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## **Honduras' New President Promises Systemic Change; Outgoing President Also Faces Sweeping Change**

*by Mike Leffert*

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Manuel Zelaya Rosales was sworn in Jan. 27 as president of Honduras. He is known popularly as Mel, is 53 years old, and is the pick of the former opposition Partido Liberal (PL). He does not have a majority in the 128-seat Congress, but the PL's Roberto Micheletti was elected Jan. 25 as that body's president, so Zelaya will not be facing a hostile legislature. The PL won 62 seats in the election, the outgoing ruling party, the Partido Nacional, 52.

Dealmaking with lesser parties left the two major parties evenly divided. The negotiations were tense, with potential success or failure of Zelaya's term riding on the outcome. Zelaya was saved by a change of heart by a small leftwing party. The PN had struck a deal with the Unificacion Democratica (UD) and the Partido Democrita Cristiano de Honduras (PDCH) to back their candidate, Carlos Katan, giving them 64 votes.

The PL teamed with the Partido Innovacion y Unidad-Social Democratica (PINU-SD), which had only two votes, to give 64 votes to Micheletti. The deadlock could have spelled disaster, but the UD saved the day for Zelaya when its president, Cesar Ham, withdrew from its deal with the PN after loud complaints from within his ranks. The UD appears to have gotten nothing in return from Micheletti, who announced that the new leadership would include representatives of the PL, the PN, PINU-SD, and the PDCH, but not the UD.

The swearings-in put to rest what electoral observers say were the worst presidential and legislative elections since Honduras' return to democracy 25 years ago (see NotiCen, 2005-12-01). The final results were not released until Dec. 23, nearly a month after the elections were held. With all that behind him, Zelaya received the presidential sash with promises to govern "with honesty and transparency, which is what the country needs most." As a good-faith gesture in that direction, he signed the Ley de Participacion Ciudadana, which he said would "give the people the participation to watch the government and put an end to corruption in Honduras." The law had been passed in the Congreso Nacional (CN) the night before and presented to him for signature at the ceremony.

Another of his immediate acts was to order his Minister of Education Rafael Pineda Ponce to "take all measures necessary to guarantee that no child, no Honduran young person, has to pay to go to a public school." He said that, as the son of a schoolteacher, he made the commitment to make public education a high priority.

The inaugural speech included a long list of promises. On the environment he said he would protect water resources, prevent illegal timbering, and see to it that, for every tree legally cut, one would be planted in its place. Mining permits would henceforth include conservation measures (see NotiCen, 2003-06-26). Without environmental guarantees, he said, no more open-pit mining permits would

be issued. On energy, he would follow up on a report to deal with energy costs. He has scheduled a meeting with distributors Shell, Dippsa, and Esso to deal directly with the local causes of high prices.

Turning to security, he said he would increase the number of police officers, and he announced a plan through which minimum-wage earners might be able to buy their own houses. For small-property owners in financial crisis, he promised a plan to refinance, and with that, a fund for deputies to develop projects in their own districts, as is done in Costa Rica. To promote transparency in government, Zelaya said he would promote municipal decentralization and require that his Cabinet deliver sworn reports of their personal assets. He will seek in the CN passage of laws of transparency and access to public information. These will supplement the participation law he signed, which creates the Foro Nacional de Participacion Ciudadana.

In economic terms, the country that Zelaya inherits from outgoing President Ricardo Maduro is a mixed bag, according to analysts. On the whole, unemployment in all its categories has risen between 2001 and 2005, but a small few living in extreme poverty now live in regular poverty. The figures for the former fell from 47.4% to 47.1%, while in the latter, they rose from 64.5% to 65.8%. These figures, together with decreases in real income and a worsening distribution of income indicate a deteriorating situation for citizens, even though the macroeconomic picture is brighter. T

he deficit, inflation, growth, exports, rate of currency devaluation, all show improvement since 2001. The Instituto Nacional de Estadisticas, which compiled these figures in its study, Mercado Laboral, concluded that the microeconomic situation of the country is worse.

## *Big losses for Maduro*

Outgoing President Maduro lost more than just a job in the handover of the office. His wife, Spaniard Aguas Ocana, told reporters the day before the ceremony that she would be divorcing Maduro. Ocana was well-liked in some poor enclaves of Honduras, where she had become something of an Eva Peron-like figure because of some children's programs her office oversaw.

She had become a citizen of Honduras in June 2004 and sent some 200 poor schoolchildren to Salamanca to be educated. She also started some social programs in rural areas in cooperation with the Junta de Andalucia in her native country. She has adopted three Honduran children and is guardian of nine others. Ocana told reporters she would soon be traveling to Nicaragua on behalf of a Spanish needy-children's nongovernmental organization (NGO), and would take her 12 children with her. After that, she said she would be returning to Honduras to continue her good works.

Maduro was openly upset and critical of his wife's announcement, good works or no. He said its timing had caused harm to him and the country. Nonetheless, Ocana accompanied her husband to the ceremony. Upon entering the ceremonial grounds, Maduro endured catcalls from the assembled crowd, even though he entered by a back door rather than make the customary grand entrance. The couple has aired their linen publicly before, more recently when Ocana found out that Maduro's former minister of culture, arts, and sports Mireya Batres had been his girlfriend.

In 2002, Maduro caused consternation in Honduras when he, as president, disappeared for three days without anyone knowing his whereabouts. He had gone to Naples to propose to Ocana. She had been posted there after serving in a consular position in the Spanish Embassy in Tegucigalpa. They married Oct. 10, 2002. Mireya Batres resigned her ministry post in January 2004, at the insistence of Ocana. Dialogue with gangs The Maduros' drama might have stolen a bit of the thunder from Zelaya's inauguration, but the new president will not be upstaged by the former first lady's devotion to children.

Beyond tasking his education minister to see to their schooling, Zelaya is concerned with what happens to them once they are a little older in this poorest of Central America's societies. During the campaign, he said he was not content to deal with the country's gang problem with severe sanctions, ignoring the social causes. On Jan. 30, he announced his intention to enter into talks with members of the most notorious international gangs, Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and La 18 (M-18), and has put his Security Minister retired Gen. Alvaro Romero on the case.

"The mareros have asked to dialogue with the government, and I believe I'm obligated to listen to them to learn their expectations," said the minister. "They are looking for a way out of this tunnel they have been stuffed into, and it's necessary to give them a chance." He said a meeting would be set up in the coming week, with Catholic Bishop Romulo Emiliani and evangelical pastor Mario Fumero invited as mediators. Both clerics have been working for years on programs to rehabilitate the gangs. Romero said he wants to offer them an alternative by which to give up their weapons and criminal ways. The general said he believes that the gangs are nothing new, that they have always been around in one form or another, and that they have of late been exploited by organized crime.

Emiliani expressed enthusiasm for the government's plan, telling a reporter, "I like Romero's attitude very much, and I'm disposed to collaborate with his initiative." The bishop has tried in the past to mediate between the gangs and the Maduro government, but without success. With this government, he expects better results. His long experience with the groups, he said, indicates that "M-18 is less numerous but better organized and disciplined than MS, and is looking for a reconciliation with society. They are ready to talk with the state because they want to reinsert themselves into their homeland."

This initiative is just one of several that represents a departure from government as usual in Honduras. To accomplish his program, Zelaya has filled his Cabinet with many people who are outside the norm and to the left of the center-right PL. For many analysts, there is some question whether Zelaya can reorient the country in view of the entrenchment of conservatism in his own party, in the opposition, and in centers of power outside government.

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