

## The New York Times

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# ***Roberto Suazo Córdova, Ex-President of Honduras, Dies at 91***

**By Joseph B. Treaster**

Dec. 23, 2018

Roberto Suazo Córdova, a country doctor who was president of Honduras in the 1980s as the country was becoming the main United States base for proxy wars in neighboring Nicaragua and El Salvador, died on Saturday in Tegucigalpa, the capital. He was 91.

His death, following surgery in a military hospital, was confirmed by Carlos Roberto Flores, a former president of Honduras and a former chief of staff to Mr. Suazo Córdova.

Mr. Suazo Córdova was the first civilian president of Honduras after nearly a decade of military rule in a Central American country that had been dominated by the military through most of its history.

But his authority was limited. The commander of the armed forces, Gen. Gustavo Álvarez Martínez, remained the most powerful figure in Honduras, inviting the United States to train and arm anti-Nicaraguan government forces — known as the Contras — on Honduran soil and serving as the point man for United States officials as they poured tens of millions of dollars into defeating the communists in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Still, Mr. Suazo Córdova came to symbolize an overeager embrace of American political ambitions in a country where Washington and American companies had often called the shots.

“He completely and willingly did everything the Americans wanted,” said Rodolfo Pastor Fasquelle, a historian, former minister of culture and a presidential candidate in Honduras in the early 1990s.

Mr. Suazo Córdova’s main accomplishment, some Americans and Hondurans said, may have been to hold together a nominally civilian government and turn over the presidency to another civilian. In its 161 years of independence before Mr. Suazo Córdova took office, Honduras had endured 385 armed rebellions, 126 governments and 16 constitutions.

“There was always a lot of apprehension, mistrust between the military and the politicians,” said Mr. Flores, who was president of Honduras from 1998 to 2002 and is now an owner of a company that runs the newspapers La Tribuna and El País and a television station. “It was a hard transition.”

It was late in the Cold War when Mr. Suazo Córdova became president, in 1982. Washington saw allies of the Soviet Union advancing in Latin America. Mr. Suazo Córdova and General Álvarez worried that communism could spread to Honduras, a country the size of Tennessee with a population of about 4 million. The Americans and Hondurans wanted to overthrow the Marxist Sandinista government in Nicaragua and help the government in El Salvador defeat leftist guerrillas.

Tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians died in the fighting before the United States abandoned its campaign against the Sandinistas and the warring sides in El Salvador agreed to a truce. Scores of Hondurans were kidnapped, tortured and killed as political enemies. Human rights groups accused General Álvarez of directing death squads.

When the United States Congress cut funding to the Contras, the Reagan administration raised money by illegally selling weapons to Iran in what became known as the Iran-Contra Affair.

Mr. Suazo Córdova loudly proclaimed his animosity toward communism and several times met with President Ronald Reagan and Vice President George H. W. Bush in Washington. Mr. Reagan stopped briefly on a Central America trip to talk with Mr. Suazo Córdova in Honduras, and Mr. Bush once went to see him at his home in the small farm town of La Paz, northwest of the capital.

The military is still perhaps the most powerful institution in Honduras; it stepped in to depose President Manuel Zelaya in 2009. Six civilian presidents had followed Mr. Suazo Córdova into office. Since the coup, two more civilians have been elected, one for a second term.



Mr. Suazo Córdova is decorated during the 25th anniversary celebration of the Honduran Constitution in 2007. Elmer Martinez/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Mr. Suazo Córdova did not aspire to lofty social goals, former American and Honduran officials said. Nor did he leave much of a mark on the many social problems that had become deeply woven into the life of one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere, now struggling with one of the highest murder rates in the world.

As a politician, Mr. Suazo Córdova played up his rural origins, often wearing a wide-brimmed cowboy hat. He had a playful, rough-edged and disarming way of talking, said Cresencio S. Arcos Jr., an American diplomat who worked closely with him in the early 1980s and was ambassador to Honduras from 1989 to 1993.

But, Mr. Arcos said, Mr. Suazo Córdova had a steely core. In early 1984 he sided with dissident military officers who had put a gun to General Álvarez's head and shipped him out of the country. Mr. Suazo Córdova was the godfather of a child of the coup leader, Col. Walter Lopez Reyes of the air force.

Later, friends of General Álvarez tried to assassinate Mr. Suazo Córdova. The F.B.I. discovered the plot in Miami. Ultimately, General Álvarez's former chief of staff, an arms dealer he had befriended, and several others were sent to prison. The plot, investigators said, was going to be financed from the sale of cocaine smuggled into Florida. General Álvarez returned to Honduras and was killed in 1989 in an ambush near his home in the capital.

In December 1982, a daughter of Mr. Suazo Córdova's, Dr. Judith Xiomara Suazo Estrada, then 33, was kidnapped by guerrillas in Guatemala, held for 10 days and released after Guatemala and more than a dozen Latin American newspapers agreed to publish a statement by the guerrillas describing Honduras as the "imperialist headquarters for the invasion of Nicaragua." The guerrillas referred to Mr. Suazo Córdova as "the buffoon of the imperialist plans."

Mr. Suazo Cordova suffered a heart attack in the summer of 1983, when he was 55. He was treated at an American field hospital in Honduras and then flown by the United States to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, according to John Negroponete, who worked closely with Mr. Suazo Cordova as the American ambassador in Honduras from 1981, just before Mr. Suazo Cordova was elected, until 1985. (Critics of United State policy in Honduras often focused on Mr. Negroponete. They sometimes referred to him derogatorily as the proconsul and as the third member of a ruling triumvirate.)

Mr. Suazo Cordova had once been a hard drinker. "When I first met him," Mr. Negroponete said, "He would tell you he hadn't had a drink for years and he would tell you the day he stopped and how long it had been since then."

Roberto Suazo Córdova was born in La Paz on March 17, 1927, the youngest of five children of Julian Suazo and Matilde Cordova. His father owned a small farm and was governor of the province of La Paz in the 1930s.

Mr. Suazo Córdova had six children with four women, said Jorge Canahuati, the chief executive of a company that publishes the newspapers *Diario La Prensa* and *Diario El Herald*. Besides his daughter Dr. Suazo Estrada, his survivors include three other children, Joseph Julian Suazo Cervantes, Socorro Maria Suazo Cervantes and Carmen Chavarria.

Mr. Suazo Córdova graduated in 1949 from a combined undergraduate and medical program at the University of San Carlos of Guatemala. He worked in a hospital in Guatemala City for four years, then went home to practice medicine for 25 years in La Paz and begin his career as a politician.

Mr. Suazo Córdova served several terms in Congress and three times helped rewrite the Constitution. Under pressure from Washington and some Honduran business leaders, the military agreed to permit elections in 1981. Mr. Suazo Córdova had become the protégé of the leader of the Liberal Party, Modesto Rodas Alvarado.

After Mr. Rodas died in 1979, Mr. Suazo Córdova became the party's leader and, later, its presidential candidate. Mr. Suazo Córdova won the election in 1981 with 53 percent of the vote.

Toward the end of his presidency 32 years ago, Mr. Suazo Córdova maneuvered to get another two years in office. The idea was rejected, and he eventually lost the leadership of the Liberal Party.

**He went home to La Paz to tend his small dairy farm. At one point he persuaded the government to renovate a building in La Paz as a cultural center. But he never again ventured into national politics.**

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 24, 2018, on Page D8 of the New York edition with the headline: Roberto Suazo Córdova, President of Honduras During the 1980s, Dies at 91