

Washington endorses gunpoint election in Honduras

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The Obama administration has declared its support for elections being held this Sunday in Honduras, under conditions in which the regime that came to power in a coup last June has refused to cede power and is preparing intense repression against those who oppose it.

The action has placed Washington at odds with virtually all of Latin America, whose governments have refused to recognize the elections as legitimate.

The US endorsement of the elections represents the culmination of a policy that has lent political support to the coup regime headed by the Liberal Party leader of the national legislature, Roberto Micheletti, and the Honduran military, even as Washington has given lip service to the principle of restoring the country's elected president, Manuel Zelaya, to power.

Zelaya was dragged from the presidential palace by hooded and heavily armed soldiers in the early morning hours of June 28, bundled onto an airplane and flown into exile. Since his clandestine return to the country two months ago, he has been forced to remain holed up in the Brazilian embassy.

In advance of a meeting of the Organization of American States in Washington Monday, the US assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Arturo Valenzuela, sent a letter defending Washington's position, insisting that Sunday's elections "are not something invented by the de facto government as a way out or to whitewash the coup."

The holding of the vote, Valenzuela said, is "consistent with the constitutional mandate to elect the president and congress."

Valenzuela was only recently confirmed to his position as the senior State Department official responsible for Latin America. Senate Republicans, led by Jim DeMint of South Carolina, had held up his nomination over the Obama administration's stated support for the return of Zelaya to office. After the administration made it clear it would back the election whether the ousted president was reinstated or not, DeMint and his fellow Republicans dropped their opposition.

Backing the Republicans' support for the coup regime was a team of high-powered political lobbyists funded by Honduran business interests. This effort was led by President Bill Clinton's White House counsel, Lanny Davis, a close political associate of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom he served as a chief political fundraiser during her 2008 presidential bid.

Valenzuela also announced that the US will send observers to monitor the election. Organizing this mission for Washington will be the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), organizations set up by the two major US political parties.

Both are funded by the National Endowment for Democracy, an

agency established in 1983 to carry out the kind of political operations that previously had been staged by the Central Intelligence Agency. The NED was a leading backer of the Venezuelan coup of 2002 and has been involved in the so-called "color revolutions" carried out in several former Soviet republics. Sitting on the board of the NDI are a number of veteran Democratic politicians as well as the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten.

The OAS, from which Honduras has been suspended since the coup, Spain and various Latin American governments have refused to send observer teams on the grounds that it is impossible to hold democratic elections under an unelected dictatorship. The only government in Latin America to openly back the elections is that of Panama.

In Honduras, a significant number of candidates have announced their withdrawal from the election. In all, 55 candidates for deputy and 110 for mayor have said they will not participate. Those refusing to run include a candidate for vice president in the Liberal Party, in which both Zelaya and Micheletti are leading members, and the party's candidate for mayor in San Pedro Sula, the country's second largest city.

Washington's backing of the election is the culmination of a protracted process that began with the coup itself. Given the overwhelming US domination of the Honduran economy as well as the political life of the country, it is difficult to believe that the overthrow of the country's president would have taken place without a green light from US officials.

The Honduran military that executed the coup is largely trained and armed by the Pentagon, and the American military maintains its largest military facility in the region on Honduran soil. This is the Soto Cano Air Base, where the plane carrying the ousted and abducted Zelaya landed before continuing to transport him to Costa Rica and exile.

Following the coup, the Obama administration issued a tepid condemnation of the action and a call for the restoration of constitutional order, while the State Department refused in the initial months to explicitly demand Zelaya's return to the presidency.

Washington promoted a mediation effort by its longtime ally in the region, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias, which led to the so-called San Jose Accord, calling for Zelaya to be restored to office, but only as a figurehead president in a so-called "government of national unity and reconciliation" controlled by the military and civilian officials who overthrew him.

The deal also included a renunciation on Zelaya's part of any bid to amend the country's reactionary constitution, a document dictated by the outgoing Honduran military dictatorship and the US Embassy in 1983. It was Zelaya's attempt to hold a consultative plebiscite asking

Hondurans whether they favored a vote on calling a constituent assembly to consider constitutional revisions that provoked his ouster.

