

Consolidating the Coup in Honduras?

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A country of sharp inequality and class polarization, Honduras recently returned to the frontlines in the battle for Latin America's soul. The terrain of struggle has shifted on multiple occasions over the last seven months, following the military coup against the democratically-elected President, Manuel "Mel" Zelaya. The battle entered its latest phase last week with the ascension to power of Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo. Lobo was inaugurated on January 27, following his victory in the fraudulent November 29 election last year. Hundreds of thousands of Hondurans greeted the inauguration with a spirited march through the capital, Tegucigalpa, against the coup and his presidency.

Zelaya, a member of the broad tent Liberal Party who defeated Lobo in the 2005 Presidential campaign, was removed from power and forced into exile in the middle of the night on June 28, 2009. This was the first successful coup d'état in Latin America - following unsuccessful attempts against Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in April 2002 and Bolivian President Evo Morales in 2008 - since Alberto Fujimori's auto-golpe in Peru in 1992. Roberto Micheletti, a member of the Liberal Party's right-wing faction, was quickly installed as the coupist President.

The Error of his Ways

Zelaya's mistake was the adoption of moderately progressive measures designed to improve the lives of the poor Honduran majority. Among other things, the minimum wage was raised by 60%, mining exploration restricted, free school enrolment introduced, and subsidized gas was purchased from Venezuela. Zelaya also led Honduras into the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA). While Zelaya's progressive credentials and proximity to Chávez - the Honduran elite like to claim that he had become a puppet of the Venezuelan leader - shouldn't be overstated, these measures angered the Honduran elite, an obscenely privileged and tiny fraction of the country's population, uninterested in even a modest redistribution of wealth. It was, however, Zelaya's efforts, supported by the social movements, to initiate constitutional reform - misleadingly presented by the elite and regurgitated unquestioningly by the North America mainstream press as a power grab - that constituted the final straw.

The new Lobo regime and the golpista press are presenting the transfer of power as a return to democracy and thus an end to the coup. Lobo, they claim, marks a new beginning for a democratic Honduras under a new government of national reconciliation. Unsurprisingly, this position is being echoed by U.S. and Canadian imperialism. These same powers supported the coup, their claims to the contrary notwithstanding. They have consistently ignored the documented repression of the anti-coup movement, and have helped circumvent Zelaya's efforts to return to power at every turn (for background on Canadian and American support for the coup see T. Gordon, "[Acceptable Versus Unacceptable](#)

[Repression](#),” [press releases](#) by Canadian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs on Honduras, Peter Kent, and Greg Grandin’s articles at www.thenation.com).

Political Repression and Mock Election

According to the Committee of Family Members of the Disappeared of Honduras ([COFADEH](#)), a human rights organization founded in the 1980s, at least 36 anti-coup activists have been assassinated, almost certainly a low estimate they acknowledge, as many families of those killed are too afraid to come forward for fear of reprisal. Many political murders are covered up, COFADEH argues, as gang killings. El Frente, the national resistance front, puts the number of assassinations at more than 130. COFADEH has also documented at least 95 cases of torture and the illegal detention of hundreds more.

This reign of terror cast its long shadow over voting day on November 29. An atmosphere of military repression and intimidation prevailed. Little more than bad theatre, the election was boycotted by the anti-coup resistance movement, offered no candidates opposing the coup, and has not been recognized by most Latin American governments. The official voter turnout figure of over 60% provided by the Honduran Electoral Tribunal is almost certainly inflated. One official with the Tribunal, speaking on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, told the Real News that the figure was pure invention (see Bullet #290 [“Honduras: The Coup That Never Happened”](#) by Tyler Shipley). Hagamos Democracia, an NGO contracted by the Tribunal to provide early reporting, put the turnout at 47.6%. Drawing on grassroots reports from across the country, leaders of the Resistance suggest that turnout was probably closer to 30%.

Imperial Recognition

Both the U.S. and Canada quickly praised the election as peaceful and upstanding, foreshadowing their inevitable support for the Lobo regime. Craig Kelly of the U.S. State Department, for instance, declared that “The Honduran people have spoken very clearly, they have elected Lobo as their president that’s clear,” while Kent remarked, “we are encouraged by reports from civil society organizations that there was a strong turnout for the elections, that they appear to have been run freely and fairly, and that there was no major violence.”

