

Congress of the United States  
Washington, DC 20510

February 17, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken  
Secretary of State  
U.S. Department of State  
2201 C Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

As the new administration of President Xiomara Castro begins in Honduras, we write to express our support for her democratically elected mandate to promote accountability for human rights violations, address poverty and economic inequality, and combat systemic corruption and impunity. We appreciate the Biden administration's diplomatic engagement with Honduran counterparts, including public statements in support of free and fair elections, swift recognition of President Castro's historic victory, and the high-level delegation that attended her inauguration. The administration's extradition request of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández on drug trafficking charges, as well as his inclusion on the State Department's Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors List last July, are welcome and long-overdue signals that the United States now seeks to reset the bilateral relationship. We encourage the administration to build on these efforts by partnering constructively with President Castro's new government, independent civil society, and social movements to support her agenda, including strengthening the human rights protections of Indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities, small farmer activists, women, and LGBTQI people; reducing poverty and inequality; respecting labor rights; and mitigating the devastating impacts of the climate crisis and COVID-19 pandemic.

Following the period of assaults on democracy under former President Hernández, support from the United States and international community will be essential to overcome internal opposition to President Castro's reform agenda from sectors of the Honduran National Congress, judiciary, and security forces. The constitutional crisis that shadowed her inauguration, in which lawmakers temporarily broke ranks with President Castro's LIBRE party over her proposed appointment for congressional speaker, suggests the difficulties she may face in securing legislative victories that could prove decisive in fulfilling key elements of her platform, as well as the urgency of robust U.S. and international backing for her human rights, anti-poverty, and anti-corruption program.

In particular, we encourage continued U.S. diplomatic attention and public support for justice and accountability in cases of human rights violations and abuses, including those ordered, carried out, or covered up by Honduran security forces or paramilitary units under the previous government, often in coordination with powerful business elites and organized crime. These include cases related to the 2016 murder of Berta Cáceres, the 2020 forced disappearances of Garífuna community leaders, the killings of over 100 activists in the Bajo Aguán Valley, and the killings of at least 22 people during the 2017 electoral crisis, all of which remain in impunity. We encourage the Biden administration to work closely

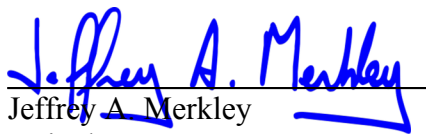
with President Castro and Honduran civil society to seek accountability for the perpetrators of these and similar crimes, continue to monitor trials and investigations involving human rights defenders to help ensure due process, support efforts to revoke legal provisions that restrict space for civil society organizations and journalists to carry out their legitimate activities, and protect activists at risk of being arbitrarily detained or criminalized for challenging extractive interests.

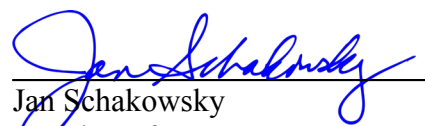
We recognize that the challenges to democracy in Honduras are immense, and that it will take dedicated action at the executive level not only to reopen civic space closed by previous administrations, but also to dismantle systemic corruption and impunity and the infiltration of organized crime into national government institutions and state security forces. The closure of the Mission of Support against Corruption and Impunity (MACCIH) by the Hernández administration and revisions to the Honduran penal code that reduced prison terms for corruption-related crimes are emblematic of these obstacles and the response President Castro's anti-corruption agenda is likely to encounter from opposing lawmakers. We are encouraged by the Biden administration's support for President Castro's pledge to form a new, United Nations-led anti-corruption commission, and urge the State Department to dedicate the requisite diplomatic capital to ensure the mechanism's establishment and effective implementation.

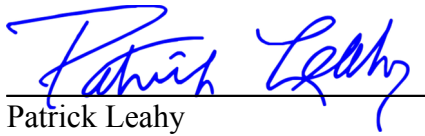
In addition, U.S. support for President Castro's inclusive economic agenda will prove essential as she confronts an enormous debt burden created by her corrupt predecessors. Government fraud has badly withered the Honduran education and health systems, including the country's COVID-19 response, which under President Hernández was plagued by massively inflated pandemic relief contracts for field hospitals that never materialized. We urge the State Department to work with President Castro's government to help fulfill her pledges of job creation and the restoration of social services, with the goal of rebuilding the Honduran domestic economy. This includes ensuring that all U.S.-government investment to promote economic development in Honduras respects human rights and the environment and reflects the input of local communities, as well as monitoring U.S. firms' compliance with OECD Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct and respect for Honduran labor law.

Finally, expanding U.S. consultation with independent Honduran social movements, Indigenous and Afro-indigenous populations, and rural communities across all areas of U.S. diplomatic, security, and economic engagement in Honduras would represent an important course correction in U.S. policy that has too often prioritized the interests of the country's political and economic elites. We look forward to working with you to support President Castro in reversing systemic corruption, human rights violations, poverty, and inequality that have cast a shadow over the democratic aspirations of the Honduran people in recent years.

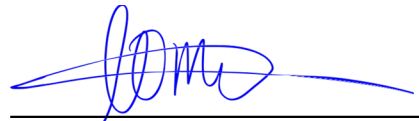
Sincerely,

  
Jeffrey A. Merkley  
United States Senator

  
Jan Schakowsky  
Member of Congress



Patrick Leahy  
United States Senator



Ilhan Omar  
Member of Congress



Richard J. Durbin  
United States Senator



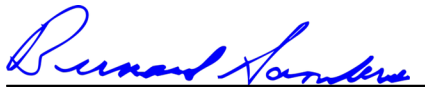
Raúl M. Grijalva  
Member of Congress



Thomas R. Carper  
United States Senator



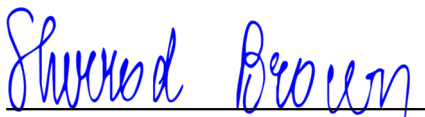
James P. McGovern  
Member of Congress



Bernard Sanders  
United States Senator



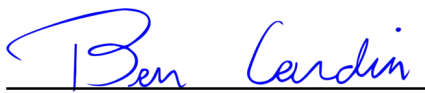
Joaquin Castro  
Member of Congress



Sherrod Brown  
United States Senator



Jesús G. "Chuy" García  
Member of Congress



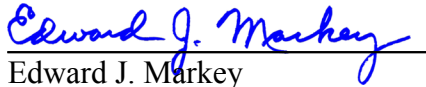
Benjamin L. Cardin  
United States Senator



Peter Welch  
Member of Congress



Elizabeth Warren  
United States Senator



Edward J. Markey  
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker  
United States Senator



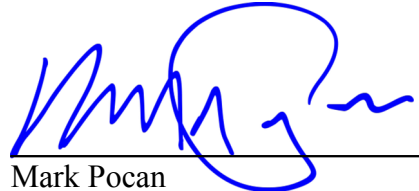
Ron Wyden  
United States Senator



Christopher S. Murphy  
United States Senator



Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress



Mark Pocan  
Member of Congress



Danny K. Davis  
Member of Congress

/s/ Ayanna Pressley  
Ayanna Pressley  
Member of Congress