

Honduras: A Coup is Not a Coup. A “Not-Coup” is a Coup.

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On Sunday June 28th, the Honduran military kidnapped their president, Manuel “Mel” Zelaya, and flew him to Costa Rica in his pajamas. In doing so, the military enforced an unconstitutional and undemocratic transfer of power from the Honduran left to the right. The international community immediately and unanimously condemned the coup d’état. Meanwhile, there is ongoing censorship of the press and several laws protecting Hondurans’ basic civil liberties have been indefinitely suspended by the coup government. In light of these basic facts, there are at least three historical problems that both activists and policymakers must address.

First, what is the significance of this coup for Honduras? Second, why is it that what from the outside is universally regarded as a coup d’état, is from the inside seen by so many as an authentically democratic step? And finally, what are the regional implications of the sudden and violent seizure of power by the Honduran right?

In the magical realism of Honduran politics, the past comes back to repeat itself as farce. On Monday June 29, in a replay of the military raids on the Jesuit radio station El Progreso of the 1960s and 1970s (the Jesuits committed the grave error of walking with the poor rather than serving as mere instruments of the rich), the Jesuits’ progressive radio broadcasts were abruptly pulled off the air at four in the morning. On Sunday evening at 6 PM, just an hour after the coup government’s curfew began, a military contingent broke into Radio Progreso’s headquarters. With fury and guns pointed, they shouted, “We’ve come to close down this piece of shit!” One broadcaster had locked himself in to keep broadcasting throughout the night. Shortly after, another military convoy stopped outside Radio Progreso. A group of soldiers approached the radio station’s guard and asked him if there were any people still working inside. When the guard said no, the soldier in charge told him, “If we find someone inside, you will regret it.” Radio Progreso is the only radio station on the north coast that has remained critical of both the right and left wings of Honduras’s ruling Liberal Party. This military operation to shut down the radio station was not accompanied by any written orders, only the threat of violence. On Tuesday, Radio Progreso went back on the air and continued to cover the diverse acts of resistance to the coup. And while the coup government, led by Roberto Micheletti, a native of El Progreso, threatens to shut down the station with violence, popular organizations resisting the undemocratic change in their government are criticizing the station for “watering down” its reporting of the tense and dynamic situation.

The significance of this coup is that it is in fact a break from the pattern of past coups. In past Honduran coups, either one political party overthrew the other, preserving their traditional patron-client relations and taking the spoils of the state for those within their

patronage network, or the military overthrew a civilian government so that it could stay in power itself, as happened multiple times during the 1960s and 70s. This, however, is the first coup by a united upper class. The Honduran business community united across party lines, deciding that it was worth severing the traditional patron-client relations that they enjoyed through their affiliation with one of the dominant parties so that they could stop Zelaya in his effort to increase the participation of common citizens in the affairs of their government while he also drew the country closer to Venezuela. In past Honduran coups, ethnic and regional divisions created cleavages between economic and political elites that most often led Hondurans of Palestinian, Syrian, and Lebanese origin to support democratic and liberalizing measures while Tegucigalpa-based criollo elites clung to conservative and often anti-democratic political configurations. In contrast, this was a coup in which social class was the main galvanizing element.

A class-based coup cannot be openly declared as such and must instead be articulated through existing political ideologies that allow the group seizing power to represent what they are actually doing as something other than what it is. So as the business, industrial, and news media of the country summoned the repressive power of the military to create the political conditions to rule by the traditional economic and political ideologies that have left the majority of Hondurans in dire poverty, they justified subverting the legal and democratic system as a defense of democracy.

This cacophonous composition, in which the coup is merely the crescendo, started to play within elite circles of the Liberal Party just one day before Mel Zelaya was sworn in as president in 2005. Although he ran his presidential campaign as a traditional Liberal Party candidate, refusing to say whether or not he would withdraw Honduran troops from Iraq and declaring that the free market economic policies that the country had dutifully enacted to the detriment of its legions of poor would not be modified. But after winning the election, Zelaya gradually began to confront the main power blocks in the country. It was then that he gave Roberto Micheletti Bain, who was at the time the President of the Honduran Congress, an ultimatum: either sign a law widening the scope of the citizenry's participation in the affairs of its government or he would not take office the next day. Micheletti signed the Law of Citizen Power (La Ley de Poder Ciudadano; the government website explaining this law has been shutdown by Micheletti's interim government). In 2006, Zelaya pushed through the Law of Transparency, giving the public unprecedented access to the information produced by and for the Honduran government. In January 2009, he increased the minimum wage from \$132 per month to \$290 per month, infuriating the elite and small business owners. Shortly after, he joined ALBA. Spearheaded by Hugo Chávez, ALBA is an economic development initiative that is intended as a counterweight to U.S.-backed development initiatives in the region. Each of these steps to the left alienated the right wing of his own Liberal Party, not to mention the already hostile opposition in the Nationalist Party. Furthermore, given Honduras's tiny and rather ineffectual left, along with his inability to ground his discourse of Citizen Power (Poder Ciudadano) in the social movements of the country, Zelaya found himself more isolated than ever, with a rapidly dwindling power block.

Given his background as a member of the landed elite, Zelaya's moves to the Latin American left have caught everyone off guard. The public persona of "Mel" is rooted in Olancho, a notoriously rowdy region of the country dedicated to ranching and harvesting lumber. And although he wears a cowboy hat and speaks as if he just came out of Honduras's Wild West, he hails from an extremely wealthy family with vast holdings of land. And the one strong social movement that he could have fallen back on, the peasant

movement, was not only disarticulated by the Reagan-backed repression of the 1980s but its remnants were also deeply wary of him.

