

Honduran military appears to back plan to restore Zelaya to office—not to power

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For the first time, apparently at the instigation of the Obama administration and the Pentagon, the military of Honduras has weighed in independently in support of the San José accord for restoring the country's ousted President José Manuel Zelaya to office—though not to power.

The military announcement came Saturday, the day after Zelaya set foot on Honduran soil, only to withdraw to Nicaragua within moments.

The San José accord, a proposal submitted by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias as part of a US-instigated mediation process, calls for Zelaya to return to the presidential palace, but under conditions in which he would be a virtually powerless figurehead in a government of “unity and reconciliation” dominated by the very forces that overthrew him in June 28 coup. The coup leaders themselves, having accomplished their principal objectives, would be granted amnesty for their crimes.

Until now, the accord—while accepted by Zelaya—has been repeatedly rejected by the right-wing coup regime headed by former congressional leader Roberto Micheletti, which has ruled out any return by the deposed president except to face arrest and trial for alleged violations of the Honduran constitution.

A statement posted on the web site of the Honduran armed forces dated July 24 insisted that the country's military “as an institution supports a solution to the problems challenging our country through a process of negotiation in the framework of the San José Accord. Thus, we reiterate our unrestricted support for this in conformance with our Constitution and other laws.”

It is unclear whether the statement indicates a crack in the coup regime or merely another stalling tactic. According to a report in the *New York Times*, however, the statement was drafted not in Tegucigalpa, but in Washington.

“The communiqué was drafted in Washington after days of talks between mid-level Honduran officers and American Congressional aides,” the *Times* reported Saturday.

It went on to cite unnamed US officials as saying that the Hondurans involved in producing the statement were “two colonels who were concerned about the tensions generated by the political conflict.”

Zelaya, meanwhile, is set to return to Washington for further talks with US government officials.

If this indeed proves to be the way out of the current political impasse, it will be entirely in keeping with the long and tragic

history of Honduran politics, in which the most important economic and political decisions are dictated by Washington with the military playing the decisive role in seeing that they are carried out.

From the start, Zelaya has indicated his willingness to collaborate in such a solution, his occasional flamboyant rhetoric and gestures notwithstanding.

On Friday, the ousted Honduran president crossed the Nicaragua-Honduras border for a few minutes. Dressed in his customary wide-brimmed hat, carrying on a constant cell phone conversation and surrounded by supporters and aides, Zelaya's crossing proved little more than a brief photo opportunity.

As he embarked in his jeep ride to the border, Zelaya declared that he would speak to coup officials, suggesting that he would be able to negotiate face to face with representatives of the de facto regime of Roberto Micheletti, despite the latter's denunciation of the deposed president and orders to arrest him upon his entry into the country.

Once inside Honduras, Zelaya shook hands with, and spoke briefly to, a military officer. “I am the Constitutional President of Honduras,” said Zelaya, “therefore I am your commander in chief.” The latter informed him that he would be arrested by security forces as soon as the instructions were received. Moments later, Zelaya retreated back into Nicaragua. Micheletti later accused Zelaya of being a subversive, of inciting violence and attempting to bring foreign troops into Honduras. Micheletti also said that his government had not arrested Zelaya in order to avoid an international incident.

While the border crossing may have been a photo opportunity, the repression unleashed against Zelaya's supporters has been very real. A day before, thousands of troops were deployed in the border area and a 12-hour curfew—6 a.m. to 6 p.m.—was imposed to prevent Zelaya supporters from moving toward the border. The troops cut off the highway to the border town of Las Manos and immobilized 37 buses, forcing protesters to march on foot.

“We were repressed because we were not allowed to pass. There is no respect for the constitutional right of free movement,” declared Pablo Oyuela, president of the Honduran Middle Education Teachers Union (CPEMH). “They pat us down like criminals. They take our names down and write down our vehicle license plates to intimidate us,” added Oyuela.

Two protesters were injured at the army roadblock 10 kilometers from the border; one of them was critically wounded by gunfire.

And on Saturday, the body of a protester who had been arrested in the town of El Paraiso near the border was found dumped by the road, bearing signs of torture.

