

POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**State Building, Ethnic Land Titling, and Transnational Organized Crime: The Case of Honduras**

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Existing work on state building focuses on the creation of modern bureaucracies and institutions for education and taxation but generally neglects to point to communal property regimes as tools of statecraft. Political science scholars who focus on ethnic communal lands in the Americas emphasize the rise of formal multicultural institutions, including Indigenous land rights, but are skeptical about governments' willingness to title large extensions of land to Indigenous or other ethnic groups because of opposing economic interests. Focusing on the titling of 12 percent of Honduras's territory between 2012 and 2016, this article uses semi-structured elite interviews, land titling data, field notes from three months in rural and urban sites in Honduras, and drug-trafficking reports to examine the motivation of officials in the central government. Evidence suggests that the central government views and uses ethnic land titling as a strategy to reclaim territorial dominance in contested locations that lack state presence.

Los análisis sobre la creación del estado moderno se enfocan en el diseño de burocracias e instituciones modernas para la educación y la recaudación de impuestos pero generalmente omiten la propiedad comunal como herramienta para gobernar. Los analistas que estudian la propiedad comunal de pueblos étnicos en las Américas enfatizan la difusión del multiculturalismo mediante instituciones legales, incluyendo el derecho a la tierra de pueblos indígenas, pero dudan que el gobierno quiera titular grandes extensiones de tierras a dichos pueblos por oposiciones de intereses económicos. Este artículo usa entrevistas con la elite política de Honduras, datos cuantitativos sobre la titulación de tierra comunal, notas detalladas de tres meses de trabajo de campo en lugares urbanos y rurales de Honduras e informes sobre el narcotráfico para examinar la motivación de miembros del gobierno central para titular 12 por ciento del territorio hondureño como tierra indígena entre 2012 y 2016. La evidencia presentada sugiere que el gobierno central titula tierra indígena como una estrategia para reforzar su dominio en localidades vulnerables sin presencia estatal.

Introduction

Why, and how, do states title large swaths of communal lands to Indigenous and ethnic groups? Building on and expanding existing work on state building, this theory-building study proposes that high-ranking government officials title ethnic communal lands to extend the power of the state in contested peripheral localities. Political scientists have examined why and how governments create private-property regimes, institutions for taxation and education, and bureaucracies that bolster the modern state (Mylonas 2013; Slater 2010; Centeno and Ferraro 2013). Until recently, less emphasis has been accorded to ethnic communal land titling as a tool of statecraft. My study provides insight about state building by focusing on the motivations of political elites in the central government for titling communal lands to Indigenous and other ethnic groups.

A first generation of studies about ethnic land rights has examined the rise and spread of formal institutions at the international and national level (Van Cott 2000, 2002; Sieder 2002; Plant 2002; La Peña 2005; Henders 2015). These studies have emphasized that Indigenous people's mobilization and international allies' pressure has been essential for the formal adoption of communal land rights based on ethnicity, but analysts have been skeptical about rights implementation, especially in developing countries, where

the rule of law is weak, political corruption is high, and political appointees, rather than independent land commissions, make land titling decisions (Van Cott 2000; Stocks 2005; Brinks, Levitsky, and Murillo 2020). A second generation of studies is paying analytic attention to a wave of ethnic communal land titling that has spread through the Americas since the 1990s. In Bolivia, for instance, 20 percent of the territory is titled ethnic land (Reyes-García et al. 2014; Colque Fernández, Tinta, and Sanjinés 2016). Surprisingly, in Colombia and Nicaragua, where the majority of people do not self-identify as Indigenous, that number is higher than 30 percent (Salinas Abdala 2014).¹ On average, 11 percent of the territory in Latin American countries is titled as ethnic land (Altamirano Rayo 2017).

To learn about the motivations behind ethnic land titling, I focus on Honduras, where people that self-identify as Indigenous make up about 7 percent of the national population, and titled ethnic lands cover about 13 percent of the national territory, an extent approximate to the Latin American average (Davis-Castro 2020), which makes Honduras an appropriate case study for theory generation. I approach this issue by demonstrating that political elites in the central government use communal land titling to Indigenous and other ethnic groups to meet the state's own security needs. In the Honduran case, criminal organizations contested the state's territorial power in remote localities without state presence. Presidents and the military used ethnic land titling to recover control of those regions. Analyzing the interaction between security interests and ethnic communal land titling in Honduras is important for a number of reasons.

First, much of the existing scholarship on ethnic land rights focuses on the origin and spread of formal institutions (Assies, van der Haar, and Hoekema 2000; Van Cott 2000; Rodríguez Garavito 2015; Rodríguez-Piñero Royo 2010; Verdum and Grijalva 2009; Uprimny 2010; Lucero 2013). The normative power behind ethnic land rights has played an important role in driving the research agenda (Brysk 2000; Lightfoot 2016). Scholars are now exploring questions about implementation (Kröger and Lalander 2016; Otto and Hoekema 2012; Martí i Puig 2010; Ubink, Hoekema, and Assies 2009; Assies 2007). Like the majority of countries in the Americas, Honduras has adopted international and national legislation that recognizes the land rights of Indigenous and ethnic groups. The Honduran case offers a productive setting for continuing to focus the research agenda beyond institutional adoption and into implementation issues.

Second, many scholars assume that ethnic land titling is uncommon in weak institutional environments where economic groups that covet ethnic lands are seen as powerful, overriding forces in political decision-making processes (González 2015; Aguilar-Stoen 2016; Kröger and Lalander 2016). Analysts often depict government authorities as members of informal power structures and corruption networks who are unwilling to realize the socioeconomic rights of marginalized ethnic groups (Velásquez Runk 2012; Gonzales and González 2015; Shipley 2016). Under this rendition, political decisions result from bargaining outcomes between government officials and economic groups. Honduras is one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the Western Hemisphere. High levels of poverty and income inequality have resulted in and been reinforced by widespread political corruption (Warf and Stewart 2016), making the country one of the most corrupt countries in the Americas (Transparency International 2016). Hence, the Honduran context allows for probing whether the pattern of economic-based political decision-making persists under all conditions in weak institutional environments, and under which conditions government authorities might realize the historical socioeconomic claims of marginalized groups.

