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Former Honduran President Manual Zelaya Says Coup Staged to Hand Country to Foreigners
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The bloody coup that rocked Honduras six years ago was staged to hand the county over to foreign interests, which are using the Central American nation as a lab for a model to be implemented elsewhere if it proves successful, says former President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya (2006-2009), ousted in that coup (NotiCen, July 2, 2009). Legislation being passed aims at massive privatization of public services and infrastructures, a context made possible by the coup.

In his evaluation of the violent action that toppled him at dawn on June 28, 2009, Zelaya told NotiCen that testing the country model implies repression through official security forces—several of them recently created—as well as an illegal structure made up of paramilitary squads. Within this framework of violence, making Honduras one of the most dangerous places worldwide—at the top of the list, according to different accounts—political killings are an ongoing practice triggered by the coup, Zelaya said.

Severely hit by corruption, Honduras is a country where US ambassadors tell incoming presidents who to appoint to head ministries, Zelaya said during a recent visit to Costa Rica—where he was taken the morning of the coup—pointing out he did not yield to pressure in this regard, thus getting himself in political trouble. "The coup, in a nutshell, was staged to hand over the country to foreigners," Zelaya said in summarizing to NotiCen his violent downfall some seven months before his presidential term was to constitutionally close.

"Look, Honduras is a laboratory for transnationals, to test what they want our countries to be by the end of the 21st century: privatization of all public services and anything that moves," said the former president, in whose view Honduras "is a state economically handed over to transnationals."

"Right now, they’re privatizing health, they’ve privatized highways, ports, airports, telecommunications, energy," Zelaya said. "The laws that are right now in force, post-coup, will be implemented in all countries in the next decade, if we can’t turn them around."

Troubling ciudades modelo

As an example of the government’s privatization push, Zelaya mentioned the administration’s initiative known as Zonas de Empleo y Desarrollo (ZEDE). Officially described as a tool for attracting investment, reaching development, and lifting people from poverty (NotiCen, Jan. 15, 2015), the ZEDEs—also known as ciudades modelo (charter cities)—are opposed by civil-society sectors warning that Honduran sovereignty and territory will be sold in chunks by foreign investors allowed to build urban spaces, which they will later run.

Communities where the cities are to be constructed have protested against the ZEDE legislation, and repression has ensued. In this scenario, militarization has become a key component for the conservative authorities running the country since January 2014 as a result of the elections held two
months before, which kept the traditional, rightist Partido Nacional (PN) in power, according to Zelaya.

The former president said, "They’re ruling because of the coup," which broke up the other traditional political party—the center-right Partido Liberal (PL)—the political group that took Zelaya to the presidency but, nevertheless, was one of the coup forces, along with the military and the private-sector leadership.

In the toppled president’s analysis, with the coup, the PL was divided and a splinter group surfaced—the leftist Partido Libertad y Refundación (LIBRE), co-founded four years ago (NotiCen, June 14, 2012) and led since then by Zelaya, now one of its congressional representatives, thus leaving the PN in power since 2010.

**Staggering murder rate**

Faced with increasing popular dissatisfaction, authorities are resorting to militarization, having created several military-type police forces (NotiCen, April 2, 2015), added to which there is action by illegal paramilitary groups, Zelaya said, referring to politically motivated killings. "They didn’t pass the death penalty legally, but they’re in fact implementing it, because the levels of homicides per 100,000 population are among the highest throughout the world."

Different estimates by international and Honduran organizations place the country’s homicide rate as high as some 80 to 90 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

"There are paramilitary groups, there are death squads operating," added Zelaya. "Political homicide is in force ever since the coup," and its implementation "is selective."

Honduran human rights advocate Bertha Oliva says there is much to be done in the country, which should include the coordination of efforts between nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements, the latter making up a sector that, since the coup, has been badly hit—as severely as in the 1980s under de facto regimes in the context of the Cold War.

"I believe that there’s still a lot to be done," Oliva, leader of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), one of the nation’s top human rights NGOs, told NotiCen. "One way is to keep coordinating efforts with the social movements. The strength is in the social movement, which at this point has been weakened because it’s been hit as much as in the 1980s, but I do believe that the way we manage for rights to be empowered by the people is going to cause effervescence and manage changes."

"Changes aren’t going to come designed by the official sphere to favor the country, to favor the people. No. Changes will come when the people decide to make proposals, when the people decide to defend their accomplishments," Oliva said. "I believe in social strength. It’s a peaceful thing, but the danger is that repression is very strong."

The coup is also seen by civil-society sectors as having further strengthened corruption, an endemic, deeply rooted problem massively affecting Honduras’ state and private sectors, which is perpetuated by impunity.

"In Honduras, impunity is the biggest political party, and that’s where COFADEH’s bet is: the fight against impunity," said Oliva. "Fighting against that is a difficult task."
US tells presidents what to do

In this regard, during a visit last month to Costa Rica—the country he was hastily expelled to the morning of the coup—Zelaya referred to US interference in Honduran government affairs and said, as an example, that US ambassadors suggest to Honduran presidents who should be appointed as heads of ministries. Referring to his personal experience in this regard, he recalled that, immediately after being officially informed he had won the 2005 election, the first phone call he received was from then US Ambassador to Honduras Charles Ford.

"I was told this is so throughout Latin America," said Zelaya. "Someone tells me, 'President-elect, you have a phone call from the US ambassador.'" He then heard, "President-elect, this is Ambassador Charles Ford of the United States speaking. I want to invite you to lunch tomorrow." Zelaya pointed out, smiling, that it was the "first call from the empire."

Zelaya said that the following day when he arrived to meet with the diplomat, "he hands me an envelope and tells me, 'Open it, please, when you arrive home.'" Again smiling, Zelaya said, "Immediately the idea comes to me: 'could it be some check from the empire?'"

"When I got home, I opened the envelope," Zelaya said. "Honduras has 13 ministers. … The ambassador had given me a list of nine ministries, with three names each, suggesting three names for me to choose from. That’s the way Honduras is governed."

Zelaya said he did not follow the suggestions, a decision that accounted for some of the difficulties he encountered while in office.

Zelaya also recalled details of his forced flight on board a Honduran military airplane that landed at Costa Rica’s Juan Santamaría International Airport, where he was left—in sleepwear—standing on the runway and was met by a member of protocol sent by then Costa Rican President Oscar Arias (1986-1990, 2006-2010).

Zelaya thus started a period of involuntary exile in several countries, a clandestine return into Honduras, refuge in the Brazilian Embassy, and exile again—this time in the Dominican Republic, where he was safely taken in, with his family, by then Dominican President Leonel Fernández (2004-2012).

Upon his return, in 2011, to a massive, enthusiastic welcome in Honduras, Zelaya co-founded LIBRE—with wife Xiomara Castro heading the party’s presidential ticket two years later and himself winning a seat in Congress for the 2014-2018 period (NotiCen, Nov. 7, 2013).

With LIBRE, other opposition parties, and civil-society sectors alleging electoral fraud, the presidential vote was officially won by President Juan Orlando Hernández (NotiCen, Feb. 6, 2014), with just over 34% of the vote, followed by Castro, with almost 29%.

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