Meanwhile a reporter for the ABN (Agencia Bolivariana de Noticias) news agency reported that army troops have taken over a local stadium in El Paraiso, preparing it to serve a mass detention center, in much the same style as the murderous dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet in Chile in 1973.

Scores of Zelaya supporters did make it to the border and greeted Zelaya during his few minutes inside Honduras, but were blocked by the military, which used tear gas against them. As he was leaving, Zelaya called on his supporters to continue resisting and on soldiers not to fire on the people.

There was an element of choreography in the brief border crossing. As his supporters lifted the chain that marks the border, the Honduran troops, as if on cue, retreated 20 feet. This allowed the president to approach a “Welcome to Honduras” road sign, and shake hands with the army officer while the troops stood in riot gear. “I came to speak with the army high command to find a solution for all this,” said Zelaya to the press, “I cannot govern without the support of the oligarchy and they cannot govern without the support of the people, without the president that was chosen by the people.”

Zelaya’s words correctly suggest that the United States and the coup leaders may have underestimated the popular reaction to the coup. In addition to scores of protests in Tegucigalpa and other cities, workers across Honduras have gone on strike in opposition to the coup and demanding Zelaya’s return. Among the strikers are the nation’s public school teachers, the employees of the National Electricity Company and the University of Honduras and public health workers.

Zelaya is offering himself as the figure who will make Honduras governable again, until elections set for this fall bring in a new government. This was made clear on July 18 when he accepted a proposal from Costa Rican President Oscar Arias that would have placed him at the head of a government largely controlled by the coup leaders.

This was not the image of a popular leader coming back at high personal risk to take his place at the head of a popular insurrection, reclaim his presidency and bring his usurpers to justice. On the contrary, this elaborate farce is wholly consistent with the negotiations taking place to arrive at what the US State Department and Costa Rican President Oscar Arias refer to as a government of “national reconciliation,” a formula of compromise that safeguards the interests of the Honduran oligarchy and of US imperialism.

The de facto regime declared that it found it “deplorable” that Zelaya had abandoned negotiations with President Arias. Arias’s compromise proposal includes Zelaya’s return to the presidency. That is also what the Organization of American States demands. Given the coup conspirators’ intransigence on this issue, the negotiations in San José have until now been a charade.

At a press conference in Washington with Iraq’s president, Nouri Al-Maliki, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was far more scathing about Zelaya’s brief border crossing than she ever was about the coup itself. She called his actions “reckless” and echoed

Micheletti’s accusation that Zelaya was attempting to incite violence in Honduras. “We have consistently urged all parties to avoid any provocative action that could lead to violence,” she said. She also urged both parties to accept the Arias compromise.

From June 28, the day the coup took place, the White House has lent legitimacy to the forces that overthrew Zelaya and called for a negotiated solution, ignoring that Zelaya was elected by a majority of voters and that he was fully justified in organizing a popular plebiscite on constitutional reform. His opponents took power without the consent of the electorate—but with the backing of the right-wing Honduran oligarchy, the Church and the military.

Since then, it has violently repressed the thousands that have protested the coup and revived and reactivated institutions of repression that had operated during the 1972-81 US-backed dictatorship. This includes bringing back death squads to murder and terrorize independent reporters, workers and peasants. In this context, Secretary of State Clinton’s statements amount to gross hypocrisy, particularly in light of the White House’s vitriolic denunciations of the Iranian regime’s acts of violence against the protests that have challenged election results in that country.

Behind Clinton’s appeals for nonviolence there is growing evidence of US support for the coup and for Micheletti’s regime. Three elements are at play in this political conjuncture: the rejection by the Organization of American States of the US embargo against Cuba, the growing commercial independence of Latin American nations, and the growing weakness of US industry vis-à-vis Brazil, and its European and Asian rivals. As in the Middle East, US imperialism seeks to offset its economic decline by resort to military force.

After returning to Nicaragua, Zelaya said that he would establish a camp on the Nicaraguan border from which he would press for his return. The deposed leader, citing human rights abuses by the new government, also demanded that US President Barack Obama impose financial sanctions on Honduras and restrict the ability of the coup conspirators to travel to the United States.

From the outset, Zelaya has demonstrated no real independence from imperialism and a willingness to compromise with both the coup leaders and their US supporters.



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