

Honduran coup tries to stop Latin American left's advance

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The coup against Honduras President Manuel Zelaya is a last-ditch effort by Honduras's entrenched economic and political interests to stave off the advance of the new left governments that have taken hold in Latin America over the past decade.

Zelaya said after being forcibly dumped in Costa Rica: "This is a vicious plot planned by elites. The elites only want to keep the country isolated and in extreme poverty."

Zelaya should know. His roots are in the country's large land-owning class, having devoted most of his life to agriculture and forestry enterprises that he inherited.

He ran for president as the head of the centre-right Liberal Party on a fairly conservative platform, promising to be tough on crime and to cut the budget.

Inaugurated in January 2006, he supported the US-backed Central American Free Trade Agreement, signed two years earlier. He continued the economic policies of neoliberalism, privatising state-held enterprises.

But about half-way into his four-year term, the winds of change blowing from the south caught his imagination, particularly those coming from Hugo Chavez's Venezuela, the largest regional power fronting on the Caribbean.

With no petroleum resources, Honduras signed a generous oil subsidy deal with Venezuela. Last year, Honduras joined the emerging regional trade bloc, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).

Inspired by Venezuela, ALBA now has Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, Dominica, Ecuador, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Antigua and Barbuda as members.

Simultaneously, Zelaya implemented domestic reform policies, significantly increasing the minimum wage of workers and teachers' salaries, while increasing spending on health care and education.

The upshot is that a reform-minded president supported by labour unions and social organisations is now pitted against a mafia-like, drug-ridden, corrupt political elite that is accustomed to controlling the Supreme Court, Congress and the presidency.

It is a story often repeated elsewhere in Latin America, with the United States almost always weighing in on the side of the established, entrenched interests.

The Honduran elites were outraged that a member of their class would carry out even modest reforms. They began to portray Zelaya as a demagogue, and demonised Chavez as trying to take over the country.

When Zelaya announced that he would hold a plebiscite on June 28 to see if the country wanted to

have the option in the upcoming November presidential elections to vote for the convening of a constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution, the political establishment would have none of it.

They falsely claimed that Zelaya was trying to stand for re-election (a lie repeated by the international media).

In fact, the possibility that a president might serve a second term could only emerge in a new constitution that would not be drafted until well after Zelaya left office in January, 2010.

The elites did, however, have reason to fear a new magna carta, since this is the path that Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia and Rafael Correa in Ecuador have used to draft new constitutions to begin transforming their countries' political, social and economic structures.

The political establishment decided to nip this process in the bud by quashing the plebiscite scheduled for June 28. The Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional and the military refused to help distribute the ballots.

Then Zelaya fired the head of the army, General Romeo Vasquez, and led workers and social movement activists to seize ballots stored at an air force base for distribution. At 6am on the day of the plebiscite, the military sent a special army unit to seize Zelaya in his pyjamas and to deport him to Costa Rica.

The next day, the Supreme Court levied charges of treason against Zelaya and the Congress elevated its president, Roberto Micheletti, to be the interim president of the country.

The rest of the Americas, and most of the world, reacted with outrage against the coup. The Organization of the Americas convened an emergency session and voted unanimously to call upon the coup makers to restore Zelaya to power.

Regional organisations such as the Group of Rio also denounced the coup, and the European Economic Union and the World Bank announced that they were suspending economic assistance to Honduras.

Even the right-wing governments of Alvaro Uribe of Colombia and Felipe Calderon of Mexico felt compelled to denounce the coup.

What explains this virtually unanimous opposition to the coup? Most of Latin America still remembers the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s when three-quarters of the continent's population fell under military rule. Countries such as Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil still bear the scars and traumas of this period and do not want to contemplate any opening that would allow their militaries to begin interfering once again in the political sphere.

The US is also opposed to the coup, with President Barack Obama denouncing it, saying it set a "terrible precedent". He said, "We do not want to go back to a dark past" in which coups often trumped elections. "We always want to stand with democracy."

Many observers are suspicious of how solid the US stand against the coup is. Obama, given his emphasis on multilateralism, may have had little choice, knowing that his predecessor George Bush had roiled Latin America when he rushed to endorse the coup attempt against Chavez in 2002.

The State Department has taken a more tepid stance. When Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was asked if "restoring the constitutional order" in Honduras meant restoring Zelaya, she would not say

yes.

The New York Times said she did not take to the Honduran president when she met him on June 2 at the meeting of the OAS in Tegucigalpa. Zelaya brought up his plans for the referendum on June 28, and US officials took the position that it was unconstitutional and would inflame the political situation.

Washington also has a very close relationship with the Honduran military, which goes back decades.

During the 1980s, the US used bases in Honduras to train and arm the Contras, right-wing paramilitaries who became known for their atrocities in their war against the left-wing Sandinista government in neighboring Nicaragua.

John Negroponte, who became the czar of intelligence during the Bush administration after serving as US ambassador to Iraq, first achieved notoriety when he served as US ambassador to Honduras in the early 1980s and granted US approval to death squads run by a special Honduran military unit against domestic opponents.

On July 1, the OAS meeting in Washington called for the restoration of Zelaya to office by July 4. The head of the OAS, Jose Miguel Insulza of Chile, along with the president of the UN General Assembly Miguel d'Escoto of Nicaragua, and presidents Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and Rafael Correa of Argentina and Ecuador respectively, have said they will accompany Zelaya on his return.

But it is doubtful if he will be allowed to return by the coup leaders. For Micheletti and Vasquez, the Rubicon has been crossed and they cannot abandon power without suffering consequences.

Any aircraft trying to descend with this list of dignitaries would require air-landing clearance by Honduran authorities and this would likely be denied.

The key may well be whether the Obama administration is willing to bring inordinate pressure to bear on its historic allies to impose the deadline for Zelaya's return. And if the external pressure gets Zelaya back in office, will he be allowed to get the vote for a constituent assembly that the country so badly needs to become a progressive society?

P.S.

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