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PARLACEN Could Provide Temporary Easy Way Out for former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya's Return

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The US needs exiled former Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya back in the country so the situation in the Central American nation can be portrayed as back to normal, and the coup d’etat that toppled him last year (NotiCen, July 2, 2009) can be considered done with.

Central to this scenario, promoted by the US State Department and its Honduran allies, is the new government in place since January, following the November 2009 elections—regardless of their legitimacy or lack of it. With gestures from the new administration formally aimed at restoring institutional stability and healing the country’s deep political wounds and with the readmission of this historically troubled Central American nation to the Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana (SICA), Zelaya’s return could be the needed element to have Honduras welcomed once again into the Organization of American States (OAS), where it was given the boot right after the coup.

Zelaya’s return seen from different perspectives

However, there are two opposing views of Zelaya’s return to a country still strongly polarized and deeply hurt by the first successful coup in Latin America in the new century.

Honduras’ traditionally pro-US political establishment holds the view that Mel’s return cannot take place according to conditions set by the exiled leader and because of the massive opposition to first the coup and now the new government—seen by the opposition as a continuation of "golpismo" (coup ideology).

In this view, charges made against Zelaya immediately after he was toppled at dawn on June 29, 2009, rushed to a plane, taken out of the country, and initially dropped off at Costa Rica’s main police air base just outside that country’s capital cannot be dismissed, and the former president must be tried on those charges.

Zelaya and the opposition, gathered since the coup within the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP), basically demand that charges against the exiled former president be dropped thus enabling his free, unconditional return, that Honduras’ institutions be reformed, and that human rights violations end once and for all.

This political tug-of-war has the two sides adamantly pitted against each other and has Zelaya, a leader of the Partido Liberal (PL) and now general coordinator of the FNRP, producing pro-democratic stabilization calls mainly from his exile base in the Dominican Republic.

And now a new actor has entered the Honduran drama, the Parlamento Centroamericano (PARLACEN).
Zelaya joins PARLACEN

An event took place on Sept. 17, which, according to some observers of the Honduran case, could turn out to be a temporary easy way out for Mel's return. Other analysts are skeptical, although they partially coincide with this view.

On that date, Zelaya was sworn in as a member of PARLACEN, as befits former presidents as well as vice presidents right after they step down in what is described in the regional parliament’s language as "diputado por derecho" (deputy by right).

PARLACEN, whose creation was promoted by the administration of Guatemala’s then President Vinicio Cerezo (1986-1991), particularly by its vice president Roberto Carpio, officially started work in a stormy plenary session at a luxury hotel in Guatemala City’s exclusive Zona 10 at 10 am on Oct. 21, 1991, and ended just before dawn the following day (NotiCen, June 18, 2009).

In a blatant show of a lack of the regional unity PARLACEN was conceived to promote—and attain—and after much discussion and conflict, both among and within national blocs, Carpio—who only months before had ended his vice presidential term—was elected the first head of the regional forum, thus seeing justice done for his relentless effort in its creation.

From the original four national blocs—El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, with 22 members each, and Nicaragua, then with only two—PARLACEN has grown to its present six 22-member blocs, as the Dominican Republic and Panama joined, while Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Taiwan became observers. Panama is now threatening to withdraw.

Despite being a signatory of the Procedimiento para Establecer la Paz Firme y Duradera en Centroamérica—the treaty that ended the internal strife in Nicaragua (1982-1990), El Salvador (1980-1992), and Guatemala (1960-1996) and gave birth to PARLACEN—Costa Rica has refused to be a member of the regional parliament, arguing that it would hinder its sovereignty and that the forum is a useless institution that encourages high-level corruption in the region.

Members’ immunity and the nonbinding character of PARLACEN’s decisions are among the factors Costa Rica and other PARLACEN critics underline as they disqualify it.

Alicia Almendárez, a Honduran human rights activist and member of the massive, national resistance movement against the coup, told NotiCen that PARLACEN, "since its creation...has not had any impact of value whatsoever that might have been coherent with its goals: self-determination, nonintervention, demilitarization, and Central America democratization, the most recent case being Honduras and the coup."

"To me, it’s an institution lacking context—in its life span so far I haven’t heard of any positive impact on real regional integration and identity," added Almendárez, an Afro-Honduran teacher and sociologist who is a women's rights leader. "I believe that, just like many other spaces, it’s worked as a smokescreen to cover up obscure forces, both external and internal, that have turned us, as countries and as a region, into victims of traditional political parties represented by the presidents and vice presidents who become members of this social instance, this club."

Costa Rican civil-society leader Jorge Coronado's view coincides. "To start with, PARLACEN is nothing," and, as far as Central American integration, the regional Parliament "expresses
what this...integration process has been, that neoliberalism’s bet has been nothing but economic integration, betting on the free-trade agreement with the US, and betting on uniting customs," said Coronado.

The regional body "has in some cases been the center of refuge for politicians with pending legal issues, Central American politicians," added Coronado, who heads the Costa Rican Comisión Nacional de Enlace (CNE), a member organization of the Alianza Social Continental (ASC), a network of Latin American social-sector movements.

**US wants Zelaya back**

Thus, Zelaya’s joining the regional forum "means reinforcing PARLACEN a bit as an institution that has been severely affected," Coronado told NotiCen. "So, I believe that Honduras brought before it an issue that is especially strong because of the decision of the ‘golpistas’ that [former de facto President Roberto] Micheletti had to get in as ex-president."

In admitting Zelaya as a deputy, PARLACEN, "more than displaying solidarity...or an ‘antigolpista’ position," decided, "for its own survival...to support Zelaya being the one to join PARLACEN," Coronado said.

In Coronado’s view, this could make Mel’s return to Honduras easier, "because let’s keep in mind that...one of the things PARLACEN provides is immunity, so, some sectors could be looking there at an easy way out. What’s the easy way out? Well, that even though all the fabricated charges against him don’t end...they won’t be able to touch him, even returning to Honduras, because he’s protected by the immunity PARLACEN provides."

The Costa Rican civil-society leader said making Zelaya’s return to Honduras easier "could be a possibility" behind accepting him into the region’s parliament. "At the end of the day, to legitimize the coup, the US needs Zelaya to return," which requires focusing on the conditions for this to happen, he added.

"Because conditions where...there’s no change in the judiciary, charges aren’t lifted, and all that" amount to "a return in defeat, so to speak, for the resistance movement and for Zelaya—which is what the administration of [US President Barack] Obama, or [US Secretary of State] Hillary Clinton, let’s say, seeks, which is Hillary’s bet," underlined Coronado.

Although disagreeing with this analysis, because she does not believe that being a member of PARLACEN would make Zelaya’s return easier, Almendárez is nevertheless certain that "it depends...on interests, decisions of the US government."

US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Arturo Valenzuela told NotiCen, "We’re looking forward to continuing the efforts on the part of the international community, particularly the countries of Central America and Latin America, working with Canada and the United States, to see the full reincorporation of Honduras into the Organization of American States."

"In that sense, we value efforts that are being made in order to provide an opportunity for President Zelaya’s rights to be considered, and the fact that he’s been able to enter into the Central American parliament I think is a positive step," added Valenzuela, who recently visited Colombia, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. "These are important efforts that are being made."