

Honduras

Ethnicity in Honduras

Group selection

Ethnicity is politically less important in Honduras than in Guatemala or Nicaragua; there was neither ethnic conflict nor genocide nor is the existence of indigenous peoples ignored. But as in all other Latin American countries, **Mestizos/Whites** (used interchangeably throughout) have always held exclusive control over the Honduran state apparatus. Mestizos and whites together make up 91% of the total population (²³⁷⁹, 279). The Garifuna make up 1.6% of Honduras's population (²³⁸⁰, 389). Foster (²³⁸¹, 279) puts the **Indigenous peoples'** population of Honduras at 7% of the country's total population.

²³⁷⁹ [Foster, 2000]

²³⁸⁰ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁸¹ [Foster, 2000]

Honduras' largest ethnic minority group are the **Garifuna**. They are descendants of African-Caribbean exiles and, together with the English-speaking Creoles on the Bay Islands, form the Afro-Honduran population. During large parts of the 20th century, the Garifuna were discriminated based on their race (²³⁸²). Historically, the Garifuna in Honduras were subject to social and political discrimination. Within the vision of an indio-hispanic mestizo nation there was no space for "negros" which, consequently, were excluded from the nation and suffered from targeted discrimination (including partial segregation). In the second half of the 20th century, only the more overt forms of discrimination were abandoned (²³⁸³, 391). Already in the 1950s and 1960s, Garifuna organizations (like the "Sociedad Cultural Abraham Lincoln") were formed to fight against racism and segregation, and for an equal treatment as citizens and integration in public institutions, relying on local activism and petitions to the national government (²³⁸⁴, 392). Garifuna are coded as a politically relevant ethnic group throughout.

²³⁸² [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁸³ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁸⁴ [Anderson, 2007]

Indigenous mobilization in Honduras began in the mid-1970s and really gained momentum in the 1980s when most of the indigenous advocacy organizations were formed (²³⁸⁵; ²³⁸⁶). The politically relevant indigenous groups in Honduras are the Lenca (settled mainly in the western departments of La Paz, Intibucá, and Lempira); the Miskito (eastern rainforest region of the Moskitia) whose political mobilization was strengthened by the events in Nicaragua after the Sandinista revolution; the Maya Chorti, the descendants of the ancient inhabitants of the Maya city Copán in the country's far western part; the Xicaque (central-north); the Pech; the Nahua; and the

²³⁸⁵ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁸⁶ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

Tawahka/Sumu²³⁸⁷). The Tawahka are a subgroup of the Sumu which are mainly based in Nicaragua (²³⁸⁸). At the center of the indigenous struggle in Honduras has usually been the reclamation of traditional lands. To this end, all of the mentioned groups have founded their own advocacy organizations, especially since the 1980s: ONILH (Lenca), MASTA (people of the Moskitia, above all Miskitos); FETRIXY (Xicaque), FITH (Tawahka/Sumu), CONIMCHH (Maya Chortis), FETRIPH (Pech), and FINAH (Nahua) - which are all represented within the national organization CONPAH. Their struggle is partly a common, jointly organized, partly a separate affair (personal communication with Oscar Cerrato, development worker, HEKS Honduras). Based on the main ethnic cleavages described above and in line with the common EPR practice, these different groups were combined into one politically relevant ethnic category “indigenous peoples”.

Beginning in the 1980s, Garifunas embraced a discourse of a combined struggle of Afro-descendants and indigenous people which together, they argued, constituted the “indigenous”, later “autochthonous”, population of Honduras. This seems to have been a deliberate political strategy in order to frame the black ethnic movement as a part of the more global struggle of indigenous peoples and to benefit from the political gains these indigenous movements achieved in Latin America (²³⁸⁹, 386, 394-5). As Hooker (²³⁹⁰, 293) argues: “In the cases where blacks have won the same collective rights as indians, such as Honduras and Nicaragua, they have done so because they have been able to cast themselves as ‘autochthonous’ groups having an indigenous-like status and distinct cultural identity, (...)” Thus, portraying themselves as one of several “indigenous” peoples in Honduras and representing the Garifuna struggle within a framework of indigenous rights was a conscious strategic decision by the leading Garifuna organizations such as OFRANEH. Today, the Honduran state largely follows this standard treating all ethnic minorities as “indigenous” groups (²³⁹¹).

