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**FEATURED Q&A**

# Why Did Trump Pardon Honduras' Former President?

U.S. President Donald Trump last week pardoned former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was convicted and sentenced last year of aiding drug traffickers, saying the case was politically motivated. // File Photos: White House, Mexican Gov't CC BY 2.0.

**Q U.S. President Donald Trump on Dec. 1 pardoned former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández, who was convicted last year in U.S. federal court of facilitating shipments of cocaine from Honduras to the United States and sentenced to 45 years in prison. The pardon freed Hernández from a federal penitentiary in West Virginia at the same time that electoral authorities were still tabulating votes from Honduras' Nov. 30 presidential election. Why did Trump pardon Hernández, and why did he make the move when he did? What does the pardon mean for the future of U.S. anti-drug cooperation with Latin American countries? To what extent does impunity exist for former high-ranking elected officials in Latin America who may face prosecution in the United States?**

**A Todd D. Robinson, former U.S. assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs:** "It's hard to say with certainty what motivated President Trump to pardon former President Hernández. If you look at President Trump's past practices, however, a pattern emerges: a.) Hernández either has something the president needs or wants; b.) Hernández has something someone close to the president needs or wants; c.) the president believes he has something to gain from attempting to tip the scales in the elections in Honduras; or d.) all of the above. This pardon clearly undermines U.S. anti-drug cooperation with Latin American countries. The United States has devoted decades to bolstering the rule of law in Latin America. We've trained prosecutors and judges, equipped security forces and supported communities that have come under threat by transnational

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**TODAY'S NEWS**

POLITICAL

## U.S. Targets Maduro Relatives, Shipping Firms in New Sanctions

The U.S. Treasury on Thursday sanctioned three relatives of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, as well as several shipping companies and vessels involved in the country's oil sector.

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POLITICAL

## Chileans to Vote Sunday With Kast Leading Polls

Conservative José Antonio Kast is leading Communist Party candidate Jeannette Jara ahead of the second round of Chile's presidential election.

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BUSINESS

## Puerto Rico Sues Private Utility Firm Luma

Puerto Rico has filed a lawsuit against private power company Luma. Governor Jenniffer González-Colón said the company has provided poor service and has failed to resolve complaints.

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González-Colón // File Photo: U.S. House of Representatives.



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POLITICAL NEWS

# U.S. Targets Maduro Relatives, Ships in New Sanctions

The U.S. Treasury on Thursday imposed sanctions on three nephews of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's wife and six shipping companies involved in Venezuela's oil sector, identifying six vessels that it said "have engaged in deceptive and unsafe shipping practices and continue to provide financial resources that fuel Maduro's corrupt narco-terrorist regime." The sanctions were announced a day after U.S. President Donald Trump said the U.S. military had seized an oil tanker carrying about $80 million worth of Venezuelan crude off the coast of the South American country, The Wall Street Journal reported. The sanctions announced Thursday target Efraín Antonio Campo Flores and Franqui Francisco Flores de Freitas, two nephews of Venezuelan First Lady Cilia Flores. The men were serving 18-year prison sentences in the United States on drug charges when they were released in 2022 in a prisoner swap for seven jailed Americans. The sanctions also target another nephew of Flores, Carlos Erik Malpica Flores, a "purported" former Venezuelan national treasurer and vice president of Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA, the Treasury said. Malpica was sanctioned in 2017 but removed from the Treasury's sanctions list in 2022 as the administration of former U.S. President Joe Biden was seeking to persuade Maduro to restart talks on elections with Venezuela's opposition, Bloomberg News reported at the time. The sanctions also target Ramon Carretero Napolitano, a Panamanian businessman who the Treasury said "engaged in lucrative contracts with the Maduro regime and has had various business dealings with the Maduro-Flores family." The sanctions also target six oil shipping companies—Myra Marine Limited, Arctic Voyager Incorporated, Poweroy Investment Limited, Ready Great Limited, Sino Marine Services Limited and Full Happy Limited—which the Treasury said move fuel for Venezuela's oil sector, helping to "fund Maduro's illegitimate regime." The sanctions block property and interest in property that any of the designated entities have in the United States and ban transactions by Americans with the blocked people and companies, the Treasury said. "Nicolás Maduro and his criminal associates in Venezuela are flooding the United States with drugs that are poisoning the American people," U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in announcing the sanctions, also faulting the Biden administration for what he called a "failed attempt to make a deal with Maduro, enabling his dictatorial and brutal control at the expense of the Venezuelan and American people." Also on Thursday, six unnamed sources told Reuters that the Trump administration is preparing to intercept more ships laden with Venezuelan oil following the seizure announced earlier this week. [Editor's note: See related **Q&A** in the Nov. 20 issue of the Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

