

# MORE TRIALS OF HONDURAN DAM PROTESTERS

The “Jilamito Five” are among hundreds of Honduran land and environmental defenders caught up in drawn-out legal battles over recent years, a trend advocates blame on collusion between economic elites and state authorities eager to exploit the country’s natural resources for profits. Their alleged misdemeanour: “land invasion” during a protest against the construction of a dam. A guilty verdict could bring a jail term of up to four years.

If that seems harsh, then it’s because this is Honduras, where hundreds have been jailed and scores killed for environmental activism over the past decade. Honduras remains one of the world’s most dangerous countries to defend land and the environment, with at least 130 people killed since the 2009 coup - engineered with the enthusiastic cooperation of Sec. of State Hillary Clinton - which ushered in a pro-business repressive government. This coup unleashed a tsunami of permits for mines, dams, model cities and African palm plantations on mainly rural and indigenous communities.

**The Jilamito Five** - a teacher, hardware-store owner, two local farmers and the newly elected municipal mayor, Arnolando Chacón - are opposed to a dam on the Jilamito river in the tropical region of Atlántida. Atlántida is a lush biodiverse department rich with minerals and waterways, flanked to the north by the Caribbean Sea. Jeanette Kawas, a well-known environmentalist was murdered here in 1995 in a suspected military operation after saving a coastal strip, home to more than 400 flora and fauna species, from developers. The region is subject to at least 34 mining and hydroelectric dam licences, with scores more applications under consideration.

**The authorities are hoping** a prosecution will enable them to clear a makeshift community blockade in the remote hilly pastures so construction can begin. Jilamito river supplies several thousand households across the municipality of Arizona, and communities fear the 14MW plant will aggravate water shortages.

**In the country’s most emblematic case**, indigenous Lenca leader Berta Cáceres, a celebrated environmentalist and anti-globalisation campaigner, was gunned down at home in March 2016 after a systematic campaign of harassment, attempted bribes, smear campaigns, and trumped-up criminal charges linked to her opposition to the Agua Zarca dam on the Gualcarque river.

*“In Honduras, the state and economic elites have been complicit in the systematic killing of land and environmental defenders who threaten business interests at least since the 1980s. Back then defenders were called subversives, now they are criminalized. Either way, they’re considered enemies of the state,”* said Eugenio Sosa, a sociologist at the National Autonomous University.

**The death toll** includes Carlos Hernández, a young lawyer whose work included representing the mayor, Arnolando Chacón - elected on an anti-dam platform - in the Jilamito case, shot dead inside his practice less than a month after the hearing. In September 2017 Chacón told police that unknown men had threatened to kill him or those close to him if he continued obstructing the dam project.

**Ramon Fiallos, 67**, was gassed and shot in the right arm in January at a protest against the looming re-inauguration of Juan Orlando Hernández as president. Fiallos died en route to hospital in what his family believe were suspicious circumstances linked to his longstanding defence of land and water rights. Fiallos was a founding member of the Jilamito blockade and had been threatened over years for his work organising campesinos against land grabs by African palm conglomerates.

**On the same night**, about 40 miles west in the community of Pajuiles, Geovanny Diaz Carcamo was dragged from his house by eight men in police and SWAT team uniforms and peppered with bullets on the nearby highway. Diaz Carcamo, 37, a quiet-mannered campesino, played a discreet role. He passed information to community

leaders, gathered while farming in the hills near the proposed dam site where a camera drone monitors the area.

*“Communities resisting destructive projects, imposed by big money and corrupt acts against their wishes and best interests, are confronted with tear gas, violence, and the selective criminalisation of leaders,”* said lawyer Victor Fernandez, co-founder of the collective Broad Movement for Dignity and Justice (MADJ in Spanish) which represents communities across northern Honduras, including Jilamito.

