

Behind the Honduran Coup Geoff Thale | July 1, 2009 Foreign Policy In Focus www.fpif.org

On the morning of June 28, masked soldiers burst into the home of Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya and forced the elected head of state onto a plane out of the country. Later that day, the Honduran congress overwhelmingly elected its speaker Roberto Michiletti, a member of Zelaya's own Liberal Party, as the country's new president.

Troops swarmed the streets in the capital, Tegucigalpa, and media outlets considered sympathetic to Zelaya were shut down. Some of Zelaya's cabinet members and leaders of popular organizations friendly to Zelaya are in hiding, and there are reports that arrest warrants have been issued for them. Police and military units have broken up demonstrations in support of Zelaya, and on at least one occasion tear-gassed demonstrators. There have also been demonstrations in support of the new government.

The international reaction was swift and surprisingly united. President Barack Obama made a statement within hours of the coup in support of the rule of law. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton issued a strong statement the next day, opposing the coup and calling for Zelaya's return to office. The governments of Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador, which form the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), an economic and trade group Zelaya had joined in the last year, strongly condemned the coup, as did every other government in Latin America. The United Nations General Assembly called on member nations not to recognize any government other than that of Zelaya. And on the Tuesday after the coup, the Organization of American States (OAS) threatened to suspend Honduras' membership in the body if Zelaya is not restored in three days time.

Individual countries and agencies also took action. Honduras' neighbors in Central America announced they were suspending trade for 48 hours to send a political message, and some countries withdrew their ambassadors. The regional Bank for Central American Integration announced that it would suspend loans. The World Bank announced that it would "pause" its loan efforts.

The U.S. was more cautious. The U.S. ambassador hasn't been withdrawn. Though U.S. law requires the United States government to suspend foreign aid to countries that have experienced military coups, U.S. officials have (as of this writing) explained that they are conducting a legal review to determine whether aid should be suspended (There are reports that Pentagon officials have suspended military cooperation.).

OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza has taken a high profile role in attempting to end the coup and restore the constitutional order. He's leading an OAS delegation to Honduras that will soon travel there. Zelaya announced his intention to accompany the delegation and return to the country, but a specific date remains up in the air.

Causes of the Coup The immediate cause of the coup has to do with the ousted president's efforts to advance a process of constitutional reform in Honduras. Zelaya was elected in 2005 as the candidate of the Liberal Party, one of two parties that have alternated in power for the last 25 years. Zelaya and his 2005 opponent, Pepe Lobo, had markedly different approaches to addressing problems of crime and insecurity (Lobo advocated the death penalty and zero-tolerance policing; Zelaya favored a more prevention-oriented approach), but had few differences on the economy or foreign policy. Zelaya was part of the traditional

political elite; a large rancher and landowner, he was widely believed to have supported death squads that targeted left-wing activists in his home department in the 1980s.

During his first few years in office, Zelaya didn't distinguish himself as an economic or political radical, or even a populist. But he moved to the left during his term in office. Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez offered discounted oil to Honduras and Zelaya accepted. He developed modest but real new domestic initiatives, including raising the minimum wage, which infuriated the business community. And he began to collaborate with the foreign policy initiatives of the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, the Venezuelan-led political alliance. His leftist rhetoric and populist programs won him a degree of domestic political support from organized campesino groups and some trade unions, although Zelaya didn't have the level of popular support enjoyed by leaders like Chávez. At the same time, his increasingly radical rhetoric infuriated sections of the traditional elite, and the political class began to turn away from Zelaya. He lost the support of his own political party in the Congress.

Several months ago, Zelaya began to talk about a "consultation" or non-binding referendum to determine whether there was popular support for constitutional reform. Though many analysts believe that Zelaya was hoping that a constitutional congress would rewrite the electoral laws and allow him to run for another term in office, there was no clear evidence of that intent. Zelaya sought a non-binding vote in June that would permit a binding vote in the November federal elections, and set the stage for a constituent assembly next year that could have considered and approved a wide range of constitutional reforms. Zelaya's opponents charged that the goal was to permit him to return to power, but it may also have been their fear that he might support economic or political reforms that would undercut their traditional domination of the economy and the political process. Zelaya's supporters in the popular organizations hoped that an assembly would initiate a reform process. Zelaya said nothing either way.

Despite the president's silence about the content of the constitutional reform he would seek, political positions began to polarize. Zelaya's own political party allied with its traditional opponents in the Congress in opposing the initiative. Zelaya won support from some popular sectors, eager to take advantage of an opportunity for change. The consultation was scheduled to occur on the day of the coup.

As the date for the "consultation" approached, political leaders in the Congress grew increasingly nervous about the upcoming vote, and what it might portend. The previous week, the Honduran congress sought to halt the consultation, and its supreme court ruled it unconstitutional. Zelaya dug in his heels, ordering the military to organize and conduct the vote. When military leaders refused, citing the supreme court decision, Zelaya fired the senior commander and the defense minister. Coup rumors began to circulate. Accompanied by some popular movement leaders, Zelaya personally seized ballot boxes that were stored at a military base and announced plans to move ahead with the vote. On Saturday night, reports circulated claiming Zelaya planned to consider the vote binding and use it as a mandate for calling a constituent assembly.