By ignoring the intensity of repression meted out by the golpistas and relying on falsified reports on the elections, the U.S. and Canada can make their claim that, while they were uncomfortable with the Micheletti regime, Honduras is now entering a new democratic, post-coup period, which is important for them to support in order to help the government stabilize itself and reintegrate with the international community. The day after Lobo’s inauguration, [Kent announced](#):

“As Hondurans begin this new chapter in their history, Canada stands ready to assist with the challenges that lie ahead. As we have throughout the impasse, Canada will continue to do all it can to help Honduras quickly return to full democratic and constitutional order. Once that has been achieved, we will also support President Lobo’s efforts as he moves to fully reintegrate Honduras into the international and hemispheric community, including in the Organization of American States.”

Assistant Secretary of State, Arturo Valenzuela, suggested that “things are moving very much in the right direction” with Lobo and pledged to help the regime normalize its relations with the rest of the region. Both the American and Canadian governments of course add their requisite refrain, that Lobo needs to promote reconciliation, suggesting that perhaps a Truth Commission would be a step in the right direction. These bold partisans of justice have little to say, however, on the amnesty law already passed by the Honduran Congress, and supported by Lobo, which will insulate military and political leaders responsible for the coup and the subsequent repression from prosecution. In any case, how could reconciliation with opponents of the coup ever be achieved (should anti-coup forces even desire that) by a government elected under the coup?

Payday for Foreign Capital

Thanks to the American and Canadian governments it’ll be business as usual for foreign capital, much of it dominated by North American corporations. Honduras is an important destination for sweatshop manufacturing and (increasingly) tourism capital, while foreign mining companies, dominated by Canadians, are salivating at the prospect of the opening up of new mining concessions under the new regime. Anti-mining activist, Carlos Danilo Amador, notes that the Mining Association of Honduras and the Honduran National Business Council, of which Canadian miners are members (indeed, leading players in the former) were important supporters of the coup. He also points out that all of the current exploration concessions in the country are owned by Canadians. “This is the new Canadian colonization of Honduras,” Amador points out, “replacing the Spanish and the Americans” in the mining sector.

Hope is in the Streets

But as we witnessed most vividly in the streets of Tegucigalpa on Wednesday, January 27, business as usual will not go uncontested. Despite the black-suited sharp shooters visible on the tower edges of buildings running parallel to the resistance march, and the hundreds of military and police troops weighed down with automatic weapons, it was hardly obvious that the protesting masses had more to fear than Pepe Lobo. Indeed, as one popular resistance t-shirt proclaims, “Nos tienen miedo porque no tenemos miedo/They fear us because we’re not afraid.”

In a meeting in Tegucigalpa on the eve of Lobo’s inauguration, Radio Globo journalist Felix Molina suggested that Honduras is entering the fourth moment of the coup. The first phase, involved its preparation and execution. The second saw the gathering of domestic elite and imperial forces around the San José Accord. The third carried out that accord.

At the outset of last week, the fourth moment began to congeal. Posters plastered the walls of the capital celebrating the commencement of Pepe Lobo’s government of “national unity.” “This fourth moment,” Molina suggests, “is about constructing normality, ostensibly with peace and reconciliation. It’s about selling a supposed project of national integration. Essentially, the objective is to say that nothing happened here, that coups can be a democratic method to correct a democracy gone awry. The point of this fourth moment is to legalize the coup.”

As quickly as the state’s posters of calm and consensus marked the avenues of Tegucigalpa, graffiti artists of the resistance offered their response – Fuera golpistas asesinos! Out with the Coupist Assassins! The corporate media casts Lobo as the “elected president,” whereas

the Frente repudiates him as the “son of a coup.” The corporate media celebrates a national unity government of integration, whereas the Frente refuses dialogue with Lobo’s regime, and denounces it as the latest incarnation of the original coup of June, 2009.