**Extractive industries are booming** in Honduras with 39 privately owned hydroelectric dams currently in operation, according to the industry-run Association of Renewable Energy (AHER), and dozens more rivers licenced. For mining, there are almost 300 exploration and exploitation licences, with more than a hundred other applications under consideration. In addition, a handful of conglomerates have taken possession of thousands of acres of fertile plains to grow crops for biofuels.

**With the odds stacked against them**, grassroots resistance to projects threatening farm lands, water sources and ancestral territories has surged. In response, defenders say that a range of tactics have been deployed to intimidate and divide communities, weaken opposition, and generate terror.

**Fear of state forces is justified.** At least 36 people were killed and hundreds detained during nationwide protests prompted by last November’s general elections which were mired by fraud allegations. A UN investigation found evidence of extrajudicial killings. The post-election killings according to Sosa served two purposes: 1) *random killings* to generate fear among the general population, and *targeted killings* of political activists and environmental defenders with likely participation of the country’s power structures. *“We believe the protests presented a perfect cover,”* said Magdalena Diaz. *“Killing Señora Berta caused big problems for the government, so now they’re attacking the base.”*

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## A BETTER WAY TO VOTE?

The voting method we are all used to, known as plurality voting, is notorious for the spoiler effect and fails miserably at reflecting the will of voters in contests with more than two candidates. With plurality voting, when honestly voting for your favorite candidate, you may well be helping to elect your least favorite candidate. This problem inevitably led to a two-party system, corresponding with a limited and polarized political debate with too few participants to hold each other fully accountable. This system limits participation of potential candidates and limits choices for voters.

Fortunately, there is an alternative to plurality voting that has the potential to reinvigorate our political process, expand choices and, more importantly, accurately register the will of the voters.

Some of the alternative voting systems that have been implemented in various municipalities and some states include Top Two runoff voting, Approval Voting, and Ranked Choice Voting (also known as Instant Runoff Voting). But each of these systems has flaws and fails to fully reflect the will of the electorate.

With Top Two, the runoff election provides for voter equality, but the first round of voting suffers from the same pitfalls as any other multi-candidate race. Approval Voting suffers from the problem that expressing approval of a lesser choice may hurt the chances of electing one’s first choice. Ranked Choice Voting does not solve the problem of the spoiler effect, and it suffers from the problem that by the time your first choice is eliminated your second choice may have already been eliminated at a previous stage, meaning that your second-choice vote was never counted.

STAR Voting (which stands for Score Then Automatic Runoff) is a method that reflects the will of the electorate better than all others and is the least vulnerable to manipulation through strategic voting. Developed by voting science experts and fair election advocates at the Equal Voting Conference in Eugene in 2014, STAR voting allows the voter to score each candidate on a scale of 0 to 5, just like rating a movie on Netflix or a product on Amazon. Scores are totaled for each candidate followed by a runoff between the candidates with the top two scores. The data needed for the runoff already exists on the ballot, so long as the voter gave the two finalists different scores. The finalist that the voter scored more highly gets their vote in the runoff.

The automatic runoff part of the procedure corrects for any distortion in the scoring process and encourages voters to differentiate their preferences, so they are not left out of the runoff vote.

In any election with more than two candidates, when all the votes are counted, we still do not truly know the will of the electorate. While the use of STAR Voting would certainly invigorate primary elections, the major

democratizing effect of STAR Voting would be in general elections when minor party and unaffiliated candidates are no longer systematically excluded as potential spoilers.

STAR Voting is now under petition for use for real political races for the first time. Twin campaigns in Multnomah and Lane Counties in Oregon are engaged in signature gathering efforts to put the ability to vote with STAR Voting to the voters this November. Adoption at the local level will be followed by a push to adopt STAR Voting at the statewide and national level as well.

The Equal Vote Coalition’s mission is to promote true equality in the vote itself. Our current voting method is inherently unequal, and this inequality has decidedly negative consequences: outsized influence of money in politics, hyper partisan rancor and widespread electoral disenchantment.

[www.equal.vote](http://www.equal.vote)

