9-16-2010

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Honduras’ Return to Organization of American States Easier Said Than Done

by George Rodriguez
Category/Department: Honduras
Published: Thursday, September 16, 2010

With Nicaragua absent, seven other member countries of the Central American Integration System (Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana, SICA) agreed to welcome back Honduras and urged the Organization of American States (OAS) to do the same as soon as possible.

Shortly after last year’s bloody coup d’etat (NotiCen, July 2, 2009) in Honduras that overthrew democratically elected President Manuel "Mel Zelaya, SICA decided—as did the OAS—to expel the country from its midst.

More than a year later, after months of human rights violations by the de facto régime, elections held within the framework of the constitutional crisis, and a new president sworn in, seven SICA member nations decided, during the regional body’s meeting on July 20 in San Salvador, to let the pariah back in.

The decision was strongly opposed by Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega, a staunch critic not only of the coup and the past de facto régime but of the elections and Porfirio Lobo’s becoming the new president and, as Ortega has repeatedly pointed out, continuing the coup.

In a four-point Declaración Especial on Honduras, the seven SICA leaders attending the meeting stated their "unwavering support and acknowledgement of the commitment and responsibility of constitutional President Porfirio Lobo to guarantee respect for democratic institutions, rule of law, and respect for human rights in Honduras."

They also said that "authorities in Honduras have been taking part in and carrying out rights and duties of the Republic of Honduras as a member of the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana" through participation in several SICA summit meetings, including one with the European Union (EU).

Thus, "on this occasion, and recognizing progress made toward re-establishing constitutional order in Honduras and the need for its authorities to fulfill the rights and duties conveyed" by SICA, "we decide to support formal and permanent normalization of Honduras’ participation in SICA," they added.

The leaders also decided to request other OAS member states, "within the framework of the OAS Comisión de Alto Nivel, to, as quickly as possible, resolve reinstating Honduras" in the hemispheric body and to "reiterate the call to Honduran authorities to guarantee their citizens full exercise of fundamental rights."

The OAS high-level commission on Honduras, made up of 13 foreign ministers, issued a lengthy report on July 29 this year.

In the last of its seven conclusions and recommendations, the commission said that it called on the organization’s General Assembly to "make the appropriate decisions regarding the situation of Honduras" according to the OAS charter and the Inter-American Democratic Charter.
The regional summit was held to relaunch Central American integration after the coup, and the declaration was signed by Lobo and Presidents Laura Chinchilla (Costa Rica), Álvaro Colom (Guatemala), Mauricio Funes (El Salvador), Ricardo Martinelli (Panama), Vice President Rafael Alburquerque (Dominican Republic), and Vice Prime Minister Gaspar Vega (Belize).

Nicaragua challenges decision

In firm disagreement with his colleagues’ decision, an absent Ortega said in Managua, immediately after the meeting, "This is absurd, it’s ridiculous, they are being ridiculous because SICA has its rules, and there must be consensus, unanimity."

"There must be unanimity," and, "if there isn’t, then, simply, these decisions can't be made," added Ortega who was neither present nor represented at the San Salvador summit.

"Nicaragua didn’t take part in this meeting since we already knew this meeting was led, pushed forward, logically, we know by whom, by the policy of the United States," stressed Ortega as quoted by the Nicaraguan daily El Nuevo Diario.

Ortega also said his regional colleagues were breaking with SICA foundations, adding, "There’s nothing left for us to do but call them to think and to work in order to unite and not divide."

"We’re going to continue working as we’ve been doing, respecting resolutions SICA itself passed here in Nicaragua on June 29 of last year, clearly stating that Honduras couldn’t be recognized until conditions for that recognition were established," Ortega went on to say, referring to the date the Honduras coup was carried out.

Reacting to his Nicaraguan counterpart’s statement, Lobo said in Tegucigalpa, "We [both leaders] often speak," and "I know that in his heart he wants all of us Central Americans to be united, and all of us Central Americans are going to be united."

But Ortega’s comments annoyed Salvadoran Foreign Minister Hugo Martínez, who said the Nicaraguan leader was wrong regarding necessary unanimity in SICA decision making, and he insisted decisions both in SICA and the OAS are made by consensus.

Funes, a firm promoter of readmitting Honduras to SICA and the OAS, said, during a visit to Brazil —whose President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has not recognized Lobo’s government—following the regional summit, "We were the first to condemn the coup, but we are also the first to promote the return of Honduras to international fora, mainly SICA and the OAS."

Other Latin American nations including Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru, besides Central America—with the exception of Nicaragua—have restored diplomatic links with Honduras, which they had broken after the June 29 coup.

OAS secretary-general confident in resolution

Within this framework, OAS Secretary-General José Miguel Insulza is hopeful that the outcast nation will soon be readmitted to the continental organization.

During a two-day visit to Costa Rica last month, the Chilean diplomat said the atmosphere for Honduras’ return is improving, with an increasing number of countries favoring this. "I believe conditions are much riper" for the Central American nation to be readmitted into the OAS, he told a press conference.
"The first issue is President Zelaya’s quiet return, without persecution," said Insulza. Zelaya has been in exile since January in the Dominican Republic. "We’re waiting for the necessary safeguards for President Zelaya’s return. I don’t want to preview anything on this, but I hope to have news within the next 10 days."

"And, second, is a strengthening of the issue of human rights, mainly regarding certainty that there’s not going to be impunity in human rights violations," said Insulza. "We’re happy how that’s working out, the truth commission is taking up the human rights issue much more clearly than before."

Insulza thus referred to the Comisión de la Verdad y la Reconciliación the Lobo administration set up on May 4 as part of its effort, as stated by the president (NotiCen, May 20, 2010), to shed light on the constitutional crisis unleashed by the coup and the resulting human rights violations and multiple abuses of power by the de facto régime.

The lack of credibility the commission has—because of links between some members of the government group and coup leaders or sympathizers, according to the opposition Plataforma de Derechos Humanos—led this amalgam of civil-society organizations to simultaneously appoint and put to work its own Comisión de Verdad.

In separate statements to the press the same day that Insulza spoke, Costa Rica’s first woman president agreed with the OAS official as she told reporters that Honduras’ return is something "Central America is working on...very much united. And what we want is to work in consultation."

"I think the fact that in the latest SICA meeting there was a statement of all countries, minus one, supporting precisely this position meant major progress," Chinchilla said. "So, we’re going to see how this moves forward, what’s the step that follows to try and close this situation," said the Costa Rican leader.

On Nicaragua’s stand, Chinchilla said, "We’ve been talking" with that country’s authorities, and we trust that sooner or later that’s going to come to order."

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