

Washington pushes through deal with Honduran coup regime

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Delegations representing ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya and the regime that replaced him through the coup of June 28 signed an agreement Friday following the intervention in Tegucigalpa of a high-level delegation from the US State Department.

There is no guarantee that the deal will restore Zelaya to office. If it does, it will be for no more than two months and only as a figurehead president in a government dominated by those who overthrew him.

The terms of the agreement serve to consolidate the central aims of the coup, while betraying the political and social demands of masses of Honduran working people who have resisted the coup and suffered violent state repression for more than four months.

The signing came less than one month before an election to choose Zelaya's successor. The deal was struck two days after Thomas Shannon, the US assistant secretary of state for western hemisphere affairs and a holdover from the Bush administration, arrived in the Honduran capital together with Dan Restrepo, the Obama administration's National Security Council advisor on Latin America.

Washington's central aim is to legitimize the presidential election scheduled for November 29 to choose Zelaya's successor. It sees this vote as a means of stabilizing the Honduran state and stemming the radicalization of the Honduran masses.

Nearly all of the terms of the so-called Tegucigalpa Accord signed Friday were contained in the San José Accord brokered by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias more than three months ago at Washington's behest.

These include the formation of a government of "unity and national reconciliation" in which the dominant forces will be the politicians who backed the June coup and the military that executed it. Reportedly, the two sides and the major political parties will select the ministers of such a regime. It is by no means clear, however, what happens to the many other officials who were fired and replaced after the coup. The one institution that will remain untouched is the armed forces.

The deal also includes a renunciation by Zelaya of any effort to convene a national constituent assembly for the purposes of revising the Honduran constitution. The changing of this charter has been a key demand of the mass protests against the coup. The constitution was imposed upon the Honduran people in 1982 by the outgoing military dictatorship in consultation with the US embassy and was crafted to uphold the interests of the oligarchy that monopolizes the wealth of the country.

It was Zelaya's attempt to hold a vote to determine whether there was popular support for such an assembly that triggered last June's coup. The coup's supporters charged that he was attempting to amend the constitution in order to overturn term limits and run again for

president. This was patently false, as a vote to actually convene a constituent assembly would have been held concurrently with the election of Zelaya's successor.

The accord calls for the formation of a verification commission and a truth commission. The first of these is to consist of two Hondurans and two foreigners, to be chosen by the Organization of American States, who will oversee compliance with the agreement. The truth panel will be delegated to investigate the coup and the events leading up to it and those following it. In virtually every country where such commissions have been formed, they have served as a substitute for holding accountable those who have carried out coups and state repression.

While providing a moratorium on criminal prosecutions of either Zelaya or the coup leaders, the final deal excludes an amnesty for political offenses. Initially it was reported that Zelaya opposed an amnesty provision, but it appears that the Honduran generals vetoed it as they still want to see the ousted president tried for "treason."

Also under the accord, formal authority over the military is to be transferred to the country's Supreme Electoral Tribunal in advance of the November presidential election. All parties are bound to support this election, together with the installation of a new government in January.

The final clause concerns the mechanism for returning Zelaya to office. Earlier this month, the two sides broke off negotiations after Zelaya's delegation demanded that his return to the presidency be decided by the National Congress, while Micheletti's team insisted that it be determined by the Supreme Court.

In last June's coup, it was the high court that declared Zelaya's actions a violation of the constitution, while it was the Congress that voted to replace him with Micheletti. The decision was implemented by the military, which dragged him out of the presidential palace in the middle of the night and forced him onto an airplane that flew him into exile.

The supposed success of the US-led mediation of the past few days was to engineer a compromise under which the Supreme Court would issue a recommendation regarding Zelaya's status, while the Congress would cast the determining vote.

"Just minutes ago, I authorized the signing of the agreement that marks the beginning of the end of the political problem that has faced the country," Micheletti announced late Thursday night after this issue was settled.

How soon the "end of the end" will come, however, is by no means clear.

First, the country's Supreme Court must provide its recommendation to the Congress. Then, even if the legislature

ultimately votes to put Zelaya back into the presidential palace, there is no guarantee that this will happen any time soon. The president of the Honduran National Congress, José Alfredo Saavedra, told the local radio station HRN Friday that no one could impose a deadline on the body's discussion of the accord and the scheduling of a vote. Until then, he stressed, Micheletti would remain president.

