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Honduras Coup Still Unresolved; Deep Flaws In U.S. Policy And Understanding Of The Region Thought To Be Part Of The Problem

by LADB Staff

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The de facto regime installed by coup in Honduras has shown a penchant for fastidiousness as it worries about the guest list for upcoming talks with luminaries from the Organization of American States (OAS) "A" list. Talks were headed for the abyss when the junta led by former president of the legislature Roberto Micheletti objected to the inclusion of OAS Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza because he has openly advocated the return to the country and to power of exiled President Manuel Zelaya. This explanation soon gave way to other interpretations. After a brief period of reconsideration, the junta came back with a modified plan: Insulza could come, but only as an observer, not as a delegation member. The civilian junta had already imposed a strict prohibition against any member of the party who represented an Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA) government. One of its initial rationales for the coup was that Zelaya, in joining first Petrocaribe and then ALBA, was handing over the country to Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez, and the communists. When the Hondurans relented on the Insulza question late in the evening Aug. 9, the finalists for the trip were Insulza as observer and the foreign ministers of Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Jamaica, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic as members of the delegation. According to reports, the aim of the talks was to coax the Micheletti people into accepting a plan elaborated by Costa Rica's President Oscar Arias that would permit Zelaya's return to a radically reduced presidency. This, despite junta representatives' rejection of the plan in two separate forms and saying repeatedly that any such return was nonnegotiable (see NotiCen, 2009-08-06). Insulza declined to comment or clarify the point, preferring silence at this juncture in the situation, but president of the OAS Permanent Committee Pedro Oyarce defended his chief against the accusation that he was biased in favor of Zelaya. Oyarce pointed out that Insulza had brought the proposal to the committee to seek consensus on the Arias proposals, not to further his own. The visit of these dignitaries in the face of the junta's unequivocal rejection of the most sought after outcome has led the Zelaya support forces to charge that this is nothing more than another stalling tactic to deprive the president of his office. Supporters cited the off-again, on-again schedule as evidence, since, after the de facto government relented on the visit, it postponed the previously agreed upon day of arrival without replacing it with a firm alternative date. Global rejection of the junta The junta has dug its heels deep into the sands of sovereignty as international pressure continues to mount against it in pretty much all quarters except the US, which continues to backpeddle on its early support for Zelaya. In Europe, Spanish social organizations filled the streets in front of the Honduran Embassy in Madrid to celebrate a Global Day of Action for Honduras. The organizations demanded a return to constitutional order in Honduras in response to an international appeal launched by the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Contra el Golpe de Estado (FNRCGE) and Via Campesina, in Honduras. Europe has been generally cooperative with the interests of the elected Honduran government, and all the individual European Union (EU) countries have withdrawn their ambassadors. One difficulty has been with regard to the negotiations between Central America and the European Commission (EC) for establishing an association agreement, a broad form of trade agreement meant to include

