

# **The caravan: Who is behind it, what internal factors provoke it, how to situate ourselves?**

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## **Overflow**

The caravan is a social migratory phenomenon that has overflowed any political and institutional foresight. It is world news. In all the international media, which never have anything to say about Honduras, today they have put it in the “eye of the hurricane” news. It is a phenomenon that has overwhelmed churches, sectors of civil society, NGOs and governments. It is an avalanche that at the beginning of this dramatic period began with a few hundred Hondurans to become an uncountable number, growing and uncontrollable, which is answered with simple gestures of solidarity, generosity and spontaneity on the part of people who see migrants pass by, and even with the highest-level military responses as the Trump administration threatens, and as the Honduran regime continues to unsuccessfully create a police wall on the border between Honduras and Guatemala.

## **Born in the "Juarez City of the South"**

It is not just a caravan. It is a social phenomenon led by thousands of impoverished rural and urban settlers that manifests itself in large and massive spontaneous and improvised caravans, with no more organization than the one that has taught the basics of survival and the manifest decision to go north to reach the territory of the USA. It's not the first time. Last year, 2017, in the month of April there was a caravan of about 800 Central Americans, 75% of whom were Hondurans. At the same time, there is a constant movement of some 300 Hondurans who daily seek to cross the border of Aguascalientes, between Honduras and Guatemala, resulting in many of whom are lost on the road.

This human and social avalanche exploded like a powerful far-reaching bomb gaining second or third importance news in the city of San Pedro Sula where it all began. San Pedro Sula is known worldwide as one of the most violent, and thus various researchers and analysts often call it the "Juarez City of the South". It is

similar with the boom of the maquilas (sweatshops) that characterize this Mexican city bordering El Paso, Texas, which was promoted in the 1970's as a response to poverty in Mexico. Juarez City is best known worldwide for other by-products: an endless flood of internal migration, juvenile delinquency, and drug trafficking. What was this news in San Pedro Sula? A group of about 200 Hondurans announced that they were organizing a caravan to migrate north, leaving the bus terminal in San Pedro Sula, on the Honduran Atlantic coast, on Saturday, October 13.

### **Who was behind it?**

In the beginning, the caravan was identified with the name of Bartolo Fuentes, a social and political leader based in the city of El Progreso, who said in an interview to the local media, that he would join the caravan for a few days. Bartolo Fuentes as a journalist accompanied the previous caravan of April 2017. Being also a politician of the LIBRE (Freedom and Refoundation) Party of the Honduran opposition, Bartolo Fuentes quickly became the political "scapegoat". He was accused of such at a press conference by the government minister of Foreign Affairs while she was accompanied by the Minister of Human Rights. "Bartolo Fuentes is responsible for this caravan, he organized and instigated many people to manipulate them and lead them on this dangerous journey" she said, while calling on the Public Ministry to proceed with charges against the person to whom the regime downloaded all responsibility as a representative of the radical political opposition of Honduras. As with most things, Bartolo's name was soon discarded and other scapegoats emerged, still more powerful than a mere local and national social and political leader.

By the time the caravan crossed the border at the Aguascalientes crossing to Guatemala it has already swelled to about four thousand people, who managed to topple the fence that police from both Honduras and Guatemala had established at the border post. And it continued to grow in numbers as it crossed Guatemalan territory and approached the Mexican border. The Honduran regime, undoubtedly with financing from the government of the United States, conceived a plan between October 17 and 20 with the purpose of convincing the migrants to return to the country. A few hundred seemed to accept this proposal, many of whom were transported by bus and others by airlift, as each person was promised immediate help and a package of undetermined services. However there are witnesses who revealed that not a few of the returning migrants were in fact activists of the National Party (the Honduran government) who sought to entice the Caravaners, and above all, to provide official publicity for the government. However, from October 23 on and with figures that increased as the days passed, the Caravan grew to almost 10 thousand migrants crossing through the State of Chiapas in the Mexican Republic.

## **A pressure cooker**

The Honduran government accuses the opposition and criminal groups for being responsible for the caravans for destabilizing political purposes. The government of the United States added its weight to this accusation going so far as to accuse the Democratic Party of instigating and financing political and criminal groups so that the migrants would invade US territory in order to destabilize the American government. All these accusations have no real basis. The phenomenon of caravans is the expression of the desperation of a population for which it is increasingly risky to live in a country that denies employment, public safety and a life time of permanently gleaning for leftovers. The caravan is the explosion of a pressure cooker that the Honduran government in association with a small business and transnational elite has been stirring for at least a decade. This is the government that abandoned public social policies and replaced them with public handout programs, while consolidating the development model based on investment in the extractive industry and the privatization and concession of public goods and services.