Nevertheless, the racial distinction between the “real” indigenous peoples - here in the usual meaning denoting both their pre-Colombian presence and the racial category of “Indian” - and Garifuna/Blacks is still salient and politically relevant. Even the overarching minority advocacy organization CONPAH (“Confederacion Nacional de Pueblos Autoctonos de Honduras”) that followed the “autochthonous discourse” in its name and composition has been affected by this distinction as several leading figures questioned the political “marriage” between indigenous and Garifuna peoples on the basis that the latter were “very distinct” and that their movement had a “different trajectory” (²³⁹², 386, 400, 407). In 2002, an alternative indigenous macro-organization was formed (although it never turned into an important force) explicitly excluding Garifuna/Blacks (²³⁹³, 401). There are also Garifuna organizations explicitly focusing on black racial identity (²³⁹⁴, 387, 407). And it is not uncommon that in disputes over land, indigenous groups and Garifuna both use

²³⁸⁷ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

²³⁸⁸ [Herlihy & Leake, 1990]

²³⁸⁹ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁹⁰ [Hooker, 2005]

²³⁹¹ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁹² [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁹³ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁹⁴ [Anderson, 2007]

racist rhetoric against each other (see e.g. ²³⁹⁵). Therefore, the Garifuna are listed as a separate politically relevant ethnic group here. (The English-speaking Creole population is recognized as a distinct ethnic group by the Honduran state but has played a minor role in black ethnic mobilization (²³⁹⁶) - for which reason it is not listed as a politically relevant ethnic group here.).

²³⁹⁵ [Mollett, 2006]

²³⁹⁶ [Anderson, 2007]

Power relations

1946-1974

During this period, Indigenous peoples were not yet considered politically relevant. Garifunas were discriminated. Whites/mestizos were dominant.

1975-1989

A new period is coded from 1975 on, the year when indigenous mobilization began (see above). As a response to this mobilization, the government made some concessions in form of land entitlements but the implementation has often been inconsistent and halfheartedly enforced (as has also been the case for Garifuna land entitlements). Up to the present, indigenous peoples still suffer from land expropriation, especially when powerful economic interests are at stake and frequently come into conflict with local landowners when they try to actively defend their land rights). Violent responses are frequent, often committed by criminal actors connected to powerful economic forces. A common method of repression is the assassination of indigenous leaders. These cases of political murders - like almost all criminal acts in a country pervaded by profound lawlessness - are usually not investigated or solved (²³⁹⁷). Yet, although tolerated by state authorities this repression is usually not directly state-led. Moreover, it does not have an explicitly “ethnic nature” as the same kind of violent repression also affects the majority of poor mestizo Hondurans. Thus, the indigenous group was coded as “powerless”. The historical, racially-based discrimination against Garifunas persisted during this period (see above).

²³⁹⁷ [Orozcoo & Rouse, 2010]

1990-2021

Both the Garifuna and indigenous peoples are coded as “powerless” between 1990 and 2017. A new period is coded starting in 1990, when the strategic alliance with Honduras’ (“real”) indigenous peoples from the 1980s on finally bore some political fruits in the early 1990s when the country embarked on a more serious (although still incomplete) policy of multiculturalism explicitly integrating the Garifuna group as a “beneficiary” of this policy. The Garifuna started to benefit from land entitlements in the early and mid-1990s (²³⁹⁸, 385-6, 391, 395, 397-9, 406; ²³⁹⁹, 286, 304-5; ²⁴⁰⁰). In 1994/5, the Legal Office for Ethnic Groups and Cultural Heritage was founded. In 1995, Honduras implemented the ILO Convention 169 on indige-

²³⁹⁸ [Anderson, 2007]

²³⁹⁹ [Hooker, 2005]

²⁴⁰⁰ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

nous rights as one of first Latin American countries which was an important factor for ethnic minorities in their pursuit of political rights (²⁴⁰¹).

The (somewhat) changed status of the Garifuna can also be seen politically. In 2005, three Garifunas became members of the parliament although their influence obviously remains marginal (²⁴⁰², 12). Like the indigenous peoples, the Garifuna suffer from political marginalization and the state's inability or unwillingness to protect their interests and rights (²⁴⁰³; ²⁴⁰⁴; see also ²⁴⁰⁵). Again, however, this also affects the large majority of the mestizo population in a country completely dominated by a tiny oligarchic elite unwilling to give up only the slightest part of their entrenched political and economic privileges. Thus, indigenous and Garifuna rights movements are treated similarly to any other human rights, labor rights, anti-corruption etc. movements.

