

Manuel Zelaya, President of Honduras: ‘We Will Not be Brought to Our Knees’

Exclusive interview

By [Manuel Zelaya](#)

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In a SPIEGEL interview, ousted President Manuel Zelaya, 56, discusses the coup in his native Honduras, the lack of intervention from Washington, his political ties to Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and his hopes to unseat the regime by peaceful means.

SPIEGEL: Mr. President, you have now established your headquarters in northern Nicaragua, only a few kilometers from the Honduran border. Will you attempt, as you have already done several times in recent weeks, to return to Honduras on your own?

Zelaya: I could go back across the border today or tomorrow, but I'm being threatened. The coup leaders want to murder me, or at least arrest me, as they have done once before. I want to prepare for my return in a peaceful way. Hondurans should know: I am prepared to resume control of the country at the appropriate moment. For now, we are organizing the resistance.

SPIEGEL: Your Costa Rican counterpart, President Oscar Arias, has unveiled a peace plan designed to reinstate you. Do you have faith in a negotiated solution?

Zelaya: We accept the Arias plan. Negotiations are the only way. But it will only work if the international community increases its pressure on the coup leaders. It has to make sure that coups don't become an epidemic. That would jeopardize security and stability on the entire continent. If coups, revolutions and uprisings were to spread throughout Latin America once again, the United States and Europe would also pay a high price.

SPIEGEL: Under the peace plan, you would be required to give up some of your power. For instance, you would no longer be able to appoint your own ministers ...

Zelaya: I accept that. I'm a politician, and I'm tolerant.

SPIEGEL: Do you see an opportunity for dialogue with the new regime?

Zelaya: International pressure would have to be increased for that to happen. It affected the coup leaders when Washington suspended their diplomatic visas, and the sanctions are also taking effect. In many ports, goods coming from Honduras are no longer being unloaded. The German firm Adidas, along with Nike and clothing manufacturer Gap, have announced that they will cancel orders from Honduran factories unless democracy is restored.

SPIEGEL: Your supporters claim that the US ambassador and influential right-wing politicians in the United States were told about the coup in advance.

Zelaya: There were many rumors leading up to the coup, as well as unusual military movements. I'm sure that the Obama administration knew about it, but it didn't agree to the overthrow.

SPIEGEL: The secretary general of the Organization of American States (OAS) and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have criticized you for your attempts to return to Honduras on your own, by crossing the Nicaraguan border. Aren't you just provoking further violence with such actions?

Zelaya: They don't know anything about the suffering of the Honduran people, and the sacrifices Hondurans are making to bring me back. The military coup has turned into a dictatorship. It is oppressing the people and committing massive human rights violations. Hillary and the OAS should find out more about that.

SPIEGEL: The US government has condemned the coup. Was that too lackadaisical for you?

Zelaya: US President (Barack) Obama is sincere, but he is not acting decisively enough. He ought to pursue the coup leaders more resolutely so that such coups don't happen again.

SPIEGEL: The Honduran congress and the country's highest court accuse you of having breached the constitution. You wanted the people to vote directly on whether a decision to convene a constitutional convention should be voted on in the November elections.

Zelaya: But that isn't a reason to stage a coup right away. I didn't commit a breach of the constitution.

SPIEGEL: Will you insist on a constitutional reform if you return to Honduras?

Zelaya: I want to actively involve the people in democracy. This is a historic process, and it cannot be stopped.

SPIEGEL: One of the reasons you want to amend the constitution is so that you can be reelected, or so the accusations go.

Zelaya: I have never tried to do that, nor will I, because the constitution prohibits it.

SPIEGEL: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez is one your key supporters. That's why you are suspected of trying to create a populist regime similar to his. How much influence does Chavez have on your government?

Zelaya: Absolutely zero. These accusations are just a trick to divert attention away from the coup leaders' true motives. Chavez is the scapegoat. In fact, the USA is the one intervening in Honduras. Seventy percent of Honduran exports go there. We have a military, trade and immigration treaty with Washington.

SPIEGEL: But Venezuela supplies discounted oil to Honduras, which makes you dependent on Chavez.

Zelaya: That's another of those lies. Venezuela covers only 15 percent of our oil needs. American oil companies bring in 85 percent.

SPIEGEL: You are also considered an admirer of Fidel Castro. How is your relationship with Cuba?

Zelaya: We have very good relations, just as we do with Europe and the United States. I have no problems with any country in the world, only with the economic elite in Honduras, which is getting rich at the expense of the poor. I don't want to drive them out. I just want them to change their attitude. The wealth must be more evenly distributed. The political parties that have ruled Honduras for the past 100 years are merely defending the economic elite.

SPIEGEL: But now you and coup leader Roberto Micheletti belong to the same party. You are both considered part of the upper class, and you yourself come from a family of wealthy cattle farmers. When did you discover your heart for the poor?

Zelaya: It was a long process of developing awareness. The neoliberal economic model has failed, and we need social policies for the disadvantaged in our society. That's why I aim for a new model of development, and part of my administration supported me in that endeavor. But the neoliberals simply want to expand their wealth, and they have no interest in the country's development. A few large companies dominate the Honduran economy. This plays into the hands of multinational corporations, which control the market, thereby creating even more poverty. I believe in entrepreneurship and economic liberalism. But things have to become more equitable, which is why we must amend the laws.

SPIEGEL: What happens if your efforts to return are unsuccessful? Will you call upon the Hondurans to rebel?

Zelaya: Under the constitution, the people have the right to resistance and rebellion if someone assumes power by force.

SPIEGEL: But that creates the threat of civil war.

Zelaya: There is the same danger if the coup leaders prevail. If that happens, we could face a long conflict, because we will not be brought to our knees. We are not afraid of their guns. The military in Honduras has only 7,000 men. If we were to take up arms, we would quickly drive away those few soldiers. But we want to unseat the regime in a peaceful and honorable way. Women, children, young people, students, workers - we have all joined forces in a civil front against the coup. Even my 80-year-old mother is taking to the streets and offering peaceful resistance.

SPIEGEL: The coup regime claims that there is in fact little resistance, and that there have been hardly any dead or injured.

Zelaya: More than 1,000 people were arrested and are now in prison, and four young people were killed in a protest march. I am afraid that even more people have died. We don't know exactly what is happening in the country. The coup leaders control most of the media.

SPIEGEL: Are the armed forces behind the coup government?

Zelaya: The military is divided. Many young officers oppose the coup. They could rise up against the military leadership any day.

SPIEGEL: Will you put the coup leaders on trial when you return to Honduras?

Zelaya: Of course. There should be an international trial, to discourage copycats.

SPIEGEL: What happens with the elections planned for November? Would you agree to early elections?

Zelaya: They can take place tomorrow, as far as I'm concerned, but I will not participate. I am working on a big plan for social reforms. We are merely changing the strategy, but the struggle continues.

*Interview conducted by **Jens Glüsing**. Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan.*

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