Finally, ethnic land titling is widely considered to result from a combination of grassroots and international activism. There is a strong belief that massive titling programs are a reaction to the mobilization strategies that Unity of Mosquitia (Moskitia Asia Takanka, MASTA), an Indigenous political organization, used to obtain greater economic and political participation. However, internationally connected grassroots organizations, such as the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares e Indígenas de Honduras, COPINH), the Fraternal Organization of Black Hondurans (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña, OFRANEH), and the Tawahka Indigenous Federation of Honduras (Federación Indígena Tawahka de Honduras, FITH)—all among the oldest and most experienced organizations in the country—have consistently claimed communal land rights by using similar mobilization tactics (Gómez 2004; Anderson 2007; Brondo 2010, 2013; Mollett 2013; Thorne 2016; Loperena 2016; Jokela-Pansini 2016). Rather than being responsive, the government has failed to protect grassroots leaders (Gynther 2016; Global Witness 2017) and purposely fragmented their land claims (Brondo 2007). The government has also treated COPINH, OFRANEH, and FITH with less generosity. Determining the motivations behind this differentiation in treatment has important implications for grassroots mobilization strategies in the Honduran context.

¹ Attorney General's Office (Nicaragua), "Sistematización titulación de territorios del régimen de propiedad comunal," 2016.

Although previous studies have emphasized international norms and social movements as factors shaping ethnic land titling, this study focuses on the security interests of high-ranking government officials as an additional but crucial motivator. My research does so by comparing titling patterns across Honduras, bringing together in-depth subnational studies in anthropology and geography on participatory mapping projects (i.e., the practice of producing maps of customary use of land and resources with the involvement of Indigenous people) with grassroots movements' demands for guaranteeing Indigenous and ethnic land rights (Bryan 2011; Mollett 2013; Webber and Gordon 2013; Portillo Villeda 2014). Based on semistructured elite interviews, data on ethnic land titling, reports on drug-trafficking, and notes from three months of fieldwork in seven sites in Honduras—including intense on-the-ground work in its southeastern region—my study suggests that analyses of political decision-making in weak institutional environments should also consider security interests as an important factor.

Through a close study of Mosquitia, Honduras's southeastern region chosen for its surprisingly high communal land-titling levels, I demonstrate the powerful role that security interests play in producing unexpected institutional outcomes. I adopt a narrow definition of security interests that focuses on territorial control by the central government, rather than a broader conception which includes the provision of protection and public goods for citizens (Enloe 2016; Hyndman 2007). In the Honduran case, security interests translate into an anti-narcotic strategy intended to recover physical access to Mosquitia for state authorities, not a strategy that produces much-needed security services for local inhabitants. I build on the work of Catherine Boone (2014), which highlights how the government manipulates different types of property regimes in sub-Saharan Africa to secure political order. The analysis focuses on the crucial role that ethnic land titling plays as an anti-narcotics strategy. I present Honduran officials as strategic actors who seek to reclaim territories controlled by rival nonstate actors to reproduce the state's power. The state's infrastructural reach constrains the range of action of these strategic actors. Presidents and the military are incentivized to penetrate regions that Indigenous and other ethnic groups inhabit and that organized crime occupies. In a context where the local population resists direct state domination, government officials use ethnic land titling as a relatively cost-efficient technique to govern local civil society. The need to reclaim territorial power informs the state-building strategy that authorities adopt.

The analysis of land institutions as a mechanism to secure state rule builds on an extensive literature in political science and comparative sociology. That literature upholds that the design, and redesign, of land tenure regimes is a strategy that states use to reinforce rule (Anderson 1974; Scott 2009). From a historical and comparative perspective, the argument presented in this article is not surprising: central government officials have allocated land to guarantee security objectives in disparate contexts, including North America, Africa, and Asia (Mamdani 1996; Boone 2003, 2014; Engerman and Metzer 2004; Davidson and Henley 2007; Harris 2002). Yet arguments about ethnic land titling as a means to secure state rule have not resonated in the Latin America literature. Most of the work on Latin America regards ethnic land titling as a way to uphold Indigenous autonomy rather than as a security strategy that reinforces state power. By using original qualitative evidence from Honduras, I propose a different perspective. Honduran authorities have replaced state property and private property in land with communal property. Because of the concentration of state-sanctioned communal property in the eastern region of Mosquitia but not elsewhere, Honduras offers insightful conditions to use comparative logic to pinpoint the motivations of decision-makers.

Concepts

Douglass North (1991) has defined institutions as “humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)” (97). I leverage this bifurcated definition of institutions to analyze the implementation of formal property rights in land. At the center of my inquiry is the motivation for the selective observance of formal rights that allocate collective land and natural resources to Indigenous and other ethnic groups, or what I have termed ethnic communal property rights.

Ethnic communal property rights are formal institutions that govern the use, access, management, and tenure of land and land-based natural resources on the basis of ethnicity. Formal legal recognition happens when the state adopts constitutional provisions, ratifies international treaties, or enacts domestic laws that incorporate these rights as part of the country's legal framework. Since the 1980s, countries in the Americas have codified laws that recognize ethnic communal property rights in constitutions,² signed the

² The Honduran Constitution reads: “Article 346. It is the duty of the state to adopt measures to protect the rights and interests of the indigenous communities in the country, especially of the lands and forests in which they are settled.” An English translation is published at <https://www.constituteproject.org>. For the original Spanish, see Honduras Constitución de la República, 1983.

UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), and ratified ILO Convention 169, which orders the titling of Indigenous territories³ (Anaya 2004; Rodríguez-Piñero 2010). A large body of literature has explored the drivers and diversity in form of this wave of formal recognition (Anaya 2004; Rodríguez-Piñero 2010; Gilbert 2016).

There are five distinct types of property rights: the rights of access, use, management, exclusion, and alienation (Ostrom 2003). Countries do not always recognize the same bundle of rights to ethnic groups. The law could grant ethnic people collective control over land and natural resources, which entails a degree of self-government (Yashar 1999; González 2015; Engle 2010; Boone 2019). Conversely, local people might have narrow rights of access, use, and management (Agrawal and Ostrom 2016). In that case, the state devolves only limited decision-making powers to ethnic groups. In all cases, the state affords members of certain ethnic groups the legal right to exclude nonmembers from enjoying land rights. In addition, group members cannot alienate their rights to ethnic outsiders; the sale or transfer of land is illegal. Neither individual members nor the ethnic community as a whole have full ownership rights, only proprietor rights.

Government officials must activate formal ethnic communal property rights for these institutions to have actual political effect (Carey 2000; Levitsky and Murillo 2009); this occurs through titling programs, in this context. Ethnic communities may exercise de facto property rights, but the state may disregard or undermine these informal institutions (Ostrom 1990). For ethnic communities to eventually hold secure property rights in land, government authorities must first identify, delineate the boundaries of, and issue formal titles to the land. Thus, ethnic communal land titling happens when the government issues an official document that serves as a public certification of communal land tenure. An ethnic land title results from three crucial political decisions: (1) whether to incorporate ethnic people into the modern state (Scott 2009; Slater 2010); (2) whether to title private property in land (freehold) or communal property based on ethnicity (Otto and Hoekema 2012);⁴ and (3) whether to title microterritories or macroterritories.⁵ This article focuses on the underlying reason for titling macroterritories (i.e., large land extensions to Indigenous and other ethnic groups).

Focusing on the territorial claims that Indigenous people and ethnic communities make across the Americas, I draw a distinction between two observed types of ethnic land titling. In the case of microterritories, the government breaks ethnic villages apart and allocates small plots of land at the village level to local, state-sanctioned political organizations. By titling individual villages separately, central authorities design smallholding regions and prevent local authorities from managing the land and natural resources that are located beyond the village boundary. Only the village land that is included in the communal property title, and not adjacent areas, falls within the jurisdiction of local leaders. In this case, the government encourages the proliferation of political and administrative units at the lowest level of the state apparatus. By fracturing the powerbase of large Indigenous or ethnic communities in a territory, this mode of titling follows the political logic of divide and rule. Alternatively, the government can design and title macroterritories. Government officials can amalgamate separate villages together and allocate a large continuous area with its surrounding environment to state-authorized political organizations, so that ethnic leaders have the direct authority to allocate productive resources located far beyond the village boundaries. In this way, the government institutionalizes relations of property and authority between themselves, their allies, and villagers. Although both kinds of titling modes create communal land that cannot be legally traded on open and competitive markets, the distinction between microterritories and macroterritories is pivotal for this analysis. In essence, the difference is political: state-sanctioned local authorities in macroterritories have greater authority over more villagers and determine resource allocation for larger expanses than those that govern microterritories. The mode of titling macroterritories follows a political logic of co-optation.

³ ILO Convention 169 (Part 2) says: "Article 14 (1). The rights of ownership and possession of the peoples concerned over the lands which they traditionally occupy shall be recognised... (2). Governments shall take steps as necessary to identify the lands which the peoples concerned traditionally occupy, and to guarantee effective protection of their rights of ownership and possession." The original text published at <http://www.ilo.org/>.

⁴ Catherine Boone (2014) and Mahmood Mamdani (1996) construct a typology of land tenure regimes as neo-customary regimes (indirect rule) and statist land regimes (direct rule). My research focuses on neo-customary regimes only.

⁵ I follow James Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009, 209) in dividing neo-customary regimes (indirect rule) into "tight" or "loose" incorporation of non-state peoples into the modern state. Anthropologists and public policy practitioners distinguish these two forms of ethnic land titling as "island demarcation" or "continuous demarcation." See Herrera and Edouard (2013), Ramos (1998, 260–267), and Mollett (2013, 1232).

Theory

Existing studies provide society-centric explanations of ethnic land titling that span both economic and political motivations. Economic structuralism provides a pessimistic answer: the government will side with economic elites and resist titling macroterritories (Larson, Cronkleton, and Pulhin 2015; Stocks 2005; Van Cott 2000, 2002; Brinks and Botero 2014; Hale 2011). To reinforce established structures of socioeconomic domination, governments will stall or ignore claims to resource-rich land with little consequence. If titling happens, it follows an economic rationale. Government officials, the argument goes, will allocate microterritories in coveted areas and in slightly larger extensions in places that hold little to no economic potential (Hale 2011; Pacheco 2009). Instead of titling macroterritories to ethnic groups, government officials would rather title private property to further the formation and growth of supra-local land markets (Gauster and Isakson 2007). Velásquez Runk (2012) further expects government officials to protect economic interests in countries with high levels of socioeconomic inequality and corruption. A corollary is that ethnic land rights are largely aspirational.

Surely, economic structuralism is part of the story; government officials may be inclined to protect the interests of economic elites rather than those of marginalized ethnic groups. But that is only a partial answer. Economic structuralism does not persuasively explain the contrasting outcomes in Honduras. In much of the country, the government has titled microterritories. In the eastern Mosquitia region, however, they have enacted a generous titling program that encompasses large territories with productive potential. Domestic economic elites and transnational companies alike covet the natural resources in the east (Kerssen 2013; McSweeney and Pearson 2016).⁶ Despite strong economic interests, government officials removed from the legal land market about one million hectares that the state could have left as state property or titled as private property⁷ (INA 2016).

