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Honduras President Manuel Zelaya, Tired Of Waiting, Calls For Insurrection

by LADB Staff

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Two weeks into Honduras' post-coup interregnum, exiled President Manuel Zelaya has come to see the Washington-brokered mediation of Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias as a scheme to run out the clock on his tenure. Hondurans are scheduled to go to the polls to elect a new government on Nov. 29 and to inaugurate a new president in January 2010. Faced with a string of time-outs and delays for all manner of procedural purposes in what he views as reinstatement talks, Zelaya has sought to retake control of a situation that finds his country run by a group headed by the former president of the Congress, Roberto Micheletti. No country recognizes this group as a legitimate government, and no country has withdrawn recognition of the Zelaya administration. On July 13, Zelaya told a news conference, "We are giving the coup regime an ultimatum. The mediation effort will be considered failed and other measures will be taken," if, at the next round of talks, he is not returned to country and to office. The Micheletti regime contends that a fair reading of the Honduras Constitution proves that the concerted actions of the military, the legislature, and the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) in overthrowing the Zelaya government were legal, that theirs is the extant government, and that a misguided international community will come around in time. They are more than comfortable with a bargaining schedule that calls for the next meeting of principals to be delayed until July 18. Time appears to have worked for the regime on the home front, too. A curfew and other restrictions, encompassing generation of electricity and media shutdowns amounting to near-martial law, have diminished pro-Zelaya fervor to the point that the restrictions had been lifted without a return to massive street protests seen at the outset of the coup. Just to be on the safe side, however, Micheletti reimposed the curfew on July 15. Mediator Arias interprets the slow pace of the talks as beneficial. The week off gives the sides time to "reflect," so that they can participate "more calmly" in the coming conversations. Arias was unable to get Zelaya and Micheletti to face each other, ending up speaking to each separately, with no progress to report at the end. Regaining initiative could bring class war. The viscosity of events has begun to strip the Zelaya support of its patience. Marvin Ponce, deputy of Unificacion Democratica (UD), said he thinks the talks are just "buying time while the Micheletti regime gets established, and we won't let that happen. We think they are only trying to drag this situation out, when things are clear. There was a coup d'etat, and Manuel Zelaya should be reinstated." The UD is part of the Frente Nacional contra el Golpe de Estado en Honduras, and Ponce's statement reflected the Frente's July 12 statement expressing its conviction that the talks are a dilatory tactic aimed at keeping Zelaya out of the country. The anti-coup forces have recognized that, with inertia setting in and favoring the Micheletti regime, the initiative must be wrested away. Ponce told IPS, "As of this week, we are going to take more radical action. We are calling all of the organizations that make up the resistance front to an assembly Tuesday [July 14] where we are going to propose a nationwide general strike as well as more radical actions." He did not specify those actions, but in an indication of how far the resistance is prepared to go, he added, "If what it takes is civil war, then that's what we'll do." If there is to be a war, Ponce said it would be a class war. Despite his personal wealth and class affiliation, Zelaya has come to champion the poor against the elite classes that traditionally rule

