

Honduras: US-backed mediation legitimizes military coup

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The talks convened in the Costa Rican capital San José on Thursday with the purported aim of resolving the political crisis unleashed by the June 28 coup in neighboring Honduras, are shaping up as a farce. The apparent object of this fraudulent exercise is to legitimize the military overthrow of the elected president of Honduras and realize the aims of Washington and the predominant sections of the right-wing Honduran oligarchy.

Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, who last month was seized by troops, bundled onto an airplane and flown to San José and exile, returned to the Costa Rican capital Wednesday and was the first to hold talks the next day with the US-designated mediator, Costa Rican President Óscar Arias.

He was followed by Roberto Micheletti, head of the government installed by the coup, whom Costa Rican authorities referred to as the “acting president,” a description that disconcerted Zelaya and his supporters, who have denounced the former head of the parliament as a criminal who illegally usurped power.

Before the talks, Arias stressed that he would treat both men equally as presidents.

Each met separately with Arias at the Costa Rican president’s mansion in the wealthy San José neighborhood of Rohrmoser, which was surrounded by police and hundreds of demonstrators, who came to denounce the coup, shouting “assassin” at Micheletti and burning him in effigy.

After meeting with Arias, Zelaya told reporters waiting outside, “We believe we have been in accord with the position of Honduras: the restoration of the state of law and democracy. The restoration, as the UN and the OAS have demanded, to office of the president elected by the Honduran people.”

Micheletti followed Zelaya into Arias’s residence shortly afterwards. Before coming into the city, he had spent three hours at the airport, apparently concerned for his security. According to some reports, he had asked Arias to meet him there in order to avoid demonstrators.

For his part, Micheletti, declared himself “satisfied” with Arias’s mediation, and then immediately flew back to Honduras. His departure upended Arias’s vow to keep the two men negotiating until a settlement was reached. Instead, Micheletti announced that he was leaving behind a “commission” of Honduran political figures who supported the coup. Zelaya then formed a commission of his own supporters to participate in negotiations.

After returning to the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa, Micheletti told reporters, “We are in agreement with his (Zelaya’s) return here, but directly to the judges.” The coup leaders are demanding that Zelaya be tried for treason for attempting to hold a non-binding plebiscite to determine popular support for amending the country’s constitution. Critics have charged that this was part of an attempt by Zelaya to win another term in office, a virtual impossibility given that the vote for a constituent assembly to redraft the constitution would not be held until national elections on November 29, when a new president is to be chosen.

Micheletti added, “I anticipate that on my next visit to Costa Rica the brotherly people of that beautiful country will receive me as my own people do today, as the constitutional president of Honduras.”

The coup leader has reason to exude such confidence. The entire mediation process is stacked in favor of those who overthrew Zelaya. Backed by the army, the Church and the predominant sections of the landowning and business sectors, the only thing Micheletti has to fear are the masses of Honduran working people, who have been at the center of resistance to the coup.

For his part, Arias reacted to the first encounter with Zelaya and Micheletti by declaring, “We have no illusions, this may take longer than what we imagined.” He added, “In two days there could be a solution, or it could be that in two months there is no solution.”

Given that elections are to be held in barely four-and-a-half months, Micheletti and his fellow coup leaders can run the mediation sessions out until the end of Zelaya’s term.

Arias has insisted that any solution must include the restoration of Zelaya to office. His sponsor, the Obama administration, has taken an ambiguous position on this score, with Obama calling for him to be reinstated and his secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, pointedly refusing to make such a call. A State Department spokesman said that Washington hopes the Arias mediation “restores the democratic order in Honduras.” He made no mention of the elected president.

A former Costa Rican official with some insight into the mission that Arias has accepted from Washington suggested another alternative: that Zelaya would be brought back to Tegucigalpa to serve briefly as a powerless figurehead president of the regime installed by the coup. The obvious aim of such a solution would be to lend a democratic cover to a US-backed military overthrow of an elected government.

