

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2781

January 26, 2010

Battling Chávez's Radical Vision for an Anti-U.S. Honduras

Ray Walser, Ph.D.

On January 27, Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo will don the sash of presidential office in Honduras. He becomes the eighth civilian president since military rule ended in 1982. Lobo and a new congress dominated by his National Party take power in one of the Western Hemisphere’s poorest countries—a nation badly scarred by a seven-month upheaval that culminated with the removal of former Liberal Party President Manuel Zelaya.

A scattering of dignitaries, including the presidents of Panama and Taiwan, will attend Lobo’s inauguration. The Obama Administration is sending Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, Dr. Arturo Valenzuela—a step down from the usual cabinet-level official routinely dispatched to presidential inaugurals. Most Latin American nations will boycott the event, claiming that Lobo’s election was the outcome of an interruption in the democratic and constitutional order of Honduras, not a resolution.

Chávez Game Plan Disrupted. Last summer, with the backing of Venezuela’s populist-authoritarian President Hugo Chávez, Zelaya launched a bid to alter the Honduran constitution and open the way for a populist, participatory democracy by removing the cornerstone of the Honduran constitution: non-reelection of presidents.

On June 28, the Supreme Court and Congress removed Zelaya from office and the military dispatched him into exile. The action was a serious blow to a key Chávez ambition: a radicalized, anti-American Honduras. Zelaya managed to return to

Honduras in September and took sanctuary inside the Brazilian embassy, attempting to rally support and discredit the interim government of Roberto Micheletti and the November elections.

The Obama Administration first rushed to pronounce events in Honduras a coup. It joined with the Organization of American States (OAS) to condemn Zelaya’s removal and voted for the hasty expulsion of Honduras from the regional body. The Administration then began applying economic and visa sanctions.

Fulfilling the October Accords. After months of controversy, on October 30, the interim government and Zelaya signed an agreement promising to recognize the legitimacy of the November 29 elections, a congressional vote on Zelaya’s return, a government of national unification, and a truth commission. Implementation of the accord swiftly became mired in controversy, with each side accusing the other of bad faith.

The November 29 elections were free, open, and fair. Voter turnout exceeded 2.3 million and was on par with previous elections, despite calls for boycotts by the Zelaya camp. Honduran voters returned an overwhelming mandate for Lobo and the

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/LatinAmerica/wm2781.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

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.

National Party. On December 3, 111 of the 125 members of the Honduran congress voted against restoring Zelaya to the presidency.

On January 12, the Honduran Congress formally withdrew from Chávez's Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. On January 21, Zelaya accepted an agreement that will allow him to depart for the Dominican Republic, a step he called a "first step" toward national reconciliation.

While not entirely to Washington's liking, the January 27 inauguration is a Honduran solution to a Honduran problem.

Time to End Honduras' Isolation. The costs of Honduras' isolation have been substantial. It has created a climate of uncertainty for businesses and investors. Honduras also suffers from generalized economic recession and a loss of remittance earnings that undercut its already fragile economy. Impoverishing Honduras will not improve democracy.

The Obama Administration has yet to cease visa revocations and aid cut-offs that harm Honduran allies. These acts of retribution will quickly be perceived as petty and punitive for what they are, and they will harm U.S. relations with its friends.

It is also incumbent on President Lobo to demonstrate strong leadership skills, pursue truth and reconciliation, and heal the polarizing wounds inflicted upon the Honduran body politic.

Shoring Up Democracy in Central America. Efforts to radicalize Honduras in the Chávez manner failed on June 28. Yet the conditions that allowed Zelaya to gain a vocal following persist. Unemployment, poverty, inequality, and low standards of education cannot be ignored. Democratic institutions throughout Central America need U.S. support.

Chávez ally President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua has already opened the window for his re-election with a piece of constitutional legerdemain. Guatemala has been battered by drought, drug trafficking, and political scandals. In El Salvador, tensions are emerging between the hard line radicals of the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN) and the more moderate elements of President Mauricio Funes's administration.

These developments demand a strong U.S. response.

Toward a Renewed Partnership. The U.S. cannot be just a distant mentor that leaves the future of democracy and good governance to other undemocratic and profoundly anti-American nations. It needs to remain a stronger player in Central America. The U.S. should begin again with a genuine welcome to President Lobo and a renewed partnership with Honduras.

Then, the U.S. should take the following steps:

- **End all sanctions.** The Obama Administration must end all punitive sanctions against Honduras, including visa denials.
- **Stand up against security challenges.** Drug trafficking and gangs are the result of a toxic combination of poverty, weak law enforcement, and judicial institutions as well as the ever-evolving threat of drug production, transiting, and consumption in the Americas. The U.S. needs to resume full military and police cooperation with its valued partners.
- **Full recognition for Honduras.** Inside Honduras, the U.S. can work to facilitate dialogue that overcomes internal divisions. Externally, it must press for the return of Honduras to the OAS and the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with the international community.
- **Install a new ambassador in Tegucigalpa.** Ambassador Hugo Llorens's tenure as U.S. ambassador to Honduras has been fraught with difficulties. The events before, during, and after June 28 have contributed to misunderstandings and clashes of personalities. A new U.S. ambassador would help set the tone of a better bilateral relationship.

By following these recommendations, the U.S. would take the critical first steps toward improving conditions not only in Honduras but—to Chávez's chagrin—throughout Latin America.

—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.