



**Executive Constraints: Substantial Limitations (5)**

The executive branch has traditionally dominated the legislative and judicial branches of government. Despite recent efforts to modernize the political system in the country, Honduran politics remains traditionalist and paternalistic in nature. While the judiciary is largely autonomous from executive influence it remains, nevertheless, weak and corrupt.

**Political Participation: Political Liberalization: Limited and/or Decreasing Overt Coercion (9)**

While the government regularly gets passed back and forth between the Nationals and the Liberals, in reality, true participation is held within the hands of the country's small oligarchic elite who use government largely to benefit themselves and their patronage-based followers. With few exceptions, members of the political class do not consult with their constituents, instead favoring to act in a patriarchal manner. Nearly all of the top Honduran political officials in both parties are drawn from the white ruling class that comprises about 1% of the population and has long constituted the political and economic backbone of the country. The only exception to this rule tends to be when a member of the mestizo class, which is of mixed Indian and European descent and comprises over 90% of the population, enters the political arena through the military apparatus. As a general rule, the political competition between the National and Liberal parties does not reflect a partisan divide based on ideological or policy differences but, instead, represents a continuation of the historical conflict between traditional landed elites and their patronage networks. For example, both candidates in the 2005 presidential election were large landowners who gained their political support, particularly in the rural areas, on the basis of traditional regional loyalties and the influence of local powerbrokers. Traditionally, the Nationals have had stronger support in rural areas and the less developed and southern agricultural departments, whereas the Liberals have been stronger in the urban areas and in the more developed northern departments (although it continues to have some strong rural support). Moreover, unlike the political left in other Central American countries, the legalized remnants of the Honduran leftist insurgency of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been unable to form an effective political counterweight to these elite interests in Honduras.

Honduran politics have long been defined by factional violence and repression. However, since the military decided to usher in a return to civilian leadership in 1981, politics in this country have been uncharacteristically stable. The two major parties have increasingly distanced themselves from the military and, when in power, have generally sought to protect human rights. However, widespread social inequalities and weak political institutions continue to undermine democratic consolidation in this country. Right-wing paramilitary groups continue to be active in the countryside and the police have been implicated in the death of thousands of street children in recent years. The military continues to resist, often with the threat of force, efforts by civilians to control their budget and regulate their extensive business holdings.

The greatest threat to social stability in Honduras stems from the rise of violent crime throughout the country. With a demographic base of 50% under the age of 19, the endemic poverty, high unemployment and the lucrative prospects offered by drug trafficking have all contributed to the rise of youth gangs known as "maras." The maras are reported to have tens of thousands of members and typically use violence to control the citizens and politicians in the towns and cities in which they reside.