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Honduran Coup Opposition Unrelenting, But Regime Digs In, Showing Little Sign Of Surrender

by LADB Staff

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The clock is ticking, and news media around the world have begun to take that wistful tone associated with the end of a long and suspenseful saga. Regardless, the last word has not been written on the Honduras coup (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). Whether one supports the de facto regime's contention that it has acted in accord with the Constitution, or the elected, exiled government's assertion that it has been illegally overthrown, it is difficult to deny that the Micheletti forces are now behaving like the military-backed regimes that blemish Central America's history. Amnesty International (AI) and other human rights organizations are busy documenting abuses against an angry citizenry ranging from curfews to shootings. If there is a bright side, it is that the international community remains opposed to the goings-on, and no country has yet recognized the regime. A case in point is Argentina, whose diplomats have been ordered out of Honduras for its outspoken support for exiled President Manuel Zelaya's government. Argentina has declined even to dignify the order with confirmation that it exists. "I do not know of any ultimatum from Honduras," said Argentine Foreign Minister Jorge Tiana. His government's position is that relations with the duly elected Zelaya government are "very cordial," that his country "maintains diplomatic relations with the legitimate government," and that it "does not know of any deadline for anything." A further ray of sunshine came from Costa Rica, where mediator President Oscar Arias is reported to have recovered from the case of H1N1 (swine flu) that flung him to the sidelines as he was about to revive his failing mission to achieve a negotiated settlement between the regime and the exiled government (see NotiCen, 2009-08-06, 2009-08-13). Hondurans carry on. It is one thing for a South American government to ignore the regime and quite another for an ordinary Honduran to do so. AI's monitors have alleged widespread abuse of citizens. Incidents include injuries and bruises from alleged beatings of demonstrators detained in the nation's prisons and the arrests and beatings of human rights personnel and journalists, all of which security forces deny. These forces are made up of both police and the military. The Organization of American States (OAS), while nominally supportive of a return to constitutional democracy, has been less forthcoming. A delegation of foreign ministers from member states, which has been slated for a visit to Honduras to urge Micheletti and company toward resolution, still has not arrived. In the end, it is the Hondurans who bear the brunt of the challenge to their country's institutional integrity. At the forefront of the fight, first lady Xiomara Castro stands among the leaders, urging the people on. Pro-Zelaya Radio Globo continues to provide her with national reach, and she uses it to tell constituents, "We will manage to defeat them, let's keep on marching. We are very clear that history is allowing us to change our nation. We are fighting for real change that comes from the base of the people." Some members of the Zelaya family have fled to the mountains of their home department of Olancho, taking up the fight as they are able. The Micheletti government has turned to the task of reshaping the state as best it can, steering it back to straight and narrow conservatism and to a notion of sovereignty that disregards global scorn. It has attempted to disengage from the Alternativa Bolivariana para las Americas (ALBA), the leftist coalition of countries led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, which Zelaya joined in the hope of extricating Honduras from its economic crisis (see NotiCen, 2008-08-28).

It has decided to go ahead with elections in November, even though the world has said it will not recognize any resulting government, and has finessed the consequences. "Commercial relations are more important than diplomatic ones, and Honduras' commercial trade with ALBA countries is not much," said Micheletti. "So whether they recognize the elections is not a very important issue to us." Micheletti said he believed the legislature would act to withdraw the country from ALBA. He gave a glimmer of encouragement to the Arias efforts but cautioned that "there should not be commands in the mediation." At this point, a return to bargaining is in Micheletti's interests as he sees it. The talks, he hopes, will mitigate some of the international criticism while the sun sets on the Zelaya presidency, which expires in January 2010. The international community has warned that this is a false hope. Micheletti also risks a more forceful response from his Central American neighbors as the fallout from the coup begins to spill over into other countries. Trouble is already brewing in Nicaragua, where the opposition to the government of President Daniel Ortega is clashing with Sandinista supporters of Zelaya. Opposition demonstrators have marched against Zelaya's "occupation" of the border where the Honduran has set up a jumping-off point on the Nicaraguan side, awaiting a chance to cross over. As a member of ALBA, Ortega has seen it his duty to afford Zelaya refuge and every possible advantage in his attempts to return, including safe haven for Honduran supporters who wished to stand beside their president. The Nicaraguan opposition sees an opportunity in the Honduran situation. Like Zelaya, Ortega is seeking constitutional reforms, and the demonstrations favoring the coup next door are, in effect, demonstrations against Ortega's plans. As the left has gained the presidencies of other Central American nations, the still-powerful rightist opposition could similarly use the Honduran situation as a wedge.

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