Kevin Casas-Zamora, who was vice president under Arias until two years ago and is now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, spelled out this scenario in an interview Thursday with the Council on Foreign Relations. “My sense of what the international community is demanding, and what is correct, is first of all that Zelaya should return to the presidency, though not necessarily to power,” said Casas.

In addition to abandoning any real power, Zelaya, Casas said, would be required to scrap any plans to amend the constitution (something he has already pledged to do), sever the ties he has established with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and enter into an explicit “power-sharing agreement” with those who overthrew him.

The Times and the Post on Honduran “democracy”

That this is the alternative favored by the US political establishment was made clear in similar editorials that appeared this week in the Washington Post and New York Times, both characterized by political cynicism and hypocrisy.

The only problem that the Post had with the Honduran coup was that the manner of its execution “played into the hands of the faction, led by Mr. Zelaya’s mentor, Hugo Chavez, that is attempting to overthrow democratic institutions across the region.” In other words, those trying to overthrow democracy were not the Honduran officials who ordered troops to storm the presidential palace and take control of the streets, closing down radio and television stations unsympathetic to the seizure of power and firing on unarmed demonstrators. Rather it was their victims.

The Post argues that the Honduran coup leaders have little to fear from Zelaya’s return. “Even if he does not wind up in jail,” the newspaper writes, “there is little chance he could now ... succeed in changing the constitution.”

Similarly, the Times argues, “Probably the best outcome would be for the Honduran military, courts and de facto government to allow Mr. Zelaya back into Tegucigalpa for the remainder of his term, which ends in January, in exchange for his pledge to abandon all efforts to change the Constitution so he can run for a second term.”

Strict fealty to the Honduran constitution and steadfast opposition to changing the document to allow Zelaya to run for another term is invoked by both newspapers to justify the coup and the stripping of the elected president of any real power. Their adherence to such “principles,” however, is entirely situational, depending on whether maintaining or changing such laws best serves the interests of America’s ruling elite.

Neither newspaper, for example, voiced any great concern when Alvaro Uribe, Colombia’s right-wing president and a loyal supporter of US foreign policy, amended the Colombian constitution to give himself a second term—without even bothering to submit the proposal to a popular referendum.

The Times’ response at the time was that Uribe’s maneuver “would ensure that Washington retains a reliable caretaker for two of the Bush administration’s top priorities in this tumultuous region, the fight against drugs and Marxist rebels.”

Even closer to home, the newspaper was enthusiastically in favor of the move by New York City’s billionaire mayor, Michael Bloomberg, to rewrite the city’s laws in order to end term limits and award himself a third four-year term in office. In this case, the newspaper proposed that the changes be carried out in backroom deals between Bloomberg and the City Council, explicitly opposing a popular referendum, like the one proposed in Honduras, as “technically difficult.”

As the US-orchestrated “mediation” got under way in San José, Honduran workers and youth continued to resist the coup. Thousands of people demonstrated Thursday and Friday in Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula and many other cities.

In a number of areas, protesters occupied highways and bridges, halting traffic. On Thursday, demonstrators blocked traffic for six hours on the main route connecting Tegucigalpa to the Pan American highway and Nicaragua and El Salvador to the south,

leaving long lines of tractor trailers backed up into the capital. On Friday, thousands marched to northern Tegucigalpa to shut down the highway leading to San Pedro Sula, the country's second largest city.

The coup regime's repression is also continuing. On Thursday, security forces detained the father of Isis Obed Murillo, the 19-year-old youth who was shot to death on July 5, when soldiers opened fire on demonstrators who had gathered at the Tegucigalpa airport as Zelaya made his abortive attempt to return to the country.

The father, David Murillo, has spoken out since the killing, demanding justice for his son. He was grabbed by the national police after speaking at the headquarters of the Committee of Relatives of the Detained and Disappeared of Honduras and taken directly to a prison controlled by the military.

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