

The Rise, Repression and Uncertain Future of the Coup

Showdown in Honduras

By BENJAMIN DANGL

Worldwide condemnation has followed the coup that unseated President Manuel Zelaya of Honduras on Sunday, June 28. Nation-wide mobilizations and a general strike demanding that Zelaya be returned to power are growing in spite of increased military repression. One protester outside the government palace in Honduras told reporters that if Roberto Micheletti, the leader installed by the coup, wants to enter the palace, "he had better do so by air" because if he goes by land "we will stop him."

On early Sunday morning, approximately 100 soldiers entered the home of the left-leaning Zelaya, forcefully removed him and, while he was still in his pajamas, ushered him on to a plane to Costa Rica. The tension that led to the coup involved a struggle for power between left and right political factions in the country. Besides the brutal challenges facing the Honduran people, this political crisis is a test for regional solidarity and Washington-Latin American relations.

Manuel Zelaya Takes a Left Turn

When Manuel Zelaya was elected president on November 27, 2005 in a close victory, he became president of one of the poorest nations in the region, with approximately 70% of its population of 7.5 million living under the poverty line. Though siding himself with the region's left in recent years as a new member of the leftist trade bloc, Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), Zelaya did sign the Central American Free Trade Agreement in 2004.

However, Zelaya has been criticizing and taking on the sweatshop and corporate media industry in his country, and increased the minimum wage by 60%. He said the increase, which angered the country's elite but expanded his support among unions, would "force the business oligarchy to start paying what is fair."

At a meeting of regional anti-drug officials, Zelaya spoke of an unconventional way to combat the drug trafficking and related violence that has been plaguing his country: "Instead of pursuing drug

traffickers, societies should invest resources in educating drug addicts and curbing their demand."

After his election, Zelaya's left-leaning policies began generating "resistance and anger among Liberal [party] leaders and lawmakers on the one hand, and attracting support from the opposition, civil society organizations and popular movements on the other," IPS reported. The social organization Via Campesina stated, "The government of President Zelaya has been characterized by its defense of workers and campesinos, it is a defender of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA), and during his administration it has promoted actions that benefit Honduran campesinos."

As his popularity rose over the years among these sectors of society, the right wing and elite of Honduras worked to undermine the leader, eventually resulting in the recent coup.

Leading up to the Coup

The key question leading up to the coup was whether or not to hold a referendum on Sunday, June 28 – as Zelaya wanted – on organizing an assembly to re-write the country's constitution.

As one media analyst pointed out, while many major news outlets in the US, including the Miami Herald, Wall St. Journal and Washington Post, said an impetus for the coup was specifically Zelaya's plans for a vote to allow him to extend his term in office, the actual ballot question was to be: "Do you agree that, during the general elections of November 2009 there should be a fourth ballot to decide whether to hold a Constituent National Assembly that will approve a new political constitution?"

Nations across Latin America, including Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, have recently re-written their constitutions. In many aspects the changes to these documents enshrined new rights for marginalized people and protected the nations' economies from the destabilizing effects of free trade and corporate looting.

Leading up to the coup, on June 10, members of teacher, student, indigenous and union groups marched to demand that Congress back the referendum on the constitution, chanting, "The people, aware, defend the Constituent [Assembly]." The Honduran Front of Teachers Organizations [FOM], with some 48,000 members, also supported the

referendum. FOM leader Eulogio Chávez asked teachers to organize the expected referendum this past Sunday in schools, according to the Weekly News Update on the Americas.

The Supreme Court ruled that the referendum violated the constitution as it was taking place during an election year. When Honduran military General Romeo Vasquez refused to distribute ballots to citizens and participate in the preparations for the Sunday referendum, Zelaya fired him on June 24. The Court called for the reinstatement of Vasquez, but Zelaya refused to recognize the reinstatement, and proceeded with the referendum, distributing the ballots and planning for the Sunday vote.

Crackdown in Honduras

Vasquez, a former student at the infamous School of the Americas, now known as Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC), went on to be a key leader in the June 28 coup.

After Zelaya had been taken to Costa Rica, a falsified resignation letter from Zelaya was presented to Congress, and former Parliament leader Roberto Micheletti was sworn in by Congress as the new president of the country. Micheletti immediately declared a curfew as protests and mobilizations continued nation-wide.

Since the coup took place, military planes and helicopters have been circling the city, the electricity and internet has been cut off, and only music is being played on the few radio stations that are still operating, according to IPS News.

Telesur journalists, who have been reporting consistently throughout the conflict, were detained by the de facto government in Honduras. They were then released thanks to international pressure.

The ambassadors to Honduras from Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua were arrested. Patricia Rodas, the Foreign Minister of Honduras under Zelaya has also been arrested. Rodas recently presided over an OAS meeting in which Cuba was finally admitted into the organization. The military-installed government has issued arrest warrants for Honduran social leaders for the Popular Bloc Coordinating Committee, Via Campesina and the Civic Council of Grassroots and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras, according to the Weekly News Update on the Americas.

Human rights activist Dr. Juan Almeyda, reporting from Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, told Democracy Now! that due to government crackdowns and the electrical blackout, there is "not really access to information, no freedom of the press." He said, "We have also a curfew, because after 9:00 you can be shot if you are on the streets. So we have a curfew from 9:00 to 6:00 a.m."

In a statement on the coup, Via Campesina said, "We believe that these deeds are the desperate acts of the national oligarchy and the hardcore right to preserve the interests of capital, and in particular, of the large transnational corporations."

Mobilizations and Strikes in Support of Zelaya

Members of social, indigenous and labor organizations from around the country have concentrated in the city's capital, organizing barricades around the presidential palace, demanding Zelaya's return to power. Sixty protesters have been injured and two have died in clashes with the coup's security forces.

