

US seeks deal between Honduran coup leaders and deposed president

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The standoff between deposed Honduran President Manuel Zelaya and the “interim government” installed by the military following Sunday’s coup intensified Wednesday, following unanimous resolutions passed by the United Nations General Assembly and the Organization of American States (OAS) condemning the coup and demanding Zelaya’s reinstatement.

The OAS, meeting in Washington on Wednesday, gave the new regime in Tegucigalpa three days to relinquish power and allow Zelaya to resume his presidency or face suspension from the body. On Tuesday, Zelaya addressed the UN General Assembly and obtained its official support.

He announced that he would postpone his return to Honduras, originally slated for Thursday, to Saturday, after the three-day OAS deadline expires. He said he would be accompanied by OAS head José Miguel Insulza, Argentine President Cristina Kirchner, Ecuadorian leader Rafael Correa, and Miguel d’Escoto Brockmann, the Nicaraguan president of the UN General Assembly.

The show of support from the OAS and the UN was joined by a series of moves by governments in Latin America and Europe as well as international bodies aimed at isolating the new regime in Honduras and intensifying pressure on it. Ten Latin American countries have withdrawn their ambassadors, as well as Spain, France and Italy. The World Bank announced that it was suspending all loans to Honduras.

The country’s Central American neighbors—Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador—said they were cutting off all overland trade.

But the coup regime, headed by former parliamentary speaker Roberto Micheletti, maintained a public posture of defiance. Micheletti and other officials said they would arrest Zelaya the minute he entered Honduras and put him on trial for 18 crimes, including abuse of authority and treason. Officials also indicated that they would block Zelaya’s escorts from entering the country.

Micheletti declared that it would take a foreign invasion to restore Zelaya to power—a reference to threats by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez to resort to force to undo the coup. On Tuesday, Chávez repeated those threats, warning that if the Honduran military or coup leaders respond aggressively to Zelaya’s return, “we won’t remain with our arms crossed.” He added, “If there is aggression against the [Zelaya] delegation, it would open another door that I don’t want to talk about.”

The Obama administration has officially joined in condemning the coup and calling for Zelaya's reinstatement—US representatives participated in the votes at the OAS and the UN—but it has signaled its hostility to Zelaya. The 56-year-old land owner and logging baron, who was elected in 2005 as the candidate of the bourgeois establishment Liberal Party on a right-wing program, has won the enmity of Washington in recent years by adopting a populist posture and allying himself with Chávez.

The US has refrained from formally declaring Zelaya's ouster a "coup," a designation that would, under US laws, require Washington to cut off military aid to the country and impose sanctions. Nor has it recalled its ambassador.

Honduras is the only site in Central America where the US maintains a permanent military base. It has some 800 troops and personnel at an air base 60 miles from the country's capital. Washington has for decades backed the most right-wing forces in the country, and utilized it as a base for counterrevolutionary operations throughout the region. The two officers who led Sunday's coup, Army General Romeo Vásquez Velásquez and Air Force General Luis Javier Prince Suazo, were trained at the School of the Americas in Ft. Benning, Georgia.

In 1954, the CIA used Honduras as a base for the coup that overthrew Guatemala's elected president, Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán, and in the 1980s the country was the base of operations for the US proxy war against the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua. These and other crimes of US imperialism have cost the lives of hundreds of thousands in Honduras and the surrounding region.

There is ample evidence that the Obama administration was deeply involved in plans by Zelaya's opponents within the Honduran ruling elite—sections of business, the military, the political establishment and the Church—to destabilize or topple his government. The New York Times on Tuesday cited an unnamed US official as saying that US Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon and US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens spoke to "military officials and opposition leaders" in the days before the coup. He said, "There was talk of how they might remove the president from office, how he could be arrested, on whose authority they could do that."

Both Shannon and Llorens served under the Bush administration as top advisers on Andean affairs—covering Venezuela, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru and Ecuador. Their stints on the National Security Council and at the State Department coincided with the US-backed coup that briefly toppled Venezuela's Chávez in 2002.

