

# WebMemo



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## The Return of Manuel Zelaya and the Honduras Crisis: Time for a U.S. Policy Change

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On September 21, former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya slipped back into Tegucigalpa. Backed by anti-democrats like Hugo Chávez, Raul Castro, and Daniel Ortega, Zelaya claims only to desire dialogue and a peaceful accord with the interim government of Roberto Micheletti. Yet in reality, an unrepentant Zelaya seeks to overturn the constitutional order by convening a “constituent assembly” to alter presidential term limits—an illegal action that he tried earlier this year, resulting in his removal from office on June 28.

It is time for the U.S. to cease its policy of backing Zelaya and support elections that can truly end the Honduran crisis.

**Zelaya’s Brazilian Gambit.** After arriving in Tegucigalpa, Zelaya proceeded straight to the Brazilian embassy. Because diplomatic conventions and international law protect embassies, Zelaya is free to use the diplomatic space that is supposed to be outside of domestic politics as a safe haven and base of operations in his effort to regain office.

Allowing use of Brazil’s embassy for acts of subterfuge and political intervention runs contrary to diplomatic custom and practice. Nonetheless, Honduras wants to avoid a diplomatic confrontation with the South American giant. Zelaya’s sojourn in the Brazilian embassy is carefully calculated to advance his interests and generate polarizing conflict while protecting him from the exercise of national laws against a Honduran citizen on Honduran soil.

Supporters of Zelaya have rallied to the embassy, hoping to spark confrontation and protests that will provoke government repression and inflame international opinion. The Micheletti government has imposed curfews and cordoned off the embassy to deter destabilizing acts by Zelaya’s backers. Still, the situation remains a radical hothead’s dream.

Micheletti has stated that Zelaya’s return does not alter the “Honduran reality.” From the perspective of the interim government, Zelaya is first and foremost a fugitive from Honduran justice, having been formally charged with acts of fraud, treason, and abuse of power. The interim government continues preparing for the November 29 elections, which it believes offer the only real chance for ending the schism.

**U.S. Policy Consistently Misreading the Honduran Situation.** U.S. policy toward Honduras has reflected a mix of inattention, indifference, and arrogance. Before the removal of Zelaya, there is no evidence that the U.S. attempted to head off the crisis with any kind of sustained diplomatic engagement. Without conducting an in-depth investigation of the circumstances and events that led to Zelaya’s removal, the U.S. joined the Latin American con-

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sensus in the Organization of American States (OAS) to demand Zelaya's unconditional return to office.

When the interim government of Honduras balked at a 72-hour OAS *diktat*, the U.S. invited Costa Rican president and Nobel Peace prize winner Oscar Arias to act as a mediator. Once more the interim government answered that Zelaya could not be trusted to abide by the Honduran constitution.

When Secretary Clinton met with Zelaya in early September, she turned up the heat on the interim government. The U.S. State Department pronounced the events of June 28 a coup, cut off further economic assistance, and revoked the visas of those believed to be involved in Zelaya's removal, including all the justices of the Honduran Supreme Court. Concurring with Zelaya's demands, the State Department also announced it would not recognize the winner of the November 29 elections as legitimate without Zelaya's restoration to office.

Despite these exceptional efforts on behalf of the deposed president, an impatient and increasingly egotistical Zelaya staged his dramatic and secretive return to Honduras on September 21. Once again the Obama Administration appears to have been caught off guard by events in Honduras and, consequently, forced to react rather than lead.

#### **Ending Foreign Intervention in Honduras.**

International intervention in a poor, divided, often corrupt democracy is unlikely to resolve what is essentially a domestic power dispute. Zelaya says he is still the president and will be until January. The interim government believes the events of June 28 were constitutional and therefore a legitimate defense of Honduran democracy. While Zelaya commands active and vocal support from a significant minority of Hondurans, there is little doubt that the majority of Hondurans fear his potential return to power: They do not wish to see their nation marching in lockstep with Hugo Chávez and his ilk. Honduras's differences must be overcome by its citizenry and its citizenry alone—with wise counsel and measured advice but without violence, outside intervention, sanctions, or threats.

It is time for the U.S. and others to stop meddling in Honduras. Safe for the time being within the Brazilian embassy, Zelaya is counting on a combination of internal mass pressure, external sanctions, and

punitive diplomacy to break the will of those who—justifiably—removed him from office.

#### **Recommendations for Resolving the Honduran Crisis:**

- *Let Honduras End Its Crisis.* Since June 28, the U.S. appears to have consistently sided with Zelaya. Yet, Zelaya's persistent and often quixotic effort to return to power raises question about America's ability to influence—let alone constrain—his efforts to regain the presidency and jeopardize any potential for an orderly end to the Honduran crisis.

It is time to uncouple U.S. policy in Honduras from Zelaya and urge him to surrender to the interim government and answer for his provocative actions and abuse of executive power.

- *Support November Elections.* The elections of November 29 offer the only real path to resolving the current Honduran political crisis. They were scheduled before the events of June 28, candidates were already selected through democratic primaries, a full spectrum of public opinion is represented, and neither Zelaya nor Micheletti are eligible to run.

It is critical that these elections are free, fair, transparent, and legitimate. This means throwing America's full weight behind the elections and flooding the country with electoral observers, not isolating it and threatening not to recognize the outcome.

**Time Is Running Out in Honduras.** The Obama Administration's policy in Honduras is incoherent. It has been unable to constrain Zelaya, whose objective is to fracture a fragile democracy. Furthermore, the Administration continues to alienate and punish those who oppose Zelaya's reckless populism and support democratic freedoms and economic liberty. If the only chance at a peaceful resolution to the current Honduran crisis—the November 29 elections—are to be a success, this inconsistent policy must change.

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