The Honduran coup: another US destabilization operation

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While publicly opposing the military coup that ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya on Sunday, the Obama administration on Monday indicated that it will not cut off aid to the Central American country or demand Zelaya's reinstatement.

Following a White House meeting with Washington's closest Latin American ally, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, President Obama reiterated the position that the ouster of Zelaya was illegal. However, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told reporters at a State Department briefing that the US government was refraining from formally declaring the removal of Zelaya a "coup."

Under the Foreign Assistance Act, no US aid can be given to a country whose elected head of government is removed by a military coup. The US is providing Honduras with $43 million in aid this year and maintains a major military presence in the country, including a base staffed by 600 US troops located 50 miles from the capital, Tegucigalpa. The US has also refrained from recalling its ambassador to Honduras.

Earlier on Monday, Clinton was asked whether the stated US goal of "restoring democratic order in Honduras" included returning Zelaya to the presidency. "We haven't laid out any demands that we're insisting on," Clinton replied.

The official US line is that it attempted unsuccessfully to convince the Honduran military not to proceed with the coup. However, this amounts to a tacit acknowledgment that Washington was well aware of the coup plans.

Given the intimate and long-standing ties between the US and the Honduran military, the record over many decades of US-backed coups and military dictatorships in the country and the region, and the ongoing efforts to destabilize the regime of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, it is not credible that the US played no role in the removal of one of Chavez's allies in Latin America.

Sunday's coup was the culmination of an escalating political crisis in the impoverished country. Zelaya, a wealthy rancher, was elected in 2005 as the candidate of the bourgeois establishment Liberal Party. He ran on a right-wing program, but shifted in the intervening years, adopting a populist and nationalist persona in order to appease growing popular discontent, and allying himself with Cuba, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, all of which are headed by regimes considered by Washington to be hostile to US interests in Latin America.

At the beginning of June, Zelaya hosted the meeting of the Organization of American States (OAS) which provisionally removed the long-standing US-backed ban on Cuba. He was among the most strident advocates of allowing Cuba to join the organization, frustrating US efforts to maintain the political quarantine on the Castro regime.

Zelaya increasingly earned the enmity of dominant sections of the Honduran business elite, the military brass and the Church—the forces most closely allied to US imperialism. On June 12, a motorcade transporting Zelaya came under fire in Tegucigalpa. At least one bullet hit the President's limousine, shattering the windshield.

Zelaya's effort to hold a referendum on changing the constitution became the pretext for the coup. His opponents declared the referendum an attempt to override a constitutional limit on presidential tenure to one four-year term. The referendum proposed that a vote be held on November 29, the same day as national elections, to establish a constitutional convention.

Earlier this month the Honduran Supreme Court declared the referendum unconstitutional, and army chief General Romeo Vasquez refused to allow it to proceed. When Zelaya fired Vasquez, the Supreme Court overturned the action and reinstated the general. Last Thursday, Zelaya led a demonstration to seize referendum ballots that were being held by the military.

When Zelaya attempted on Sunday to hold the referendum, recast as a nonbinding opinion poll, the military broke into his home, arrested him and deported him to Costa Rica. The Honduran Congress, with the imprimatur of the Supreme Court, elected the parliamentary speaker, Roberto Micheletti, a member of Zelaya's Liberal Party, as "interim president."

The military imposed a de facto state of siege in Tegucigalpa, cutting off electricity, closing down pro-Zelaya media and reportedly arresting the foreign minister and other government officials. Cuba has charged that its ambassador to Honduras and the ambassadors from Nicaragua and Venezuela were beaten by troops carrying out the coup.

Since Sunday, a tense standoff has continued between the army and pro-Zelaya demonstrators outside the presidential palace. On Monday there were reports of tear gas attacks on demonstrators.

Zelaya has vowed to return to power, and the coup has been condemned by the US, the European Union, the OAS, the United Nations and the leaders of Venezuela, Bolivia, Nicaragua, Colombia and other countries allied with the Zelaya regime, who met Sunday night in Managua.

Chavez has, justifiably, cast the coup as an overt threat to his regime. He has charged the US with complicity, alleging involvement by Otto Reich, a long-time anti-Castro operative and favorite of anti-Castro exiles in Miami. Reich played a key role as a Reagan administration State Department official in the Iran-Contra conspiracy, in which Reagan authorized secret funding for the anti-

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Sandinista Contras, in violation of the Boland amendment which had been passed by Congress banning US aid to the Contra death squads.