On June 25, 1975, at the height of the agrarian reform movement, the National Peasant's Union (Unión Nacional de Campesinos — UNC) led a nationwide hunger march to Tegucigalpa. As a group from Olancho reached Juticalpa, the army moved in to stop it. With the help of local cattle ranchers, the soldiers attacked the peasant activists when they were meeting at their training center. Five peasant leaders, two students, and two foreign priests were shot dead and nine peasants were forcibly disappeared. Their dismembered bodies were found a week later in a dynamited well of a local landowner, the father of President Zelaya. This incident became known as the “Los Horcones” massacre, after the name of the ranch where the bodies were found. The mid-1970s massacre at Los Horcones reverberated throughout Honduran society, deepening fissures between the military government and popular movements, between Catholic traditionalists and progressives. The memory of the brutal killing of these peasants resurfaced during Zelaya's 2005 presidential campaign. Nevertheless, we could be looking at a very different Honduras had Zelaya sought to ground his actions in a discourse that resonated with the social and economic cooperatives that are one surviving legacy of the peasant movement. Tractors from Venezuela are not land reform.

In a word, in the eyes of Honduran elites, “Mel” was considered a traitor to his social class. And in the eyes of the poor and marginalized, he was perceived as inauthentic.

With regard to the radical disjunction between international perspectives (“It was a coup and that is inherently undemocratic”) and local perspectives (“It was not a coup but the rescuing of democracy”), we can look to the role that the Honduran media played in Zelaya's overthrow. Over the past seven months, Honduras's ultra-conservative and reactionary media has served as an echo chamber in which the elite has been able to repeatedly use a recycled version of Cold War anti-communism to convince much of the Honduran population that Zelaya was driving the country toward, to quote *La Prensa*, “a system of totalitarian socialism.”

Part of the media's hostility toward Zelaya might be due to the fact that it is largely controlled by families who have accumulated their wealth not through the inheritance of land but through commercial and industrial endeavors. The bulk of these families emigrated from the Middle East early in the twentieth century, at the height of the banana boom, opening up stores and servicing the banana-export economy of the North Coast. Their exclusion from the circles of [criollo](#) power was one reason that this economically elite group was friendly to labor and tended to support liberal democratic reforms throughout the Cold War. Whereas in the past there was a disconnect between local Arab and criollo elites, in this coup, they have united across lines of ethnicity, party affiliation, and economic sector. President Zelaya's failure to adopt the cultured elegance of a European minister made him the source of endless ridicule in the national press. As the Presidential Palace was peopled for the first time by indigenous and black Hondurans, the disconnect between the urbane, who for so long had enjoyed ruling the country, and the hitherto invisible governed became more pronounced.

As Hondurans have been bombarded by a coherent media assault that began many months ago, they internalized the constantly repeated notion that seeking the public's input through a non-binding referendum was in fact a veiled attempt to consolidate power in the executive branch and to force them into adopting Hugo Chávez's socialism of the twenty-first century.

The tightening of media control since the coup has only reinforced the notion within Honduras that the military's sacking of the elected president "was not a coup."

"No fue golpe!" is the refrain constantly shouted by supporters of Micheletti's interim government. A coup is not a coup. A not-coup is a coup. This is the Alice-in-Wonderland world of present-day Honduras.

Although many have commented on the links between Chávez and Zelaya, few have noted the ties between in the undemocratic Latin American right. Just as the international community has denounced the coup and called for the restoration of constitutional rule in Honduras, throughout Latin America, Chambers of Commerce have been expressing their support for the rightwing coup government. The closing of ranks of the Honduran media is eerily familiar to those who followed the Venezuelan media's all out war on Hugo Chávez following the unsuccessful coup in 2003. In another eerie similarity, at the rallies in support of Micheletti's coup government, the mostly upper middle class and mostly light-complexioned participants are almost all dressed in white, draping themselves in the Honduran flag, repeatedly singing the national anthem, holding candles, and always holding the same mass-produced Honduran flag. This attempt to represent order, purity, and to portray themselves as the "true" Honduran defenders of the constitution is similar to the anti-Chávez rallies in Venezuela. In contrast, Zelaya's supporters are a raucous bunch, eclectically dressed, and ethnically diverse. They are creatively getting around the media's attempt to ignore them and render them invisible to the rest of the nation and the world. If they can't get their messages across through radio, television, or print media, they will spray paint them on the walls. If the interim government says that there is no repression and everything is normal, they will bring the cartridges of bullets and tear gas that the military has used against them to the next demonstration. And for his part, Hugo Chávez's threats to invade Honduras have sparked defiant nationalist sentiments that Micheletti is using to consolidate his power.

This coup has just upped the ante for all involved. It was Zelaya's unexpected moves to the left, without the strong support of any particular social and political base, that helped to unify the Honduran right against him. But while less than a week ago, Zelaya had no social base to speak of, the coup has outraged even those who thought his policies and erratic behavior to be ridiculous. For them, this is no longer about the political left or right and much less about Mel Zelaya. Instead, they see the military's illegal sacking of the president as an assault on their democratic system.

And geopolitically, the stakes are equally high. If the Honduran right gets away with this military coup, what is to stop the Salvadoran right from sacking Mauricio Funes? And if the international community allows the military to overthrow the democratically elected leader of Honduras, why shouldn't the Nicaraguan right feel emboldened enough to overthrow Daniel Ortega?

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