

Three months after coup:

Honduran regime imposes state of siege

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Three months after the coup that brought it to power, the right-wing regime headed by Liberal Party leader Roberto Micheletti has imposed a 45-day state of siege, suspending all basic democratic rights.

Monday saw the implementation of the decree, which allows for arrests and searches without charges or warrants, and abrogates the right to assembly, freedom of movement and freedom of speech and press.

The coup regime has claimed that the measures were necessary to counter supposed calls for “insurrection” by ousted President Manuel Zelaya, who managed to make a clandestine return to the country on September 21, taking refuge in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa.

Following his return, far from calling for an “insurrection,” Zelaya appealed for dialogue and then met with the four candidates for president—all of them coup supporters—in an election set for November. Those resisting the coup had called for a boycott of this vote.

Hundreds of riot troops backed by a tank mounted with a water cannon and a military helicopter were brought in to break up a demonstration outside the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional- Francisco Morazán, where hundreds had gathered to march on the Brazilian Embassy. The demonstration had been called to mark three months since the June 28 coup, in which Zelaya was dragged from the presidential palace and forced at gunpoint onto a plane that took him to Costa Rica and exile.

Troops were deployed at key points throughout the Honduran capital to prevent people from reaching the starting point of the demonstration. “The same thing is happening throughout the country, they are blocking people from coming out to demonstrate,” peasant leader Rafael Alegría told reporters.

Earlier in the day, hundreds of combat-equipped troops and riot police surrounded two broadcast stations that have opposed the coup regime—Radio Globo and Canal 36, a television station. Breaking down the doors to the stations, the soldiers destroyed their offices and equipment, taking them off the air. Some members of the stations’ staff were

forced to jump out of windows to escape the attack.

The state of siege decree authorizes closing of “any media, spoken, written or televised...which threatens peace and public order” or that “attacks the human dignity of public officials or government decisions.”

The decree called for the arrest of “persons considered suspicious,” adding that they should be placed in “legally established detention centers.” There were reports that the government has ordered a round-up of known activists and their imprisonment in a soccer stadium.

As the state of siege went into effect Monday, opponents of the coup regime were burying another of its victims, university student Wendy Elizabeth Avila, who died from inhaling tear gas during an assault on demonstrators outside the Brazilian Embassy.

Meanwhile, the Honduran dictatorship has adopted a posture of hostile provocation toward the governments and international institutions that have called for Zelaya’s return to office.

The coup regime issued a deadline to the Brazilian government Monday, giving it 10 days to either hand over Zelaya or remove him from the country to asylum in Brazil. After that, it said, it would no longer recognize Brazil’s diplomatic immunity, and security forces would be free to carry out an assault on the embassy to capture the deposed president.

“Brazil does not accept the ultimatum of a coup government,” Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva responded. “For me the solution is simple,” he added. “The coup leaders should leave the presidential palace. Zelaya should return to power and elections should be held.”

This “solution” touted by Lula is in all essentials the same as that promoted by Washington via its mediator, the longtime US “asset,” Costa Rican President Óscar Arias. Under the San José Accord issued by Arias, Zelaya would return to office as a figurehead in a “national unity” government dominated by the generals and politicians who overthrew him. They in turn would be granted amnesty for the repressive crimes of the past three months. And elections

in November would choose a successor for Zelaya, who would finish his term in January.

While in office, Zelaya would be barred from advocating any change to the Honduran constitution, a charter imposed on the country by its former military dictators and the US Embassy. His attempt to hold a referendum on whether Hondurans would support changes to the constitution was the pretext for his overthrow.

Zelaya has accepted this reactionary proposal; Micheletti and his fellow coup leaders have rejected it, demanding that Zelaya be placed on trial.

On Sunday, a five-member delegation sent by the Organization of American States to seek a mediated settlement of the crisis landed at the airport in Tegucigalpa. Of the five, only one, John Biehl, an advisor to OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza, was allowed to stay. The other four were deported under police-military guard. All of them were detained for six hours.

“As a Chilean, I must say that this brought back some terrible memories,” said Biehl, referring to the savage repression under the military dictatorship headed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

A spokesman for the regime noted that ambassadors who were withdrawn from the country in protest over the coup would “not run the risk” of returning after seeing the treatment meted out to the OAS delegation. The one ambassador who has remained in Tegucigalpa is that of the United States, which has also kept its air base in Soto Cano—the largest US military base in Latin America—functioning as normal.

The Permanent Council of the OAS convened in an extraordinary session Monday to discuss the Honduran situation. The body passed a resolution condemning the suspension of constitutional rights and the expulsion of the OAS representatives only after US, Brazil, Mexico and Costa Rica intervened seeking to weaken the language.

OAS Secretary General Insulza made clear the toothless character of the resolution, saying that the state of siege in Honduras “should not lead us to change course, but rather to persist in the notion that it is necessary and possible to reach a peaceful solution.”

The US representative at the OAS, Lewis Amselem, used the session to place the principal blame for the crisis not on the coup regime, but on Zelaya. He described the ousted president as “irresponsible and foolish” for returning to his country before a mediated settlement was achieved by Washington and its agent, Arias.

“The return of Zelaya absent an agreement is irresponsible and foolish,” said the US representative. “He should cease and desist from making wild allegations and from acting as though he were starring in an old movie.”

Given that Zelaya is trapped in an embassy that is surrounded by heavily armed troops and has been subjected to repeated gas attacks, this is an extraordinary statement that could easily be read as prior approval for the ousted president’s assassination.

Amselem added, “Having chosen, with outside help, to return on his own terms, President Zelaya and those who have facilitated his return, bear particular responsibility for the actions of his supporters.”

He added that Zelaya’s return to Honduras was “an insult to the international community” and to the OAS. Finally, he called for “all sides to abstain from provocation and the instigation of violence.”

Such language amounts to implicit support for the ongoing repression in Honduras. It is by no means an aberration. Last week, following the imposition of a protracted curfew and the violent dispersal of Zelaya’s supporters gathered outside the Brazilian Embassy, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton noted approvingly at a press conference, “I think the government imposed a curfew, we just learned, to try to get people off the streets so that there wouldn’t be unforeseen developments.”

Presumably, these “unforeseen developments” did not include the killing of Wendy Elizabeth Avila, the beating of many others, the detention and torture of demonstrators and the locking of seven and a half million people in their homes to face hunger and fear. All of this was imminently foreseeable.

As the crisis in Honduras drags on, the real position of the Obama administration is emerging with increasing clarity. It has from the outset supported the political aims of the coup leaders, while seeking through the so-called mediation process to run out the clock on Zelaya’s presidency or restore him only as a powerless puppet of the coup regime. While it has chafed at times at the extreme right-wing intransigence of the Honduran oligarchy towards a settlement designed to preserve its interests, at every step of the way, Washington has signaled its tacit support for the repression of the growing upsurge of Honduran working people.



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