

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2566  
July 27, 2009

## Honduras's Conservative Awakening

*Ray Walser, Ph.D.*

Since June 28—when the Honduran military placed Manuel Zelaya on an aircraft bound for San Jose, Costa Rica—massive media coverage, diplomatic maneuvering, and political theater have accompanied efforts to restore Zelaya to the presidency of his Central American nation.

In the aftermath of his exile, Manuel Zelaya's shift from the political center toward both foreign and domestic Leftist radicalism has become apparent to the world. Over the past two years, Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, a democratic charlatan and unabashed opponent of U.S. policy, has charmed Zelaya with oil and aid, pulling him out of the U.S. orbit. Chávez encouraged Zelaya to exploit the polarizing schism between rich and poor, the shortcomings of Honduran institutions, and the suspect promise of a new political order favorable to the dispossessed.

**Cowboy President to Caudillo.** Chávez's despotic influence has pervaded Zelaya's approach to the rule of law as well. With the complicity of Chávez, Zelaya dismissed negotiation and compromise, adopting instead an increasingly cavalier disregard for Honduras' legal and institutional restraints on presidential power. Zelaya acted increasingly in the manner of "the man on horseback," or Latin American *caudillo* [strong man], in keeping with Latin America's authoritarian traditions—Chávez being one such example.

Conservatives reflexively fear concentrations of unchecked executive power. Zelaya wanted to capitalize on popular discontent with the status quo and the dominance of the traditional Liberal and

National parties in order to upset the political applecart and usher in a new era of "participatory democracy."

**A Miscalculation.** Obviously, Zelaya miscalculated regarding his opposition. Resistance has come from government institutions, political parties, the military, the Catholic Church, and the business community. The Church resisted the idea of a polarizing conflict and cynical outside manipulation. Business feared the assault on private property and unsustainable dependency on government and foreign handouts.

Conservative Hondurans justifiably feared the new Bolivarian axis which operates in concert to advance a revolutionary agenda—"socialism of the 21st century." It is a *mélange* of authoritarianism, Marxism-Leninism, anti-Americanism, nationalism, and opportunism. As The Heritage Foundation's Kim Holmes recently observed, this revolutionary agenda involves the "illiberal abuses of the ballot box and the degradation of constitutions" that become the hallmarks of pseudo-democracy. It is backed by Venezuela's capacity to direct petroleum resources to client states along with proven agitation and propaganda tactics honed over decades in Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2566.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2566.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting  
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to  
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Chávez and company are adamant about Zelaya's return to power, and fearful that successful resistance to their tactics of infiltration and disruption might stiffen resistance throughout the Western Hemisphere. Perhaps they were frightened further by the massive rejection of Chávez friends and fellow leftist-populists Nestor and Cristina Kirchner in a recent election in Argentina.

**A Conservative Response.** The very laxness of international protections against the *Chavista* threat has clearly galvanized a conservative response in Honduras. Although Zelaya met with Secretary of State Clinton, there is little doubt he considers himself a full partner of Hugo Chávez and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and that his every move has been carefully coordinated with his ALBA allies. Most recently Zelaya has operated out of Nicaragua where ALBA mainstay President Daniel Ortega just launched an effort to change the Nicaraguan constitution to allow his reelection.

The interim government of Roberto Micheletti believes in the legality/constitutionality of its actions in removing Zelaya. Mediation efforts undertaken by President Oscar Arias, backed by the U.S., insisted on Zelaya's return to the presidency albeit conditioned and with reported safeguards. This demand sparked a fierce debate within the interim government which appeared prepared to accept this condition. In the end reports indicate that the Supreme Court would not reverse its position that Zelaya's actions gravely injured the constitutional order and cannot be expunged. For many Hondurans the court's ruling represents a triumph of principle over expediency. A government based on checks and balances and rule of law does not easily bend to accommodate foreign dictates.

The Supreme Court demands Zelaya return to face justice and the trial warranted for his violations of Honduran law. Fervent supporters of Zelaya denigrate the institutions that removed a president and vow to gut them. Conservatives rightfully fear a fratricidal conflict if Zelaya is allowed to return.

**The U.S. Position.** The U.S. supported OAS and U.N. condemnations and declarations that the Honduran constitutional order suffered a catastrophic, and perhaps fatal, interruption. The position of the Obama Administration rests primarily

on the charge that Zelaya's expulsion by the Honduran military from office was illegal. It demands Zelaya's return without taking into account the constitutionality of the acts of the Honduran Congress and the Supreme Court or publicly speaking out about Zelaya's violation of Honduran law. It granted Zelaya a presumption of legality and protections inconsistent with the analysis of the actions leading to his removal and expulsion.

Conservatives are rightfully troubled when a true totalitarian, Raul Castro; a pseudo-democrat, Hugo Chávez; and President Obama stand together. The largely unqualified and less than even-handed support for the return of Zelaya has caused a strong conservative response in the U.S. The position of the Obama Administration raises concerns about where it stands against the relentless efforts of anti-American leaders to erode U.S. influence and interests in Latin America. The position raises the fear that good governance, constitutionality, and rule of law are secondary to attempts to forge a new relationship with Chávez, Castro, and their ideological ilk, and to remain bound by the faltering multilateralism of the Organization of American States (OAS).

**Zelaya's Return.** Honduras totters on the brink. Zelaya continues to try to force his return. While public opinion in Honduras remains seriously divided, a significant number of Hondurans appear willing to defy international pressure in order not to restore Zelaya and thereby fuel Chávez and his allies.

In the name of democracy for all, the U.S. needs to distance itself from the erratic, messianic Zelaya. It should move boldly to accept the workings of the Honduran constitution, insist on Zelaya's legal responsibility to answer the charges against him, and promote peace, dialogue, and a recovery of trust.

#### **Recommendations:**

- *Friends of Honduran democracy.* The Obama Administration should move away from the OAS and create an active, pro-democracy grouping comprised of nations, such as Canada, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, and others, whose objective is a balanced dialogue and national reconciliation in Honduras.
- *Avoid economic sanctions.* As a long-term friend concerned about the majority in a poor country,

the Obama Administration should refrain from punitive economic measures that are injurious to the poor and difficult to remove.

**The Path to Resolution.** The path to resolving the Honduran crisis begins with a genuine understanding of the facts on the ground, a recognition of the negative impact of Chávez and ALBA, and more rather than less direct involvement by the U.S. in

helping to support a genuine rather than cosmetic end to the crisis.

—Ray Walser, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst for Latin America in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.