This war of words found its material expression in the protesting cascades of hundreds of thousands, marching from downtown toward the airport, on January 27. The march paid homage to Zelaya – as he finally escaped four months of sequestration in the Brazilian embassy for exile in the Dominican Republic – and, at the same time, announced that the struggle against the coup regime would continue.

We approach the first row of military police and the crowd rings out, urging folks to study and learn so they’ll never have to be on the other side of the barricades.

Estudiar, aprender, para chepo nunca ser!

A group of insanely energetic 10 year olds dance amidst the marchers, chanting concordantly for the death of the golpistaregime. Peasants, trade unionists, feminists, and different left groupings walk arm-in-arm and cheer ecstatically as cars moving in the other direction honk in solidarity. Teenagers lean out of the windows of a passing bus, their fists raised in the air.

El pueblo ¿dónde está?
¡El pueblo está en las calles exigiendo libertad!
Where are the People?
The people are in the streets demanding liberty!

¿Estás cansado?
¡No!
¿Tienes miedo?
¡No!
¿Entonces?
¡Adelante, Adelante, que la lucha es constante!
Are you tired?
No!
Are you afraid?
No!
So?
Forward! Forward! In Constant Struggle!

“The resistance has two principal pillars,” Rafael Alegría, a principal peasant leader in the resistance, informs us as we walk on. “A social pillar for the revindication of the people’s rights, in which the resistance accompanies people in their daily struggle, for agrarian reform, for just salaries, and opposition to the privatization of social services. This is the pillar of social mobilization.” The other pillar, Alegría emphasizes, “is the political arm – to convert ourselves into a militant political force which will work toward taking political power in our country.”

We ask Alegría about the Constituent Assembly, as the crowd around us thunders:

¿Qué somos?
¡Resistencia popular!
¿Qué queremos?
¡Constituyente!

What are we?
Popular Resistance!
What do we want?
Constituent Assembly!

“The power of the people,” he tells us, “is going to result in massive transformations in this country. We are demanding a Constituent Assembly that is going to transform this country, into a participatory democracy. It will be a new Honduras – a country with social justice, with equality, with a new model of development in which everyone is included, and, as the Bolivians say, so that our entire country can live well.” Alegría contrasts this vision with the “current situation, in which there is a privileged oligarchy, which owns and controls everything, while on the other hand there is an immense mass of impoverished people. This can’t continue.”

Two days earlier, in a gathering of the resistance outside the Brazilian embassy to celebrate National Women’s Day in Honduras, Brenda Villacorta, of Feminists in Resistance, expressed many of the same sentiments. “Lobo’s possession of office doesn’t represent anything. It is the continuation, the perpetuation of the coup d’état that took place in this country on June 28, 2009. The protagonists have changed but the scenario is exactly the same.” The marchers of January 27 agreed:

!No existe Presidente!
!Si a la constituyente!
There is no President!
We demand a Constituent Assembly!

“The resistance will take to the streets again and again,” Villacorta said. “This is the only way we can apply pressure, or at least the most effective way of doing so.” “The process to create the Constituent Assembly will be a long one,” she estimated, but worth the struggle. “The old constitution was established under a military dictatorship, and it does not benefit the Honduran people, the authentic Honduran people. Instead, it works in the interests of the business class and the big power groups.”

Regional Repercussions

For the Honduran Resistance, Lobo isn’t an end of the coup but rather its consolidation under the veneer of democratic legitimacy. One day into his Presidency, Lobo had already declared a financial emergency, and called for new fiscal austerity measures. Together with the amnesty law for protagonists of the coup and the opening up of mining concessions, all signals point to the consolidation of a hard-right shift in domestic and economic policy, no doubt designed to roll back the modest reforms introduced by Zelaya. The coming socioeconomic assault on the popular classes, in the midst of a deep recession exacerbated by the coupists, alongside continuing repression and political intimidation, will present formidable challenges to the Resistance in the months ahead. If January 27 revealed anything, however, it was that there are two sides to Honduras. The pole of Pepe Lobo and the imperialists, on the one hand, and the sea of exploited and oppressed. If the masses have not yet gathered sufficient power to toss Lobo into the dustbin of history, they have just as clearly demonstrated that they will not be easily cowed by a tiny minority, even when its armed to the teeth. •

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