Van Cott (²⁴⁰⁶, 132) places contemporary Honduras (like Nicaragua and Guatemala, but not El Salvador) in the category of countries which provide “modest” recognition of indigenous rights in regard to land, language and other rights, and political autonomy. “Promulgating glorious images of the Indian past”, the indigenous population was seen as part of the nation (²⁴⁰⁷, 390-1). Already in the early 1980s, there was a National Indigenous Institute mediating between indigenous peoples and the state, and limited recognition of indigenous rights was granted in the 1982 constitution (²⁴⁰⁸, 393). Thus, the country opened certain political space for indigenous peoples to express their demands, for the struggle for and recognition of collective rights (²⁴⁰⁹, 393; ²⁴¹⁰). Indeed, Honduras could be seen as an “early starter” in recognizing indigenous rights. A certain tolerance – without committing itself to real social or political change – seems to be the general strategy of the Honduran government towards social movements (²⁴¹¹). Indigenous peoples are also coded as “powerless”.

In recent years, the situation for minority groups in Honduras has stayed relatively the same since the early 1990s (²⁴¹²; ²⁴¹³; ²⁴¹⁴; and the ²⁴¹⁵). Various sources, such as ²⁴¹⁶, ²⁴¹⁷ and ²⁴¹⁸, emphasize the continuing neglect of indigenous rights in the context of resource extraction and land use. The vast majority of the members of indigenous communities in Honduras live in extreme poverty, still face discrimination and have little access to education, health and politics (²⁴¹⁹: 5; ²⁴²⁰: 14; ²⁴²¹: 31). The Garifuna as well as the indigenous peoples are not represented in executive politics (²⁴²²: 20). Additionally, the weakness of designated state institutions – such as the Office of the Special Prosecutor for Ethnic Groups and Cultural Heritage or the Directorate of Indigenous and Afro-Honduran Peoples – renders the minorities' influence on decisions concerning their lands, cultures and natural resources almost insignificant (²⁴²³; ²⁴²⁴).

It should be noted that in 2015, a policy against racism and racial discrimination and for the development of the indigenous and African-Honduran populations has been adopted by the government and granting of land titles to the Miskito community has been

²⁴⁰¹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

²⁴⁰² [Orozcoo & Rouse, 2010]

²⁴⁰³ [Orozcoo & Rouse, 2010]

²⁴⁰⁴ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

²⁴⁰⁵ [Bertelsmann, 2003-2020]

²⁴⁰⁶ [Van Cott, 2007]

²⁴⁰⁷ [Anderson, 2007]

²⁴⁰⁸ [Anderson, 2007]

²⁴⁰⁹ [Anderson, 2007]

²⁴¹⁰ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

²⁴¹¹ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

²⁴¹² [Freedom House, 2013]

²⁴¹³ [U.S. State Department, 2009-2013]

²⁴¹⁴ [Bertelsmann, 2003-2020]

²⁴¹⁵ [Minority Rights Group International, 2005]

²⁴¹⁶ [IWGIA, 2015]

²⁴¹⁷ [UNHRC, 2016]

²⁴¹⁸ [USDS, 2016]

²⁴¹⁹ [Freedom House, 2017]

²⁴²⁰ [IWGIA, 2015]

²⁴²¹ [USDS, 2016]

²⁴²² [USDS, 2016]

²⁴²³ [IACHR, 2015]

²⁴²⁴ [USDS, 2016]

extended (²⁴²⁵: 27; ²⁴²⁶: 31,33).

In 2017, elections took place in Honduras, but they were tainted by claims of election fraud (²⁴²⁷). While international observers generally recognized the elections as free, they disputed the fairness and transparency of the results (²⁴²⁸). In addition, no representatives of the Afro-Honduran (Garifuna and Afro-descendants) population were elected to Congress in 2017. In fact for OFRANEH, the re-election of Juan Orlando Hernández “locks in a continued onslaught of land grabs and climate disaster caused by deepening extractivism and industrial agriculture. Both are part of a wholesale corporate takeover that Garifuna leaders say could wipe out their community” (²⁴²⁹,195). Indeed, this does not enable to improve the situation of the Garifuna as the government economical interest - in particular palm oil exploitation - predominates over the respect of the traditional lands and culture of the Garifuna’s (²⁴³⁰). All in all, this ethnic group does not have a say in those matters and remains poorly represented in the national government. As a result, they can give little direct input into decisions affecting their lands, cultures, traditions, and the allocation of natural resources (²⁴³¹).

At last, even though the state recognizes to some degree the ancestral territory of indigenous peoples and Afro-Hondurans, they have not taken the necessary steps to ensure land demarcation, titling and reorganization of their territories. Moreover, various mining or oil exploration activities and hydroelectric projects within the territories of indigenous peoples and Afro-descendants have taken place without prior consultation (²⁴³²).

