

Paraguay: Obama's Second Latin American Coup

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The recent coup against Paraguay's democratically elected president is not only a blow to democracy, but an attack against the working and poor population that supported and elected President Fernando Lugo, whom they see as a bulwark against the wealthy elite who've dominated the country for decades.

The U.S. mainstream media and politicians are not calling the events in Paraguay a coup, since the president is being "legally impeached" by the elite-dominated Paraguayan Congress. But as economist Mark Weisbrot explains in the Guardian:

"The Congress of Paraguay is trying to oust the president, Fernando Lugo, by means of an impeachment proceeding for which he was given less than 24 hours to prepare and only two hours to present a defense. It appears that a decision to convict him has already been written...The main trigger for the impeachment is an armed clash between peasants fighting for land rights with police...But this violent confrontation is merely a pretext, as it is clear that the president had no responsibility for what happened. Nor have Lugo's opponents presented any evidence for their charges in today's 'trial.' President Lugo proposed an investigation into the incident; the opposition was not interested, preferring their rigged judicial proceedings."

What was the real reason the right-wing Paraguay Senate wanted to expel their democratically elected president? Another article by the Guardian makes this clear:

"The president was also tried on four other charges: that he improperly allowed leftist parties to hold a political meeting in an army base in 2009; that he allowed about 3,000 squatters [landless peasants] to illegally invade a large Brazilian-owned soybean farm; that his government failed to capture members of a [leftist] guerrilla group, the Paraguayan People's Army... and that he signed an international [leftist] protocol without properly submitting it to congress for approval."

The article adds that the president's former political allies were "...upset after he gave a majority of cabinet ministry posts to leftist allies, and handed a minority to the moderates...The political split had become sharply clear as Lugo publicly acknowledged recently that he would support leftist candidates in future elections."

It's obvious that the President's real crimes are that he chose to ally himself more closely with Paraguay's left, which in reality means the working and poor masses of the country, who, like other Latin American countries, choose socialism as their form of political expression.

Although Paraguay's elite lost control of the presidency when Lugo was elected, they used their stranglehold over the Senate to reverse the gains made by Paraguay's poor. This is similar to the situation in Egypt: when the old regime of the wealthy elite lost their president/dictator, they used their control of the judiciary in an attempt to reverse the gains of the revolution.

Is it fair to blame the Obama administration for the recent coup in Paraguay? Yes, but it takes an introductory lesson on U.S. - Latin American relations to understand why. Paraguay's right wing - a tiny wealthy elite - has a long-standing relationship with the United States, which has backed dictatorships for decades in the country - a common pattern in most Latin American countries.

The United States promotes the interests of the wealthy of these mostly-poor countries, and in turn, these elite-run countries are obedient to the pro-corporate foreign policy of the United States (The Open Veins of Latin America is an excellent book that outlines the history).

Paraguay's elite is incapable of acting so boldly without first consulting the United States, since neighboring countries are overwhelmingly hostile to such an act because they fear a U.S.-backed coup in their own countries.

Paraguay's elite has only the military for internal support, which for decades has been funded and trained by the United States. President Lugo did not fully sever the U.S. military's links to his country. According to Wikipedia, "The U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) provides technical assistance and training to help modernize and professionalize the [Paraguay]military..."

In short, it is not remotely possible for Paraguay's elite to act without assurance from the United States that it would continue to receive U.S. political and financial support; the elite now needs a steady flow of guns and tanks to defend itself from the poor of Paraguay.

The Latin American countries surrounding Paraguay denounced the events as they unfolded and made an emergency trip to the country in an attempt to stop them. What was the Obama administration's response? Business Week explains:

"As Paraguay's Senate conducted the impeachment trial, the U.S. State Department had said that it was watching the situation closely."

"We understand that Paraguay's Senate has voted to impeach President Lugo," said Darla Jordan, a spokeswoman for the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs..."We urge all Paraguayans to act peacefully, with calm and responsibility, in the spirit of Paraguay's democratic principles."

Obama might as well have said: "We support the right-wing coup against the elected president of Paraguay." Watching a crime against democracy happen - even if it is "watched closely" - and failing to denounce it makes one complicit in the act. The State Department's carefully crafted words are meant to give implicit support to the new illegal regime in Paraguay.

Obama acted as he did because Lugo turned left, away from corporate interests, towards Paraguay's poor. Lugo had also more closely aligned himself with regional governments

which had worked towards economic independence from the United States. Most importantly perhaps is that, in 2009, President Lugo forbid the building of a planned U.S. military base in Paraguay.

What was the response of Paraguay's working and poor people to their new dictatorship? They amassed outside of the Congress and were attacked by riot police and water cannons. It is unlikely that they will sit on their hands during this episode, since President Lugo had raised their hopes of having a more humane existence.

President Lugo has unfortunately given his opponents an advantage by accepting the rulings that he himself called a coup, allowing himself to be replaced by a Senate-appointed president. But Paraguay's working and poor people will act with more boldness, in line with the social movements across Latin America that have struck heavy blows against the power of their wealthy elite.

President Obama's devious actions towards Paraguay reaffirm which side of the wealth divide he stands on. His first coup in Honduras sparked the outrage of the entire hemisphere; this one will confirm to Latin Americans that neither Republicans nor Democrats care anything about democracy.

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Notes

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/jun/22/washington-fernando-lugo-ouster-paraguay>

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