

*Former Honduran President
Juan Orlando Hernandez guilty
in drug trafficking case*

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New York, March 8 (RHC)-- Former Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez has been found guilty in a New York federal courtroom of participating in a scheme to ship cocaine through his country and into the United States.

On Friday, a jury in the Southern District Court of New York rendered its verdict after two weeks of argument, convicting Hernandez on charges related to drug trafficking and weapons possession.

He was convicted on all three criminal counts he faced: the first for conspiring to import cocaine into the US, the second for carrying “machine guns and destructive devices” to help in cocaine shipments, and the third for conspiring to use those weapons to pursue his aims. The latter two charges carry maximum sentences of life in prison.

U.S. prosecutors had accused Hernandez of partnering “with some of the largest cocaine traffickers in the world” and using his public office to protect shipments passing through Honduras.

In exchange, the prosecutors argued, Hernandez received bribes to further his political career. In one instance, as Hernandez campaigned for his first term as president in 2013, prosecutors said he accepted approximately \$1 million from Joaquín “El Chapo” Guzman, the leader of Mexico’s Sinaloa Cartel, a powerful drug smuggling syndicate.

Hernandez has denied the charges against him and has instead sought to bolster his image as a tough-on-crime politician, known for “mano dura” or “iron fist” tactics. His defense team likewise tried to frame damaging testimony as attempts by drug traffickers and other criminals to get lighter sentencing in their own cases.

“They all have motivation to lie, and they are professional liars,” Hernandez said of the prosecution witnesses. Defense lawyer Renato Stabile used his closing argument this week to make the case that his client had “been wrongfully charged.”

But the prosecution painted Hernandez as using the “full power and strength of the state” to transform Honduras into “a cocaine superhighway to the United States.” Hernandez’s two terms in office, from 2014 to 2022, had been marked by a series of scandals, and his trial in the U.S. was closely watched by Hondurans at home and in the country’s diaspora, with some appearing outside the court to demonstrate.

“The people suffered so much in Honduras,” one courtroom attendee, Cecilio Alfaro, told Al Jazeera last week. “There’s going to be justice, divine justice.”

Known by his initials JOH, Hernandez campaigned on the slogan of “una vida mejor” — a better life for Hondurans. He also pledged to crack down on drug trafficking within the country’s borders, using his inauguration speech to deliver a message to cocaine smugglers: “The party is over.”

But quickly, his own administration became embroiled in controversy, including allegations he had dipped into funds for the country’s Social Security Institute for personal gain.

U.S. prosecutors said he also used his office to protect his younger brother, former Honduran Congressman Juan Antonio “Tony” Hernandez, from arrest and extradition. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) ultimately arrested Tony Hernández in 2018, while his brother was still president.

In 2021, Tony Hernandez was sentenced to life in prison in a U.S. federal court for his role in distributing 185 tonnes of cocaine.

Only weeks after leaving office in February 2022, former President Hernandez surrendered to U.S. authorities who had surrounded his residence in the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa. He was extradited that April.

In a news release after Friday’s conviction, the United States Attorney’s Office hailed the jury’s decision as sending a message of justice to “all corrupt politicians who would consider a similar path”.

“Juan Orlando Hernandez had every opportunity to be a force for good in his native Honduras,” said U.S. Attorney Damian Williams. “Instead, he chose to abuse his office and country for his own personal gain.”

Attorney General Merrick Garland likewise said Hernandez had “abused his position” to transform Honduras into a “narco-state.” “As today’s conviction demonstrates, the Justice Department is disrupting

the entire ecosystem of drug trafficking networks that harm the American people, no matter how far or how high we must go,” Garland said in a statement on Friday.

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