

Not supporting anyone “in particular”

State Department spells out US stand on Honduran coup

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In a letter to the ranking Republican member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the US State Department issued its clearest statement yet on the coup in Honduras.

The letter, addressed to Senator Richard Lugar, was aimed at mollifying Republican criticism of the Obama administration over its supposed support for the country’s overthrown president, Manuel Zelaya, portrayed by the Republican right as a dangerous leftist ally of Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez.

The State Department letter began by assuring Lugar that the claim that the Obama administration is backing Zelaya is a misunderstanding.

“Our policy and strategy for engagement is not based on supporting any particular politician or individual,” wrote Richard Verma, the assistant secretary of state for legislative affairs. “Rather, it is based on finding a resolution that best serves the Honduran people and their democratic aspirations.”

Verma pointed out that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had spoken to both Zelaya and the leader of those who overthrew him, Roberto Micheletti, referred to by Washington as the “de facto president,” essentially granting them equal status.

The letter, dated August 4, went on to blame Zelaya for provoking the June 28 coup, in which the military seized him from the presidential palace and forced him at gunpoint onto an airplane that flew him into exile. It also made clear that the Obama White House has no intention of heeding Zelaya’s ever more frequent calls for Washington to impose significant sanctions against the coup regime.

“We energetically condemn the actions of June 28,” the letter states. “We also recognize that President Zelaya’s insistence on undertaking provocative actions contributed to the polarization of Honduran society and led to a confrontation that unleashed the events that led to his removal.”

The “provocative actions” consisted of Zelaya’s attempt to hold a vote to gauge popular support for a constituent assembly to revise the Honduran constitution, a reactionary charter imposed by the military and then-US Ambassador John Negroponte at the end of the last military dictatorship in 1982.

The Honduran oligarchy—echoed by the mass media in the US—has equated this project with Zelaya attempting to change the constitution in order to overturn its limits on presidential terms and thereby hold onto the presidency. The vote—which was thwarted by the coup—was to ask voters whether they would favor a referendum on a constituent assembly being placed on the ballot in the November election to

choose a new president. Zelaya is ineligible to run in this election, no matter what the results of a referendum held simultaneously with the presidential vote.

“We have rejected calls for crippling economic sanctions and made clear that all states should seek to facilitate a solution without calls for violence and with respect for the principle of nonintervention,” the letter declared.

When it comes to hypocrisy and sanctimony, the US State Department stands without equal. The pretense that the policy being pursued by the Obama administration in relation to Honduras is founded on some transcending principles is laughable.

Washington has had no problem maintaining “crippling economic sanctions” for nearly half a century—under Democratic and Republican presidents alike, up to and including Obama—against Cuba, because it opposed the regime there. Of course, in Honduras, Micheletti and the generals are committed to protecting corporate interests, rather than expropriating them, and to maintaining the oppressive conditions that ensure rock-bottom labor costs for multinationals like Nike, Adidas and Gap. If there is any “principle” involved here, it is the fundamental one of profit.

As for the appeal for all countries to “seek to facilitate a solution without calls for violence,” it cannot have escaped the US administration’s notice—despite the media’s blackout on events in Honduras—that violence has already been unleashed against workers, students and other opponents of the coup on a scale unseen since the days of the dictatorship nearly 30 years ago.

In the latest events, hundreds of riot police and troops invaded the National Autonomous University of Honduras, attacking thousands of students protesting against the coup. The cops and troops used clubs, tear gas and a tank mounted with a water cannon. Sporadic shots were also reported. Among those thrown to the ground and beaten by the dictatorship’s shock troops was the university’s rector, Julieta Castellanos, who approached them, waving a white flag, seeking to negotiate an end to the assault.

This rampage follows violent attacks on peaceful demonstrations in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula in which police and troops have beaten and arrested protesters while also attacking members of the press in an attempt to prevent their acts from being filmed. Along the same lines, the military ordered the shutdown of one of the few critical media outlets in Honduras, “Radio Globo,” accusing it of “promoting sedition.”

Teachers, workers, union and political activists have been shot dead in the street or murdered by death squads. Thousands have been

beaten or subjected to unlawful arrest. Yet from the Obama administration and the State Department, there has been not a word of protest against this violence. They see it as legitimate and necessary.

