The US and the Honduran coup

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Washington's criticisms of the June 28 military coup that ousted President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras lack any element of sincerity or historical truth. The Obama administration is uneasy at the ouster of Zelaya, a conservative-turned-populist allied to Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, because it reveals all too clearly the character of US foreign policy.

President Barack Obama's condemnation of Zelaya's overthrow as a "terrible precedent" is belied by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's refusal to characterize it as a coup. Under US laws, such a designation would force the government to cut off tens of millions of dollars in aid to Honduras and its armed forces. Clinton also declined to call for Zelaya's reinstatement, saying, "We haven't laid out any demands that we're insisting on, because we're working with others on behalf of our ultimate objectives."

Zelaya was overthrown because his populism was seen as a threat both to conservative sections of the bourgeoisie in Honduras and to US strategic interests in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In October 2008, Zelaya joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA in Spanish), a regional alliance organized by Chávez that includes Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Antigua and Barbuda. Member states receive subsidies coming largely from Venezuelan oil earnings. One provision, which Zelaya chose not to ratify, calls for common defense in case one of the member states is attacked by the US.

Zelaya's efforts to hold a constitutional referendum that would allow him to run for a second term provoked an escalating conflict with the Honduran military, the Congress and the courts, which culminated in his ouster.

US diplomats worked closely with the Honduran opposition to Zelaya. A US official speaking anonymously confirmed to the *New York Times* that US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas A. Shannon, Jr. and US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens spoke to "military officials and opposition leaders" in the days before the coup. He explained: "There was talk of how they might remove the president from office, how he could be arrested, on whose authority they could do that."

The identities of the Obama administration's point men on Honduras demolish claims that it is formulating a new US foreign policy. Shannon was special advisor to President Bush in 2003-2005, when he was also senior director for western hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council. From 2001 to 2002 he served at the State Department as director of Andean affairs—covering Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador.

Llorens was the National Security Council's director of Andean affairs in 2002-2003, holding the post when the Bush administration backed a military coup in Venezuela that nearly toppled Chávez.

The official speaking to the *Times* complained, however, that the administration did not expect that the Honduran army would go so far as to carry out an overt military coup. The Obama administration was evidently seeking to engineer a de facto coup, but with a gloss of constitutional legality. Thus Washington's main complaint about the Honduran coup is not that the army intervened in politics. Rather, it is that the Honduran army's open intervention has exploded the democratic veneer that the bourgeois media tries to give to US foreign policy.

The *Washington Post* editorialized on Tuesday: "The military's intervention may have the unintended effect of saving Mr. Zelaya. The Congress voted him out of office on Sunday by a large margin; had the generals merely allowed events to proceed according to the rule

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of law, the president could have been legitimately deposed or isolated." It called on Obama to "speak out more clearly about the abuses that prompted [Zelaya's] removal."

Revelations of US complicity with Honduran coup leaders comes at an inopportune time for Washington. It is waging a campaign to weaken or topple Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, wrapping itself in invocations of democracy and alleging that Ahmadinejad stole the June 12 election in Iran.

The administration is relying on the US media to limit the political damage resulting from its role in the Honduran coup and the exposure of its hypocrisy in relation to the Iranian elections. In contrast to the media's coverage of Iran, there have been few breathless reports, amateur videos or Twitter feeds coming from Tegucigalpa.

The US role in Honduras must be appraised in the historical context of Washington's violent and oppressive relations with Central America and its longstanding ties to the most reactionary forces in the region. As political and economic tensions mount, the big landowning and corporate interests and the US-trained officer corps in America's traditional "back yard" fear the effects of populist appeals against US imperialism by left-nationalist figures like Chávez and Zelaya.

During the debate over Honduras' joining ALBA, anti-Zelaya Honduran deputy Marta Lorena Alvarado attacked Chávez and warned, "We are allowing a man with a strange ideology to make his way into our population and into our manner of seeing Honduras' history."

Considering just the post-World War II period, the US and Honduran ruling elites have collaborated in huge crimes against the Central American masses. In the US-engineered 1954 coup against Guatemala's elected president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, Honduras served as a base and training camp for a CIA "rebel force" on Guatemala's southern border. The US intervention in Guatemala would ultimately provoke a series of civil wars prosecuted by US-backed anti-communist death squads, lasting over 30 years and claiming 200,000 lives, according to US figures.

In 1963, Honduran President Ramón Villeda was overthrown by military officers led by General Oswaldo López Arellano. US President John F. Kennedy then decided to end US adherence to the Betancourt doctrine, which held that the US should not recognize extra-constitutional governments. López Arellano called elections in 1971 but lost. He regained power through another coup in 1972.

The US responded to the 1979 overthrow of the Somoza family in neighboring Nicaragua by setting up the anti-communist Contra insurgency, which it funded in violation of US laws banning aid to the Contras. Based in Honduras, the Contras fought a war against the Nicaraguan Sandinistas that lasted until 1987, costing 60,000 casualties and displacing 250,000 people.

Seen in the context of Honduras' historical role as a center of US-backed counterrevolution, the ouster of Zelaya constitutes a sharp warning to the working class in the Americas. Prompted by concern over the political ramifications of Zelaya's links to Venezuela, a US-backed coup in Honduras could well be the signal for a broader regional campaign by US imperialism against Venezuela and allied regimes throughout the continent.

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