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Honduran Presidency Unraveling

by Mike Leffert

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Serious rifts in the government of President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya threatened to throw Honduras into chaos as the government celebrated its sixth month in power with what has been termed the toughest week of its mandate. Two of the president's ministers have quit, and his own vice president has challenged his policies. The government is fending off striking doctors, demonstrating teachers, protesting students, and charges that an energy deal with Venezuela will hurt relations with the US, upon whose good will the country's future depends. And those are just a sample of the full slate of issues.

The breach between Zelaya and Vice President Elvin Santos was, perhaps, foreseeable. The two represent opposing tendencies within their party, the Partido Liberal (PL) (see NotiCen, 2005-12-15), and those opposing sides may be irreconcilable. The manner in which the split occurred points to that possibility. It began with an interview with Santos published simultaneously in two newspapers, *El Heraldo* in Tegucigalpa and *La Prensa* in San Pedro Sula. Both papers are owned by a single media mogul, Jorge Canahuati Larach. Santos comes from the conservative, big-business faction of the PL.

The interview started off innocuously enough, with Santos fending off intimations that his moving his offices out of the Casa Presidencial to set up official quarters in his own house reflected anything more than the same security concerns that prevent the two officials from flying together. Another softball allowed him to laud his personal relationship with the president. Once the interview got up a full head of steam, however, Santos hoisted his colors. Exploiting the differences within the party, he identified himself with "the democratic umbrella that firmly believes that the problems of Honduras will be resolved under the design of social participation, but without going to populist extremes," and from there he outlined an argument wherein "Honduras is a nation that, while the rest of the countries of Central America drain themselves fighting for outdated and unbalanced ideologies, we sustain ourselves under our democratic banner...." He explained that to mean development through free-trade agreements and free markets.

Blasting Zelaya deniably

The interview was structured in such a way that Santos could deny making certain accusations against the president, and then go ahead and make them. Santos was asked, for instance, "Are you in agreement with this populism that President Zelaya projects?" The vice president answered, "President Zelaya does not feign any populism," but then answered a question about Zelaya's seeking an oil deal with Venezuela in a way that carried a heavy burden of populism-by-association.

He criticized the president for unnecessarily provoking the US with the deal, noting, "Our principal trade partner is the United States. They have invested more than a billion dollars here, we're talking here of more than 20 billion lempiras. And 90% of our agricultural production is destined for the

US," He continued to tick off other economic facts that included the US\$1.5 billion in remittances from Hondurans abroad, leading to the conclusion that "we depend on the United States." Santos brushed aside the suggestion that there is a good deal of popular support for a Venezuelan oil deal that could ease the squeeze in Honduras, favoring the development of hydroelectric resources within the terms of trade agreements as a way to solve energy problems.

The interview had repercussions. Among them was the perception in the public mind that the gulf between the nation's two highest leaders was there to stay and that it bode no great good for the president. Zelaya tried to minimize the damage but was reported to have felt that his vice president had stabbed him in the back. His first impulse was to salvage the Venezuela deal. Without mentioning names, he told the media, "All those who are opposed to Honduras entering into this process are those who want to remain with the transnationals. They are those who unite with interests external to the country, and with economic interests, because they have gas stations they have interests in common with the transnationals they dedicate themselves to their defense. Those who are using these arguments to sow discord are those accustomed by economic interests to be on good terms [with them]. They are the ones in good standing at the embassies."

At this time, it is definitely Santos, and not Zelaya, who is looking good at the US Embassy. Apart from the Venezuela connection, Ambassador Charles Ford is said to be concerned at a very sensitive time with Zelaya's relationship with the Cuban government. Cuban Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Rafael Daussa was just recently in Honduras, said a statement from the Honduran government, to invite selected world leaders to the XIV Summit of Non-Aligned Nations, to be held in Havana Sept. 11-16.

The government issued statements designed to calm the US over the issue, promising "the delegation that will represent Honduras at the summit will be careful to respect our commitments with other countries." As the weight of all this bears down, Zelaya is simultaneously having the props kicked out from under him. Most recently, Health Secretary Orison Velasquez quit. Velasquez said he'd had enough of accusations from the Colegio Medico de Honduras (CMH) of corruption in purchasing for the country's 28 public hospitals. The accusations against Velasquez led to the freezing of US\$3.8 million in funds from the US Agency for International Development (USAID). With the appointment of Yeni Meza to replace Velasquez, the US turned the spigot back on.