Deeper Roots It's tempting to view the crisis in Honduras through one of several narrative lenses. The U.S. media apparently sees the situation in Honduras as a reflection of a struggle between Chávez and his allies on the one side, and the United States and its

moderate allies on the other. In this view, Zelaya moved to the left during his term in office, joined the Venezuelan-led Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, provoked the military and the political class with his attempt to rewrite the constitution (following the examples of Chávez, Ecuador's Rafael Correa, and Bolivia's Evo Morales, all of whom have led efforts to rewrite their national charters), and is now seeking to return to power with the support of Venezuela, Nicaragua, and others. In this scenario the United States, while formally opposed to the coup, is happy enough to see Zelaya out of office, and wants him reinstated only if his power is restrained.

Some Latin American leftists and their allies see the United States as behind the coup because it tolerated, if not encouraged, the conservative elites and military forces that overthrew Zelaya. In this narrative, the U.S. and its allies are seeking to consolidate the power of the traditional elites, keep Zelaya out of office, and prevent any populist push for constitutional reform in a country that houses a U.S. military airbase and has been a long-term ally (and at times a puppet) of the United States.

Analysts more focused on the internal dynamics of Honduras argue that the crisis is the result of profound institutional weaknesses in the country. In this view, Zelaya challenged the institutional order, calling for a referendum on whether to hold an assembly to rewrite the constitution, and was acting in ways that were at least arguably outside the constitutional process. The other institutions of the Honduran state — its congress, supreme court, and electoral tribunal — were too weak to respond effectively, either through constraining the president or engaging in negotiations with him. The coup was the result of an inability of the state to manage political disagreements.

These are all flawed ways to interpret the coup. It's a mistake to understand Honduras (or Latin America more generally) as driven by Cold War style conflicts between a pro-U.S. bloc and a pro-Chávez bloc. Chávez and others have been very outspoken in their support of Zelaya, and in their demands for his return to office. While there's no question that the U.S. government has been more cautious in talking about how Zelaya should be reinstated, the United States clearly opposed the coup itself — embassy officials discouraged a coup in discussions with military leaders earlier in the week, and have been public in their condemnation since. Administration officials certainly understand that they must visibly oppose the coup, whatever their private views about Zelaya, to set a new tone for U.S.-Latin American relations.

While it's tempting to turn differences between the United States and the ALBA countries into major issues, the issues in Honduras itself aren't about outside actors and their disagreements. The institutional analysis has the virtue of focusing on Honduras and its own problems. The Honduran state is extremely weak. Its institutional capacity is limited. The inability of the state to mediate political disputes clearly contributed to the coup. In addition, Honduran political and economic systems are profoundly unresponsive to the needs and desires of its ordinary citizens.

Honduras is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, along with Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Haiti. It's much poorer than its neighbors Guatemala and El Salvador. According to the 2007/2008 UNDP Human Development Report, 50.7% of the population lives below the poverty line. Along with its extreme poverty, Honduras has been characterized, since the restoration of formal democracy in the 1980s, as a country where the political parties are not known for their policy differences, and where the

poor majority often doesn't bother to vote, viewing differences between the political parties as meaningless. Honduras is a country where the poor, both urban and rural, feel deeply excluded from and outside of the political process.

What's key to understand here is that Zelaya, once in office, turned away from the traditional elites who had supported him, and turned toward the trade union and campesino groups who might support his more populist and left-of-center programs. He built support in Via Campesina and other peasant organizations, as well as in trade unions and other sectors. More broadly, Zelaya began to win favor among the traditionally excluded, as his rhetoric and the animosity directed at him from the business community brought him supporters among the poor and marginalized.

This is the key dynamic in Honduras — significant (though not perhaps majority) sectors of the population feel deeply excluded from the economy and the political process. Zelaya, in his break with the traditional elites, has curried favor and won votes among this sector. Thus Mel Zelaya, a politician of the traditional elite whose history includes allegations of serious human rights abuses, lost the support of the political elite and became the symbol of change for excluded sectors of the population.

And of course, on the other side, a conservative political elite that has been relatively weakened and divided over the last few years came together in opposition to Zelaya and reasserted its domination of the political system. Institutional weakness and provocative action by Zelaya led to the crisis and the coup. But beneath it all is the basic fact that the Honduran economy and political system has left sizeable sectors of the population feeling excluded and ignored.

No one doubts that the first step in resolving the crisis in Honduras is Zelaya's return to office. Every government in the Western Hemisphere — from Colombia to the United States to Venezuela — has called for his return. But once restored, Zelaya will confront a deep set of institutional and political problems. His relationship with the military, the political parties, the Congress, and the Supreme Court is tainted, and may be irreparable. But even if those problems can be addressed, steps must be taken to address the political marginalization and economic exclusion that characterize Honduras, and that underlie this crisis.

The political system must open up, and parties more genuinely linked to the aspirations and interests of the poor majority must become serious political actors. The state must pursue at least modest social welfare, rural development, and jobs programs to reduce, if not end, economic exclusion. These steps have to be taken to build confidence in Honduras' political system, or else this crisis will erupt again. Nothing Obama, Chávez, or the OAS do will matter much unless Honduras assesses these challenges.

The international aspect of the Honduran crisis is significant. Chávez has sought to encourage close relations between Venezuela and Honduras, and the U.S. Embassy in Honduras has sought to discourage too close a relationship. But elevating this dynamic, and making it the central aspect of any analysis of Honduras, is simply wrong. The coup is the result of a polarized political fight, in a country with a weak institutional structure, whose economy and political process are widely seen as excluding the poor and the vulnerable. Addressing those problems will require a serious long-term effort in Honduras, and in the international community.

Geoff Thale is the program director of the Washington Office on Latin America and a Foreign Policy In Focus contributor.