

Honduran coup enters second month

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With the coup in Honduras having entered its second month, there is growing evidence that the Obama administration in Washington—while formally condemning the action—is working behind the scenes to consolidate the changes wrought by the June 28 overthrow of President Manuel Zelaya and use them to advance US interests throughout the region.

On Tuesday, the US State Department announced that it had revoked the diplomatic visas of four unnamed members of the coup regime led by Roberto Micheletti, a former Zelaya ally and fellow Liberal Party member who headed the Honduran congress before the coup.

Department spokesman Ian Kelly said that the visas of all of the regime's officials were being reviewed, but rejected suggestions that it was a matter of "ratcheting up the pressure" or "turning the screw" on the Micheletti regime. Instead, he claimed it meant to aid the negotiation process initiated at Washington's behest by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias.

The action has limited significance. Wealthy members of the coup regime have bank accounts in the US and condos in Florida and thus will experience some inconvenience.

But in the same press conference, the spokesman indicated that the State Department's legal section had yet to determine—one month after soldiers grabbed Zelaya from his bed, forced him onto an airplane and flew him into exile—whether or not the events of June 28 constituted a coup. Such a determination would trigger legal requirements to cut off all US relations and aid to the Honduran government. Thus far, Washington has merely "suspended" a relatively small military aid program.

The visa revocations were announced after ousted President Zelaya appealed to President Barack Obama to carry out the action. Zelaya, who is camped in the Nicaraguan border town of Ocotal together with hundreds of supporters who braved military roadblocks and repression to join him, hailed Washington's action.

"This is a coup that has been dead from the start, so they will have to abandon their position of intransigence in the coming hours," he declared.

Perhaps more important than Zelaya's personal appeal to Obama was a phone call the day before from Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim to Hillary Clinton, urging the visa revocations.

Washington is anxious to maintain Brazilian support for the Arias mediation maneuver in Costa Rica under conditions in which a number of Latin American governments appear to be growing frustrated with negotiations in San Jose, seeing them as a delaying tactic that is facilitating the consolidation of the coup regime.

On Monday, Chilean Foreign Minister Mariano Fernandez announced that Chile's ex-president Ricardo Lagos was seeking to form a commission of Latin American "statesmen" to carry out their own mediation. Mentioned in connection with the plan were former Uruguayan president Julio Maria Sanguinetti and Javier Perez de Cuellar, the Peruvian former secretary general of the United Nations.

The Arias negotiations have dragged on for weeks because of the intransigence of the coup regime, which has repeatedly rejected Zelaya's return to Honduras for any other reason than submitting to arrest and trial

for "treason."

Those who plotted the coup have justified it with the claim that Zelaya had violated the constitution by attempting to amend it so that he could seek another term as president. While dutifully repeated by the bulk of the US media, this accusation is nonsensical.

The coup was launched on the pretext of a nonbinding plebiscite to determine whether there was popular support for amending Honduras's constitution—a reactionary document dictated by the military and the US embassy following the end of the last dictatorship. If a vote for constituent assembly were held, it would have been concurrent with presidential elections set for November in which Zelaya would be barred from running.

Zelaya himself has repeatedly agreed to the terms of the so-called San Jose Accord drafted by Arias. Under this document, the coup leaders would be granted a general amnesty, including for the killing, jailing, torture and repression carried out against Honduran workers, youth and peasants who opposed their illegal regime.

Zelaya would be compelled to join a government of "national unity and reconciliation" dominated by the same political representatives of the Honduran oligarchy and the military that overthrew him. The accord also would bar him from making any moves toward amending the country's constitution and force him to operate under a budget recently enacted by the coup regime.

Another part of the accord calls for the presidential elections to be moved up one month to October and indicates a central preoccupation of all sections of the Honduran ruling elite and its allies in Washington. It makes an appeal to the Honduran people to "avoid any type of demonstration which opposes the elections or their results, or promotes insurrection, unlawful conduct, civil disobedience or other actions that could produce violent confrontations or transgressions of the law."

Zelaya—despite his brief steps across the border and demagogic statements—has proven himself entirely amenable to the terms being dictated by Washington.

Honduran working people who have opposed the coup, however, have struggled intransigently and have suffered intensifying repression as a result.

Thousands have risked their lives trying to get to the Nicaraguan border to support Zelaya's return. Reports from Honduras indicate that as many as 2,000 people, many of them teachers and other workers who have been at the center of the demonstrations against the coup regime, have been encircled by the military in the mountainous border region without adequate food, water or medical supplies.

The regime has imposed an around-the-clock curfew in the area, meaning that the security forces have the pretext for arresting anyone on sight. Scores have been arrested and thrown into prison cells in the town of Danli, while it is reported that a soccer stadium is being prepared for mass detentions.

It was in this atmosphere of generalized repression that the regime carried out one of its most horrific crimes.

Pedro Magdiel Muñoz Salvador, a 23-year-old bricklayer, was arrested last Friday afternoon as the military sought to repress opponents of the

regime headed for the border, attacking them with tear gas, clubs and gunfire.