# Puerto Rico Sues Private Power Utility Firm Luma

Puerto Rico's government on Thursday filed a lawsuit against private power utility firm Luma in an effort to cancel the contract that grants the company oversight of the island's electrical grid, the Associated Press reported. The firm, which is controlled by a consortium of Canadian and U.S. companies, took over management of power transmission infrastructure in 2021 from Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority, which struggled to restructure billions of dollars in debt accrued in the wake of Hurricane Maria in 2017. Luma has since faced intense scrutiny from Puerto Rican civil society, as well as politicians across the ideological spectrum, for widespread blackouts that continue to affect the island. Transmission failures caused near-total power outages in Puerto Rico at least twice within the last 12 months, including on New Year's Eve last year and during Holy Week this year. "Luma's

NEWS BRIEFS

## Chileans to Select President Sunday With Conservative in Lead

Chileans head to the polls on Sunday for the second round of the country's presidential election, with right-wing candidate José Antonio Kast leading opinion polls. A former lawmaker, Kast placed second in the first round in November to Communist Party member Jeannette Jara. However, most of the other candidates who were eliminated were on the right, and their supporters are expected to favor Kast, Reuters reported.

## Man Wrongly Deported From U.S. Released on Judge's Order

Kilmar Abrego García, a Maryland man whom U.S. authorities admitted to wrongly deporting to his native El Salvador in March before his return to the United States in June, was released Thursday from a U.S. migrant detention center in Pennsylvania on the order of a U.S. federal judge, NBC News reported. U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis today blocked the government from re-detaining him. The Trump administration accuses Abrego García of being a gang member, which his attorneys and family members deny. He has not been convicted of any crime.

## Wind, Drought Cause Blackouts in São Paulo

Strong winds and a worsening drought in southeastern Brazil caused power outages that left 1.3 million people without electricity in the São Paulo metropolitan area on Thursday, Bloomberg News reported. Local businesses have lost at least $290 million in revenue due to the outages, which began on Wednesday, the news service reported. Power utility firm Enel, an Italian company whose Brazil subsidiary has more than seven million customers in the São Paulo area, has not said when it expects electricity service to be fully restored.

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actions, their poor service, and their lack of interest in resolving the complaints leave us with no alternative but to resort to the court," Puerto Rico Governor Jenniffer González-Colón said Thursday in a message posted on social media site X. "Despite the operator's expectations and representations, the electrical system has not improved with the speed, consistency or effectiveness that Puerto Rico deserves," she added. González-Colón said that Luma should be able to access nearly $11 billion in U.S. federal funding to repair and upgrade Puerto Rico's grid, but the firm has only been able to secure $550 million from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the AP reported. Puerto Rico's government is already in talks with undisclosed power utility firms located on the U.S. mainland that could replace Luma, according to the wire service. In a statement, Luma said it is considering legal options and is "remaining committed to Puerto Rico's energy transformation, the AP reported. It added that it has replaced electrical infrastructure including transformers, breakers and poles, maintained substations and invested in excess of $2.4 billion in federally funded projects. "We are proud of the measurable progress we have made but there is still much more to be done," the company said in a statement, calling the lawsuit politically motivated, the AP reported.

# Banco do Brasília Faces Doubts Amid Ties to Banco Master

Banco de Brasília (BRB), the bank owned by the government of the federal district of Brasília, is facing rating downgrades and increasing doubts from investors after it was revealed that it had purchased $2.4 billion in "fake credit" from mid-sized lender Banco Master, which Brazil's central bank liquidated last month, Bloomberg News reported today. BRB has said that it has replaced or liquidated more than 75 percent of its holdings that came from Banco Master, Bloomberg News reported. Last month, Moody's Ratings downgraded its evaluation of BRB from B1 to B3.

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criminal organizations that bring crime, addiction and corruption in their efforts to control territory. All of that will be called into question. If our 'brand' over the years has been the United States of America, that brand, or name, has been tarnished. What anti-drug cooperation looks like in the future will be anyone's guess. Countries large and small used to use the United States as a shield against impunity in Latin America. When the justice systems in Colombia, or the Central American countries, failed to prosecute high-level or socially protected individuals in those countries, they could (and did) call on the United States to help. U.S. prosecutors, Justice Department lawyers and the Treasury Department, among others, could be counted on to work investigations and, especially if there was a U.S. nexus to the crime, successfully extradite these individuals. That cooperation gave strength to these countries and built foundations so that eventually they could prosecute these cases on their own. Hernández's pardon now tells these countries that simply currying favor with this president can get you off the hook. In the grand scheme of things, I would argue that this is not in the best interest of the United States, or our hemisphere."

