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Crisis in Honduras: A Diplomatic Balancing Act for the United States

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On July 5, Manuel Zelaya, president of Honduras until he was deposed by his Supreme Court and expelled from the country, tried to return home. He traveled on a Venezuelan aircraft, chartered by Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, while the Venezuelan-owned media group Telesur covered his every utterance. Pro-Chávez United Nations General Assembly President Miguel D'Escoto, a Nicaraguan and vocal advocate of anti-American causes worldwide, went along for the ride. Denied permission to land, Zelaya's aircraft turned away, leaving violence and bloodshed in its wake.

The presidential aircraft of Argentinean President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner—carrying a posse of South American presidents including Rafael Correa of Ecuador, Fernando Lugo of Paraguay, and Fernandez de Kirchner herself, along with Organization of American States (OAS) Secretary General Miguel Insulza—also planned to land in Honduras to support Zelaya. All passengers aboard the plane (known as Tango-1) are staunch supporters/clients of Chávez and grateful beneficiaries of Venezuela's recent economic largesse. However, like Zelaya's aircraft, Tango-1 was denied clearance and diverted to El Salvador.

The events of July 5 reflect careful coordination and planning on the part of a vocal and increasingly visible body of anti-American, pro-Chávez executives who are expending time and political capital in order to advance their brand of popular, executive-dominated democracy at the expense other more traditional models.

ALBA's Agent in Honduras. From the moment Zelaya began his campaign for a popular referendum to alter the Honduran constitution on March 28, he has charted a collision course with his nation's constitutional institutions, the legal safeguards established in 1982 after decades of military rule. As the likelihood of a constitutional confrontation grew increasingly likely, Zelaya received the unstinted backing from Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), an economic and political association aimed at fostering and protecting radical populism and anti-Americanism throughout the Americas.

Following Zelaya's June 28 expulsion, ALBA has worked overtime to make Zelaya the poster child for the "new democracy" in Latin America, portraying him as a humble reformer standing up against corrupt elites, outdated institutions, and the evil military of Honduras. The truth, however, is that Zelaya has become a stalking horse for those advocating populist, polarizing agendas aimed at splitting Honduras politically and promoting a violent confrontation between the haves and the have-nots, between pro- and anti-Chávez forces.

At the same time, in an effort to bring Zelaya back, Chávez is moving to shut off vital oil sales to

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Honduras, while internally pro-Zelaya followers are threatening roadblocks and other actions to cripple Honduras economically.

Combined, these circumstances have provided the first, but certainly not the last, diplomatic crisis in the Western Hemisphere for the Obama Administration. In addressing this crisis, the Administration needs to chart an accurate and realistic course. It needs to find compass points to guide its policy through a political and diplomatic storm that threatens democratic order in Honduras.

Will the U.S. Defend the American Brand of Democracy? Fundamental differences exist between ALBA and the U.S. regarding the concept of democracy. When addressing the current crisis, U.S. failure to take into account the democratic principles advocated in a bipartisan manner across Latin America—such as rule of law, limits on executive power, protections of individual rights and liberties, and strong democratic institutions—will allow democracy in Latin America to be defined by the ALBA alliance.

Inflexible attempts to observe certain articles of the Inter-American Democratic Charter regarding “an unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime” while ignoring the prior violations of other articles of the charter committed by Zelaya demonstrate a position likely to kill the charter’s spirit.¹

Does the OAS Speak for U.S. Interests? The increased leverage and influence of the ALBA alliance within the OAS has created a powerful group of actors anxious to dominate the regional body and use it to achieve their ends. The OAS has increas-

ingly shifted from an organization where U.S. ideas and ideals had significant influence to one catering to an increasingly assertive, often anti-U.S. membership that sees little distinction between Fidel Castro’s communism, Chávez’ authoritarianism, and Daniel Ortega’s electoral chicanery. Given the Latin American traditions of solidarity and non-intervention, the loudest and most aggressive members in the OAS increasingly carry the day.