aid and cooperation that would make up for the asymmetries between the regions (see NotiCen, 2009-04-30). The EC has elected to keep to a timeline, neither upsetting the schedule nor excluding Honduras. "Our posture has not changed nor has there been discussion in the commission about continuing the negotiations without Honduras," said an unidentified official quoted by Spanish news service EFE. The official said the EC is betting on a peaceful solution soon. Reluctance to suspend the talks lies partly with the fact that they have already been going on since 2007. The parties hope to conclude negotiations this year and sign them early in 2010 under the auspices of a Spanish EU presidency. Despite the EC intentions to get on with it, however, the talks have been in temporary suspension since the coup. Upcoming is the subject of tariffs on banana imports from Central America (see NotiCen, 2005-11-17), a subject of great interest to Honduras. Costa Rica's President Arias has sought to leave the issue aside for now on the possibility that it might be settled by the World Trade Organization (WTO). In other international action against the de facto government, the Union de Naciones Sudamericanas (UNASUR) took advantage of a reception for Zelaya with full presidential honors in Ecuador to reaffirm its commitment not to recognize any Honduran government elected under the authority of the junta. UNASUR hosted Zelaya as special invitee to the organization's third summit. International criticism of US role From Cuba, President Raul Castro accused the US of being responsible for the golpe de estado, saying that no one would have dared such a thing within that wholly dependent country "without receiving the authorization" of Washington. Castro observed, as have many others, that President Barack Obama has been decidedly two-faced on the subject. "On one side we see a president condemning the golpe, and on the other, support." He argued, "These golpistas don't breathe without permission from Washington." But Castro also said he did not believe that Obama was directly behind the coup. "I am one of those who keep saying that he is a well-intentioned man and that he is full of good intentions," he said. "I want to keep believing that. This is a government that is half of the old [former President George W. Bush] and half of the new." Obama continues to provide critics both foreign and domestic with indications that he and his administration are out of their depth generally in Latin America. In Mexico on Aug. 11 for a summit meeting with Mexican President Felipe Calderon and Canada's Prime Minister Steven Harper, Obama stunned critics on the subject of US reaction to the coup with the statement, "The same critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say that we're always intervening and the Yankees need to get out of Latin America. You can't have it both ways. If these critics think that it's appropriate for us to suddenly act in ways that in every other context they consider inappropriate, then I think what that indicates is, that maybe there's some hypocrisy involved in their approach to US-Latin America relations that certainly is not going to guide my administration's policies." The critics in question found the disingenuousness of Obama's statement staggering. Laura Carlson is director of the Americas Program at the International Relations Center (IRC). She corrected what she called Obama's inaccuracies on the radio program Democracy Now, saying that critics were not calling for US intervention in the internal affairs of another country. She continued, "What we've been calling for is for the United States to do exactly as the European Union and other countries across the world have done, which is to apply the sanctions that are called for in US legislation to cut off aid to an illegal military coup, or also to withdraw an ambassador who no longer has a valid counterpart in the country. So that's not intervention; that's simply following and being consistent with the policies and the laws in the United States." On the home front, meanwhile, Zelaya supporters were undeterred. A seven-day coordinated march from the president's strongholds in rural Honduras arrived in Tegucigalpa and in San Pedro Sula, the nation's second city. As streams converge to form mighty rivers, a trickle of walkers became a torrent as they picked up adherents

along the way, ultimately meeting by the thousands on the capital's central Bulevar Juan Pablo II to cheer speeches demanding the return of their defenestrated leader and denouncing the usurper. They were met by first lady Xiomara Castro, who has kept the drive alive and may yet emerge as the most potent figure in this protracted political drama. She has defied even her husband's wishes in stirring the masses, putting herself at risk at the forefront of rallies on his behalf. At this rally, she pressed the faithful to "persist in the resistance." Zelaya's daughter Hortensia also appeared, telling followers, "They are afraid of us because we are not afraid." That comment comported with reports that the junta had delayed the arrival of the OAS delegation on the pretext of Insulza's bias because it did not want the delegation to arrive while demonstrators were still on the streets. At the conclusion of the rally, exhausted marchers retired to the campus of the Universidad Pedagogica to spend the night. Micheletti's Minister of Information Rene Zapeda said the demonstrators torched a bus and a restaurant along the way, apparently in response to police shooting a demonstrator on a motorcycle. TV footage showed the burning bus and police disbursing the crowd. The government reimposed the near-martial-law curfew it has used on and off to keep control. Police later invaded the campus on a pretext and locked out the demonstrators. FNRCGE leader Juan Barahona accused the de facto government of staging the destruction. He told reporters on the scene, "We don't have better information at the moment. Some of our people have told us that this [the bus fire] was provoked by police infiltrators." The Frente subsequently released a statement that it would increase peaceful actions if the junta did not come around. The actions would, said the release, affect "the normal development of commercial operations." The Frente has also said pro-Zelaya citizens would boycott the coming elections if Zelaya was not restored, adding impetus to the movement to deprive any government resulting from the coup of legitimacy. The junta countered with an Interpol arrest order against three of Zelaya's officials, Vice President Aristides Mejia and Cabinet Ministers Rebeca Santos and Rixi Moncada. Interpol chief in Honduras Rommel Martinez made the announcement, but international wire services could not confirm it at Interpol headquarters in Paris. The three are allegedly charged with abuse of authority and fraud. Late reports had it that President Arias might be sidelined in his efforts to seek a settlement. He has announced he has contracted the H1N1 influenza virus, swine flu. His chief of staff and brother Rodrigo Arias said the president was under medical care at his home and was expected to remain there for a week. More than 20 people are said to have died from the disease in Costa Rica.

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