

Honduras: Is US moving to back ‘state of siege’ election?

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With talks deadlocked between delegations representing ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya and the coup regime headed by Roberto Micheletti, the Obama administration may be preparing to drop its demand for Zelaya’s return to office.

Instead, according to media reports, Washington is considering a “Plan B” in which it would back elections set for November 29 as a solution to the country’s three-and-a-half-months-old crisis, regardless of whether Zelaya is reinstated or not.

The Honduran president was removed from office in a June 28 coup that saw him abducted from the presidential palace by armed troops and placed on an airplane flying him into involuntary exile.

Zelaya, who has been confined to the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa since his clandestine return to the country last month, has once again extended a deadline for negotiating an agreement with the coup regime, with another round of the so-called Guaymuras Dialogue set to take place today.

While after two weeks of talks both sides had claimed to agree on “95 percent” of a settlement, the sticking point remains the return of Zelaya to the presidency.

The Micheletti-led regime is demanding that any return to office by Zelaya be predicated on a decision by the Honduran Supreme Court of Justice, which issued the original ruling legitimizing the coup. The court found that Zelaya’s attempt to stage a referendum on whether there existed popular support for constituent assembly to amend the country’s constitution amounted to a criminal violation of the constitution itself.

Zelaya’s negotiators have countered with a proposal that the elected president’s return to office be decided by the country’s National Congress, which had voted overwhelmingly for his ouster last June.

The points that have been accepted by both sides are drawn largely from the San Jose Accord, the product of US-backed mediation by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. The agreement would establish a “government of national reconciliation” dominated by the coup’s political and military leaders and with Zelaya, stripped of any real power, restored to office for barely two months.

It explicitly renounces any attempt to alter the Honduran constitution, a reactionary charter that was imposed upon the country in the early 1980s by a military dictatorship and the US embassy. And it calls for the formation of a “Truth Commission” in 2010, assuring that there will be no prosecution of the Micheletti regime’s leaders and military and police commanders responsible for the June 28 coup and the wave of repression that has followed.

This repression claimed another victim with the death of Jairo Sánchez, the president of the Institute of Professional Training Workers Union (SITRAINPOP), who finally lost a 24-day struggle for

his life. The union leader was shot in the face on September 23 when police opened fire on a protest he had organized in his neighborhood against the repression. He died of his wounds Saturday.

Zelaya insisted on Saturday that, contrary to media reports, he had not broken off talks and cautioned against any resort to “violence or arms” against the coup regime. Instead, he appealed again for stiffer trade sanctions, particularly from the United States and the European Union.

The prospects for the Obama administration exerting additional pressure to return Zelaya’s to office appear extremely slim. The administration and the State Department have remained silent on the Honduran situation for weeks, even as Micheletti has continued to rule the country under a state of siege that has seen demonstrations broken up by police and army troops, mass detentions and the shutdown of the only broadcast outlets supportive of Zelelya.

Instead, according to a report published by *Time* magazine Friday, the administration is muting its demand for Zelaya’s restoration and is considering a break with the position adopted by virtually every Latin American government that an election held in November will only be legitimate if the coup crisis is resolved and Zelaya returned to the presidency.

“There are growing signs that the US may be willing to abandon that condition,” according to the *Time* report. “A number of well-placed sources in Honduras and the US tell *Time* that officials in the State Department and the US’s OAS delegation have informed them that the Obama administration is mulling ways to legitimize the election should talks fail to restore Zelaya in time.”

The magazine quoted a State Department official as saying: “We’ve always preferred a restoration of constitutional and democratic order in Honduras that includes the restoration of Manuel Zelaya. But the elections are going to take place either way, and the international community needs to come to terms with that fact.”

The article went on to quote a Latin American diplomat in Tegucigalpa, who said that Micheletti’s aides had showed him an email from a senior official in Washington’s delegation to the Organization of American States declaring “that Zelaya’s return should not be a condition for approving the election,” while suggesting “that insisting on Zelaya’s restoration has handed a victory to [Venezuelan President Hugo] Chávez and other anti-US leaders in the region.”

Last month, the head of the US delegation to the OAS, Lewis Amsalem, denounced Zelaya as “irresponsible and foolish” for daring to return to his country and accused him of making “wild allegations” for denouncing the use of tear gas, sound cannons and violent attacks on peaceful demonstrators at the Brazilian embassy where he had

taken refuge. Amselem, like the US ambassador to Honduras and the chief State Department official in charge of Latin America, is a holdover from the Bush administration.