Experienced Latin American hands feel a sense of growing dissatisfaction with of the manner in which Insulza has handled the Honduran crisis. Where was the OAS in the months and weeks leading up to the current confrontations? The credibility of the OAS, moreover, has been compromised by the organization’s continued silence on a wide range of anti-democratic moves executed by ALBA members, including electoral fraud in Nicaragua, curtailment of freedoms and a concerted campaign against elected municipal officials in Venezuela, and Insulza’s impassioned efforts to bring communist Cuba back into the OAS fold.

Can the U.S. Play a Constructive Role in Honduras? With U.S. economic and diplomatic pressures, combined with the eager application of sanctions by ALBA allies, the government of Robert Micheletti will likely be brought to its knees—Honduras is no Iran or North Korea. Yet the parties that removed Zelaya feel they were fully justified in their actions by the laws and constitution of their nation. Critical articles of the Honduran constitution—notably articles 3, 42, 239, and 374, aimed at strictly prohibiting any effort at presidential re-election—were clearly violated by Zelaya.²

1. Article 3 of the Inter-American Democratic Charter defines the essential elements of representative democracy, including, *inter alia*, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; access to and the exercise of power in accordance with the rule of law; the holding of periodic, free, and fair elections based on secret balloting and universal suffrage as an expression of the sovereignty of the people; the pluralistic system of political parties and organizations; and *the separation of powers and independence of the branches of government*. Article 4 states, “The constitutional subordination of all state institutions to the legally constituted civilian authority and *respect for the rule of law on the part of all institutions and sectors of society are equally essential to democracy*.” In the present crisis, the OAS is operating in accordance with Articles 20 and 21, designed to deal with “an *unconstitutional alteration of the constitutional regime* that seriously impairs the democratic order in a member state” (emphasis added). “Inter-American Democratic Charter,” Organization of American States, Lima, September 11, 2001, at http://www.oas.org/charter/docs/resolution1_en_p4.htm (July 7, 2009).
2. Honduran Constitution, at <http://pdba.georgetown.edu/Constitutions/Honduras/hond05.html> (in Spanish) (July 7, 2009). A concise explanation of the grounds for Zelaya’s removal is provided in this succinct video on the situation in Honduras: Union Civica Democratica, “Democracy Alive and Strong Because the Constitution Works,” July 4, 2009, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maMA3PTYoZE> (July 7, 2009).

Honduras in 2009 is not a repeat of the coup that nearly toppled President Hugo Chávez in April 2002. At this moment, despite the vocal crowds demonstrating on behalf of Zelaya, most Hondurans would probably like to see him remain outside of the country: Hondurans still have faith in their institutions, not in mob rule.

In the days ahead, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton needs to demonstrate diplomatic finesse and the capacity to handle a situation adroitly if the U.S. actually wishes to protect democracy not only in Honduras but the entire hemisphere. The U.S. must carefully weigh what benefits are to be gained by returning a runaway and allegedly corrupt executive to a polarized nation, particularly one left without the protections of its constitutional foundations.

Recommendations. When addressing the challenges posed by the current crisis in Honduras, the U.S. should:

- *Clarify U.S. interests in Honduras.* At stake in Honduras are the nation's constitutional institutions, the rule of law, and the preservation of a political succession process that is already underway. The health of democracy in Honduras is not a personal or partisan issue and needs to be the focal point for all further discussions about this troubled nation. Zelaya's wanton violation of the constitutional order in Honduras must be taken into account.

- *Advance national reconciliation.* The key to Honduras's future lies in adhering to the framework of the nation's constitution, protecting the rule of law, minimizing economic damage, and proceeding with the scheduled November elections.
- *Support mediation efforts of Costa Rican President Oscar Arias.* This mediation effort, announced on July 6, and accepted by the Micheletti government, offers the best prospects for a solution to the Honduran crisis. Resistance from Hugo Chávez and the ALBA alliance can be expected.

Another Scalp for Chávez? In the July 5 flight over Honduras, Zelaya announced that failure to force his return would constitute "the death of democracy in Latin America." There is an ironic truth in his statement: An internationally coerced and unconditional return of Zelaya to the Honduran presidency will weaken the fundamentals of liberal democracy (limited government, checks and balances, and executive accountability) in the Western Hemisphere and hand Hugo Chávez and his ALBA alliance another propaganda scalp.

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