On the political side, the rationale for ethnic land titling can be broadly categorized as a response to demands by subnational ethnic groups (Martí i Puig 2010; Reyes-García et al. 2014). Observers have argued that ethnic groups in the east push for the protection of their land from outsiders and the government listened. Kröger and Lalander (2016) particularly stressed that ethnic land titles are the culmination of ethnic communities' major political mobilizations against land grabbers. According to this perspective, the government responded to ethnic demands to help mitigate intergroup land conflict (Kröger and Lalander 2016). However, land conflicts are spread throughout Honduras and the government's response varies from neglect to repression. In fact, grassroots organizations that represent the Lenca people, the largest ethnic group in the country, have been demanding territorial rights since the mid-1980s (Mollett 2013; Slack 2009). Despite the Lencas' relentless mobilization to protect their land and ward off hydroelectric and other development projects (Shiple 2016; Loperena 2016), government officials have largely ignored their requests. Rather than titling large macroterritories to the Lencas, the central government has fragmented their territorial claim by titling small communal land plots, reducing their power to resist the government's development projects.⁸ Another mechanism that generates titled macroterritories is the conciliatory lobbying strategies that ethnic leaders employ to persuade bureaucrats of the cultural validity of their territorial claims (Jung 2008; Stahler-Sholk, Vanden, and Kuecker 2008; Jackson and Warren 2005). According to Gómez (2004), convincing ethno-environmental arguments produce macroterritories. More broadly, Warren and Jackson (2013) argue that Indigenous leaders have been able to establish their legitimacy through the rhetoric of cultural continuity, which has allowed them to gain official recognition, protection, and access to territories. Although grassroots organizations have based their territorial claims on environmental conservation and cultural continuity, the Honduran government has mostly resisted these demands. For instance, the Organization for Ethnic Communal Development (ODECO) has established working relationships with government officials to defend the territory of Garifuna people with limited success (Anderson 2012).

To be sure, society-centric accounts are crucial to understand the context in which ethnic communities live. As a complement, I propose a state-centric argument that focuses on the motivations of officials in the central government to unexpectedly title macroterritories in 2012. Since the early 1990s, when the administration

⁶ Honduras, "Visión de País 2010–2038: Plan de Nación 2010–2022," 2010.

⁷ Instituto de Conservación Forestal (ICF), "Convenio Interinstitucional para la Regularización y Titulación de Tierras," report, 2016.

⁸ The central government has created the architecture to limit the communities' decision-making regarding development projects to the small plots of titled land, rather than the whole claimed ancestral territory. The government strategy is akin to that of "participatory development," whereby individuals affected by development projects are invited to participate in decision-making within preestablished parameters (Brondo 2013, 53; Anderson 2009, 148).

of Rafael Callejas (1990–1994) instituted neoliberal reforms, the government titled microterritories outside Mosquitia (Anderson 2007, 2009). In 2012, the government radically shifted its strategy and began titling macroterritories in Mosquitia. In only four short years (2012–2016), macroterritories in Mosquitia covered about 12 percent of the country's total land area. By early 2016, the governments of Porfirio Lobo (2010–2014) and Juan Orlando Hernández (2014–present) had granted land titles over the largest extension of land in forty years. In a context where ethnic land titling is authorized by the president and supported by the military rather than by independent agencies, there is little reason to modify the traditional, restrictive titling model in place since the 1990s. I draw from a state-centered understandings of security interests to explain the sudden shift in titling strategies (Huntington 1968; Skocpol 1979) and to argue that ethnic land titling happens to bolster territorial power in contested geographies.⁹ In the process of claiming domination over territory, the government makes limited concessions to civil society when and where they need to. In Honduras, these concessions took the form of titled macroterritories.

Internal security threats are a crucial motivating factor for titling macroterritories. Threats to state power arise in far-flung localities where the repressive arm of the state is scarcely present. In these areas of limited state reach, internal security threats arise from the capacity of nonstate actors to cause or facilitate internal turmoil and render the locality difficult or nearly impossible to govern. For instance, nonstate subnational authorities may obstruct access to particular locales, impede the enforcement of national laws and policies, and even fuel criminal activity. Internal security threats arise where the state has low coercive and infrastructural capacity when *de facto* local authorities obstruct the government's entrance and management functions. In the state-centric model proposed here, ethnic land titling is state-driven and determined by the need to exercise territorial authority. By titling ethnic lands, central authorities create local administrative units that are governed from the top down through their allies. The government fixes the new boundaries of ethnic lands and, within this delimited area, asserts political control through intermediaries. Consequently, vast areas that central authorities initially conceive as troublesome are transformed into manageable areas. Seeing ethnic land titling as a strategy to recover territorial control helps explain the remarkable episodic burst of land titling in Mosquitia. As I show in the section that follows, the state acted with stunning speed in an inaccessible and remote region but has resisted doing so in the rest of the country. Government authorities simultaneously embarked on a widespread land titling project and increased military presence in Mosquitia, a major transshipment point for narcotics intended for the United States market. Through that titling strategy, government officials sought to increase military presence unencumbered, diminish the intensity of the drug trade, and incorporate ethnic people into the state apparatus.

