

Compromising Democracy in Honduras

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Can a solution to the crisis in Honduras — itself the result of a military coup — be “mediated,” where on one side sit coup leaders and on the other a democratically elected but ousted President? Does any “middle ground” exist? Of course not. If President Zelaya unconditionally returns to finish his term in office, democracy will be restored; anything short of that will have democracy “compromised” into its opposite.

Obama is the behind-the-scenes organizer of this negotiated farce, even though he has no legal or moral right to undermine the democratic process in Honduras. His Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, brought the parties together and chose an “objective” mediator, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias — someone who has obviously aligned himself with the United States.

And while Arias is the “official” mediator, Obama will be the one calling the shots, using U.S. economic and military clout to bully the opposing sides into an “acceptable deal.”

For example, when some members of the coup leadership were still using obstinate language against a deal with ousted President Zelaya, the U.S. finally announced it would withhold \$16.5 million in military assistance to the country.

If this announcement were made the day the coup took place — as it was legally required to under U.S. law — the coup would have been crushed. Now, the money is simply being used to cajole the coup plotters into a more pliable position at the bargaining table; a place at which they obstinately refused to sit previously. It was also announced that \$165 million in aid to Honduras could be in jeopardy. That is, if the coup leaders don’t do exactly as the U.S. demands.

And this highlights a stark fact that many Obama supporters are refusing to see: the origins of the coup, and indeed its resolution, lie squarely on the shoulders of the U.S. When a country [the U.S.] trains and funds another nation’s military [Honduras], while also purchasing the vast majority of that country’s exports, and supplying it with enormous financial aid, there is little ground for “equal footing.”

In fact, all of Obama’s rhetoric about leaving South America to the South Americans is a conscious ploy at public relations. In reality, the economic and military screws continue to be tightened, and U.S. foreign policy continues as it always has.

After the coup first happened, the entire world reacted with horror, condemnation, and sanctions of various kinds, while everyone understood that only one country had the economic and military influence to actually reverse it...instantly.

Obama purposely dragged his feet. He cleverly tagged the U.S. name on U.N and O.A.S resolutions, while doing absolutely nothing in the realm of guns, trade, or aid — the places where actual power is wielded.

The New York Times correctly noted that “the mixed messages have emboldened Honduras’s de facto government...” (July 7, 2009).

Also emboldening the coup leaders is Obama’s virtual silence around the fact that Honduras has been transformed into a democracy-free zone, where anti-coup media has been silenced, a military curfew enforced, basic rights suspended, and unarmed protestors killed.

Ousted President Zelaya correctly noted that “if they [the U.S.] decide to live with the coup, then democracy in the Americas is over.”

This is a bold yet correct assessment of the situation in Latin America, carrying with it enormous implications. Zelaya described in vivid detail one such consequence while talking to Hillary Clinton about his kidnapping at gunpoint. He asked her, “What have Latin American presidents learned from Honduras? To sleep with our clothes on and our bags packed.”

And while media outlets treated the comment as a mere joke, the truth of it will reverberate throughout Latin America. If a military coup against a democratically elected government is not completely reversed, elites in the region will be profoundly encouraged to follow the Honduran formula and return to a time where U.S.-backed military coups and mass repression were commonplace.

And while Obama has recently repeated that President Zelaya should be returned to finish out his presidential term, Hillary Clinton “...stopped short of calling for his reinstatement, a departure from statements by President Obama earlier Tuesday...” (New York Times July 7, 2009).

This good-cop-bad-cop routine isn’t by accident, but appears to be an emerging signature of Obama’s forked tongue political method: he says what he thinks people want to hear, while others close to him pursue a different course.

It is unclear at this time what type of rotten compromise will emerge. Zelaya will either be prevented from returning to his Presidency, or as a senior U.S. official leaked to the press, “...Zelaya would be allowed to return and serve out his remaining six months in office with limited powers...” (Associated Press, July 7, 2009).

Either scenario will have democracy severely eroded, so that those who previously dominated Honduran society — the local super-wealthy and rich U.S. investors — will remain all powerful.

The average, working class Honduran, however, is acting independently. A mass march of at least 100,000 congregated at the airport last week during President Zelaya’s failed attempt to re-enter the country, a fact heavily obscured or ignored by the U.S. media.

The country’s school teachers are also jointly striking until Zelaya is returned, while talks of a general strike continue. If such a strike were successfully carried through, all the maneuvers of Obama and the native Honduran elite will have been for naught, and the unconditional return of President Zelaya will be assured.

If that were to happen, the working class would be further forced to defend democracy, by arresting all those who conspired to overthrow the democratically elected Zelaya, including any implicated members of the military, the Honduran business elite, foreign corporation representatives, and members of Congress.

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