discrimination on multiple fronts suffered by a large part of the population is condemned. Crime, drug trafficking, the erosion of values associated with national identity and community ties are other elements that should set off alarm bells. Mistrust in institutions cuts across all sectors and all institutions, from the powers of the state, the electoral institutions, and security and justice sectors. The assessment is that these institutions are corrupt and/or

inefficient and that they exercise power in a discretionary manner.

The vision of Honduras cuts across education levels, economic status and social standing, occupation and region of residence, rural or urban. Respondents contemplate a future marked by uncertainty; they express the need for an inclusive economic policy that reduces poverty; they identify insecurity, violence, crime, impunity and vulnerability as factors that directly affect daily life. All these factors are drivers of migration, and for these reasons they believe that migration will not reduce but, on the contrary, increase in the coming years. All families talk about the future, and most of them see that future as leaving the country.

The various forms of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of democracy do not seem to find answers in the policies for economic and social development and the protection of rights that governments promote or claim to promote. Respondents agree that they search for individual recourse, some of them outside the State and its institutions. Uncertainty about the future and the lack of actions that mark a change of course are cause of dissatisfaction and disaffection with democracy. From the perspective of the participants, it does not seem that the political parties and the politicians who lead them have noticed or are aware of the current state of democracy and how negatively citizens perceive and experience the results of four decades of governments elected through free and direct elections.

6 | SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Weaknesses in adherence to democracy and its institutions	> Weak and declining democratic legitimacy. In theory, the value of democracy is recognized, but disenchantment with poor institutional performance is beginning to erode adherence to democracy. > There is a high level of distrust in institutions. It is believed that they suffer from clientelism and operate in a corrupt manner, and that multiple forms of discrimination are exercised from these institutions. > Widespread feeling of mistrust in politicians, politics and institutions. > Fear (of drug traffickers, police, etc.) permeates social relations. > The elements that make up national pride refer mainly to the past (XIX) and/or to nature rather than to contemporary achievements. > Politicians are identified as part of the problem and not part of the solution.
Stark contrasts in integration in political and community processes	> Perception of elections as a mechanism that brings opportunity for change and improvement. > Voter turnout is considered high but declining. > Community participation is stronger in those places where the State and other organizations such as unions are less present. > Legitimization and use of non-institutional means to resolve conflicts, including violence. > Tacit acceptance of the discretionality of power. Non-institutional channels are legitimized and used as the most effective ways to resolve problems and conflicts. > The correlation between abuse of power and institutional nepotism comes from a generalized perception that problems can only be solved through informal means (including violence).

Differentiated knowledge of the political system	> Widespread recognition of freedom, equality and respect as basic pillars of democratic life. Rights and duties are identified, although their fulfillment is negatively evaluated. > There is less awareness of the judiciary and of the independence and division of powers. > Elected officials are known. > There is greater recognition and demand for rights, especially by trade organizations, and less recognition of citizens' duties.
Contradictions and limitations in the valuation of and respect for human rights	> In theory there is adherence to the principle of tolerance, but in practice religion and politics generate polarization and conflict. > It is emphasized that families are not able to talk about many issues. > Tolerance is negatively associated with "putting up with" or accepting abuse. > Discrimination based on ethnicity, gender, age or social status is frequently reported.
Deep dissatisfaction and uncertainty about the future	> Leaving the country is seen as the only way out for many people. > Preference for individual departures. > Low confidence in the possibility of change. > High uncertainty. > Fear of violence.