Context

I focus on the Mosquitia region to illustrate how security interests motivated presidents to title macroterritories. Mosquitia, Honduras easternmost region, has very little formalized state presence (US Department of State 2012). Mosquitia offered the ideal geographical and physical conditions for organizations trafficking drugs: it is flat, traversed with rivers, has a deepwater port, and is virtually inaccessible except by small planes or boats (Bunck and Fowler 2012, 301, 307). The region has been serving as a popular refueling stop for vessels moving cocaine northward from South America. In the mid-2000s, the region became the perfect place for traffickers looking for an unencumbered path to the north after Mexico stepped up drug interdiction measures (UNODC 2012). In 2009, Mosquitia was the single most important port of entry for drug cargoes headed northward (UNODC 2012; Bosworth 2011; Cuéllar et al. 2011; Bunck and Fowler 2012). Organized crime took advantage of the political crisis triggered by the successful overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya to use Mosquitia as the main entry point for drugs (UN 2010). After the coup d'état, the police and the military focused on controlling dissidents in cities (ICC 2015, par. 61–65), which led the government to neglect the east even further. In 2008, the United States had provided US\$3 million through the expanded Mérida Initiative to fund law enforcement and interdiction operations in Honduras (Meyer and Ribando Seelke 2015, 17–18; Ribando Seelke, Wyler, Beittel, and Sullivan 2012, 33). However, the United States suspended economic assistance, information exchange, and anti-narcotics aid to Honduras after the coup (UNODC 2012; Bosworth 2011). In short, the 2009 coup turned the east into a hub for drug traffickers (UNODC 2012, 23). By 2010, according to US estimates, about 260 tons of cocaine, worth roughly US\$2 billion (or 13 percent of Honduras's gross domestic product), landed in Honduras (UNODC 2012). In 2011 and 2012, between 80 and 87 percent of

⁹ Government officials concede land rights to subjects when and where it produces a benefit by reducing political or economic costs (Boone 2015, 5). In this article, I stress the benefit of reducing political, rather than economic, costs.

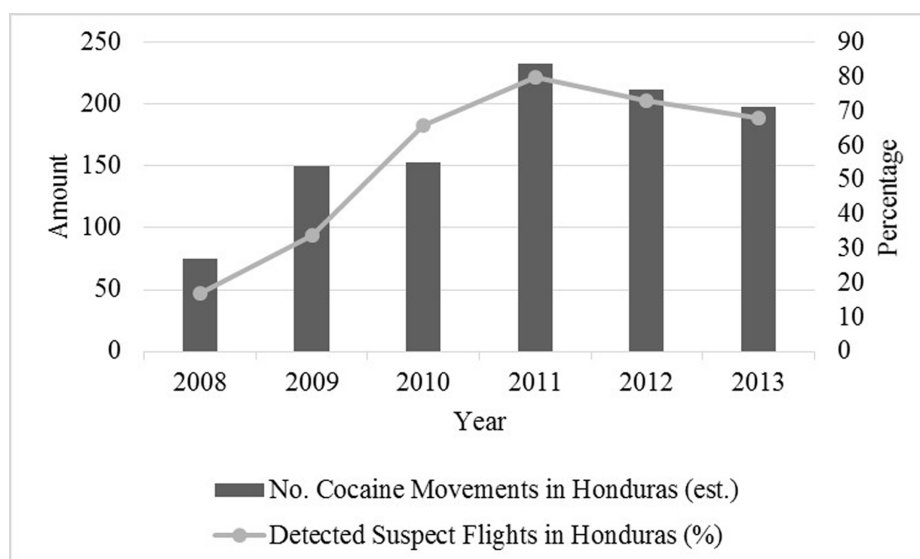


Figure 1: Drug flights landing in the east, 2008–2013.

Sources: US Department of State 2011–2017; UNODC 2012.

all cocaine smuggling flights destined for the United States first landed in Honduras (US Department of State 2012–2013). Between 80 and 90 percent of cocaine arrived in Honduras via maritime shipments (US Department of State 2014–2015). Drug trafficking became an important source of income, and traffickers created a drug-based economy (Cuéllar et al. 2011; Bunck and Fowler 2012). **Figure 1** shows the number of suspected cocaine-carrying flights detected by US authorities and estimated cocaine movements using Honduras as a bridge.

Although cocaine flowed into the east, the more developed, populated, and affluent cities of the north and west suffered violent consequences. Heavily armed criminal groups fought to control strategic territories (UNODC 2010). Rivalries between these drug-trafficking rings, in turn, caused mayhem in the country's major cities (UNODC 2010). By 2011, “the national murder rate (92 per 100,000),” according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “was one of the *highest recorded in modern times*” (2012, 15, my emphasis). Drug lords targeted each other but also police officers and high-ranking military officials. For instance, in late 2009, the Sinaloa Federation, a powerful drug-trafficking organization in the Western Hemisphere (UNODC 2012; Phillips 2015), assassinated “anti-narcotics czar” General Arístides Gonzáles for campaigning against illicit airstrips linked to that cartel (Bosworth 2011; Arce 2016). The UNODC (2012, 13) remarked that the influx of greater volumes of cocaine raised the economic incentives for criminal groups to maintain control over larger geographic areas, tax all activity therein, and “act like a state within the state.” To put it succinctly, criminal organizations affiliated with Mexican cartels usurped state power in key strategic localities and, in the process, destabilized the country.

Data and Methods

My approach is comparative. Original qualitative research in Mosquitia provides empirical support for the state-centric argument developed in this article. I chose Honduras as a representative case to generate theory mainly because the percentage of titled ethnic land in the country closely follows the Latin America average (Bennett 2004), and for its history of civil-society engagement in participatory mapping projects (Herlihy 1997; Chapin and Threlkeld 2001; Bryan 2011). Research design principles guided case selection at the subnational level (Snyder 2001). As a region, Mosquitia has three important features: (1) high levels of in-migration by ethnic outsiders from the hegemonic population (*mestizos*) demanding secure private-property rights in land, (2) abundant land and natural resources ripe for economic exploitation, and (3) active claims to ancestral territory by local ethnic elites (Herrera and Edouard 2013; Mollett 2011; Pacheco 2009). These are the demographic, economic, and social attributes that scholars highlight to explain the government's refusal to back ethnic land claims.

In 2015, I gathered information from national and provincial archives, secondary literature, and three months of fieldwork in seven sites in Honduras. I conducted work in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Catacamas, Omoa, and Tela, as well as in Puerto Lempira and Mocoron, both in Mosquitia, where titling has concentrated.