## **State and corruption understood as business**

In turn, the public administration is led by a sector of politicians who have understood the State as their private enterprise. They have plundered public institutions, such as the Honduran Institute of Social Security, the health system in general, and the electric energy corporation, among many others. These politicians protect themselves with political control of the justice system. The population has been progressively experiencing helplessness and abandonment. This experience and feeling was reinforced with the elections of November 2017 when the government was re-elected in violation of the Constitution of the Republic and was awarded a victory that some 70 percent of the population acknowledges was the result of organized fraud. The population no longer has confidence in politicians, the government and the higher levels of private business. The caravans are a phenomenon that expresses the despair and anguish of a people that no longer believes in solutions inside the country. This decision of the people to find their own just solution results in this extreme expression of flight.

## **Everyone looking for someone to blame and take advantage of**

The government of Honduras and the government of the United States seem to need someone to hold responsible. This is so because in the end they represent an elitist sector of society that systematically despises populations with low economic resources, and will never give credit to their initiatives. Everything that comes from these lower sectors is understood as a threat, and in many cases like the one that is now observed with migrants, the initiatives are perceived as delinquent or criminal acts. They do not believe or accept the decisions, initiatives and creativity of the people. Theirs is the expression of contempt, discrimination and racism. They assume that the people cannot think are unable to decide on their own. There must be a factor, or some external actor that encourages, that manipulates their decisions. Obviously, the phenomenon of the caravan can serve to benefit the interests of other sectors. There are opposition sectors in Honduras, and perhaps in the United States, which seek to benefit from the instability caused by this migratory movement.

Surely, the extreme right of the Trump administration is especially interested in capitalizing on this phenomenon to strengthen the anti-immigrant movement, one of the fundamental policies of his administration. The mid-term elections in the United States are a thermometer to establish whether or not Trump will continue for a second term. Accusing the Democrats of funding the migrations is a convenient argument to empower Trump towards the Republican triumph in the November elections. In turn, opposition political sectors in Honduras have also shown signs of taking advantage of this phenomenon to further weaken the government of Juan Orlando Hernández, who is also interested in using the migrant movement to accuse the opposition of being responsible for causing greater instability to the national government.

## **From shameful to dignified**

The phenomenon of the caravan has brought light to a daily hidden reality. The caravan has been happening every day, and surely in less than a month the number of people who have been leaving is comparable to those who joined the massive exit in a single day. This daily caravan has been silent, dry, discreet, private, invisible and even shameful. But with this explosion it has become a visible, public and even dignifying caravan. This phenomenon has unmasked the false discourse and laid bare the official failure. It has dismantled that triumphalism that has claimed that the country was improving. It has proven that social compensation programs of the regime not only do not solve the problems but deepen the precariousness of the majority of society. It has revealed that a society that allows only 35 percent to participate in the formal economy is unsustainable. The massive caravan is the expression of a massive phenomenon of a model of systemic social exclusion.

## **Elites and regime, wounded in their self-esteem**

The caravan that started on October 13, and that opened the valve for subsequent caravans, suddenly woke up the political sectors and the business elite accustomed to having strict control over everything that happens in the country, and they strive to avoid undesirable surprises, or at least they are experts in capitalizing in their favor the discomforts or skirmishes of protests and claims of the social sectors. The elites have enjoyed the privileges of the State and only react when their infinite profits are hindered by adverse reactions, as is happening with the opposition of communities and organizations to extractive projects and concessions granted by the government to national and transnational companies. This is how it is explained that business elites react with extreme aggression when there are people who hinder their accumulation of wealth, to the point of assassinating their leaders as happened in March 2016 with the murder of Berta Cáceres.

In the same way, these sectors feel beaten in their self-love when, feeling at ease in their privileges, the reality of the excluded unmasks their lies with a single demonstration. This is what the caravan has done. Just after the elites and the regime of Juan Orlando Hernández have invested millions of dollars in publicizing that the country is on the right track, that the economy is healthy, and that the people are happy with the social programs, then this caravan of thousands of citizens breaks out and creates the alternative news that goes around the world. The shame of the elites is transformed into accusations against the opposition while they conspire to look for scapegoats, which in the last days of October passed from blaming a specific person, to the radical political opposition, to the Democrats, to the businessman Soros, until finally deciding to blame their denominated “axis of evil” made up of Cuba, Venezuela and Ortega de Nicaragua. It is the answer to the shame that the Honduran elites experience while not accepting the extent that those who unmask them are those sectors that the elites believe do not deserve to be considered equal because they are second, third or fourth category citizens.

