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Honduras: Interview With Frente Leader Betty Matamoros Flores

by LADB Staff

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[The following interview by Paolo Moiola is reprinted with the permission of Lima-based Noticias Aliadas and was posted on the Latinamerica Press Web site www.lapress.org Nov. 5, 2009]

Honduras, a country of 7 million people, is dominated by a privileged elite. More than half the population lives in poverty, even though the country is rich in agricultural and mineral resources, which have attracted transnational giants such as Chiquita, Dole, and Canadian mining company Glamis Gold. After Haiti, Honduras competes with Guatemala and Nicaragua for the spot as the second-poorest country in the Americas, with some poverty estimates as high as 80%. A small group of families dominate the country's wealth, many of whom backed the June 28 ouster of democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya (see *NotiSur*, 2009-07-02), whose seat was taken over by Roberto Micheletti, both of the conservative Partido Liberal (PL). Zelaya's supporters, mainly Honduras' disenfranchised masses, took to the streets to demand his return to office while reports of human rights violations against Micheletti's government mounted, drawing international attention (see *NotiCen*, 2009-07-16, 2009-11-05). "I never thought about taking to the streets to defend [Zelaya], but I did it and I will continue to do so because I have to admit that Manuel Zelaya was doing good things," said Betty Matamoros Flores, a teacher and the foreign-relations coordinator for the Frente Nacional contra el Golpe de Estado en Honduras, a citizens' group, who spoke with Latinamerica Press collaborator Paolo Moiola about what was behind Zelaya's ouster. How was the Frente Nacional contra el Golpe de Estado en Honduras formed? It came out of the Honduran Bloque Popular, a group of citizens, labor, student, women's, and youth organizations. We started in 2000 against the signing of the free-trade agreement [Central America Free Trade Agreement, CAFTA] with the US. Manuel Zelaya was the president of the right-wing, ousted by the right and defended by the left, is that correct? President Zelaya was not elected by our people. He was elected by the most hard-line faction of the Partido Liberal, a traditional party like the Partido Nacional (PN). The two parties have dominated the country for the last 100 years. The president acted as a president always should turning his attention to a people with so many needs. I believe a president should focus on the masses and not on the elite. That's how it went, and the result was a coup and the president taking refuge in the Brazilian Embassy because of the usurper government. Why was President Zelaya ousted? There was a series of motives: Honduras' joining ALBA [Venezuela's Alternativa Bolivariana de las Americas initiative] and Petrocaribe, lower fuel prices, a 60% increase in the minimum wage. All of those were proposals made to the president, and they were made possible because he had people fighting by his side. What specifically led to the June 28 coup? Zelaya used the popular-participation law to call a referendum. The politicians of the oligarchy interpreted that measure as an automatic step to stay in power, meaning to be elected again although the current Constitution doesn't allow it (see *NotiCen*, 2009-03-26). But it's not like that. In the referendum, the president was going to ask: "Do you agree that there should be a fourth ballot?" That means that in the Nov. 29 elections, which had already been called, there would be three ballots for president, for legislators, and for mayors. A fourth ballot would be on a different referendum question: "Do you agree that a constituent assembly should be called?" The question

would have been nonbinding because it would have to be approved in Congress. Opponents started to call themselves "defenders of the Constitution." Why did the attorney general open charges against Zelaya, clearing the way for the coup? Because [the other branches of government] are accomplices of the man who usurped power. There are only two reasons why a president should be replaced if he dies or if he is mentally unfit to serve. Neither of the two causes is valid with Manuel Zelaya. This was what's called a coup. How much of the country supports Micheletti? His support is very low. Even though it seems like more because 90% of the media are in the hands of the coup-backers. We know of people who have been threatened with losing their jobs if they didn't attend the marches called by the "blancos," as Micheletti supporters are called because of the white shirts they wear to distinguish themselves. They are the opposite of our people, people who go barefoot and dress poorly. [Los blancos] also are protected by the Army and police, while we march defying the repression of state forces. The Consejo Hondureno de la Empresa Privada (COHEP) supported Micheletti's coup. It's well-known that they asked the companies to contribute donations. The mining companies are a case of their own. Zelaya's government had blocked their concessions, above all, open-pit mining. The mining companies have only brought more poverty and serious social costs with health and environmental damage. Chiquita says it had nothing to do with the coup and that it is at peace with its workers union. The international pharmaceutical industry was also endangered by Zelaya's government, which had been signing agreements for cheaper, generic drugs. These savings could have favored a public-health system that is much fairer than the current one. What could happen on the Nov. 29 elections, if they happen? People don't want to vote now. First, because there's been a coup. Second, we don't feel protected by the current Constitution. We've seen that when the economic and political oligarchy doesn't like something, the president is deposed. Why did Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga and the Catholic hierarchy support Micheletti's coup? Catholics are amazed at seeing that the hierarchy is in favor of the oligarchy and not the people. But not all support Micheletti. The bishop of Santa Rosa de Copan, Bishop Luis Alfonso Santos, is against the coup, as are many priests and most of the faithful of my country.

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