Afterwards, his right-wing opponents, parroted by the bulk of the US media, floated the charge that this was an attempt on Zelaya's part to grab another, illegitimate term in office. As the vote on whether to hold a constituent assembly, which theoretically could overturn the constitution's term limits, would be held concurrently with the presidential ballot choosing Zelaya's successor, this charge was patently absurd.

Zelaya and his backers accepted the San Jose Accord, while Micheletti's so-called de facto government rejected it, raising repeated objections and managing to drag out the process for months, even as it unleashed a wave of violent repression against the mass protests against the coup regime. Opposition sources say that this repression has claimed the lives of 27 people, while thousands more have been illegally detained, many of them suffering beatings and torture.

Finally, at the end of October, a US delegation headed by Thomas Shannon, Valenzuela's predecessor at the State Department, brokered an agreement signed by both parties, the so-called Guaymuras accord. The terms of this deal were even more reactionary than those drawn up by Arias. In addition to the government of "national unity" and the renunciation of any attempt to alter the 1983 constitution, it conditioned Zelaya's return to office on a vote by the same Honduran congress that had endorsed his overthrow. Moreover, as subsequently became clear, it included no timetable for the coup regime to step down.

In the wake of the signing, Micheletti announced the formation of a "national unity" government with himself at its head and including not a single Zelaya supporter. Meanwhile, the Congress announced that it would not even meet to consider Zelaya's restoration until December 2, three days after the election.

First Shannon and then the number-two State Department official on Latin America, Craig Kelly, made it clear that Washington would not condition its support for the election on Zelaya's return to office, essentially handing the organizers of the coup everything they had sought.

Speaking in Tegucigalpa last week, Kelly declared, "Nobody has the right to take from the Honduran people the right to vote, to elect their leaders." In a transparent threat to the mass movement that has opposed the coup regime and has called for a boycott of any election held under its rule, Kelly admonished all Hondurans to "avoid provocations, calls to violence."

Zelaya has facilitated this entire process, seeking to subordinate the movement of the Honduran workers, peasants and students against the regime to these negotiations. From the beginning, he has placed his faith in the Obama administration to rescue him. As late as last Friday, he issued a letter to other Latin American heads of state warning against the "ambiguous and imprecise" positions of the Obama administration and expressing his surprise at Washington's support for the election.

This process degenerated further into farce last week with the announcement by Micheletti that he would take a "leave of absence" from the presidency from November 25 until December 2 in order to "concentrate all the attention of the Honduran people on the electoral process and not on the political crisis."

The State Department "welcomed" the move, proclaiming that it would give the Honduran people "breathing space" and allow them to "focus on the election."

Micheletti named no one to succeed him, and the State Department's spokesman acknowledged that he did not know who was running the country. The obvious answer is the same people who have run it since the June coup, the military command and the ruling oligarchy.

Micheletti added that faced with any disruption of "order and security that threatens the peace of the nation and the tranquility of the Honduran people," he would return to the presidency and organize "with vigor and firmness the measures that are necessary to guarantee order."

Opponents of the regime point out that such measures are already being implemented in preparation for the disputed elections. The regime has imposed a state of emergency and ordered Honduran troops to impose a "general disarmament" beginning this week, with the search for and seizure of weapons. Roadblocks have been set up in various parts of the capital and on national highways, with people subjected to searches and detentions.

In addition to 16,000 troops and 14,000 police agents, the regime has mobilized 5,000 members of the military reserves to be deployed for the election.

The country's mayors have reportedly been ordered by the armed forces to draw up lists of people considered to be opponents of the elections for possible detention.

Micheletti has threatened that the government will criminally prosecute anyone in the media who advocates a boycott of the November 29 vote. And last Friday, the regime once again forced Canal 36, the sole television outlet that has opposed the coup, off the air.

The Committee of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees in Honduras (COFADEH), one of the country's principal human rights organizations, issued a warning Sunday that in the run-up to the election, the coup regime is launching a "new wave of death threats, political persecution, illegal detentions, torture [and] militarization of some sectors in the main cities."

It pointed to "the incursion of cars bearing no license plates and with tinted windows, driven by heavily armed subjects, with their faces covered in ski masks in the neighborhoods identified with resistance to the coup."

The group also called attention to an order issued by the Ministry of Public Health, instructing health facilities to prepare for mass casualties, postpone elective surgeries and to remain open 24 hours a day during the election period.



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