Baker warns: Honduras “on the brink”

Support for such a shift in US policy was also signaled by an opinion piece published Saturday in the *Washington Post* by James Baker, the US Secretary of State under Bush senior and a major figure in the Washington political establishment. It was Baker who co-chaired the bipartisan Iraq Study Group that called for a shift in policy by the administration of George W. Bush.

“Unrest and protest are mounting as Honduras’s constitutional crisis continues,” Baker warns. “Matters will only deteriorate if the international community refuses to recognize the results of the coming Honduran elections, scheduled for Nov. 29.”

In an attempt to appear even-handed, Baker supported the removal of Zelaya from office, but faulted the leaders of the coup for having “illegally deported” him from Honduras.

“The solution?” he writes. “Stop looking backward. Forget about who might be most at fault. Look forward. Neither Zelaya nor interim President Roberto Micheletti is eligible to run in the presidential election.” Washington, he continues, should support the election “without preconditions” and should pressure other governments to do likewise.

Again, he warns: “On the verge of civil strife, a free and fair election may be the only way to bring Honduras back from the brink. A refusal to recognize the results of the Honduran election would almost certainly prolong and deepen the constitutional crisis there, and it may plunge the country into more violence.”

Baker’s warnings against “violence” – like those of Zelaya against the use of “violence or arms” – express growing fears within both the US political establishment and the Honduran ruling oligarchy that the popular resistance to the coup and the subsequent repression will give rise to revolutionary struggles in what is one of the most impoverished and socially unequal countries in the hemisphere. Seventy percent of Honduras’s 7.7 million people live in poverty, while the country’s “10 families” monopolize the lion’s share of the wealth.

No doubt such fears weigh heavily in the Obama administration’s calculations regarding Zelaya and the November election. So too does the increasing pressure from Republicans within Congress, who have openly backed Micheletti and denounced Obama for “appeasement” of what they portray as the spreading influence of Venezuela’s Chávez in Honduras.

Finally, supporting the November 29 vote may be seen in US foreign policy circles as a means for Washington to seize back the initiative in the Honduran crisis, where the Brazilian government, with its hosting of Zelaya at its embassy, has assumed an increasingly prominent role in efforts to mediate the dispute. US imperialism has dominated Honduras, which was the quintessential banana republic, for over a century and relies on the country for hosting its largest military base in Latin America. It is not about to cede such influence to the Brazilian ruling elite’s increasing regional aspirations without a struggle.

While Washington appears to be moving towards renouncing its demand for Zelaya’s return to office — even as a powerless figurehead

for barely two months until the president elected in November takes over – the ousted president’s acceptance of nearly all the conditions laid down by the coup leaders has provoked increasing dismay and anger among the broad masses who have opposed the dictatorial regime.

Juan Barahona, a union leader and the general coordinator of the National Front of Resistance who had been included as one of Zelaya’s negotiators in the “dialogue” with the Micheletti regime, found himself compelled to leave the talks because of popular opposition to the deal being made behind closed doors.

In particular, the renunciation of any fight for a constituent assembly to change the country’s constitution proved unacceptable to the Front, which issued a statement declaring its “irreconcilable commitment to the creation of a democratic and inclusive National Constituent Assembly, which has its principal objective the refounding of Honduras in order to overcome the oppression and exploitation of the popular sectors by a minority elite which unjustly concentrates the wealth created by the workers.” It also demanded the lifting of the state of siege decree and the reopening of the broadcast stations shut down by the regime.

At the same time, however, the Front’s leadership has refused to draw any fundamental conclusions from this experience, continuing to proclaim its political subordination to the bourgeois faction supporting Zelaya. It made clear that Barahona would have stayed in the negotiations if he had been allowed to record the front’s “reservations” about to the third point of the agreement renouncing any call for a constituent assembly.

The Front said that it had withdrawn Barahona to “leave President Zelaya free to replace him with another representative who enjoys his confidence,” and declared, “we will respect the decision of our president if he decides to sign the San Jose Accord, even with all of its conditions.”

If the Micheletti regime ever accepts the San Jose Accord, these “conditions” would turn Zelaya into a powerless figurehead in a regime dominated by the politicians and generals who overthrew him. His return to office would merely provide a “democratic” façade for intensified repression. It now appears more likely, however, that the regime — increasingly confident of US backing — will continue to stall negotiations until it is able to hold elections under state of siege conditions next month.



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