Village and regional-level data came from land administration and environmental protection agencies; members of grassroots organizations, such as OFRANEH, ODECO, and MASTA; officials of nongovernmental organizations such as the Agency for the Development of the Mosquitia (Mosquitia Pawisa Apiska, MOPAWI), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the Ford Foundation; and local political elites. I also rely on field notes from participating as an observer in three workshops with social movement's leaders and government agents in Catacama, Omoa, and Puerto Lempira.

Information about the motivation of government authorities comes from in-depth and semi-structured interviews with Porfirio Lobo and Juan Orlando Hernández, the presidents that made the decision to title macroterritories; high-ranking military elites; midlevel military officers responsible for security and anti-narcotics operations; activists from OFRANEH, ODECO, MASTA, and COPINH; experts from the National Autonomous University of Honduras; and technical advisors from the World Bank. I conducted a total of seventy-nine interviews in Spanish. I chose key informants based on the findings of preliminary research and conversation with experts in Honduras by using the following criteria: position, expertise in the subject matter, willingness, and wide range of views. Some of the limitations of interviewing government elites include access, time constraints, social status differences, and bias. To solve the first two problems, I relied on an extensive network of individuals with either professional or personal connections to the key informant. To avoid uncomfortable interactions caused by differences in status, I dressed according to standards expected by the interviewee.

My face-to-face interviews were semistructured and lasted on average about thirty minutes. I asked the following five questions: "What is your opinion regarding...? (a) the demands of the international community or grassroots organizations about titling ethnic lands; (b) military bases inside ethnic lands; (c) the relationship between titling ethnic lands and state control; (d) development projects inside ethnic lands; and (e) the eviction of nonethnic rural farmers from ethnic lands." To avoid bias, I asked the same questions in different ways and at different moments of the conversation. I either recorded the interviews or took shorthand notes, depending on interviewee preferences. In cases of contradictory information from a government elite and a member of civil society on the issues of motivations for titling, the core issue addressed in this article, I focused on the opinion of the decision-maker. For instance, members of grassroots organizations generally, but not always, argued that ethnic land titling was a reaction to social movements and Indigenous people's mobilization. Although the president and the military elite mentioned working with ethnic leaders to implement their titling program, they viewed ethnic land titling as part of a security strategy to ensure military access and presence in the east. Two experienced qualitative researchers validated the coding and interpretation independently.

Analysis: Ethnic Land Titling as a Security Strategy

In September 2012, President Lobo ordered the government's land administration agencies to work with Miskito political elites to title a dozen "Territorial Councils" in the east, each amalgamating several villages into ethnic land blocks. By 2016, the government had met its aim: bureaucrats had designed and titled all the ethnic land blocks in Mosquitia. Titled lands added up to over one million hectares, an area larger than Jamaica (INA 2016; Honduras 2016). In that land area, the state has officially sanctioned about a dozen ethnic elites, the heads of the Territorial Councils, to administer and adjudicate land matters inside the newly created jurisdictional units. Both Lobo and his successor, Hernández, traveled to Puerto Lempira to hand-deliver the land titles to the authorities of the newly formalized Territorial Councils (Honduras Presidencia, 2016). Ethnic land titling was not solely a response to ethnic community's demands for secure property rights. Honduras began identifying and titling macroterritories recently, three decades after acknowledging ethnic communal property rights in the 1982 constitution and nearly two decades after ratifying ILO Convention 169 in 1995. For over three decades, grassroots organizations had demanded a land title (MASTA 2013; Padilla 2008; Padilla and Contreras Veloso 2008). The government had ignored their demands until the early 2010s (Mollett 2011).

The government titled vast macroterritories in Mosquitia to accomplish two interrelated goals: to displace criminal organizations that had infiltrated the east, and to rule the region through state-sanctioned intermediaries. Government officials were worried about the serious security challenges posed by criminal organizations using Mosquitia as a forward operating base for trafficking drugs. In the process of ethnic land titling, government officials made alliances with local political elites. These alliances allowed them to gain local acquiescence for heavy-handed counternarcotic operations and increasing militarization (Cave 2012). In 2010, President Lobo decided to combat criminal organizations (Bosworth 2011; Mejía 2010). Lobo and Hernández, his successor and the head of the legislature at the time, focused on securing

anti-narcotics aid and information exchange from the United States.¹⁰ Taking the military's advice, Honduras began implementing a repressive public security strategy that broadened the role of the regular military and created a new military police to perform domestic security functions generally left to civilian law enforcement (Meyer and Ribando Seelke 2015, 12).

The acute security crisis in the country, which resulted from the intensity of the drug trade, forced government elites to pay attention to the east. The strategy to recover state power congealed by early 2012, when Lobo and Daniel Ortega met to discuss security threats in Central America (Consejo de Comunicación y Ciudadanía 2012). "I was in Nicaragua observing the process and spoke with President [Daniel] Ortega and Comrade Rosario [Murillo]. We talked a lot about what they had done," remarked Lobo. "We enrich ourselves with the experiences that our neighboring countries have about common issues [ethnic land demands]" (personal interview, May 28, 2015, Tegucigalpa, Honduras).¹¹

High-ranking government officials viewed the trafficking problem as a serious threat to the survival of the state and the lack of state presence in Mosquitia as the fundamental cause. From their perspective, local inhabitants were victims, not the main perpetrators. During the 2012 meeting with President Daniel Ortega (2007–current), President Lobo remarked,

Without a doubt a factor that greatly affects [drug trafficking] is the economic situation of our people. That is, it [our country] is sometimes fertile ground because of the needs people have to endure. We observe that in part of our population where it [drug trafficking] is frequent now, they [local people] go out to defend the smugglers that bring drug cargoes. About a week ago, we were surrounded; the community surrounded a unit in the Naval Base of Honduras, [they were] defending the drug cargo, and this is due to the same [economic] situation. (Consejo de Comunicación y Ciudadanía 2012)

