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President Porfirio "pepe" Lobo's Complex Undertakings

George Rodriguez

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New Honduran President Porfirio Lobo’s tasks are complex, to say the least. Sworn-in after a seven-month major constitutional crisis unleashed by the civilian-military coup staged on June 28 to topple then President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, the Central American nation's new head of state takes center stage in a country with a deeply polarized society, isolated by the international community, and with a severely battered economy. Lobo's steps taken the day he took office were aimed at delivering on the first two goals healing political wounds caused by the coup and achieving acceptance again as a member of the world's community of nations. "Pepe" Lobo as he is called by most Hondurans thus began to fulfill promises made first as a candidate in the process that led to the Nov. 29 elections and later as president-elect. These promises are basically the contents of the Acuerdo de San Jose hammered out between delegates of the feuding sides in the constitutional crisis the toppled government and the de facto regime during the brief mediation effort Costa Rican President Oscar Arias carried out in response to a US request. Unlike Zelaya's envoys to Arias' home, where the two rounds of talks took place in July, the de facto regime’s delegation refused to sign the accord, and de facto Foreign Affairs Minister Carlos Lopez described the proposed agreement as "unacceptable" and called the mediation an act of interference in Honduran internal affairs. Among its 12 points, the accord called for Zelaya's restoration, a government of national reconciliation, and a general amnesty regarding only political crimes committed within the framework of the coup. With this text as a basis for further discussion, delegates of both sides met yet again, this time in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, producing a similar agreement, called the Acuerdo de San Jose-Tegucigalpa, which was signed but not complied with. Thus, the coup was not reversed, the constitutional crisis lingered for seven months despite tenacious, peaceful opposition by the Frente Nacional de Resistencia contra el Golpe de Estado in the midst of military and police repression. Elections held despite warnings of nonrecognition Within such a framework, elections were held in November (see NotiCen, 2009-12-03) notwithstanding the international community's repeatedly warnings that neither the vote nor the government arising from it would be recognized. To win back international trust specifically that of the Americas, and with it Honduras' return to the Organization of American States (OAS) from which it was expelled shortly after the coup immediately after the swearing-in ceremony, the new president began gesturing willingness to comply with promises made, which coincide with the agreements that were never put into effect. In so doing, Lobo signed a decree granting political amnesty to all involved in the coup and the ensuing constitutional crisis. The amnesty had been passed the previous day by the country's unicameral Congreso Nacional, covering political crimes but not other crimes such as corruption. This, plus the safe-conduct issued by Lobo, allowed Zelaya to leave the country from which he had been expelled the day of the coup and to which he secretly returned on Sept. 21, entering Brazil's Embassy in Honduras where he remained under military siege for more than four months (see NotiCen, 2009-09-24). Lobo arrived at the embassy with Presidents Leonel Fernandez of the Dominican Republic and Alvaro Colom of Guatemala, and the three escorted Zelaya to Tegucigalpa's Toncontín International Airport. There, Zelaya and Fernandez boarded a small jet and flew to Santo Domingo, the Dominican capital, where Zelaya will stay with his wife and daughter before leaving for Mexico where, according to journalistic accounts, the family plans to settle. Referring specifically to the ousted president,
Honduras’ Attorney General Luis Alberto Rubi, one of Zelaya’s top foes, warned the safe-conduct "does not mean Mr. Zelaya is free of criminal responsibilities." Rubi said, should Zelaya return to Honduras, he could be arrested. In another gesture right after taking office, Lobo set up a reconciliation Cabinet, as he had promised to do. The new ministers are an assortment of politicians from different political parties, including some of the new head of state’s rivals in past elections. In his inauguration address, after receiving the presidential sash from Juan Orlando Hernandez, the new head of the Congreso Nacional and fellow member of the ruling Partido Nacional (PN), Lobo stressed that "we wish national reconciliation to extend to reconciliation with the international community." He added, "It is not possible to go forward into the future without first healing the wounds of the past." As one of the steps for this, the new president promised to put together, "as soon as possible, the Truth Commission, because it's fair that the [Honduran] people and the world know the reality of events prior to, during, and following June 28." He told his listeners near and far, "The Honduran family begins to reconcile today, the country follows the path of understanding in search of national unity." However tough the job ahead, Lobo has the initial blessing of the US, according to US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela, who told reporters after meeting with the new president following the inauguration ceremony, "We're going to be evaluating these events. We see that things are moving very much in the right direction." Valenzuela said, from his car as he was leaving the Casa Presidencial, "And if these steps are taken, we're going to be evaluating our position." Valenzuela explained that the evaluation would be aimed at determining whether to restore US assistance in anti-drug cooperation. The official headed the four-strong delegation sent by US President Barack Obama's administration to Lobo's inauguration, which also included US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens. Meanwhile, not all is quiet on the domestic front. The resistance movement maintains its position, and, after denouncing the November elections, it is firm in not recognizing Lobo’s government. Frente coordinator Juan Barahona considers the new administration a "continuation of the golpistas, a continuation of the business leaders' policy, and the oligarchy controlling power." He added, "There won't be any change, the resistance will be a force facing this government....We will fight for our country's interests." On the Central American front, while Arias and right-wing incoming Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli have accepted the election and recognized the new government both leaders met with Lobo at Arias’ residence shortly after the November vote Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega is on the opposite side. "We have a threat in Honduras; those coup leaders feel all the support to promote new coups in Honduras and the Central American region. We're threatened and thus cannot recognize the government of Honduras, and that's a battle that will have to be fought in international fora, because we can't surrender before military coups," Ortega said last week in Managua. On Lobo's situation, Ortega warned, "There's no guarantee they're not going to stage a coup against him any moment."

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