## **Characteristics that help interpret this mass exodus**

This phenomenon of massive human migration to foreign lands also denotes some features that contribute to understanding what underlies Honduran society:

First factor: extreme dependence on the outside. Looking outside of the country for the answers and solutions to solve needs and problems.

This is a mind-set that has been accentuated for more than a century, after the establishment of the banana enclave at the beginning of the twentieth century. Looking northward and taking the road to the United States has been the dramatic reminiscence of a society that shaped its minds and hearts around the "American dream", wanting to be like an American, with their dollars, hoping to earn dollars to buy things, to be able to spend money as it is spent in the United States. Going to the United States is that deep desire to pursue the love of a capitalism that has not been experienced within the country.

It is a spontaneous movement to go in search of the promised land, it is a desperate defense of the country of consumption and of "the land of bread to carry", as the Honduran poet Rafael Heliodoro Valle once said. It is not a massive anti-system movement. It is an intra-system avalanche of the dispossessed people who continue stubbornly to look up, to the north, for the dream that they have lived as a nightmare in Honduras. These starving migrants do not know that their initiative is shaking the system; what they do is to look in the center of the system for an answer to their needs and problems. As politicians and wealthy elites do in other ways, they always have their eyes and hearts turned northwards towards the United States, in a frank submissive attitude. It is the same attitude as that of the thousands of migrants, only that theirs is from the position of managers, of internal protectors of the interests of the empire.

Second factor: a society trapped in the struggle to survive.

In the day to day struggle, everyone is looking after their own selves, everyone and individually scratching crumbs out of the system without questioning it. The mass exodus of Hondurans has no organization other than the mutual protection offered by traveling in a group but still it is just a group of individuals searching for a new life in another country, in the country of the north. The decision to leave the country is not the result of some organization within the poor, but the expression of these individuals seeking in the same way and time the solution to their problems.

This trait of the characteristic and behavior of Honduran society, submerges its people in confinement, in the political evil of isolation, which leads to each person being locked into their own search, individually preoccupied in resolving their own individual affairs, under the adage that "the ox licks only itself"<sup>i</sup>, or what they say on the roads and streets of our neighborhoods and villages: "Everyone is getting what they can."<sup>ii</sup> It is the logic of survival; everyone seeks to find their own solutions and will make commitments with anyone, in order to get ahead. Other people only get in the way, uniting with others to meet and search together seems to hinder their search. Everybody complains about what is happening, about the rising costs of fuel, water, and electric power.

Everyone protests against the government, but when it comes to looking for common solutions, the default is to let others do so. The massive exit to the north reveals that people still do not put trust in others and the community. It is an expressed rejection towards the organization, towards the political parties and towards institutions of any sort. The massive exit is the failure of any kind of public response, and the resounding triumph of an individualistic reaction. The phenomenon of caravans is the extreme expression of the individual seeking to escape from a structural and systemic problem. In such an environment, everything that comes from above and from outside is absorbed, and then even those who have crushed the people still get elected, in exchange for a "charity bag" or some dubious handouts. In a society trapped in the "rebusque"<sup>iii</sup>, the charity handout programs have an immediate success, but when the problems remain intact, and the privatization or concessions policies take even more away, the struggle to survive becomes unbearable until ending with explosions like the massive caravans of migrants.

Third factor: a society that opts for the vertical relationship in detriment of horizontal relationships.

People look to "go up", to the north and upwards. The mirage of the migrants is focused upwards and outwards. They stopped looking to their sides, everyone walks, advances with their own steps forward, without seeing who is at their side. It is the syndrome of the "banana republic" seeded by the Americans and leaving them left waiting and enthralled for the return of the white people. There are many, thousands who are taking these same steps, but each one looking out for themselves, the self-interest of the individual. In this individualistic culture they were born, they were schooled in its message, they grew, and they have suffered for it. And so they seek their escape to the north - individually. Even if they are in a caravan, even if they are thousands. It is a caravan of individual journeys.

Honduran relationships are based on looking upwards, on the vertical, depending on those higher up in a relationship where the vertical line is the decisive one. It is the paradigm of power, of the patriarch, of the "caudillo"<sup>iv</sup> in the Honduran case. The caudillo is expected to solve ones' personal or family problem; the leader who solves problems in exchange for loyalty. It is the United States, the maximum expression of the caudillos, the father of the caudillos. That vertical line is sustained at the cost of weakening the horizontal line of relationships, the line of equals. The horizontal line is so tenuous that it is almost invisible, as if it does not exist. At most we see each other, to see who can get more with whom or who are moving upwards, to see who has climbed in the power of those who are in command.

