

# Honduras: Tensions mount as US-backed mediation stalls

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Political tensions have continued to rise in Honduras as the regime brought to power by the June 28 coup has rejected one proposal after another produced by the US-brokered mediation effort led by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias.

Opponents of the coup have called for a general strike beginning Thursday, while the country's ousted elected president, Manuel Zelaya, has announced his intention to cross over one of the Honduran borders, defying the coup regime and the military, which have threatened to arrest him on sight. Following the breakdown of negotiations between Zelaya and the coup leaders, Costa Rican President Arias warned that Honduras is on the brink of "civil war and bloodshed."

Zelaya has accepted the reactionary framework stemming from Arias' efforts. This includes his return to Honduras as an essentially powerless figurehead in a government of "national union and reconciliation" dominated by the same men who overthrew him. It also has included calls for an amnesty for the coup leaders, the moving up of the country's presidential elections and Zelaya's commitment to cease any bid to alter the country's constitution.

This is the scenario preferred by Washington. This strategy is indicative of the change that has taken place in US foreign policy since the coming into office of the Obama administration. The Bush White House openly praised the leaders of the 2002 coup in Venezuela and recognized their regime. Under Obama, however, the US government has formally criticized the action in Honduras, while working to ensure that the key objectives of the coup plotters are achieved, even as a façade of democracy is preserved. This is more a matter of style than substance, as in both cases there is ample evidence that Washington was behind the coups.

However, the Honduran coup regime led by Roberto Micheletti, the former leader of the Honduran congress who was proclaimed president after Zelaya was bundled out of the country by the military, has remained intransigent. Thus far, it has refused to endorse any proposal—including one submitted Tuesday by its own chief negotiator—that would permit Zelaya to return to Honduras for any other purpose than being arrested and placed on trial for supposed violations of the country's constitution.

*New York Times*, the latest the proposal by the illegal regime's foreign minister, Carlos Lopez Contreras, included moving the elections up a month, to October, barring any attempt by Zelaya to amend the constitution and offering an amnesty of only six months, after which charges could be brought against him. It also called for a "truth commission" to review the events surrounding the coup and the monitoring of the agreement by the Organization of American States and the UN. Even the limited amnesty, however, was vetoed by the regime's leaders.

The coup regime has sent a lobbying group—dominated by business executives and other political supporters—to Washington to convince the US government to back Micheletti.

According to the Associated Press, the group is portraying the regime brought to power in the June 28 coup as "a bulwark against 'dictatorship' and 'communism.'" It has also invoked their support of "free trade" with the US and chided the US government for forgetting their debt to Honduras, based on its use of the country as a military base of operations for the CIA-directed contra war against Nicaragua and counterinsurgency operations in El Salvador during the 1980s.

It was during this period—in 1982—that the current constitution of Honduras was drafted. The document—largely dictated by then-US Ambassador John Negroponte and the Honduran military—is invoked as the sacred cause which Micheletti and company claimed they were defending in last month's coup.

It has done so in the more than three weeks since the coup through a campaign of repression and intimidation, that has included the arbitrary arrests of more than 1,000 Hondurans, the assassination of opposition leaders, the army's use of live ammunition against demonstrators and the shutting down of those sections of the media that opposed the overthrow of Zelaya.

According to the State Department, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Micheletti from New Delhi Monday, after the second round of mediation in Costa Rica broke down. The official story is that Clinton had "a very tough phone call" with the leader of the coup regime, threatening the imposition of US sanctions if he failed to accept Arias' offer.

In all likelihood, Clinton was trying to convince Micheletti that the proposal for a government of "unity and reconciliation"

would represent a victory for those who organized the coup, marginalizing Zelaya and upholding the interests of the Honduran ruling elite.

The close relations between US officials and the coup leaders have been evident during the mediation process. US Ambassador Hugo Llorens and Assistant Secretary of State Thomas Shannon—both holdovers from the Bush administration—have repeatedly consulted with them.

And, as was revealed earlier this week by the Honduran daily *La Tribuna*, Ambassador Llorens met with key politicians and businessmen supporting the coup and presented the terms of the proposal made by the Costa Rican president 24 hours before they were given to Zelaya and formally unveiled in San Jose. The obvious issue raised was whether the proposal was actually prepared in Costa Rica, or dictated from Washington.

A glimpse of Washington's real attitude toward the coup in Honduras also emerged in a revealing press conference at the State Department Monday.

When a reporter asked about indications that Zelaya has sought to distance himself from Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez—reportedly one of the demands of the Obama administration—State Department spokesman Philip J. Crowley answered as follows:

“We certainly think that if we were choosing a model government and a model leader for countries of the region to follow, that the current leadership in Venezuela would not be a particular model. If that is the lesson that President Zelaya has learned from this episode, that would be a good lesson.” (Emphasis added)

The reporter pressed further, asking whether this wasn't “justifying ... the coup d'état,” and similar actions elsewhere should “any government try to follow the socialist government of Venezuela.”

Crowley made no attempt to refute this suggestion, stating only that Washington was “concerned about unhelpful steps that he's [Chavez] taken with some of his neighbors ... whether it's Honduras on the one hand, or whether it's Colombia on the other.”

The State Department spokesman also reiterated that Washington has not taken the position that the overthrow of Zelaya was a coup. Asked why the US government's statements on the matter failed to mention Zelaya's return to power, he told the media that they “shouldn't personalize this.”

The coincidence of views between Washington and the cabal of Honduran politicians, generals and businessmen that overthrew Zelaya extends well beyond the question of Venezuela.

The Zelaya government's limited reform measures included the raising of the minimum wage by 60 percent, which was opposed by both the local oligarchy and foreign capital that has used the country as a cheap labor manufacturing platform. The measure affected only 500,000 of the country's economically active population of 2.8 million, most of whom are either

unemployed or subsist in the so-called informal sector. The increase brought the monthly minimum to only \$289, or less than \$75 a week.

Also, Zelaya had threatened to move ahead with the conversion of the military air base at Soto Cano, 30 miles north of Tegucigalpa, into a civilian airport. The facility, commonly known as the Palmerola Air Base, has the best landing strip in Central America. It also is the base for 600 US military personnel, making it one of the largest and few remaining US military bases in Latin America. Following the decision of the Ecuadorian government to close down the US air base at Manta, it became all the more important.

In May, following protracted foot-dragging by Washington, the Zelaya government authorized the armed forces to begin the construction of a commercial airport at the site, using money from the Venezuelan-run oil alliance, Petrocaribe.

The demonstrations against the coup, now in their 26th day, are set to intensify with the call for a general strike of public employees on Thursday. Some 60,000 teachers, who had returned to the classrooms after a three-week strike, are set to walk out again. And the country's three main trade union federations have called on their members to observe a nationwide strike on Thursday and Friday.

For his part, Zelaya has declared his intention to return to Honduras on Thursday or later, declaring that if he is killed doing so, the responsibility will rest with the armed forces chief, Gen. Romeo Vasquez. Troops have reportedly surrounded Zelaya's farm in anticipation of his trying to land a light plane there.

Despite his bravado, Zelaya's submission to the terms of the US-orchestrated mediation by Arias and his appeals to Obama to intervene on his behalf have made clear that his political program has no genuine independence from imperialism.

Honduran working people have taken to the streets because they recognize in the coup and in the regime led by Micheletti the stark danger of a return to a regime of death squads and outright military dictatorship. The success of their struggle, however, depends upon the development of a political program independent of all sections of the Honduran bourgeoisie and the Liberal Party—of which Zelaya and Micheletti are both leading members—based on the struggle for socialism and the unification of workers throughout Central America and the entire hemisphere.



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