

Honduras Coup: the US Connection

By [Nil Nikandrov](#)

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-Elections in Honduras are scheduled for November. If they take place as planned, those who organized the coup – and the US more than others – will be trying to ensure Zelaya's defeat.

The topic most widely debated in Latin America at the moment is what Obama's administration has got to do with the recent coup in Honduras.

The answer is straightforward – everything. The coup is aligned with US strategic objectives and is going to be used by Washington to regain positions in the region which it lost during George Bush's presidency.

No problems between Honduras and the US loomed on the horizon over the first months of

Manuel Zelaya's presidency. The relations fit entirely within the traditional colonial pattern: Tegucigalpa fully recognized its inferior status and never did anything that could provoke Washington's discontent.

In Honduras – one of Latin America's poorest countries where the economy is controlled by US companies and foreign politics is guided by the US State Department – the de facto loss of sovereignty has long ago translated into a political inferiority complex.

The Honduran political and military elites competed over US favors while never forgetting to extract material benefits from the humiliating status quo. Honduras always served the US as a foothold for offensives against liberation movements in the region and was even dubbed the "Honduras aircraft carrier" as a result.

While Latin America was generally drifting left and the so-called populist regimes pursuing social justice and opposing predatory capitalism were emerging, until recently Honduras remained a bastion of the US neocons and the forces of Latin American reaction.

John Negroponte who was the US ambassador to the country in the 1980s, an epoch marked by the proliferation of leftist insurgencies in the region, wrote a particularly dark page into Honduran history.

Convinced that any means were acceptable, he did everything possible to bleed the enemy. The political scene in Honduras was cleaned totally as potential opposition leaders invariably got killed when ambushed by the secret police, disappeared without trace, or "committed suicide".

The ruthless killings of those who espoused left-of-center views have never been forgotten, and, extrapolating from past experience, Hondurans still regard a new round of repression as the only potential scenario for the future after the overthrow of Manuel Zelaya. He was dragged from his bed early on June 28 and put on a plane to Costa Rica by army conspirators. The coup was backed by an intense propaganda campaign with an outpouring of allegations that Zelaya was a murderer, an aide of the tyrant Chavez and Castro brothers, and a psychotic individual attempting to use a Constitutional Assembly referendum to lift constitutional limits on his presidential term.

Roberto Micheletti, former leader of the Honduran parliament which was in opposition to Zelaya, became the de facto president of the country.

As usual during such coups, media outlets which sided with the toppled president were closed, censorship was instated, and journalists from "unfriendly" (populist) countries were deported.

A smear campaign against Zelaya swept across the Honduran media. The charges brought up against the forcibly removed president seemed to be borrowed from the Cold War era: claims were made that he sold himself for petrodollars and discount oil supply prices, that he was corrupt and betrayed the country's national interests. One idea that was upheld permanently was that the removal of Zelaya – the alleged madman – was an entirely domestic affair and the result of Honduran patriots' resolute action that was in no way inspired from outside the country.

Was this actually the case? The US involvement became fully manifest over the less than

three weeks since the coup, preparations for which were blessed already by George Bush's administration.

The US neocons were convinced that the populists were not as strong as they appeared, and that one powerful strike would trigger a domino effect. The key figures behind the conspiracy were US Vice President Richard Cheney and John Negroponte. It was a matter of pride for them to arrest the drift of Honduras – the country they saw as the main instrument of curbing the influence of Hugo Chavez – in the direction of the populist camp.

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Instead, it was decided to spin off the plan and leave the whole risky venture to the Democrats to put into practice.

Zelaya is a wealthy individual who was successful in the agro-industrial business. During his presidential campaign, he sold his candidacy as a neoliberal politician who nevertheless appreciated the importance of improving the living standards of his less affluent countrymen.

At the very early stage of his presidency, Zelaya realized that the neoliberal model did not work, the budget was depleted, the hopes that investments and free market would ensure economic growth were not coming true, and the only thing that was actually growing in the country was widespread poverty. Honduras was kept afloat mainly by remittances from Honduran immigrants to the US who encountered difficulties dealing with US authorities – were fined or deported in numbers – whenever Zelaya showed signs of what Washington saw as undue independence.

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As the next step, he forged closer ties with ALBA leaders and signed several deals with Venezuela to buy oil at discount prices, broaden trade between the two countries, and jointly modernize transit infrastructures. One of Zelaya's priority projects was to construct with the assistance of the ALBA countries a modern airport on the site occupied by the US Soto Cano Air Base. The airport that is currently operating is located practically in downtown Tegucigalpa and is technically unsafe. The threat of losing another strategic airbase in Latin America made Washington hurry up with the coup.

Negroponte is known to have visited Honduras already after the inauguration of Barack Obama. He met a number of opposition politicians and secured Micheletti's pledge "to go all the way". Similar guarantees were given to him by representatives of the Honduran business community, the Roman Catholic Church, the owners of TV channels, and the military elite. At the time former adviser to Condoleezza Rice in the US State Department Negroponte had jumped to Hillary Clinton's team – the new administration obviously deemed his specific expertise in international affairs still useful.

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A conflict with the military and the failed attempt to fire army chief Romeo Vasquez were indications of the intensity of the crisis in Honduras.

Vasquez and most of the army's senior officers were trained in the US-patronized School of the Americas and maintain close ties with the US military mission, regularly getting subventions via its network.

Not surprisingly, the Honduran army's elite sided with the US and is going to oppose Zelaya's reinstatement. If the overthrown president does return, he will have to keep it in mind that the military elite presents a permanent threat to his life. In Honduras, the army has an extensive experience of murders justified by "the country's supreme interests".

Hypothetically, Zelaya can expect to find some support among the mid- and low-ranking officers. They are the target audience of his radio-addresses from abroad in which he continues to say that the authority in the country has been usurped and that they have the right to resist.

Officially, Washington is actively advocating reconciliation in Honduras, but in reality it is helping Micheletti by impeding Zelaya's return. The US would rather see Micheletti gain ground and Zelaya lose irreversibly. Theoretically, there exists a possibility of a compromise between the two, but in this case Washington will be pushing for a radical limitation of Zelaya's authority.

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