On Saturday, his body was found by the side of a road near El Paraiso bearing 42 stab wounds, including one that sliced through his neck, killing him. The dumping of the tortured body of this young worker was understood as a deliberate attempt to terrorize other opponents of the coup.

His murder brings to at least five the number of opponents of the regime who have been killed since June 28. Isis Obed Murillo, 19 years old, was shot to death by troops during a demonstration at the Tegucigalpa airport on July 4. A death squad killed Gabriel Fino Noriega, a journalist in the town of San Juan Pueblo, as he left his radio station where he had broadcast reports critical of the Micheletti regime. Two members of the left-wing Democratic Unification party, who were active in the anti-coup demonstration, were also slain. Ramon Garcia was forced off a bus in the western state of Santa Barbara and shot execution-style. And Roger Ivan Bados was dragged out of his own home and shot to death.

There has been not a word of criticism from Washington over these slayings and the generalized repression and state terror carried out in Honduras since the coup.

In what appears to be a continuing of delaying tactics, the Honduran National Congress began an extraordinary session this week to consider the Arias accord's proposals. It began on Monday to discuss the points on moving up the election and the granting of an amnesty. However, it put off the main issue of contention—allowing Zelaya to return to office, if not real power—by referring it to a congressional committee.

Meanwhile, the military sought to “clarify” a statement it issued over the weekend declaring its full support for the Arias accord, which calls for Zelaya's return. The chief of the armed forces, General Romeo Vasquez Velasquez, told the media Monday, “The army in no way expressed its support for the restitution of señor Zelaya.” Instead, he claimed, it only meant to indicate support for the coup regime's participation in the negotiations. The original statement was reportedly drafted in Washington by two Honduran colonels working together with US officials.

The Obama administration has made muted criticisms of the coup, while taking no concerted action to reverse it, and the Republican Party has enthusiastically embraced the illegal Honduran regime.

Two Republican congressmen, Brian Bilbray of California and Connie Mack of Florida, returned to Washington from a weekend “fact-finding” trip, praising the coup regime and denouncing Zelaya. Bilbray admitted that the army may have erred in the way it overthrew Zelaya: “Instead of taking him and putting him in prison the army took him to the border,” he said. (In reality, they flew to Costa Rica.) Mack said, “the people of Honduras should be congratulated and held up for what they have done,” and accused the Obama administration of “standing with the likes of Hugo Chavez.”

An indication of the support of the Republican right for the coup regime came in the form of an opinion piece published by the *Wall Street Journal* written by none other than Micheletti. The column reiterated the regime's position that Zelaya should be allowed to return only for purposes of prosecution. It appealed for support as “one of America's loyal allies,” invoking both the sordid past in which Honduras served as a base of operations for Washington's bloody wars against the peoples of Nicaragua and El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the supposed threat posed by Zelaya's cementing of close relations with Venezuela.

Significantly, however, Micheletti also had words of praise for Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. He approvingly quoted Clinton's condemnation of Zelaya's crossing of the Honduran border as “reckless” and urged that “Rather than impose sanctions, the US should continue the wise policies of Mrs. Clinton”, i.e., the continuation of the Arias mediation.

Micheletti clearly understands the mediation process as an exercise in

delay and legitimization of his actions. Moreover, he and the wealthy businessmen who support him have secured as their principal lobbyists in Washington two individuals with the closest political ties to the Clintons: Lanny Davis, the former special counsel to President Bill Clinton, and Bennett Ratcliff, a lobbyist who played a prominent role in Hillary Clinton's unsuccessful run for the Democratic presidential nomination. Ratcliff accompanied the delegation representing Micheletti in the Arias mediation sessions, reportedly advising it on its every action. It is inconceivable that such Washington insiders would play these roles without receiving a green light from the Obama administration.

There is ample evidence that the Obama administration and its ambassador in Tegucigalpa—Hugo Llorens, a holdover from the Bush administration—were apprised of and complicit in the plans for the June 28 coup, whatever qualms they may have had over its execution. It is likewise impossible to believe that the Honduran military, trained and armed by the US and working intimately with an American military force of at least 600 troops at the Soto Cano air base, would have acted without Pentagon clearance.

Behind Washington's turn to such methods is the growing crisis of US imperialism in Latin America, a region it was long accustomed to regarding as its “own backyard.” Increasingly it has been challenged for economic dominance by its European and Asian rivals, as well as by the increasing international reach of Brazilian capital. It was recently announced that China had become Brazil's number one trading partner, a position that the US had held for the previous 75 years.

The weakening economic position has translated into a growing assertiveness among sections of the Latin American bourgeoisie, expressed last month in a vote by the Organization of American States—over US opposition—to end its sanctions against Cuba.

And the attempts by Latin American governments to forge their own regional alliances (in the interests of their own ruling elites)—from the Bolivarian Alliance for the Latin American People (ALBA) led by Venezuela to Mercosur in the southern cone—have effectively stymied US attempts to dictate “free trade” relations with the continent.

US imperialism, however, is not about to cede its historic dominance of the hemisphere without a struggle. As in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere, it turns toward military force and counterrevolutionary violence to offset its economic decline. In this sense, the Honduran coup represents a warning to the working class throughout Latin America.



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