

Brazil and the Honduras crisis

Brasilia emerges as the voice of the Global South

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Rio de Janeiro — It's been a landmark week for Latin American geopolitics. With Brazil's decision to host ousted Honduran president Manuel Zelaya at its embassy in Tegucigalpa until he is restored to power (from which he has been removed since the coup on June 28), the continent has finally shifted its center of gravity from north of the Rio Grande to the core of the south.

The military-civil coup in Honduras was the first in Latin America since the region's redemocratization in the 80s-90s (aside from Fujimori's proclaimed *autogolpe* in Peru in 1992), and has received a unanimous condemnation. The continent's historical tradition of military takeovers has been challenged for the first time ever. After the "leaning leftwards" of the early 2000s, current governments in the region consider it to be shameful and humiliating to be deposed by means of force. It's a natural fear for them that, if they tolerate this, they could be next.

Although the United States of Barack Obama have publicly joined the hemispherical unanimity to condemn the coup, word that the State Department and the CIA gave their support to overthrowing Zelaya spread across the Latin American nations, ranging from suspicion to strong conviction. Although no evidence of U.S. interference could be found so far, the century-old history of Washington's logistical and financial support to "breaches of constitutional order" (to be euphemistic) is a witness for the prosecution.

On the other hand, Luís Inácio Lula da Silva of Brazil has emerged as the leading voice among Latin American governments calling for immediate restoration of Honduras' democratically-elected president to his dutiful post. This time, it wasn't theatrical Hugo Chávez denouncing the U.S. as the geopolitical devil, nor timid center-left Chilean diplomats, who took the lead in tackling the reactionary forces of the region. It was the president of a rising star: the Brazilian one.

With its economy quickly recovering from the capitalist crisis and practically returning the nearly one-million jobs lost since 2008, Brazil is presenting itself as the next best thing on the global scene. The country is now an active voice for developing nations like the G20, the BRICs (with Russia, India and China) and the IBAS (with India and South Africa), while calls for South-South cooperation are finally materializing with crossed investments and united lobby in the World Trade Organization (WTO). Historically, however, the diplomats of Brazil (long dubbed "the sleeping-giant") were deliberating about transforming the economic high tide into political power in international relations.

It seems the self-confidence problems are being solved now. The "Itamaraty", as the

Brazilian foreign office is called, has decided to take a firm stance against the coup and to help Zelaya get back into office. Brazil is sheltering the ousted president within its embassy in Tegucigalpa, where he claims he arrived “by his own means” – although we know it’s highly unlikely that Brasília was fully unaware of his coming, something the Itamaraty will never admit. In addition, Lula used his opening speech at the General Assembly to demand the immediate return of Zelaya to his elected post, while Brazil called for an emergency meeting of the Security Council. Even other international entities like the Organization of American States and the World Monetary Fund, both formerly supportive of authoritarian regimes, joined the condemnation.

Anything more than that would be interfering in a foreign nation’s internal affairs. Lula has repeatedly stated he will not cross that line, but at the same time refused to sit on his hands. However, that’s exactly what the conservative elites of Brazil are already claiming. This past Saturday, Brazilian ultra-right weekly magazine ‘Veja’ ran a cover story accusing Brazil of “megalomaniac imperialism” – while no line was ever dedicated to the U.S. centennial imperialist tradition. The opposition parties, PSDB and Democrats, are criticizing the Itamaraty for hosting the lawful president. And the daily prime time newscast of Globo TV aired an appalling report on Friday to argue that what happened in Honduras in June “was technically not a coup d’état”, quoting lines from the country’s constitution. Its article 239 says any president who proposes to alter the ban on reelection would be automatically removed, but the broadcasters omitted that Zelaya never did that, only calling for a discretionary referendum.

What they all omit, however, is that Brazil has no other interests in Honduras but to assert its political strength in the region, something that cannot be seen as being undermining in any way, but rather as a matter of state interest for the nation. Moreover, Brazil is acting not on its own behalf, but on behalf of the global South as a whole. This is the first time poor nations are raising a single voice against the use of brute force in politics. And the isolation which the regional governments have imposed on the *de facto* government in Honduras is unprecedented, even if we count what happened to Cuba in the early 1960s.

With Fidel Castro aging and officially out of power, the antagonistic role in the geopolitical script of the Americas was performed by Hugo Chávez of Venezuela. But perhaps Chávez’s bombastic style might be counterproductive for his own foreign policy and for the left in general, while Lula’s more discreet – albeit straightforward – approach has proven successful in other regional crises like Bolivia, Ecuador and Haiti, where Brazil has been keeping 1,200 troops under UN peacekeeping blue helmets since 2004.

Let it be clear: Zelaya is by no means an ideological leftist, but rather a populist leader in the very same tradition that Latin Americans are used to. But ideology is really not the central matter here: it’s about sending a message to military to stay in the barracks. Had it happened to a liberal or elite-backed conservative government, the cry against the unlawful removal of an elected Head of State would be done all the same – perhaps only less loudly.

Even if any setback in the coming days would prevent Manuel Zelaya from leaving the Brazilian embassy and walking in triumph to his lawful chair at the presidential palace of Tegucigalpa, the bridge is crossed already when it comes to the shift in regional powers. Any defeat of Zelaya now would not exactly be a defeat of the Itamaraty, but rather enforce its moral victory: that it achieved to forge an unprecedented unity in the continent and made it

clear that the age of military takeovers in Latin America is over.

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