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## Harsh Reviews For Honduras President's First 100 Days

by Mike Leffert

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Honduran President Manuel Zelaya Rosales has passed his hundred-days-in-office mark, signaling the end of a honeymoon characterized by critical silence all around. With the gags off, a picture emerges of a president who still has not hit his stride and whose flagship initiatives still have many loose ends. The critiques have come from all sectors, political, educational, popular, environmental, and economic.

The Foro Social de la Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras (FOSDEH) published a particularly harsh assessment under the title, *The Version of the Country That His Advisors Will Never Tell President Zelaya*. The organization is an offshoot of the *Asociacion de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales de Honduras (ASONOG)* comprising several organizations from the *Arzobispado de Tegucigalpa* to the *Colegio Hondureno de Economistas*. FOSDEH coordinator Raf Flores said that, in a nutshell, Zelaya "runs the risk of falling into ungovernability" if he does not change his ways. "What we are seeing is a president who complains that society doesn't understand and join in on his reform intentions, but who has been incapable of demonstrating effectively that he has any,"

Flores said that leaders of various social sectors have begun to feel defrauded. He said that the presidency has no sustainable alternatives to the economic turmoil left over from the administration of former President Ricardo Maduro (2002-2006) and that Zelaya comes up with "promises instead of proposals." He added, "What's lacking is a statesman who leads the country; the president seems not to have been prepared to govern."

### Party critiques

Comments from the various parties were a mixed bag. Clearly those in opposition to Zelaya's Partido Liberal (PL) had something to gain in passing negative judgment. Echoing the FOSDEH analysis, Olban Valladares, spokesman of the Partido de Innovacion Nacional y Unidad Social Democrata (PINU), said, "The government seems stagnant, one doesn't see that it is working on a long- or medium-term plan that would indicate to us, and make us feel, national progress." He criticized personnel changes throughout the government as simply giving jobs to party militants, and said it must stop, "because the state is not anyone's personal spoils, and these changes only bring anarchy while the new employees are being trained, ending up in inaction and delays in government plans."

The Democracia Cristiana (DC) had a similar view. Ramon Velazquez, member of the party's political committee, said, "We cannot give ourselves the luxury of putting up obstacles to discontinue democracy. Nevertheless, despite the good intentions, it must be recognized that wrong decisions have been made, and they are not giving us the results we'd hoped for."

The leftist Unificacion Democrata (UD) held back. Former UD leader Matias Funes explained the party's reluctance, recalling that the it had gotten burned in an alliance with the Partido Nacional (PN) (see NotiCen, 2006-02-02).

The PN, however, was most aggressive in its critique, with eight points, which it presented formally to the media: Security.

No policy exists. People are demanding police in the streets because the violence has increased and no notice is given of a plan to stop it.

Fuel needs. Prices have been distorted and there is a false perception that the situation is being controlled, but the truth is the price of gasoline has risen [substantially] while the president promised to lower the cost.

Land. The reform process of the property system is paralyzed, affecting the most poor. Moreover, internal battles have destroyed the Programa de Tierras.

Employment. Not one single job has been created despite electoral promises to create 100,000 jobs.

Housing. The president promised to build 200,000 houses, which means 137 houses a day, but they have no plan to do it.

Transparency. This is a pillar of this government, but Zelaya has violated it from the first day. There is opacity in issues like fuel and the acquisition of medicines.

Citizen power. The assemblies are not forums for discussion, as was promised, but rather carnivals for activists who see the government as a collection agency.

National planning. A national plan is needed, a development plan, originating among all sectors and not in the mind of a president.

The PN was the party of the last government, and they have pulled out all the stops in their analysis. The election was a close one (see NotiCen, 2005-12-01) between Zelaya and PN candidate Porfirio Lobo, who represents a considerable constituency. In addition to its eight points, the PN hit the government for awarding contracts without bids, including one for coordinating a plan to buy gasoline that cost US\$737,000 and has produced no results.

#### Civil-society critiques

Outside the government, in civil society, there is plenty of caviling as well. In education, a centerpiece of the Zelaya campaign, there is chaos, according to teacher Sinia Andino. "Few school directors have any idea how to plan, teach, and even how to use materials that at first glance appear pedagogically suitable, but in the end everything transforms into an unintelligible mess for most teachers," Andino said.

Another of Zelaya's campaign promises was action on the environment and, in particular, an end to illegal timber cutting and the practice of burning down forestland for agricultural purposes. Money has been spent on a reforestation plan and the army deployed, but critics say there has been no real improvement. Said Bishop Luis Alfonso Santos of Copan, "The president said, 'a tree cut, a tree planted,' which does not exactly demonstrate a well-defined and planned program of what should be a forest policy." Andres Tamayo, an environmentalist leader, added, "To plant a tree every time one is cut is not policy, it is demagoguery."

Tamayo is a Catholic priest long involved in the environmental movement. He said that measures announced by Zelaya have come to nothing. "Let's take the case of the [Rio Platano] Biosphere. Its protection is a task that should have been undertaken ages ago; they became disinterested and it didn't matter to them. They went to the biosphere because they had to install hydroelectric dams. Deforestation not only has to do with wood; it's soil erosion, it's water, food, health.... So while the government is making its decisions, it's killing people; it could stop the companies, but it doesn't."

Tamayo was indicting not only the Zelaya government but the one before it as well. He has been working on trying to get the degradation stopped for six years, he said, and now he and his group, seeing no action from this government, are planning a hunger strike. Zelaya responded to the critics at first by sending out his Cabinet ministers to explain themselves.

Secretary of Security Alvaro Romero told the media there was a strategy against organized crime, common crime, and the infamous gangs, but he never got around to telling what exactly the strategy entailed. The housing secretary said the government has designed an ambitious construction plan, something the previous government had not done in four years, but he too was short on details.

Presidential advisor Enrique Flores invited the participation of the PN and said that Zelaya "has a clear and transparent route, he knows what he wants and is working to benefit the poorest, to obtain development." He said the criticisms were welcome, and "if the nacionalistas have something to contribute, we are willing to listen to them." Government response weak Other officials have spoken up in defense of the administration, but the consensus has been that the statements were weak, indicating an indecisive government floundering for direction and for a coherent plan of governing.

The lack of direction has already begun to erode the administration from the inside, and that erosion is becoming public, with the resignation of Juan Bendeck, now ex-administrator of the Empresa Nacional de Energia Electrica (ENEE). Analysts have begun to notice that certain officials seem to be working for their own benefit, positioning themselves for future candidacies. They have noted that there are within the government representatives of divergent tendencies inside the PL, and their enmities have started to show. There is a tradition in Honduras of internal fighting more ferocious than the competition between parties, and this is especially true for the PL and the PN.

Zelaya's recent behavior seems to verify the perception of confusion and lack of direction. Having already invested in a plan to find a single supplier of fuels, he also announced an intention to negotiate with the government of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez for favorable oil-supply terms and, in the same time-frame, has scheduled a trip to the US to negotiate with President Bush on

"energy, cooperation for the reduction of poverty, international development agreements, peace, and military accords." He said he also wants to talk to Bush about democracy, the environment, corruption, and drug trafficking. The US meeting is scheduled for June 5, but, before that, Zelaya is going to try his luck with Chavez.

Zelaya said Honduras must "get prejudices out of its mind" about an eventual deal with Chavez. "Honduras has all the liberty, all the independence, to negotiate what is best for this country, and we all have to be in agreement, the sovereignty of this country is not for sale, either for fuel or for funds of any other kind."

-- End --