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Honduran Handshake: U.S. Policy Still Needs to Be Better

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On October 30, *The New York Times* incorrectly proclaimed, “Deal Reached to Restore Ousted [Honduran] President.” The real headline should have read: “Deal Reached to Respect Rights of the Honduran People to Decide Their Political Future.”

Presidential elections will take place in Honduras on November 29. As a result, it is now possible that the Honduran people—not outsiders—will decide who governs their nation. It is also in the power of the Honduran people to determine what will be done politically and legally to those responsible for the currently simmering crisis that first exploded on June 28 when the Honduran Supreme Court, Congress, and military removed President Manuel Zelaya from office for violations of the Honduran constitution. Zelaya was subsequently expelled from the country, and an interim government led by Robert Micheletti was elected.

The Honduran Accord. The October 29 agreement largely contains points accepted under the mediation of President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, with one fundamental addition regarding possible presidential restitution. The agreement signed by representatives for Micheletti and Zelaya contains seven basic elements:

1. Establishment of a government of national reconciliation;
2. No provisions for political amnesty;
3. Recognition of the legitimacy of the outcome of the November 29 presidential elections;

4. Transfer of control over the military from the executive to the independent electoral tribunal for the duration of the elections;
5. Creation of a verification commission to oversee the reconciliation process;
6. Creation of a truth commission to examine the events before, on, and after June 28; and
7. A call to the international community to end all economic sanctions and send electoral observers to Honduras.

Contrary to the report in *The New York Times*, the return of Zelaya to executive office is far from a done deal. It will require a ruling from the Honduran Supreme Court which ordered Zelaya’s removal from office for violations of the Honduran constitution. The National Congress will then vote on the recommendations offered by the Supreme Court, which will presumably recommend that Zelaya not be restored to office. The Congress may agree or disagree.

U.S. Congressman Connie Mack (R-FL), ranking minority member of the House’s Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, predicts that “the Honduran Supreme Court and Honduran Congress will

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not allow Zelaya to return to power.”¹ This view was supported by former Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Roger Noriega, who observed, “It is quite doubtful that the court and congress—which approved of Zelaya’s removal in the first place—will return him to power.”²

The critical point is not Zelaya’s restoration to office but the apparent willingness of the Obama Administration to accept that there is now in place a truly Honduran process for resolving the political crisis—one accepted by the two camps. In an interview on October 29, Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere Thomas Shannon noted that the agreement marks a point at which Hondurans must negotiate among themselves and decide what they are prepared to accept. Shannon indicated that the agreement constituted sufficient progress for all international parties, including the U.S. and the Organization of American States (OAS), to recognize the outcome of the November 29 elections.

A Corrective for Misguided U.S. Policy. Anxious for the glimmer of a foreign policy victory, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton praised the accord as “a big step forward for the Inter-American system and its commitment to democracy.” Such a statement grossly underestimates the serious divisions that separate the Chavista brand of populist, participatory democracy from genuine, pluralistic democracy.

In reality, the agreement appears to be the result of a combination of actually talking to the interim government and U.S. economic arm-twisting. The threat of a prolonged reduction in economic assistance and the threat of not recognizing the November 29 elections as legitimate were powerful incentives to force concessions by the Micheletti government. Fears for the future certainly worried

the millions of Hondurans who have defied the Hugo Chavez–inspired populism of Zelaya and stood in support of a government that stopped Zelaya’s bid to perpetuate his presidency.

Since the Hondurans legitimately removed Zelaya from office for violating the constitution, the Obama Administration has generally mismanaged the situation. It sided with the Chavez-influenced OAS, called Zelaya’s legal removal a military “coup,” and ominously threatened not to recognize the winner of an election process begun well before June 28. For months the Administration refused to enter into direct talks with the Micheletti government and did so only after Zelaya secretly returned to Honduras in September and established a safe haven and a post of operations in the Brazilian embassy.

To date, the Obama team has done an excellent job of hamstringing the Honduran economy by cutting off economic assistance, throttling tourism with travel warnings, yanking visas away from Hondurans, and creating a climate of massive uncertainty that spooked U.S. investors and businesses. Withholding military-to-military cooperation and reducing contact between the embassy and interim government allowed drug traffickers to make fresh inroads in Honduras.³

The U.S. embassy in Honduras, under Ambassador Hugo Llorens, did yeomen’s duty watching out for the interests of Zelaya and his followers, leaving many wondering if it was working for Zelaya or for the interests of the U.S. and its citizens. The management of affairs by Ambassador Llorens will likely be the subject of an investigation by the Government Accounting Office.⁴

The Next Steps. In the wake of this week’s agreement, the U.S. should do the following:

- *Assist with electoral observers.* Without waiting for Honduran actions on the accord, the Obama

1. Press release, Rep. Connie Mack’s (R–FL) statement on today’s action in Honduras, October 30, 2009.
2. Roger F. Noriega, “Hondurans, Not Zelaya, Will Decide Their Future,” *The American*, October 30, 2009, at <http://american.com/archive/2009/october/Hondurans-Not-Zelaya-Will-Decide-Their-Future> (October 30, 2009).
3. Juan Carlos Llorca, “Honduran Police: Drug Trafficking Up Since Coup,” Associated Press, October 14, 2009, at <http://www.google.com/hostednews/ap/article/ALeqM5ih-Jh6J-mV8XPcGjbMPsvoE0NuRAD9BB8S380> (October 30, 2009).
4. Antonieta Cadiz, “Honduras Crea Mas Polemica en el Capitolio,” *La Opinion*, October 30, 2009, at <http://www.impre.com/laopinion/noticias/estados-unidos/2009/10/30/honduras-crea-mas-polemica-en--156419-1.html> (October 30, 2009).

Administration must act quickly to fulfill its commitment to assist with placing international observers in Honduras and to support the critical November 29 elections.

- *Restore foreign assistance.* The Obama Administration should act immediately to restore the approximately \$30 million in suspended economic assistance and recommence disbursements from the Millennium Challenge Account.
- *Resume military and counter-drug cooperation.* Normal military-to-military and counter-drug activities should resume without further delay.

Strong Leadership Needed. Although hungry for a foreign policy win, the Obama Administra-

tion has not shown strong hemispheric leadership regarding Honduras. The October accord requires implementation by the Hondurans, good behavior by Zelaya, and a quick infusion of international support for the elections. It requires further hands-on U.S. diplomacy—not pre-June 28 complacency—to make sure Zelaya does not derail the electoral process and steal Honduras from under the eyes of the Obama Administration.

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