President Hernández also described criminal organizations as threats to the state. In January 2012, President Hernández noted, "As we have said that we could very well lose the country, now with the support that is being given to us by friendly nations [i.e., the United States] we can say that we will be able to reclaim peace and tranquility in Honduras" (*Honduras Weekly* 2012). Top-ranking military officers expressed that criminal organizations operating from Mosquitia threatened state sovereignty. For instance, Deputy Admiral Rigoberto Espinoza Posadas, deputy chief of the armed forces (2014–present), explained, "Two years ago, drug traffickers provided basic services, like healthcare.... La Mosquitia is a depressed zone without presence from the government. For that reason, drug trafficking activity flourished there. Organized crime was rooted in La Mosquitia ... that is why all the [military and political] activities are happening there to make sure that drug traffickers do not return" (personal interview, May 25, 2015, Tegucigalpa, Honduras).

In similar terms, General Julián Pacheco Tinoco, head of the Bureau of State Investigation and Intelligence during Lobo's administration and minister of security under Hernández's tenure, described the narcotic trafficking problem:

In that zone [the east], the state has only rarely exercised sovereignty.... In Honduras, drugs jeopardize the survival of the state.... Drug trafficking generates serious governability and security problems ..., which is why President Lobo and President Hernández focused on that issue.... Many people began to depend on drug trafficking, directly or indirectly. We had to deal with that, if not drug traffickers were going to substitute the state because they [organized crime] have abundant economic resources, control territory, and subjected or controlled people.... They [organized crime] controlled part of La Mosquitia territory; so we intervened to drive them [drug traffickers] out and to recover state control over that territory. (Personal interview, June 19, 2015, Tegucigalpa, Honduras)

The essence of Deputy Admiral Espinoza's and General Pacheco's explanation is that drug lords infiltrated Mosquitia because that territory was unguarded. As criminal organizations threatened the survival of the state, government officials designed a military and political strategy to regain control of the eastern territory and displace drug traffickers from the region. The military viewed drug lords as outsiders who either employed Miskito villagers as hired hands or bought large expanses of land to launder drug money or build clandestine airstrips, storage facilities, and training grounds. In areas where land holding

¹⁰ Between 2008 and 2012, the United States allotted \$98.95 million dollars to support security efforts in Honduras through the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) (Meyer and Ribando Seelke 2015, 17–18).

¹¹ In 2007, Nicaragua began titling macro-territories in the east only (Herrera and Edouard 2013, 12).

is communal, drug traffickers used cocaine profits to establish and extend private property relations and expand the agricultural frontier (McSweeney et al. 2017; Paley 2014). For instance, General Ronal Rivera Amador,¹² director of the School for Commanders and Generals (personal interview, May 13, 2015, Tegucigalpa, Honduras), and Infantry Colonel Alfonso Reyes, director of the National Defense College (personal interview, May 6, 2015, Tegucigalpa, Honduras), believed that government neglect of Mosquitia paved the way for drug trafficking to become “a way of life.” Local villagers began to protect the drug trade and to refuse collaboration with anti-narcotics agents, whom locals viewed as threats to the only profitable source of livelihood in the region (personal interview, Gustavo Adolfo Paz Escalante, June 18, 2018, Tegucigalpa, Honduras). As General René Osorio Canales, the chief of the armed forces during Lobo’s administration, puts it, “The [eastern] sector has been the platform of drug traffickers.... It is a flat region where an airplane can easily land.... Humble local people have seized the opportunity to earn a living transporting drugs and making due because there are no other livelihood options” (personal interview, June 30, 2015, Tegucigalpa, Honduras).

Because government officials surmised that the drug boom directly resulted from state absence, Presidents Lobo and Hernández invested substantial military and administrative resources to reestablish the state’s presence. The state’s anti-narcotics approach intertwines a military and a political element. The military plan is to stop the flow of drugs by intercepting cocaine cargoes landing or docking in Mosquitia. The political strategy centers on building alliances with local leaders.

Through its titling program, the central government built new hierarchical governing structures that are prone to political manipulation and co-optation. In 2012, the central government began working with local political elites to identify the exact area to which the state would issue land titles. Once the boundaries were identified, the state issued a communal property title to a Territorial Council on behalf of multiple villages. The Territorial Council, headed by one political appointee, became the official representative of the communities specified in the communal land title. These political appointees are the key intermediaries between the state and the villagers. **Figure 2** shows in boldface the new governing structures that the state built and bolstered by titling intercommunal lands.

Political elites used the new institutions to build a patronage system that generated local political support. In fact, the central governments channeled all of the development programs and international aid through vetted political intermediaries. For instance, the Hernández administration works with local ethnic leaders to implement the “Plan of Action for the Development of La Mosquitia.” This plan contains new projects intended to gather detailed demographic and geographic information about the east. For instance, the central government worked closely with ethnic allies to carry out a comprehensive door-to-door survey in the entire Gracias a Dios Province. The US Department of Defense also funded a detailed mapping project of the eastern territory, called Indigenous Central America, conducted by the University of Kansas with the help of the very same local intermediaries.¹³

The central government also used these new institutions to mute widespread criticisms about the heavy use of military power to ensure state dominance in the eastern territory. After all, local political elites, rather than common villagers, are the ones connected to national and international organizations that could openly criticize the government for the militarization of Gracias a Dios Province. In the east, there is no clear dividing line between civilian and military functions. The center-right governments militarized police work and public security in Honduras by decrees that authorize the armed forces to issue and carry

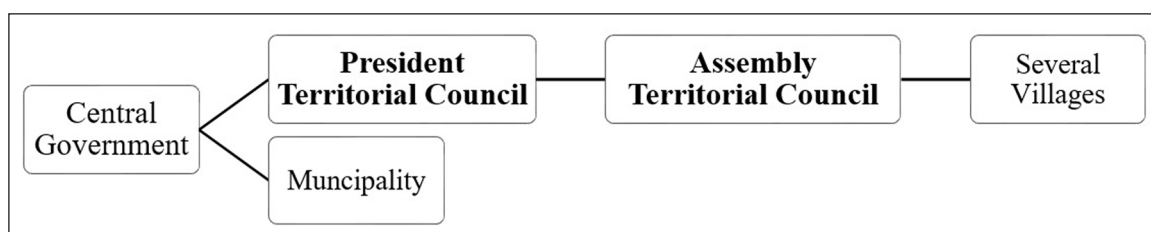


Figure 2: New hierarchical governing structure.

