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## **International Consensus: Military Coup In Honduras Must Not Stand**

*by LADB Staff*

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The rigors of profound political change have challenged the institutional strength of many Latin American countries, and they have, without exception, withstood their transformations in a way that has allowed the region to take its place in the world with a degree of autonomy not seen before. After witnessing so many nations of the hemisphere cast off hegemonic influences with a minimum of violence and maximal accommodation to the call for change, observers could be pardoned for entertaining the proposition that the military coup had been kicked to history's curb as an improbable anachronism out of synch with current affairs. But in the early hours of June 28, the Honduran Army proved that proposition wrong. At about five a.m. that Sunday morning, soldiers burst into the residence of President Manuel Zelaya Rosales, took him still in his nightclothes to the airport, and put him aboard a plane bound for Costa Rica. The military had pulled off the first golpe de estado to occur in the hemisphere in the 21st century and shattered the duly elected government. It was not immediately known if the coup was bloodless, but a confrontation between soldiers and presidential guards was reported. What precipitated the coup was Zelaya's intention to hold a popular consultation on whether the people wanted a full-scale referendum on the question of changing the Constitution. If a majority voted affirmatively in the consultation, then the question would be formally presented to the people in the next regularly scheduled election in November. Among the contemplated changes to the Constitution, one would have allowed a second successive run for the presidency. The Constitution now prohibits that. The consultation, which was not a formal election, was to be held Sunday, June 28, but was aborted after the capture and exile of the president. The consultation had only reached this point because, on June 25, Zelaya had led a convoy of supporters to Acosta Mejia Air Base to "rescue" the ballots and boxes after the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) had declared the vote illegal and the military had confiscated the materials. Zelaya got the ballots back, telling the media, "Nobody's going to stop Sunday's referendum. They don't want the people to be consulted, to speak, to have opinions, to have participation, nor do they want democracy in Honduras." Zelaya had responded to the military's refusal to distribute the ballots and boxes by firing top military chief Gen. Romeo Vasquez and Defense Minister Edmundo Orellana, occasioning the resignations of the chiefs of each of the services. The plane carrying Zelaya landed unceremoniously in San Jose, deposited its passenger along with his vice ministers of security and foreign relations and the ambassadors of Nicaragua and Venezuela. In a T-shirt of undetermined provenance over his pajamas, Zelaya stepped up to international news cameras to declare that he had been kidnapped at gunpoint and to emphasize that he had not requested exile or asylum in another country. Events, claims, and counterclaims move swiftly. The importance of going on the record early about the circumstances of presidential exile was demonstrated in the forced ouster of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide (1991, 1994-1996, 2001-2004), who was also deposed and removed but whose insistence that he was kidnapped was drowned out by US claims that Aristide had asked to be rescued by the agents who removed him from office and hustled him aboard their waiting aircraft. The Organization of American States (OAS) responded quickly on June 28 to Zelaya's ouster. Officials

of that international body had been alerted to the developing situation days earlier; on June 26, the Permanent Committee had passed a resolution requesting a special commission be dispatched to Honduras to assess the situation and try to muster participants for a national dialogue to "find democratic solutions." That opportunity missed, OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza called an emergency meeting of the Permanent Committee hoping to avoid a breach of democratic order in Honduras, but, here again, it was a bit late. Back in Honduras, it was reported that the Congreso Nacional had read and accepted the resignation of Manuel Zelaya Rosales as president of Honduras. The problem was, Zelaya denied having written or signed any such document. Nor did the document stand up to even casual scrutiny. Zelaya's son told Univision that he had examined the document and that the signature was not his father's. Moreover, the letter was dated June 25, but congressional officials had said Zelaya had signed it just before boarding the plane for Costa Rica. A second document in defense of what the OAS now regarded as a coup came from the CSJ, which released a statement explaining that the armed forces had acted in accordance with the law both in confiscating the consultation materials and in arresting the president. The final breach of democratic order came with the Congress appointing its president, Roberto Micheletti, president of the republic of Honduras in the absence of a vice president. Former Vice President Elvin Santos, who would otherwise have been Zelaya's successor, was forced to resign to run for the Partido Liberal (PL) nomination for president. After overcoming constitutional impediments, Santos finally won the nomination, beating the favorite and personal pick of President Zelaya, Micheletti (see NotiCen, 2009-03-05). Micheletti immediately denied there had been a coup and ordered a 48-hour curfew with the assertion that he "came to the presidency not by a coup d'etat but by a completely legal process as set out in our laws." In denying a coup, Honduras' new de facto leader was alone in the world except for the US, which declined immediately to label the situation a coup but which nevertheless repudiated the takeover. An unnamed top State Department official told the press, "We recognize Zelaya as the duly elected and constitutional president of Honduras. We see no other." The Micheletti appointment set Honduran officialdom against the civilized world. The Congress, the CSJ, and the military leadership all concurred in the action against Zelaya. They were also set against many of their fellow citizens, who had gone out on the streets to confront and taunt soldiers deployed throughout the capital and in front of the presidential palace. The consolidated corporate media in Honduras, a crucial link in private-sector power, went on the offensive against an outbreak of sentiment for Zelaya. Radio networks HRN and America, their news apparatuses, called upon the people to return to "normalcy" because a permanent "institutional order" had been established. It was largely the international media that carried the protests and the statements of popular organizations demanding the return of the government they had elected. It is not certain how much support exists for either side on the questions of Zelaya's ouster or his return, domestically. A regime-ordered shutdown of some media combined with power outages aimed at disrupting local communications and news dissemination have made estimates difficult. For the right, this is not a return to the anachronism of military coups; it is the resurfacing of the classic struggle between left and right, between capitalism and socialism, with each side calling its orientation "democracy." Zelaya came to the presidency as the candidate of a more liberal faction of a very conservative party (see NotiCen, 2005-12-15). He turned hard-left only after exhausting his options trying to get help as his country staggered under the burdens of an energy crisis, a food crisis, and an economic crisis. But he got little public appreciation for the tactic. His polling numbers, promulgated though they might have been by the consolidated media and conservative private sectors, lay at about 30% before the coup. The coup could boost his support on the Honduran left, however, now that his power to scare the right is on display. The international