"Thousands of Hondurans gathered outside the presidential palace singing the national hymn," Telesur reported. "While the battalions mobilized against protesters at the Presidential House, the TV channels did not report on the tense events." Bertha Cáceres, the leader of the Consejo Cívico de Organizaciones Populares y Indígenas, said that the ethnic communities of the country are ready for resistance and do not recognize the Micheletti government.

Dr. Almeyda reported that in spite of massive repression on the part of the military leaders, "We have almost a national strike for workers, people, students and intellectuals, and they are organized in a popular resistance-run pacific movement against this violation of the democracy. ... There are many sectors involved in this movement trying to reconstitute the constitutional rights, the human rights."

Rafael Alegría, a leader of Via Campesina in Honduras, told Telesur, "The resistance of the people continues and is growing, already in the western part of the country campesinos are taking over highways, and the military troops are impeding bus travel, which is why many people have decided to travel to Tegucigalpa on foot. The resistance continues in spite of the hostility of the military patrols."

A general strike was also organized by various social and labor sectors in the country. Regarding the strike, Alegría said it is happening across state institutions and "progressively in the private sector."

The 4th Army Battalion from the Atlántida Department in Honduras has declared that it will not respect orders from the Micheletti government, and the major highways of the country are blocked by protesters, according to a radio interview with Alegría.

The Civic Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH), condemned the coup, media crackdowns and repression, saying in a statement: "[T]he Honduran people are carrying out large demonstrations, actions in their communities, in the municipalities; there are occupations of bridges, and a protest in front of the presidential residence, among others. From the lands of Lempira, Morazán and Visitación Padilla, we call on the Honduran people in general to demonstrate in defense of their rights and of real and direct democracy for the people, to the fascists we say that they will NOT silence us, that this cowardly act will turn back on them, with great force."

Washington Responds

On Sunday, Obama spoke of the events in Honduras: "I am deeply concerned by reports coming out of Honduras regarding the detention and expulsion of President Mel Zelaya. As the Organization of American States did on Friday, I call on all political and social actors in Honduras to respect democratic norms, the rule of law and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter. Any existing tensions and disputes must be resolved peacefully through dialogue free from any outside interference."

But the US hasn't actually called what's happened in Honduras a coup. Hillary Clinton said, "We are withholding any formal legal determination." And regarding whether or not the US is calling for Zelaya's return, Clinton said, "We haven't laid out any demands that we're insisting on, because we're working with others on behalf of our ultimate objectives."

If the White House declares that what's happening in Honduras is a coup, they would have to block aid to the rogue Honduran government. A provision of US law regarding funds directed by the US Congress says

that, "None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available ... shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree."

"The State Department has requested \$68.2 million in aid for fiscal year 2010 [for Honduras], which begins on October 1, up from \$43.2 million in the current fiscal year and \$40.5 million a year earlier," according to Reuters.

The US military has a base in Soto Cano, Honduras, which, according to investigative journalist Eva Golinger, is home to approximately 500 troops and a number of air force planes and helicopters.

Regarding US relations with the Honduran military, Latin American History professor and journalist Greg Grandin said on Democracy Now!: "The Honduran military is effectively a subsidiary of the United States government. Honduras, as a whole, if any Latin American country is fully owned by the United States, it's Honduras. Its economy is wholly based on trade, foreign aid and remittances. So if the US is opposed to this coup going forward, it won't go forward. Zelaya will return..."

The Regional Response

The Organization of American States, and the United Nations have condemned the coup. Outrage at the coup has been expressed by major leaders across the globe, and all over Latin America, as reported by Reuters: the Presidents of Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Cuba have been outspoken in their protests against the coup. The French Foreign Ministry said, "France firmly condemns the coup that has just taken place in Honduras." Argentine President Cristina Fernandez said, "I'm deeply worried about the situation in Honduras... it reminds us of the worst years in Latin America's history."

Even Augusto Ramírez Ocampo, a former foreign minister of Colombia told the NY Times, "It is a legal obligation to defend democracy in Honduras."

Zelaya has announced a trip to the US to speak before the United Nations. He also stated that he will return to Honduras on Thursday, accompanied by Jose Miguel Insulza, the head of the Organization of

American States. "I will fulfill my four year mandate [as President], whether you, the coup-plotters, like it or not," Zelaya said.

Only time will tell what the international and national support for Zelaya means for Honduras. Regional support for Bolivian President Evo Morales during an attempted coup in 2008 empowered his fight against right wing destabilizing forces. Popular support in the streets proved vital during the attempted coup against Venezuelan President Chavez in 2002.

Meanwhile, Zelaya supporters continue to convene at the government palace, yelling at the armed soldiers while tanks roam the streets. "We're defending our president," protester Umberto Guebara told a NY Times reporter. "I'm not afraid. I'd give my life for my country."

Taking Action:

If you are interested in rallying in support for the Honduran people and against the coup, here is a list of Honduran Embassies and Consulates in the US.

People in the US could call political representatives to denounce the coup, and demand US cut off all aid to the rogue government until Zelaya is back in power. Click [here](#) to send a message to Barack Obama about the coup. Visit [SOA Watch](#) for more photos and suggested actions.

Benjamin Dangl is currently based in Paraguay and is the author of "[The Price of Fire: Resource Wars and Social Movements in Bolivia](#)" (AK Press). He edits [UpsideDownWorld.org](#), a website on activism and politics in Latin America, and [TowardFreedom.com](#), a progressive perspective on world events. Email: [Bendangl\(at\)gmail\(dot\)com](mailto:Bendangl(at)gmail(dot)com).