¹² General Rivera Amador was the commander of a military base in Mosquitia (2012–2013).

¹³ “The Human Geography Resilience and Change: Land Rights and Political Stability in Latin American Indigenous Societies,” Minerva Research Initiative Awarded Project, 2013–2018, <https://minerva.defense.gov/Research/Funded-Projects/Article/2109822/the-human-geography-resilience-and-change/>.

out arrest orders, undertake search and seizure activities, and conduct anti-narcotics operations (OAS and Inter-American Commission of Human Rights 2015, 99–112).¹⁴ Moreover, the central government has given the military the responsibility of providing local public goods in the east, typically a civilian task in other countries. For instance, the armed forces are in charge of the only regional hospital that exists in the eastern province, located in Puerto Lempira. The army also monitors environmental reserves and acts to control environmental crimes within these areas.¹⁵ The central government has even welcomed US military assistance for building basic infrastructure. President Hernández himself said, “U.S. troops are going to help us build new educational centers, health care centers, and they will probably assist in the construction of the Mosquitia Agricultural University” (*Diálogo* 2015). Without making a distinction between military and civilian functions, and without seriously considering local preferences and needs for policing and social good provisions, the central government grants ample power to the armed forces in the east.

In sum, the military elite fully supports titling macroterritories as a policy that reinforces the state’s territorial power. Titling ethnic lands in the east created new governing institutions to control the underpopulated, remote, and geographically extensive eastern territory through local political intermediaries that state elites can co-opt and manipulate. Through greater government intervention, the state sought to build local acquiescence and political support to displace drug trafficking organizations. The government uses ethnic land titling to win the war on drugs.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article has been to show that the security interests of high-ranking government officials is a major motivation behind ethnic land titling in weak institutional environments. Even though ethnic land titling continues to be an important strategy of statecraft in contemporary times, it has remained largely invisible in the political science literature about Latin America. My analysis offers a definition of ethnic land titling; proposes a state-centric approach to explain variation in titling practices; and advances a hypothesis about titled ethnic land by using original data from Honduras. I emphasize the role of security interests in designing and titling vast areas as ethnic lands to project state power, which contrasts sharply with accounts of political decision-making as primarily based in economic self-interests or as a reaction to ethnic mobilization. My emphasis on security interests makes it possible to connect the study of land institutions to broader, inherently political understandings of state reach into rural areas and to the strategies that central governments deploys to regain and maintain territorial control.

The state-centric framework and empirical evidence I present runs counter to a trend political science takes individual economic interests as an overriding factor for explaining institutional outcomes. For many, government officials in developing countries are political actors under the sway of domestic interest groups motivated by overpowering economic incentives. My analysis adds new evidence to the established literature by showing that government officials choose to title ethnic lands when security challenges arise. These land tenure regimes generate a web of institutions at the local level that anchor the power of the government. To do so, they back the power of local ethnic elites to allocate, adjudicate, transfer, and manage land and land-based natural resources in the newly designed subnational territorial units. In this way, the government builds new institutional hierarchies and manipulates local intermediaries to monitor and control the local population. In turn, these decisions are consequential for the character of citizenship and long-run economic trajectories of regions with these differentiated institutions. Some of the larger political struggles over ethnic land rights in the Americas can be better understood from this perspective.

A major contribution of my study is to suggest that the compulsion to control territory—common to all states—can be a powerful motivator to stop the creation and growth of land markets in resource-rich localities as a way to neutralize security challenges. Conversely, governments are unlikely to implement or accelerate ethnic land titling to respond to Indigenous demands when there are no pressing security issues at stake. For government officials, the strategy of building ethnic communal property regimes is viable when either neglect or moves toward land commodification risk alienating ethnic subjects and increase internal security threats—in the Honduran case, the power of drug-trafficking organizations. I underscore that advances in ethnic land titling covaries with the security interest of high-ranking government officials

¹⁴ Decree PCM-075-2011 of December 5, 2012, <https://tzibalnaah.unah.edu.hn/bitstream/handle/123456789/1938/2011125.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>; Decree PCM-009-2012 of March 20, 2012, <http://www.sefin.gob.hn/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Dec-Eje-PCM-No-009-2012-Prorroga-el-Estado-Emergencia-Seguridad-Nacional1.pdf>; Decree PCM-020-2012 of June 26, 2012; and Decree PCM-037-2012 of September 25, 2012.

¹⁵ Honduras Decree 41-2011, April 12, 2011, <https://tzibalnaah.unah.edu.hn/bitstream/handle/123456789/1612/20110627.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>.

to regain control of contested geographies. This finding, in turn, suggests that government officials choose institutional outcomes that economic elites dislike when and if state power is jeopardized. It is not that government officials respond to ethnic land demands in a technocratic way, but that they adopt ethnic land titling as a strategy to ensure institutional access and presence in contested territories, even when doing so runs against the core interests of economic elites. I conclude that government officials will act independently from economic interest groups only if and when ethnic land titling serves to prevent losing territorial authority and alleviating security concerns.

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