This vertical mentality<sup>v</sup> has permeated strongly social organizations, community organizations, NGOs and their leaders. The phenomenon of international cooperation has contributed particularly strongly to this mentality. The relations that are established with special emphasis are bilateral between the donor organism and the beneficiary organization, which in turn accentuates direct and vertical relations with the grassroots organizations. And these, by benefiting from cooperative funding, strengthen relations of dependence with the NGO which in turn, has a vertical dependency with their donor organism.

This vertical line is prioritized over the horizontal lines. The relations between the grassroots organizations, the encounters among the different grassroots leaders, are linked by a tenuous horizontal line, because the emphasis is placed in the vertical line, in the upward dependence. Finally, social organizations and NGOs are left alone, with very little impact on the people. When the people turn to force, not only does this exceed the capacity of existing organizations, but the first to be surprised are these same social and popular organizations and their leaderships. These groups have a lot to say and many formulations, but the people are not with them.

### **The axis of evil.**

Instead of looking for "scapegoats" inside and outside Honduras, the fundamental problem is a Honduras in the hands of some alliances that can be named as the axis of evil. These alliances are made up from a small political elite that has lived embedded in the State and uses its resources as its private property, in collusion with an authentically oligarchic business elite that manages the threads of the entire economy and state investments. They are but a minor partner of the capital of transnational companies. This triple collusion forms the real Honduran government, which is structured around a model of infinite accumulation at the proportional expense of denying opportunities to some six million of the nine million Hondurans that make up the population.

These three actors are co-opted by three other powerful actors: the American Embassy based in the capital, the armed bodies led by the high-ranking officers of the Armed Forces, and by public and hidden figures of organized crime. These six allied actors form the real axis of evil, wherein lies the highest share of responsibility of what happens with the almost endless deterioration of Honduran society. In this axis of evil and its development model, based on the accumulation of wealth with the corrupt control and exploitation of natural assets and the privatization of public goods and services, that one begins to find the fundamental answer to the question of "Why are the Hondurans fleeing and why are they forming caravans that attract thousands of Hondurans?".

How to understand our position in reference to the migrants in this phenomenon of caravans?

1. First of all, to accompany the analysis and research, to scrutinize the internal dynamics of the movement and provide elements so that society can have its own criteria, and thus to avoid manipulation by political sectors, the corporate media and officials whose interest is to manipulate and capitalize in their favor this human tragedy. The migrant population has something to tell us, it has in itself a message, searching for external elements within, but the most important actor is the people who emigrate, who are uprooted. Not to listen to them while seeking some forces that push them, is to fall into the same script narrated by Trump and Juan Orlando Hernández. The migrant people have something to say (their own word), their suffering and exclusion gives them the right to be considered sacred, and we have to respect and listen to them.
2. Accompanying, being close to caravans to listen to their voice and contribute to meeting their immediate and basic needs, is a condition that makes analysis and reflection valid. To accompany does not necessarily require giving material aid. It may be necessary to support with resources, but it can also be a temptation to free ourselves from the helplessness of not knowing how to answer the fundamental questions that arise from their sufferings and anguish.
3. The coordination between national and Central American, Mexican and continental networks is fundamental since it is a phenomenon that originates in Honduras, but has repercussions and international connotations. No network is in itself sufficient as the reality of the caravan phenomenon can exceed all resources. Isolated or independent efforts make the response more sterile. Effectiveness is increased when responses connect with the greatest number of instances of support.
4. To denounce and unveil the official discourse of the political manipulation of the caravan. The different international sectors should help to find answers first from Honduras, and from Hondurans, not from the “official spin” of Honduran powers, but from those sectors that have been and are close to the populations from which the Caravans originate. This search for answers must start from a pivotal observation: political responsibility resides fundamentally in the current Honduran regime and in the development model based on investment in extractivism and the privatization of public goods and services, in a system of corruption and impunity. From this denunciation, we Hondurans demand that there be new elections to allow an early return to the constitutional order, and that with a new government a great national dialogue would be convened to formulate the priorities leading to the

reversion of the current state of social calamity that has exploded in this massive migration.

5. A direct pastoral support of consolation, mercy and solidarity with the pain and despair of our people, expressed in communication strategies that link traditional media, such as radio, television and written media, with social networks.

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<sup>i</sup> “el buey solo se lame” idiom “Independence is greatly appreciated” or “better to trust in oneself than others”

<sup>ii</sup> “cada quien librando su cacaste” idiom “everyone taking care of their own interests”

<sup>iii</sup> “rebusque” idiom for “search” for an alternative or a way out

<sup>iv</sup> Caudillo – strongman or dictator

<sup>v</sup> An Adlerian understanding of this “vertical mentality” is characterized by an admiration for those “at the top”, or those aspiring upwards rather than towards others

(translation and footnotes by Phil Little)