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Honduras: Pressed By U.S., Feuding Sides Sign Agreement But Crisis Not Over

by LADB Staff

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By George Rodriguez More than four months after the coup that toppled Honduran President Manuel Zelaya's government and triggered a constitutional crisis, and after much pressure in Tegucigalpa last week from the US, on Oct. 30 the rivals signed an agreement to, among other points, reinstate the ousted leader. In the fifth of the 12 agreement points, both negotiating teams stated that "to attain reconciliation and to strengthen democracy" they had decided that the unicameral Congreso Nacional, in consultation with institutions such as the Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ), should determine whether "to restore tenure of the executive branch to its state prior to June 23 until the conclusion of the present government period on Jan. 27, 2010." Nov. 5 was set as the deadline for a Gobierno de Unidad y Reconciliacion Nacional to be brought in as the means to "attain reconciliation and strengthen democracy." Doubt about the agreement The agreement's contents seem to point to the end of the Honduran constitutional ordeal. Not so, Central American political observers told NotiCen and also pointed out that signing the agreement under US pressure proves what one of them described as imperial hegemony over this region. Alicia Almendarez, an Honduran human rights activist and member of the massive, national resistance movement against the coup, stressed that "the agreement...in no way implies an honest, respectful answer" to that sector's demands. On the accord, Jorge Coronado, leader of a Costa Rican and Central American social movement, quoted Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary-General Jose Miguel Insulza as saying that "signing the agreement was not the solution but a step forward in the right direction." In Costa Rican political analyst Jose Luis Vegas's view, the agreement is "hideous from a legal standpoint," since it is "going to put the solution to the conflict in the hands of the Congress and the CSJ, which actually caused the conflict." Vega thus referred to the events on June 28 when the Honduran Congress removed Zelaya from the presidency and replaced him with Congress president Roberto Micheletti, while the CSJ was ordering the toppled president's arrest (see NotiCen, 2009-07-02). The replacement took place hours after some 200 soldiers stormed Zelaya's Tegucigalpa home early in the morning, clashed with the president's security guards, and abducted the head of state, who was immediately put on board the presidential jet to be dropped off, in his pajamas, at the police base at Costa Rica's main international airport. "I've never seen anything like this," said Vega. "How is it possible to give those who committed this action the power to endorse an agreement between the parties?" It is tantamount to "recognizing legality to those who broke the law, because this was a coup d'etat that was backed by the so-called legal institutions, making this coup a novelty," he added. Resistance movement not consulted in agreement Vega says the agreement is untenable not only because of legal flaws but also since a key actor in the Honduras crisis, the Frente Nacional de Resistencia contra el Golpe de Estado, whose core is the popular movement against the coup, was not taken into account in drawing up the agreement. For any accord to hold, it must satisfy the legitimate needs and interests of all parties involved, and, if that is not the case, whatever is agreed upon will most likely fall through. In the Honduran case, Vega added, "In my opinion, although Zelaya may have been well-represented" in the negotiations, "the Frente Nacional de Resistencia was not." So, the Frente's central demand for a Constituent

Assembly to reform the Constitution also sought by Zelaya and one of the arguments for having staged the coup "is not taken into account in the agreement" and is a "violation of a legitimate interest of one of the major parties" in the conflict, Vega said. On this issue, both sides to the agreement stated in the second point that "to attain reconciliation and strengthen democracy we reiterate our respect for our country's Constitution and laws, refraining from directly or indirectly calling for an Asamblea Nacional Constituyente to be convened." This includes "renouncing promoting or supporting any popular consultation with the aim of reforming the Constitution to allow presidential re-election, to change the form of government, or to contravene any of the articles that are not amendable in our fundamental charter," the agreement added. In Vega's opinion, the popular-resistance movement has become a political actor through its peaceful perseverance despite ongoing military and police repression, which, according to Honduran and international human rights organizations' reports, has claimed activists' lives and meant detention and torture for others opposing the coup. "This actor, although agreeing with Zelaya's restitution, has its own and very legitimate vital interests that not only are not satisfied in the agreement but are directly violated by it," he said. "Thus, by accepting this, Zelaya really places himself more on the other side than on the side of the movement that has supported him," warned Vega, adding that "reinforcing those perverse institutions...of the ultra-right actually means keeping alive one of the conflict's fundamental causes." On the resistance movement's support for the toppled president, Almendarez said, referring to Zelaya by his nickname, "I must remind you that, during this process of resistance, it ceased being what it initially was, a small group of Mel's followers." "Today...he is only a political figure in this situation," while "we're once and for all ready and determined to walk together as a people and to recover our rights," the activist said, and she went on to stress that "it's an extremely lengthy, difficult journey in time, but we're going on it, because the country is not for sale, is not for rent." US role as deal broker unclear On the US pressing for the agreement signed last week, Almendarez, also a member of the organized women's movement, pointed out that the accord "answers only to the strategic, hegemonic interests the US government historically maintains on Honduras." Thus, it means "a more or less civilized way out...which seeks to minimize the criminal responsibility of the pro-gringo lackeys." "This agreement is a clear, powerful message...clearly showing Latin America its [the US] domination, its direct handling of these so-called democratic structures created, led, and supported by the United States," Almendarez added. In Coronado's view, "The United States steps in and manages to twist the arm" of the de-facto regime, thus proving that "this coup has been kept up with support from sectors within the [US President Barack] Obama administration and the US House and Senate." As a follow-up to the agreement, the question now is, "To what extent is the Obama administration committed to guaranteeing somewhat transparent and valid elections?" said Coronado, referring to the vote scheduled for Nov. 29, whose results the international community initially warned it would not recognize if held within the constitutional crisis. "Let's see now if the US is going to say, 'We're pressing again for this to pick up speed,' or 'We're going to leave it there so it moves on its own,'" said Coronado. Valid elections are possible through "Zelaya's immediate restitution" and "guaranteeing that, at least one month or a little more than a month [before the elections], international-observer delegations from the OAS, the UN, and the European Union (EU) start arriving in Honduras," Coronado said. "Otherwise, the move would be to delay Zelaya's restitution and put into motion the infrastructure to rig the elections, which has been set up all along, making it impossible to prevent this." "If observers arrive four days before the elections, there's no way you can control and prevent manipulation of the [election] process," said Coronado. As of Nov. 4, the Congress has still not met and says it is consulting with the CSJ and the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR), but has

set no time limit for convening. Meanwhile, the two OAS members of the Comision Verificadora, US Labor Secretary Hilda Solis and former Chilean President Ricardo Lagos (2000-2006), are in Honduras. Two other members have been appointed, Jorge Arturo Reina for the constitutional government and Arturo Corrales for the de facto regime. Reina belongs to the Partido Liberal; his brother is former President Carlos Roberto Reina (1994-1998). Corrales was part of the de facto regime's negotiating team when Costa Rican President Oscar Arias was trying to mediate a deal (see NotiCen, 2009-07-09).

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