It appears that the Obama administration was seeking to effect a de facto coup, but without a direct use of the military and under the cover of constitutional legality. That would, it hoped, reverse Washington's declining influence in Latin America and pave the way for an offensive against Chávez and his left nationalist allies in Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador and other countries aligned with Venezuela in the Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas.

Since Sunday's coup, Washington has been working for a negotiated settlement between Zelaya and the new government, possibly involving restoring Zelaya to power, but on terms more favorable to the US and under conditions where Zelaya's government would be politically crippled.

As Kevin Casas-Zamora, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a former vice

president of Costa Rica, told the Los Angeles Times, “We’re talking about a guy who is at odds with virtually every institution and political actor in the country. He won’t be able to govern.”

On Tuesday, following his speech before the UN, Zelaya made a concession to Washington, telling reporters that if returned to office he would abandon his plans for a constitutional assembly and declaring that he would not seek a second term when his tenure expires in January. He also thanked the Obama administration for its “support.”

The coup plotters had seized on Zelaya’s attempt to hold a non-binding referendum Sunday on such a constitutional assembly as the pretext for his removal. They claimed that he was seeking to change the constitution so as to allow him to remain in power for a second term, a charge which Zelaya denies.

The opposition of the Honduran Congress, Supreme Court and military appears to have increased sharply after Zelaya raised the minimum wage by 50 percent, a move that incensed the most powerful business interests in the country.

While officially calling for Zelaya’s return to power, the Obama administration has taken no significant steps to force such a development. It has not cut off trade with Honduras, whose economy is totally dependent on the US, sending 70 percent of its exports—mainly bananas and sugar—to the United States. Emilio Alvarez, the former Nicaraguan minister of international relations, told the Christian Science Monitor, “The United States is not going to impose any economic blockade on Honduras.”

On Wednesday, the Pentagon announced that it was suspending joint operations with the Honduran military, but made no suggestion that it would withdraw US forces from the country. The Southern Command, which oversees US military operations in Honduras, issued a statement indicating an even more limited step, declaring that it would “minimize contact” with the Honduran military.

No senior Obama administration officials met with Zelaya while he was in Washington. Instead, a meeting was held between the deposed president and Thomas Shannon and Daniel Restrepo, a leading adviser on Latin American affairs on Obama’s National Security Council.

The Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday that, as part of efforts to negotiate a settlement between Zelaya and the coup regime, OAS head Insulza was seeking a meeting in a third country with a delegation of Honduran coup leaders.

The Obama administration is attempting to maintain a façade of support for democracy in Honduras in part because of the political difficulties it would face were it to openly back a military coup there while conducting a propaganda war against Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad based on allegations—unsubstantiated—that he stole that country’s June 12 election. Moreover, it wants to avoid a debacle for the US similar to that which the Bush administration suffered as a result of its open support for the 2002 coup attempt in Venezuela.

The real attitude of US imperialism to democracy in Honduras and the rest of Latin America is revealed in the virtual silence of the US media on the events unfolding in the impoverished country. Virtually no coverage is being given to the repression being carried

out by the coup regime, or the ongoing resistance of workers and other opponents of the coup.

The “interim government” has flooded Tegucigalpa and other cities with troops and police and is maintaining a 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew. There are reports of at least two anti-coup demonstrators having been killed and hundreds wounded or arrested. Officials in the Zelaya government have been detained or deported, television and radio stations have been closed down, and both Honduran and foreign journalists have been arrested. CNN’s Spanish channel was shut down by the regime, without evoking any public protest by the US network.

The head of the United Workers Federation reported that soldiers fired live ammunition into a crowd of protesters. Despite this repression, there are reports of walkouts by teachers and health workers, and protests in the capital and other cities involving thousands of people.

None of this is deemed particularly newsworthy by the US media, which has conducted a massive propaganda campaign against the Iranian regime for allegedly carrying out an electoral “coup d’état.”

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