While justifying the coup in the name of the supposedly sacred Honduran constitution, Washington is not in the least troubled by the rights formally guaranteed in that document being systematically extinguished by military force. The State Department's only concern is that there be no "calls for violence," meaning appeals to the workers and oppressed of Honduras to resist the dictatorship's repression.

As for "respect for the principle of non-intervention," the entire history of Honduras is one of US intervention, with the State Department and United Fruit (later United Brands) engineering coups to protect their interests. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the country was turned into a base for both the CIA-directed contra war against Nicaragua and the counter-insurgency war in El Salvador.

Those who have handled US policy toward the Honduran coup most directly—Thomas Shannon, the assistant secretary of state for Latin America, and Hugo Llorens, the US ambassador in Tegucigalpa—are both holdovers from the Bush administration. Llorens was Bush's national security advisor on Andean affairs at the time of the US-backed Venezuelan coup of April 2002, while Shannon was the deputy assistant secretary of state dealing with the same region, placing both of them at the center of Washington's failed coup attempt. Both men met just weeks before the Honduran coup with the politicians and military commanders who overthrew Zelaya.

Moreover, the US military continues to play a major role in Honduras, with the US Southern Command's Joint Task Force Bravo, consisting of over 600 troops, operating out of the Soto Cano Air Base. The influence of the Pentagon over the country's 11,000-member military is so overwhelming that the generals carrying out such a coup without prior notice and approval is virtually unthinkable.

The State Department's letter to Lugar serves to dispel any illusions that the Obama administration is prepared to intervene on Zelaya's behalf.

The letter won qualified praise from the Republican right, with Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, another Republican member of the foreign relations panel stating, "I'm glad to see the State Department is finally beginning to walk back its support for Manuel Zelaya and admit that his 'provocative' actions were responsible for his removal." DeMint denounced the ousted Honduran president as someone "who broke the law and sought to become a Chavez-style dictator." That both Zelaya and Chavez owe their offices to popular election—as opposed to Micheletti and the Honduran generals—is besides the point in these circles.

Michael Shifter, a senior analyst at the Inter-American Dialogue, a corporate-backed think tank, told the *Wall Street Journal*, "Washington's wavering will be seen as a sign that the government can wait it out until the elections, and that the costs they are bearing for international isolation, while considerable, are preferable to the risks of allowing Zelaya to return."

In reality, there has been little wavering. The US gave at least its tacit backing to the coup. After Zelaya's ouster, Washington sought to consolidate the political aims of the coup by organizing a mediation process headed by Costa Rican President Óscar Arias. These talks have provided the coup regime with a cover for running out the clock on what remains of the Zelaya presidency by feigning negotiation while repeatedly coming back to its core position that Zelaya will be

allowed back in the country only to stand trial for treason.

The so-called San José Accord elaborated by Arias is a reactionary proposal that would force Zelaya to serve as a figurehead president in a regime controlled by those who overthrew him. The politicians and military commanders who organized the coup and the brutal repression that has followed would be granted an amnesty for their crimes. And Zelaya would be barred from raising any proposal to amend the Honduran constitution.

Zelaya has repeatedly declared his willingness to accept this proposal, despite the intransigence of Micheletti and the generals in rejecting it.

Zelaya's entire strategy has consisted of appealing to Washington to restore him to office under the humiliating terms hammered out by Arias.

Speaking to the press in Mexico City, he argued that his restoration to office was important for US national security. If right-wing coups are allowed to succeed, he said, "The people will also have the right to choose the path to defend themselves." He warned against a "rebirth of the violence of those social groups who put down their arms after the fall of the Berlin Wall."

While allowing that some right-wing elements in Washington could have been involved in the coup, he exonerated Obama and his administration. "I think Obama is trying to be strong," he said. "We must give him time." He called for Washington to impose stiffer sanctions. Extending his arm and closing his fist, Zelaya said, "The United States only has to do this with its hand, and the coup ends in five seconds."

While masses of Honduran workers, peasants and students have courageously resisted the coup in the face of mounting repression, Zelaya has demonstrated his complete lack of independence from US imperialism, which ultimately stands behind his overthrow.

The critical question in Honduras is the development of a mass political movement of the working class, independent of all sections of the bourgeoisie and its Liberal Party, fighting to unite Honduran workers with working people throughout Central America, the Western Hemisphere and internationally in the struggle for the socialist transformation of society.



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