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Honduras Fires Its Runaway President: Constitutional Order Is Preserved

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Early on June 28, members of the Honduran military temporarily arrested President Manuel Zelaya. Within minutes he was on a plane bound for Costa Rica. In San Jose, Zelaya denounced the military's intervention as a "coup d'etat" and a "brutal kidnapping." The military's actions, while swift and arbitrary, came after President Zelaya defied virtually every Honduran political and legal institution and propelled his citizens to the verge of polarizing violence. Zelaya's swift removal from Honduras probably saved many lives.

In less than six hours, Honduras's congress removed Zelaya as president for repeated violations of Honduras's laws and constitution, as well as for his failure to observe resolutions of Honduran courts. In short, the congress fired the sitting President for multiple acts of institutional insubordination. The congress then named its speaker, Robert Micheletti, to serve as chief executive until after national elections in November. The military has begun a return back to the barracks.

The events of June 28 mark the culmination in a series of confrontations between Zelaya and virtually all of Honduras's political and judicial institutions, including the congress, the supreme court, the two major political parties (including his own), and the military. At issue was Zelaya's effort to convene a non-binding public referendum that, he believed, would open the doors for major constitutional revision. Given that the Honduran constitution does not grant its president the power to convene such referenda, there is no question that,

while the response of the Honduran military may have been rash, President Zelaya was fired for a legitimate reason.

Zelaya's March to the Left. President Zelaya won election by the slenderest of margins in 2005. A series of corruption charges involving state contracts and manipulation of public services—particularly in telecommunications (Hondutel)—hounded the Zelaya government, which began its term with earnest promises of fiscal probity and transparency. In the 2008 Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index,¹ Honduras shares a place with Ethiopia, Indonesia, and Libya.

With regard to foreign policy, Zelaya in August 2008 signed on as a member of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA), a political and economic bloc controlled by senior members Venezuela and Cuba. Zelaya sought and received assistance from Venezuela via the oil-financing facility Petrocaribe and moved for closer ties with Castro's communist-revolutionary regime.

A Quandary for the U.S. Clearly the Obama Administration is highly uncomfortable with the course of events in Honduras. It is primarily concerned with avoiding a repeat of the April 2002

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coup in Caracas, in which Hugo Chávez was temporarily toppled and the U.S. appeared to favor coup-makers. Therefore, late on June 28, the White House and State Department were demanding Zelaya's return, continuing to recognize him as the only legal president and adamant that his departure was an "illegal and illegitimate act that cannot stand."² On the other hand, U.S. officials are calling for the crisis to be "resolved peacefully through dialogue free from any outside interference."

The Obama Administration wants to reverse the events of June 28. It believes restoring political order and protecting the fundamentals of the Inter-American Democratic Charter via handing the problem off the Organization of American States (OAS) will work easily and promote the smooth, orderly return of President Zelaya. The facts on the ground, however, do not lend themselves to such a tidy and optimistic scenario. There is a grave danger that by acting against the new constitutional arrangement order established by the Honduran congress, supreme court, and military, bloodshed and political chaos are likely to follow.

Chávez's Intervention Portends Bloodshed.

There is little doubt that President Zelaya was emboldened to challenge the institutions of Honduras by the support of Hugo Chávez and other ALBA members. On June 25, ALBA members issued a public statement claiming that a coup was already underway, and they backed the June referendum, despite lack of institutional support. In short, they endorsed Zelaya's defiant and reckless strategy.³

On June 28, Chávez stepped up his interventions by directing calls to campesino leaders in

Honduras to encourage resistance, putting his military on alert, calling on the Honduran soldiers to disobey their superiors, and vowing to topple the new government. "If they swear in Micheletti [or any other], we will overthrow them!" he proclaimed.⁴ Chávez also threatened to give a lesson to the military "gorillas" who do not respect Honduras's constitution.⁵

The relentless intervention of Chávez will serve only to harden the Honduran opposition, demonstrate that Zelaya is heavily compromised and dependent on foreign backing, and support tactics that can easily lead to potentially dangerous provocations. Demonstrations and resistance encouraged by Chávez and others threaten to make a shamble of institutional order in Honduras.

Recommendations.

- **Recognize the new Honduran government.** Messy as it is, the Obama Administration should recognize the new interim government, as constitutional order has been preserved.
- **Restore public order.** The Obama Administration should work with the OAS and other international missions to promote national reconciliation and an end to polarization.
- **Resist Chávez and ALBA intervention.** The Chavistas consistently pushed Zelaya toward confrontational politics; now they threaten intervention. The Obama Administration must move to neutralize this negative and highly dangerous thrust.

Chávez Democracy. The events unfolding in Honduras remain confused. Yet it appears the pri-

1. Transparency International, "2008 Corruption Perceptions Index," at http://www.transparency.org/news_room/in_focus/2008/cpi2008/cpi_2008_table (June 29, 2009).
2. U.S Department of State, "Background Briefing on the Situation in Honduras," June 28, 2008, at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/06a/125453.htm> (June 29, 2009).
3. Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America (ALBA), "Declaración de los Estados Miembros de la Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América Condenando el Golpe de Estado en Curso Contra el Presidente de la Republica de Honduras José Manuel Zelaya," June 25, 2009, at <http://www.granma.cu/espanol/2009/junio/vier26/declaracion.html> (June 29, 2009).
4. Tal Cual Digital, "Metiendose en Honduras," June 28, 2009, at <http://www.talcualdigital.com/Avances/Viewer.aspx?id=22339&secid=28> (June 29, 2009).
5. Noticias 24, "Chavez Advierte a Honduras con la Guerra y Afirma que la FANB Ha Sido Puesta en Alerta," June 28, 2009, at <http://www.noticias24.com/actualidad/noticia/61391/Chavez-denuncia-que-globovision-y-cnn-tratan-de-justificar-el-golpe> (June 30, 2009).

mary institutions of the nation—congress, the supreme court, the Supreme Electoral Tribunal, and the military as the guardian of public order—have spoken. While these institutions may have acted precipitously, the bottom line is that President Zelaya was fired for cause. The U.S. can ill afford to open the door to a counter-intervention by Hugo

Chávez, one that would deliver Honduras into the Chávez brand of “democracy.”

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