Hillary Lost My Vote in Honduras

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I am one of the many young women who to the consternation of so many pundits is just not Ready for Hillary in 2016. And it's not because I am a bad feminist, it's because I am judging Hillary Clinton, just as she has asked to be judged, on her record and her foreign policy credentials. I spent nearly five years in Central America working as a cross-border solidarity activist and I now work with immigrants in Massachusetts who have fled the violence in that region. So, I might have been moved by Clinton's recent pledge to "campaign for human rights" and take on immigration reform. But I have seen first-hand how Clinton failed on that front when top military commanders in Honduras (all men, of course) overthrew its democratically elected president Manual Zelaya in 2009.

Since that military takeover, nearly all sectors of Honduran society—union organizers, farmers and teachers, women and young people, gays, journalists, political activists, anyone who resisted the coup—have faced systematic repression. Honduras has become one the most violent countries in the world not formally engaged in a civil war, and it's now a leading source of forced migration to the U.S.

President Obama initially criticized Zelaya's ouster and forced exile as a threat to democracy throughout the region. But the Obama administration, led by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, refused to formally recognize that a military coup had taken place and never cut U.S. military aid to Honduras. Clinton's State Department even lobbied the Organization of American States, which strongly condemned the coup, to readmit Honduras after its suspension from the OAS. In November 2009, the Administration recognized the election of Porfirio Lobo, even though most opposition parties and major international observers boycotted the election. Since the coup, the U.S. has built two new military bases in Honduras and increased its support and funding for the Honduran military and police.

While living in El Salvador, I participated in four human rights delegations to Honduras and witnessed how the country's democratic institutions were destroyed by the military takeover and its aftermath. During each visit, we interviewed multiple victims of physical threats, beatings, kidnappings, and imprisonment and heard stories about growing government corruption.

In November of 2013, I was part of a group of 40 international observers from El Salvador and the U.S. who traveled to Honduras together to observe the presidential elections. In this national election, Xiomara Castro, the wife of Manuel Zelaya, ran with wide public support. However, as Rights Action reported, more than 30 candidates of her new left-wing party, Libre, were murdered or suffered violent attacks in the run up to the election. The common refrain we heard among poor Hondurans before the day of the big vote was, 'Xiomara will win, if they let her'."They" did no such thing, of course. Instead, the right wing candidate, Juan Orlando Hernandez was declared the winner, even though numerous international groups observing the election found evidence of vote buying, intimidation and other irregularities.

Here in Chelsea, MA, where I work with Latino immigrants, you can see the legacy of Clinton's stance on Honduras. Like many cities throughout the U.S. with large Central American populations, Chelsea has received a huge wave of unaccompanied minors and mothers with children since 2014. Many are escaping the poverty and gang violence that has become so much worse in Honduras since the 2009 coup.

When asked about this "border crisis" in 2014, Hillary Clinton told CNN that these children and families "should be sent back". She also recommended beefing up border security within Mexico, which the Obama administration has indeed funded. The result? The journey through Mexico is even more perilous and hundreds more mothers and children are being caught in Mexico, held for weeks in local jails, and sent right back to the violence they are trying to escape.

Clinton has yet to acknowledge the consequences of the 2009 coup. In her debate with Sanders on Feb. 11 in Wisconsin, she again acted tough about unaccompanied minors, saying they should be deported to "send a message" to their families back home, as if this continuing exodus was simply the product of bad parenting. Sanders rightly chided her, arguing that children fleeing Central American violence should be welcomed and assisted instead.

I would love to have a female foreign policy expert and human rights crusader as the next president of the United States, but Clinton's chance to prove herself as such and send a strong message to our neighbors to the south was back in 2009. If Hillary Clinton had stood up for democracy in Central America then, maybe we wouldn't have so many Central American immigrants today trying desperately to enter and stay in the U.S., because more of them would be able to survive in their home countries.