**Rodolfo Zelaya Portillo, former Honduran National Party congressman, president of the National Commission Against Drug Trafficking and minister during the government of Juan Orlando Hernández:** "Donald Trump's pardon of Juan Orlando Hernández is neither a humanitarian act nor a diplomatic surprise: It is a political message. It reveals the deep weaknesses of the United States' anti-drug strategy, which for years has relied more on momentary expediency than on a coherent policy. When interests shift, so do judicial decisions that once seemed untouchable. Far from worsening the fight against drug trafficking, this decision forces us to expose its structural flaws. The strategy has focused on individuals, not on dismantling entire networks, on narratives of 'cooperation,' not on strong institutions. The pardon makes it clear that the region can no longer depend on the United States 'deciding' when to act and against whom. This shock, though controversial, could force a more serious, more technical and less political redefinition of the fight against drugs. And that, in the long run, could improve it. Regarding impunity, the case demonstrates that there is indeed room for high-ranking Latin American officials to face prosecution in the United States, but it also reveals that the U.S. justice system is not immune to political pressure. This reinforces the need for Latin American countries to strengthen their own institutions, so as not to depend on external decisions that can be reversed for political expediency. In short: The pardon does not erase the past or change the facts, but it does expose the weaknesses of the system. And this blow to the traditional narrative could open the opportunity to build a more credible, less easily manipulated and ultimately more effective anti-drug strategy."

**Vanda Felbab-Brown, senior fellow for foreign policy at the Brookings Institution:** "President Trump's pardon of former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández is shocking and deeply detrimental to U.S. counternarcotics and rule of law efforts. President Hernández and the Trump administration have argued that Hernández's conviction in a U.S. court for facilitating the smuggling of vast amounts of cocaine through Honduras to the United States and providing protection to the most dangerous criminal groups, such as the Sinaloa Cartel that kills U.S. citizens with fentanyl, was unfair. But the investigation and prosecution of Hernández spanned the entire first Trump administration and was at times led by his close associate and Department of Justice official Emil Bove. For decades, U.S. law enforcement officials have understood that the most effective and crucial way to counter

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drug trafficking and other illicit economies is to prosecute the political sponsors of criminal networks. That's why the Justice Department during the Trump administration arrested former Mexican Secretary of Defense Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos (even though it later bowed to Mexico's threats and handed him to the Mexican government, which rapidly released him.) That's why the United States successfully prosecuted a former Mexican top law enforcement official, Genaro García Luna, and helped Peruvian authorities prosecute drug trafficking charges against former Peruvian intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos. That's why U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio has intensely pressured the administration of Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum to investigate and prosecute Mexican politicians and government officials implicated in drug trafficking. Trump's pardon of Hernández is particularly deleterious because Hernández is a former president. But President Trump also pardoned another significant convicted drug trafficker, Ross Ulbricht, who ran the Silk Road dark-web marketplace of criminality. These actions deeply undermine the credibility and deterrence capacity of U.S. law enforcement, as well as the Trump administration's core justification of why it seeks to overthrow Venezuelan dictator Nicolás Maduro."

**Enrique Rodríguez Burchard, managing partner at Aguilar Castillo Love in Tegucigalpa:** "The presidential pardon is an executive prerogative, yet its timing and manner of announcement were striking. They came with Trump's public endorsement of the candidacy of Tito Asfura of Honduras' right-wing National Party. For many Hondurans, the surprise lay not only in Trump's explicit support for Asfura, but also in the news of the pardon granted to Juan Orlando Hernández—convicted by the U.S. justice system, yet still regarded as a loyal figure within the regional right-wing movement and a friend of Netanyahu's Israel. The simultaneity of these announcements can be interpreted as a deliberate signal to political leaders across Latin America: The Trump administration will support, defend and even pardon those who align with it in confronting the Venezuela-Cuba axis. This strategy is consistent with Trump's prior actions, including his political and financial backing of Argentine President Javier Milei. Calls to pardon former Brazilian President Bolsonaro further underscore this approach. Asfura has presented himself as a pro-U.S. candidate and has expressed concern over the Honduran government's deepening ties with China, Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua. Widely known as 'Papi a la orden,' or 'buddy at your service'—a nickname that projects his humility—Asfura emphasized during his campaign his commitment to private property, human rights, private investment and the rule of law. If he prevails in this closely contested election, Asfura would likely become a strong U.S. ally to combat drug trafficking and human smuggling. He would also join the emerging bloc of conservative leaders—Rodrigo Paz, Daniel Noboa, Nayib Bukele, Javier Milei and Santiago Peña—positioning himself as a new and influential figure in containing the region's leftist movement."

> **"The Trump administration will support, defend and even pardon those who align with it in confronting the Venezuela-Cuba axis."**
>
> **— Enrique Rodríguez Burchard**

*The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.*

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