

Washington's mediator in Honduran coup

Who is Oscar Arias?

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Costa Rican President Oscar Arias has been promoted in the US media as the ideal choice for mediating a settlement between the ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya and the leaders of the military coup that overthrew him.

He is praised for winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1987 as a reward for shepherding to completion the so-called Esquipulas II peace agreement, which became known as the Arias Plan. The pact laid the basis for the downfall of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua, the disarming of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) guerrillas in El Salvador, and the coming to power in both countries of governments closely aligned with Washington.

The product of one of Costa Rica's richest coffee-growing families, Arias, 68, got his start as an advisor to President Jose "Pepe" Figueres. The founder of the Party of National Liberation (PLN), Costa Rica's leading party, Figueres came to power after winning a civil war in 1948 in which he led a rebel army that joined the country's rightists and social democrats against the army and militias organized by the Stalinist Popular Vanguard Party, which was allied with a conservative bourgeois government.

Figueres's "liberal" anti-communist credentials won him support and funding from the CIA. He worked closely with the long-time agent Cord Meyer in setting up Latin American front organizations.

Arias, who succeeded Figueres as the leader of the PLN, was first elected president in 1986. A year later, he was credited with Esquipulas II's ratification by the presidents of five Central American countries and awarded the Nobel Prize.

The only two other surviving signatories of the pact—Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega and Guatemala's

Vinicio Cerezo—have hotly disputed the credit given to Arias, charging that there was no "Arias Plan," and that the initiative had been taken by Cerezo before Arias was even elected president.

In an interview given to a Nicaraguan radio station on the 20th anniversary of Esquipulas, both Cerezo and Ortega charged that Arias's main role in the peace talks was to "conspire" with Washington to freeze Nicaragua out of the negotiations in an attempt to turn the pact into an ultimatum to the Sandinista government.

Ultimately, the Sandinistas bowed to Esquipulas, granting amnesty to the US-backed Contra guerrillas who had carried out war crimes against the Nicaraguan people, and agreeing to an election in which Washington was given free rein to pour in millions of dollars and other covert aid to secure the victory of the right-wing opposition. Similarly, the FMLN agreed to a settlement that allowed its leaders to turn from guerrillas into bourgeois politicians and parliamentarians.

Arias parlayed the Nobel Prize he won for services rendered to US imperialism—the same prize given to Henry Kissinger—into a personal fortune and a reputation as a world "statesman."

He himself managed to get Costa Rica's constitution changed, by means of sordid judicial maneuvers, so that he could run for another term as president in 2006. There were no protests heard in Washington or in the US media over that episode.

With political and financial backing from the same multinational and Central American business interests that supported the coup in Honduras, Arias took office with the goal of achieving passage of a free trade agreement with the United States. He succeeded in getting the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) passed in October 2007 by the narrowest of

margins and over bitter opposition from large sections of the population.

While serving as the mediator between the coup leaders and the ousted Honduran president, there are indications that Arias may have had foreknowledge of the overthrow of the neighboring government. Enrique Orteza Colindres, who was named as foreign minister of the coup regime (he was forced to resign this week after publicly referring to Obama as “ese negrito que no sabe nada,” which roughly translates as “this little black who knows nothing”) told the BBC that the coup leaders consulted with Arias before carrying out their action.

“President Oscar Arias was spoken to and he was in agreement, to avoid a tragedy, to receive him in his country,” Orteza said.

Whether or not Arias was a silent partner in the coup, there is no doubt, given his long history, that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton tapped him as the mediator with the assurance that he will once again prove to be Washington’s faithful servant.



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