Meza said the funds would go toward family planning, infant and maternal health, and AIDS. Velasquez follows Finance Secretary Hugo Noe Pino out the door. Pino quit in June. The president is overwhelmed Zelaya also seems to have lost ground in his ongoing battle with teachers (see NotiCen, 2006-05-18), who have been on strike and surrounding the Casa Presidencial. Zelaya responded counterproductively to their demands by sending a bill to the legislature that would criminalize demonstrations that block roads. Organizers have put the demonstrators' numbers at 40,000, too many to put in jail.

The teachers want more money in their pay envelopes. They want their hourly wage to rise substantially, to US\$1.26. The government offered just pennies, sweetened with a package of bonuses. In the meantime, classes across the nation are suspended indefinitely, affecting about two million students.

This is the latest in a series of strikes by doctors, nurses, and public employees, moving the president to comment, "It seems that the country is in anarchy, in turmoil." Zelaya might have made much the same comment weeks ago when the Catholic Church's Diocese of Santa Rosa de Copan organized a protest joined by indigenous communities and environmental organizations. But he did not because these were his supporters. Ignoring the recommendations of Bishop Luis Alfonso Santos not to block roads, the protesters brought the entire national road system to a halt by shutting down roads throughout the western and central regions of the country.

The issue in this case was mining contamination, principally from cyanide. The demonstrations were led by the director of Catholic Radio Santa Rosa, who urged, "Let's tie ourselves together, so the cyanide doesn't kill us." Representatives of a dozen organizations under the umbrella organization Alianza Civica por la Democracia called for the recall of Deputy Arnoldo Avilez, sponsor of a new mining law. The law is in process of review, but protesters want it annulled. The Alianza also demanded passage of the Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information as it was written, without amendments they suspect are being tacked on without transparency and without their having access to the information.

They protested the government's Poverty Reduction Strategy, which, they said in a press release, "continues to be a mere declaration of good intentions that still have not translated into direct benefit to the poor, particularly those living in the western zone, the most impoverished in the nation." They protested as well the construction of the El Tigre hydroelectric dam, a megaproject on the Honduras-El Salvador border they say will inundate several communities in the area along with their pasture and agricultural lands. With these demands, the protesters insist that these actions "must be understood also as an authentic exercise of citizen power, which supports President Manuel Zelaya in his efforts to reach consensus in the Congreso Nacional in order to legislate with dignity and adherence to the national interest, overcoming the corrupt sectors that buy and sell the nation."

Zelaya met with Alianza leaders in San Pedro Sula and reaffirmed a campaign promise on open-pit mining. He told the representatives, "The ministers have not given permits, but they cannot arbitrarily cancel the contracts that were extended previously. But if there is a mining company that violates the contract and violates the rights of residents, we will apply sanctions." The president does not seem, even six months into his term, to have a plan or set of policies to get his house in order.

The bill he sent to Congress to criminalize jamming the highways hurts his friends as well as his foes. It carries a five-year sentence, without possibility of substituting a fine for imprisonment, for anyone convicted of taking over a highway, road, bridge, or street, blocking traffic and damaging third parties. If he gives in to the popular sectors, he will alienate the private sectors and international donors, say many analysts. Worse, Zelaya's legislative approach to the problem is showing signs of plunging the country further into ungovernability.

On Aug. 9, at least 12 people were injured as riot police used tear gas to disperse hundreds of teachers blocking a road near the Tegucigalpa airport. The teachers responded by throwing rocks

at the police and throwing unexploded tear-gas canisters back at them. That brought in the Army to reinforce the cops. Several teachers were arrested, and Defense Minister Aristides Mejia told reporters, "The strikers have increased their violent acts and illegally closed the streets, which we will not permit." Mejia said the strikers had also tried to occupy the Casa Presidencial. "Therefore large contingents of soldiers are protecting the presidential offices," he said, adding that the teachers were armed with rocks and sticks.

The strikers saw it differently. "It was an ambush," said Edwin Oliva of the Federacion de Organizaciones Magisteriales de Honduras (FOMH), "and the police acted with violence. The government does not want to resolve our demands, and so we will be in Tegucigalpa until we achieve our objectives." Army spokesman Col. Jose Lobo also promised to stay in the streets to the bitter end. The media have estimated that there are about 20,000 striking teachers in the streets at present, who have come from all over the country.

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