the country. "The people owe Honduras a revolution," said Ponce, pulling out all the stops, "and, if Manuel Zelaya is not reinstated, there will be a confrontation between social classes. What I can say is that the days of peaceful resistance, like we have had until now, are numbered." Not that the preceding days have been entirely peaceful. Two protesters died on July 5 when protesters confronted security forces at Toncontin International Airport as a plane carrying Zelaya, intent on returning, was prevented from landing (see NotiCen, 2009-07-09). Later, two UD politicians, Roger Bados and Ramon Garcia, were murdered in separate incidents. These murders have been assumed but not proven to be linked to the resistance and have contributed to "fear and insecurity." The US has thus far been somewhat successful in letting this play out as a regional story rather than one about US interjection. But it is widely understood that the idea for the Arias mediation came from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and a belief has surfaced that the US is facilitating the process in Costa Rica for its potential to see the sun set on the Zelaya presidency rather than for its probability of resolving the conflict. Zelaya has directly faulted Arias as being implicated in the delays, saying, "We must give precise dates. President Arias asked for 48 hours the first time, then it was 72 hours, and now it has logically been extended to a week." Zelaya clearly has no intention of watching his presidency slip away, and he is not keen on cooling his heels in Costa Rica either. Shortly after Micheletti departed from his first meeting with Arias, Zelaya stepped up to a microphone to offer, "I'm publicly challenging the coup regime; let's agree to let me go back. I will go escorted by the people. You can go with your guns, and instead of shooting innocent children like the one you murdered at the Toncontin airport, shoot me. I have enough moral reliability to take your blows and bullets." Micheletti has indicated he would be all for a solution like that, blustery as it is. But there would be some conditions. First, "under no condition" could Zelaya return to office. Second, Zelaya would have to face charges, serious ones. He would have to answer to treason, abuse of power, and corruption, said Micheletti. But, the interim leader continued, the possibility of amnesty is not out of the question. Asked about amnesty by a reporter, he said, "I believe so. I don't have any objection. He is a citizen of the country." A third condition is still under construction. Micheletti spoke of the possibility of holding the presidential election scheduled for Nov. 29 sooner. "I would have to speak with the CSJ, we have to consult with the attorney general about the possibility of having something of that nature." This would suit Micheletti. He called the proposal "not unrealistic." He said he believed that once people get involved in the election, interest in the coup would wane. The newly elected government would normally take office in January, and Micheletti has said he would hand the government over at that time. But more recently he is saying that, if the election were held sooner, he might be able to pass the torch to the winner sooner. To Zelaya, it all amounted to heel dragging and term shrinking, and with it the diminution of any hope of his return. On July 14, he stepped away from Arias' insistence that "one has to be a little patient," and stepped forward to regain the initiative. Speaking from Guatemala, with that country's President Alvaro Colom at his side, Zelaya spoke for the benefit of his supporters in Honduras. In a word, he called for "insurrection." He was now specifying the "other means" he had spoken of just a short time ago but declined to elaborate. Zelaya snatched the Honduran Constitution back from the Micheletti forces who had been thumping it like a bible, to exhort, "The Honduran people have the right to insurrection." That right is, he said, "a legitimate right stated in Article 3 of the Constitution." The exhortation came with some helpful hints on how to get started, saying, "The strike, demonstrations, occupations, civil disobedience are a necessary process when the democratic order is violated in a country." He told fellow citizens not to give up the fight but to "keep it up until the golpistas leave the de facto government they have established in our country." US on defense history haunts As expectations of calmer waters for the Honduran ship of state dissipated amid the stormy rhetoric,

the US found itself again in need of asserting its commitment to noninterference. On the same day that Zelaya was stirring the pot, US Ambassador to Nicaragua Robert Callahan categorically denied any involvement in the coup. Washington "has nothing to do with the golpe de estado in Honduras. It is libelous, a lie, I say categorically," he said. In answer to a reporter's question about evidence to the contrary, Callahan said that a peaceful solution to the situation depended on being careful about what was said publicly. This was taken as a comment on Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's charge that there exist plans for other coups in Guatemala, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Callahan would not be drawn in, directing the reporter to Chavez for clarification. The ambassador stuck to the issue at hand. He reminded reporters that the State Department is on record as supporting Zelaya as the only constitutional president of Honduras, and that President Barack Obama made that clear on July 7. Callahan also reminded that the US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens at that very moment "is there giving protection to the wife and one of the children of Mel Zelaya." If there is a problem with his defense of his country's comportment, it is credibility. Callahan is associated with the tenure of John Negroponte as ambassador to Honduras. Negroponte was highly visible and highly suspect in the prosecution of the US proxy war against the Sandinistas from its Honduran base and thus with the militarization of Honduras. Negroponte went on to become former US President George W. Bush's director of national intelligence. Callahan was Negroponte's media attache. Restitution of the presidency is not simply a question of order, nor is it a matter of principle with little actual import in a lame-duck presidency with less than six months to live even under ideal circumstances. The Micheletti regime is not standing still and appears not inclined just to fill a caretaker role. Its actions will have consequences, whether they have the force of law or not. The regime is in the process of delivering to the Congress a budget that would impose strictures on the next government, regardless of whose it turns out to be. At around US\$5.944 billion, it has been closely shaved compared to Zelaya's last budget. The reduction amounts to 8.2%. Gabriela Nunez, who occupies the position of finance minister, said the cut was needed because of "excesses" in the Zelaya budget and because of the international financial crisis. A 10% cut will fall on the central government, while the decentralized institutions will suffer cuts of 20%. She said the Zelaya government spent US\$289 million off budget and left another US\$173 million in unpaid accounts. The official was not able to address the specifics of cuts in international cooperation that will inevitably affect public spending. She said international financial organizations have not notified the Micheletti regime of cuts, some of which have been announced elsewhere (see NotiCen, 2009-07-09). These are cuts brought about by the coup or necessitated by Honduras' suspension from the Organization of American States (OAS).

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