Reich was one of a number of Iran-Contra veterans who were appointed to government posts in the administration of George W. Bush, serving as assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs.

The US used southern Honduras as the base of operations for its proxy war in the 1980s against the left nationalist, Cuban-allied regime in neighboring Nicaragua.

There are parallels in the Honduran events to the abortive 2002 US-backed coup against Venezuela's Chavez. The current US ambassador to Honduras, Hugo Llorens, undoubtedly played a significant role in that failed attempt to oust an elected Latin American president.

In 2002 and 2003, Llorens served as the director of Andean affairs on the Bush administration's National Security Council (NSC). In that post, he was the principal adviser to the president and the NSC on issues relating to Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

Otto Reich was also implicated in the 2002 coup attempt. He met with Venezuelan opposition figures in the run-up to the attempted ouster of Chavez.

Reich is currently a board member of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, better known as the School of the Americas, located in Fort Benning, Georgia. Among the tens of thousands of Latin American military officers—and death squad leaders—who have been trained at the School of the Americas are two of the leaders of Sunday's coup in Honduras, Army General Romeo Vasquez and Air Force General Luis Javier Prince Suazo.

Another graduate of the School of the Americas was Policarpo Paz Garcia, who ruled Honduras in 1980-82. Paz Garcia launched Battalion 3-16, one of the most feared death squads in Latin America.

Commenting on the calculations of the Obama administration, behind the official disapproval of the Honduran coup and the pro-democracy rhetoric, the intelligence web site Stratfor on Monday noted that the US could exert irresistible pressure on Honduras to restore Zelaya to power, since the US provides the market for 70 percent of the country's exports. "However,'" Stratfor wrote, "the aim of economic pressure would be for [interim President] Micheletti to make moves to support democracy, and open elections—such as those already scheduled for November 29—would easily appease the United States."

The *Washington Post* reported that John Negroponte, the long-time US State Department official, said that Clinton's remarks "appeared to reflect US reluctance to see Zelaya returned unconditionally to power." The newspaper quoted Negroponte as saying, "I think she wants to preserve some leverage to get Zelaya to back down from his insistence on a referendum."

Negroponte knows whereof he speaks. He was US ambassador to Honduras during the 1980s and virtually ran the US proxy war against Nicaragua that was based in Honduras.

It appears that the Obama administration is involved in an operation aimed at either permanently removing Zelaya or negotiating a return to power under conditions where his government would be weakened and its policies shifted in favor of US interests. This, in turn, would further US efforts to destabilize Chavez in Venezuela and shift the balance of power throughout Latin America.

The Obama administration has, however, learned something from the disastrous failure of the Bush administration's botched coup against Chavez seven years ago. It is seeking to conceal its real aims behind formal opposition to the coup in Honduras and a public posture of fidelity to democratic elections.

Moreover, the US is in no position to openly support a coup in Honduras or maintain a public stance of neutrality under conditions in which it is waging a propaganda war and destabilization campaign in Iran based on allegations that the regime headed by President Ahmadinejad stole the June 12 election.

An unmistakable indicator of the real attitude of the Obama administration to the events in Honduras is the response of the US media. The media, led by the *New York Times*, immediately embraced the claims of the Iranian opposition that the election had been rigged and a coup had been carried out, without presenting any concrete evidence to support the allegations. It provided nonstop coverage of antigovernment demonstrations, and proclaimed the dissident faction of the clerical regime to be heading a "green revolution" for democracy.

In contrast, the US media has provided only minimal coverage of a real coup in Honduras. It has barely reported the police-state measures, arrests and beatings carried out by the Honduran military, and treated the anti-coup protests with utter indifference. On Monday evening, the events in Honduras were relegated to a mere mention on all three network news broadcasts, well behind the death of Michael Jackson.

What accounts for this stark contrast? The simple fact that the US government opposes the victor in the Iranian election and supports those who ousted Zelaya in Honduras.

The media, in particular the *New York Times*, which supported the 2002 coup attempt against Chavez, provides a further indication of US involvement in the Honduran coup. One month ago, as the political crisis in Honduras was heating up, the *Times* published a provocative article entitled "Chavez Seeks Tighter Grip on the Military." The article retailed, without substantiation, claims of a massive crackdown by Chavez against dissidents within the Venezuelan military. This article, undoubtedly written on assignment from the CIA, was a certain indicator that the US was preparing subversion in the region.

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