²⁴²⁵ [IWGIA, 2015]

²⁴²⁶ [USDS, 2016]

²⁴²⁷ [Heather, 2018]

²⁴²⁸ [USDS, 2019]

²⁴²⁹ [Heather, 2018]

²⁴³⁰ [Heather, 2018]

²⁴³¹ [USDS, 2019]

²⁴³² [Bertelsmann, 2003-2020]

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Political status of ethnic groups in H

From 1946 until 1974

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.91	MONOPOLY
Garifuna	0.016	DISCRIMINATED

From 1975 until 1989

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.91	MONOPOLY
Indigenous peoples (Lenca, Maya-Chorti, Miskito, Tawahka/Sumu, Xicaque, Pech, Nahua)	0.07	POWERLESS
Garifuna	0.016	DISCRIMINATED

From 1990 until 2021

Group name	Proportional size	Political status
Whites/mestizos	0.91	MONOPOLY
Indigenous peoples (Lenca, Maya-Chorti, Miskito, Tawahka/Sumu, Xicaque, Pech, Nahua)	0.073	POWERLESS
Garifuna	0.014	POWERLESS



Figure 441: Political status of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1946-1974.



Figure 442: Political status of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1975-1989.



Figure 443: Political status of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1990-2021.

Geographical coverage of ethnic groups in Honduras

From 1946 until 1974

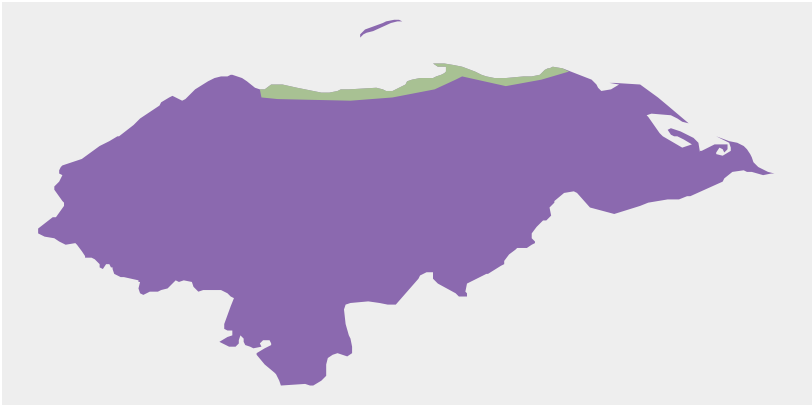


Figure 444: Map of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1946-1974.

Group name		Area in km²	Type
■	Whites/mestizos	112 199	Statewide
■	Garifuna	2908	Regionally based

Table 157: List of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1946-1974.

From 1975 until 2021

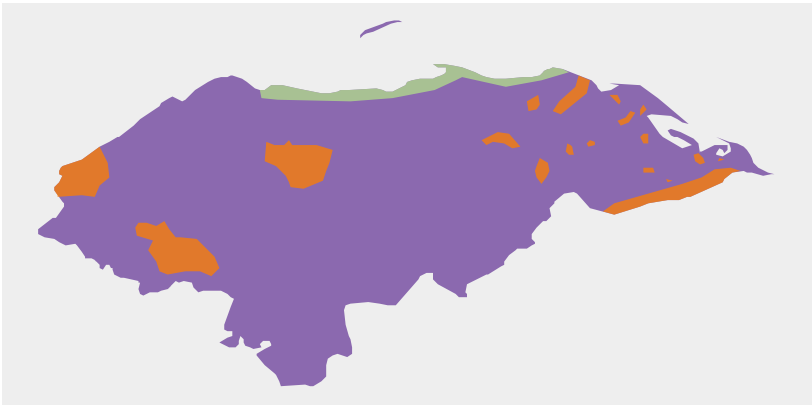


Figure 445: Map of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1975-2021.

	Group name	Area in km ²	Type
■	Whites/mestizos	112 199	Statewide
■	Indigenous peoples (Lenca, Maya-Chorti, Miskito, Tawahka/Sumu, Xicaque, Pech, Nahua)	9180	Regionally based
■	Garifuna	2908	Regionally based

Table 158: List of ethnic groups in Honduras during 1975-2021.

Conflicts in Honduras

Starting on 1957-04-30

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of Honduras	Government of Nicaragua		1957-04-30			

Starting on 1969-07-02

Side A	Side B	Group name	Start	Claim	Recruitment	Support
Government of El Salvador	Government of Honduras		1969-07-02			