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Mediation Begun to Get Honduras Back on Track and Eligible for Readmission to OAS

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Presidents Juan Manuel Santos of Colombia and Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, on opposite ends of Latin America’s ideological spectrum, have agreed to mediate between Honduras’ feuding sides in order to control fallout from the 2009 coup d’état and get the Central American nation back on democratic and constitutional track.

The April 9 meeting between Santos and Chávez in the northern city of Cartagena, on Colombia’s Caribbean coast, had a surprise additional guest, Honduran President Porfirio Lobo. On Santos’ initiative, "Pepe" Lobo—as the president is widely known and addressed in Honduras —arrived in Cartagena in what political observers have described as part of a major effort to have the Organization of American States (OAS) accept the pariah member state it expelled after the June 2009 bloody coup that toppled President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), exiled in the Dominican Republic since Jan. 27, 2010, when Lobo was sworn in as the elected president (NotiCen, July 2, 2009) and (Feb. 4, 2010).

Zelaya’s safe return to Honduras and the suspension of two corruption trials against the former president are major points for the country’s readmission in the OAS (NotiCen, Sept. 16, 2010).

Back in Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, following his one-day stay in Cartagena, Lobo told reporters, regarding Zelaya’s trials, "I’d like to see that in this context: there’s no pressure from anyone. All our friends in Central America, the Caribbean, and South America have asked us that the issue of former President Zelaya’s two trials be normalized, because they consider this would facilitate Honduras entering the OAS."

Lobo also said that in Cartagena he told the Venezuelan leader about steps taken by his administration before the Honduran Corte Suprema de Justicia (CSJ) aimed at resolving the issue. He said that he, Santos, and Chávez reached Zelaya by phone and that he again invited the former president to return to Honduras.

Three days later, Lobo told reporters in Tegucigalpa that he plans to hold a second round of talks as a follow up to Cartagena and that Zelaya would possibly attend. "It’s quite possible former President Zelaya will be there to formalize everything," said Lobo, adding that he would then inform Zelaya he is free to return to Honduras.

Regarding the trials against the toppled president, a three-judge appeals panel was set up to study the situation and concluded that the legal proceedings should be suspended, but the Ministerio Público (MP) immediately announced, in a press release, that it would appeal the ruling.

Six days after the Santos-Chávez-Lobo meeting, Zelaya arrived in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, heading a delegation of the Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (FNRP), of which he is the general coordinator. The group met with Chávez, at the Palacio Miraflores, seat of the presidency,
and handed the Venezuelan leader a four-point document detailing the FNRP’s position on the mediation.

In a statement after the talks, and accompanied by the visiting opposition leaders, Chávez said he accepted Santos’ invitation to mediate with him in an effort to normalize the Honduran situation, after "President Zelaya gave me the green light and, of course, gave me his opinion, his points of view, his conditions to go forward along this path."

"Today, we spoke about many things, and the main topic was this, a mediation," Chávez said, adding that "President Zelaya...has placed a set of negotiation points on the table. President Lobo has given a starting, positive answer, but, afterward, this has to be put in a document. We already have a draft."

Zelaya explained that the FNRP delegation arrived in Caracas "to widen communication" with Chávez, whom he referred to as "el comandante" and as Venezuela’s "democratic, elected, revolutionary president."

The toppled head of state mentioned, without elaborating, "a moral struggle, which we have won," and went on to say that reconciliation in Honduras "must now be sought."

"That coup, supported from the north, from the United States, and I think it was even planned there as well, divided Latin America, and it also deeply harmed the Honduran people and the democratic unity we had been maintaining until then, during the past several years, in our region," he added.

**Zelaya presents Chávez with four points**

"First, the struggle for an [Asamblea Nacional] Constituyente, for the restoration of democratic order; second, the struggle for the return of all exiles; third, the acknowledgement of the Frente as a belligerent force, as a political force; and fourth, participation in politics and in the defense of human rights as well," Zelaya said, enumerating the points he presented Chávez. "Human right prevail above any...crisis, and crises are meant to be resolved."

Standing with the Venezuelan leader, Zelaya, and the rest of the five-member visiting delegation at the entrance of Palacio Miraflores, the FNRP’s assistant coordinator Juan Barahona, a Cervecería Hondureña union leader, explained that "we’ve been speaking about the mediation he [Chávez] will hold for Honduras to return to constitutional order. We hope that, in the end, we may all celebrate victory."

Back in Tegucigalpa two days after the meeting, Barahona told reporters that the next OAS General Assembly is scheduled for June 5-7 in El Salvador and that "for Honduras to be accepted again in the OAS...former President Zelaya must be in Honduras."

Regarding the Cartagena talks, Jorge Coronado, a Costa Rican leader of the Central American social movement, told NotiCen that "the meeting stems from the fact that the Honduran and those running US foreign policy are realizing they’re reaching a dead-end street regarding the Honduran issue. A dead-end street, because they can’t move the internal political balance of forces in their favor...to stabilize [the situation]."

"The Honduran political situation tends not to stabilize," and there is an "increasingly frequent use of repression, and with greater force, massive repression," explained Coronado. "I don’t see an atmosphere of change."
The Cartagena meeting "was somewhat positive for the Frente, because it created debate on the Frente having to use different forms of struggle to make progress," Coronado said. "And the possible negotiation is a totally legitimate form of struggle in order to...isolate or to dismantle '"".

So, the Frente manages to debate this, not without contradictions, but this is perhaps what’s interesting," since it opened the FNRP’s options, "because, until now, the Frente’s main expression of struggle has been the street, and confrontation, and resistance," Coronado explained. Thus, the FNRP "manages to overcome a highly risky situation without breaking up. But...in the national situation, things haven’t changed, and they tend to worsen."

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