For his part, the State Department's Shannon said that the implementation of the agreement would be "complicated" and that the Congress would determine "when, how and if" Zelaya is reinstated as president.

Meanwhile, the Bloomberg news agency quoted a senior advisor to Micheletti, Marcia Facusse de Villeda, as saying in an interview: "Zelaya won't be restored. But just by signing this agreement we already have the recognition of the international community for the elections."

In a statement to Radio Globo, a station that was repeatedly shut down by security forces because of its opposition to the coup, Zelaya described the deal as a "symbol of peace for our country and of the restoration of our democracy."

He called on the Honduran people to "stay calm," adding, in an apparent appeal for respect for the coup leaders, that "we are not going to mock anyone, we will not use this to ridicule, but to get peace." He also warned the population that the situation would not be resolved "overnight."

The accord did nothing to change Zelaya's immediate status. He remains in the Brazilian embassy, where he has been holed up for nearly six weeks. Honduran security forces continue to encircle the building.

Zelaya praised US officials for mediating the agreement. "Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Shannon, Dan Restrepo and the [US] ambassador [Hugo] Llorens have played a fundamental and key role," he said.

While he also expressed gratitude to Brazil, which gave him refuge in its Tegucigalpa embassy, and to Costa Rica's Arias for negotiating the initial agreement, notably absent from this thank-you list was President Hugo Chávez. One of the justifications given for the coup was that Zelaya had grown too close to the Venezuelan president, a relationship cemented with cheap oil contracts.

In Caracas, Chávez said that he welcomed the US-brokered deal if it would "put Honduras back on the road to democracy."

The signing of the accord in Tegucigalpa within days of the Obama administration dispatching senior officials to the Honduran capital raises the obvious question of why Washington did not conduct such an initiative months ago.

The Honduran political establishment and its military have been dominated by US imperialism for over a century. In the 1980s, the CIA and US embassy had free rein over Honduran territory, using it as its "aircraft carrier" for launching the contra war against Nicaragua and supplying the bloody counterinsurgency campaign in El Salvador. Today, the US accounts for more than half of Honduras's foreign trade and two-thirds of its foreign direct investment. Clearly, serious pressure from Washington would produce the desired effect.

If the Obama administration did not intervene for four months, it was because it silently backed the aims of the coup regime, while publicly proclaiming its support for constitutional order and democracy. It pursued the same delaying tactics as the Micheletti regime, seeking to run out the clock on the Zelaya presidency.

It viewed the ouster of Zelaya as a means of countering the influence of Venezuela's Chávez in the region and securing the

interests of US corporations seeking cheap labor in Honduras. Given the close relation between the Honduran military and the Pentagon, which maintains its largest Latin American base in Honduras, it is difficult to believe that the coup itself was carried out without the foreknowledge and approval of Washington.

With barely two months remaining in Zelaya's presidential term, the Obama administration sees an agreement that may bring Zelaya briefly back as a powerless figurehead as a small price to pay for legitimizing both the coup and the coming election.

Since the coup last June, military and police repression has led to at least 20 deaths. Hundreds have been wounded and thousands detained without charges. Broadcast outlets critical of the regime have been shut down by the military, while demonstrations are routinely broken up. Even as the US-mediated talks were ongoing Thursday, security forces dispersed over 1,000 demonstrators using tear gas and baton charges.

Conditions of life for the Honduran population, which is the poorest in the Americas after Haiti, have worsened dramatically. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Wednesday issued a report denouncing "grave violations" of the rights of Honduran children since last June's coup, citing cases of children being killed, tortured, beaten and illegally detained.

UNICEF estimated that at least 1,600 infants and children under the age of five have died since the coup last June—13 a day—attributing the dramatic rise in the death rate to the near collapse of the public health system. The agency added that the 1.8 million children attending public schools have been effectively denied an education because of school closures.

The Obama administration has issued no protests against these attacks on the Honduran population and now hails their perpetrators as "heroes of democracy." It accepted the use of repressive force as necessary to quell the movement of the country's workers, students and peasants.

Given this record, the embrace of the reactionary US-brokered deal by Zelaya as well as Chávez represents the most damning exposure of the bankruptcy of bourgeois nationalism in Latin America, no matter what its "left" pretensions.

The Honduran events have demonstrated that working people in Honduras and across Latin America can defend their rights only by forging their political independence from all factions of the ruling elite and carrying out the struggle for workers' governments and the socialist transformation of the entire hemisphere.



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