response could, therefore, be ahead of the domestic response on the issue of the president's return. But the international community is adamant, as it just demonstrated in neighboring Guatemala (see NotiCen, 2009-06-25), that it would strongly support institutional integrity and constitutional order. The upstart regime headed by Micheletti has been universally rejected. A growing list of countries has recalled ambassadors or otherwise scaled back relations. The OAS and UN have denied recognition of the regime as has the US. Government in resistance Zelaya's Cabinet has not seen fit to walk away. Cabinet members have organized as the Cabinet of the Government of Honduras in Resistance and issued a statement reiterating the sequence of events, concluding with four basic postulates: "1. That the only legally constituted president elected by the people is the citizen Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales; 2. That we are organized, together with members of civil society, workers, laborers, political parties, and society in general, in a peaceful resistance, disavowing the installation of the de facto government and president that seek to deal a blow to the democracy of our country; 3. That the Honduran people have reacted bravely but peacefully against this blow to democracy; 4. That we repeat that we are standing with our president, alert to the defense of democracy, and we are sure that, thanks to the overwhelming support of the noble Honduran people and the international community, we will re-establish the state of law and reinstate the duly elected government of Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales in order that he complete his constitutional term and continue his tireless labor on behalf of the Honduran people. We exhort all the Honduran people to continue defending peacefully the democracy so that in the coming hours we might re-establish peace and order in our beloved Honduras." The statement is signed by 28 ministers and other ranking Cabinet members of the Zelaya government. At the moment, they are getting a good deal of encouragement to remain ready to return to work. From exile, Zelaya announced he would return, even though the de facto leaders threatened his arrest for treason upon arrival. His original timetable called for a return on July 2, but contingencies bumped that forward to July 4. Among the contingencies was Micheletti's threat to arrest him. In altering his plans, Zelaya cited not wanting to complicate OAS efforts, although chances of a reversal by Micheletti and company seemed slim. The OAS asked for some extra time, and Zelaya said he would respect the request. After a dozen hours of meetings, the OAS threw down the gauntlet. The organization resolved to put Insulza in charge of reinstatement negotiations with the proviso that if, after 72 hours, the de facto regime does not step aside, Honduras would be suspended from the OAS. If that happens, Zelaya said he would return home anyway and, if the military "want to execute me or assassinate me, the people will judge them." OAS credibility, if not viability, is on the line in this conflict. The organization has been unrestrained in its condemnation of the coup, and Insulza has been unequivocal. "We need to show clearly that military coups will not be accepted," he said. "We thought we were in an era when military coups were no longer possible in this hemisphere." Disabused of that thinking, it now appears he understands that whether coups are still possible depends on him and his organization. Like his Guatemalan homologue Alvaro Colom, who recently withstood domestic attempts to unseat him, Zelaya scrambled for international support early, speaking at the UN General Assembly and drawing strong support in the form of a resolution demanding his immediate restoration to office. Zelaya trumpeted the help, telling the world that the resolution "expresses the indignation of the people of Honduras and of people worldwide." But Zelaya also used the moment to signal a willingness to back off the initiatives that so incensed his country's power elite. He said he would return home somewhat chastened. "I am not going to convene a constitutional assembly, and, if I was offered the possibility of remaining in power, I would not do it. I am going to fulfill my four years. I'm going to fight to have the four years respected." The conciliatory note might help. Amid all the braying and posturing, it has been reported that some in the legislature

have been getting nervous at what they have wrought, and that group is growing. A member of that group, speaking anonymously to The Washington Post, said a compromise that would allow for a return was possible. It would include amnesty for everyone involved in the coup and in the de facto government on one side and the abandonment of the referendum, which Zelaya has already announced, on the other.

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