

Honduras: Republicans praise Obama for “reversing” policy

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Republicans in the US Senate signaled their satisfaction over the Obama administration’s recent diplomatic initiative in Honduras by lifting their months-long block on the nominations for key State Department posts related to Latin America.

The move came a week after a US diplomatic team led by the State Department’s top official on Latin American, Tom Shannon—a holdover from the Bush administration—brokered an agreement in Tegucigalpa between President Manuel Zelaya, who was toppled by a coup and forced out of the country last June 28, and the coup regime headed by Roberto Micheletti.

As has become clear over the past week, this deal has served to legitimize the principal aims of the June coup, while betraying the demands of the broad mass of workers, peasants and students that has resisted the dictatorial regime for the past four and a half months.

The agreement committed both sides—those who led the coup and those whom they overthrew—to forming a government of “national unity and reconciliation,” while making no stipulation as to who would head it.

Moreover, there was one major difference in the substance of this deal, dubbed the Tegucigalpa Accord, from an abortive agreement drafted months ago by a US-backed mediator, Costa Rican President Óscar Arias. It dropped an explicit statement that the agreement “implies the return of José Manuel Zelaya Rosales to the Presidency of the Republic until the conclusion of the present governmental term, January 27, 2010.”

Instead, it left it in the hands of the Honduran Congress, which had supported the coup, to decide in consultation with the Supreme Court, which gave the overthrow its legal blessing, whether to return the elected president to office. Also, it placed no deadlines for a vote on the question.

In giving his negotiators instructions to sign this agreement, Zelaya placed his fate in the hands of the Obama administration in Washington, to which he has appealed incessantly since being overthrown last June to restore him to power.

To secure the supposed aid of Washington, the ousted president agreed to drop a principal demand of the mass protests against the coup regime—the convening of a national constituent assembly to redraft the Honduran constitution, a document imposed upon the country by the outgoing military dictatorship in consultation with the US Embassy some 27 years ago.

Zelaya pledged to discourage any popular opposition to an upcoming election that will be held under conditions of political repression and under the control of the coup regime and the country’s military.

The Tegucigalpa accord commits Zelaya to “call upon the Honduran people to participate peacefully in the next general elections and avoid any type of demonstrations that oppose the elections or their results, or promote insurrection, anti-juridical conduct, civil disobedience or other acts that could produce violent confrontations or transgressions of the law.”

The political results of this accord were entirely predictable. Micheletti last week announced the formation of a government of “national unity and reconciliation”—without bringing Zelaya back to the presidential palace or naming a single one his supporters to the cabinet.

The Honduran Congress has given no indication that it will come back into session to consider the accord and take a vote on whether to bring Zelaya back—even as a powerless figurehead for less than three months. A congressional committee voted not to convene a congressional session until the Supreme Court has offered its legal findings. The Supreme Court,

meanwhile, has stated that it has yet to receive a request for its recommendation.

Meanwhile, the chief US negotiator in producing the agreement in Tegucigalpa, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon, clarified that Zelaya's return to office is not a precondition for Washington recognizing the November 29 vote as legitimate. Rather, the mere signing of the accord legitimized the elections.

This position was confirmed in the action of US Senator Jim DeMint, a South Carolina Republican and member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who dropped his opposition to the Obama administration's nomination of Arturo Valenzuela to become assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, replacing Shannon, who is to become US ambassador to Brazil.

DeMint, a right-wing Republican and fervent backer of the Honduran coup regime, had held up the nominations as an act of protest against what he saw as the Obama administration's support for Zelaya's return to power.

In announcing his shift on the nominations last Thursday, DeMint stated on the floor of the Senate that he was "happy to report the Obama administration has finally reversed its misguided Honduran policy and will fully recognize the November 29 election."

DeMint continued, "Secretary Clinton and Assistant Secretary Shannon have assured me that the US will recognize the outcome of the Honduran elections regardless of whether Manuel Zelaya is reinstated. I take our administration at their word that they will now side with the Honduran people and end their focus on the disgraced Zelaya."

At a press briefing the next day, State Department spokesman Ian Kelly confirmed that Clinton and Shannon had spoken to DeMint. Kelly reiterated that Washington has agreed to "support the electoral process" and would make no statement regarding the reinstatement of Zelaya.

Zelaya has indicated that he would prefer that a "verification commission" formed under the accord, consisting of US Secretary of Labor Hilda Solis and former Chilean president Ricardo Lagos, choose the interim government.

At the same time, he has written to Secretary of State Clinton demanding to know whether Washington's

"position condemning the coup d'etat has been changed or modified." The State Department spokesman said that Clinton has made no reply.



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