

The Coup in Honduras

Obama's Real Message to Latin America?

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Could the diplomatic thaw between Venezuela and the United States be coming to an abrupt end? At the recent Summit of the Americas held in Port of Spain, Barack Obama shook Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's hand and declared that he would pursue a less arrogant foreign policy towards Latin America. Building on that good will, Venezuela and the United States agreed to restore their ambassadors late last week. Such diplomatic overtures provided a stark contrast to the miserable state of relations during the Bush years: just nine months ago Venezuela expelled the U.S. envoy in a diplomatic tussle. At the time, Chávez said he kicked the U.S. ambassador out to demonstrate solidarity with left ally Bolivia, which had also expelled a top American diplomat after accusing him of blatant political interference in the Andean nation's internal affairs.

Whatever goodwill existed last week however could now be undone by turbulent political events in Honduras. Following the military coup d'état there on Sunday, Chávez accused the U.S. of helping to orchestrate the overthrow of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. "Behind these soldiers are the Honduran bourgeois, the rich who converted Honduras into a Banana Republic, into a political and military base for North American imperialism," Chávez thundered. The Venezuelan leader urged the Honduran military to return Zelaya to power and even threatened military action against the coup regime if Venezuela's ambassador was killed or local troops entered the Venezuelan Embassy. Reportedly, Honduran soldiers beat the ambassador and left him on the side of a road in the course of the military coup. Tensions have ratcheted up to such an extent that Chávez has now placed his armed forces on alert.

On the surface at least it seems unlikely that Obama would endorse an interventionist U.S. foreign policy in Central America. Over the past few months he has gone to great lengths to "re-brand" America in the eyes of the world as a reasonable power engaged in respectful diplomacy as opposed to reckless unilateralism. If it were ever proven that Obama sanctioned the overthrow of a democratically elected government this could completely undermine the U.S. President's carefully crafted image.

Officially, the military removed Zelaya from power on the grounds that the Honduran President had abused his authority. On Sunday Zelaya hoped to hold a constitutional referendum which could have allowed him to run for reelection for another four year term, a move which Honduras' Supreme Court and Congress declared illegal. But while the controversy over Zelaya's constitutional referendum certainly provided the excuse for military intervention, it's no secret that the President was at odds politically with the Honduran elite for the past few years and had become one of Washington's fiercest critics in the region.

The Rise of Zelaya

Zelaya, who sports a thick black mustache, cowboy boots and large white Stetson hat, was elected in late 2005. At first blush he hardly seemed the type of politician to rock the boat. A landowner from a wealthy landowning family engaged in the lumber industry, Zelaya headed the Liberal Party, one of the two dominant political parties in Honduras. The President supported the Central American Free Trade Agreement which eliminated trade barriers with the United States.

Despite these initial conservative leanings, Zelaya began to criticize powerful, vested interests in the country such as the media and owners of maquiladora sweatshops which produced goods for export in industrial free zones. Gradually he started to adopt some socially progressive policies. For example, Zelaya instituted a 60 per cent minimum wage increase which angered the wealthy business community. The hike in the minimum wage, Zelaya declared, would “force the business oligarchy to start paying what is fair.” “This is a government of great social transformations, committed to the poor,” he added. Trade unions celebrated the decision, not surprising given that Honduras is the third poorest country in the hemisphere and 70 per cent of its people live in poverty. When private business associations announced that they would challenge the government’s wage decree in Honduras’ Supreme Court, Zelaya’s Labor Minister called the critics “greedy exploiters.”

In another move that must have raised eyebrows in Washington, Zelaya declared during a meeting of Latin American and Caribbean anti-drug officials that drug consumption should be legalized to halt violence related to smuggling. In recent years Honduras has been plagued by drug trafficking and so-called maras or street gangs which carry out gruesome beheadings, rapes and eye gouging. “Instead of pursuing drug traffickers, societies should invest resources in educating drug addicts and curbing their demand,” Zelaya said. Rodolfo Zelaya, the head of a Honduran congressional commission on drug trafficking, rejected Zelaya’s comments. He told participants at the meeting that he was “confused and stunned by what the Honduran leader said.”

Zelaya and ALBA

Not content to stop there, Zelaya started to conduct an increasingly more independent foreign policy. In late 2007 he traveled to Cuba, the first official trip by a Honduran president to the Communist island in 46 years. There, Zelaya met with Raul Castro to discuss bilateral relations and other topics of mutual interest.

But what really led Zelaya towards a political collision course with the Honduran elite was his decision to join the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (known by its Spanish acronym ALBA), an alliance of leftist Latin American and Caribbean nations headed by Chávez. The regional trade group including Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Dominica seeks to counteract corporate-friendly U.S.-backed free trade schemes. Since its founding in 2004, ALBA countries have promoted joint factories and banks, an emergency food fund, and exchanges of cheap Venezuelan oil for food, housing, and educational investment.

In an emphatic departure from previous Honduran leaders who had been compliant vassals of the U.S., Zelaya stated “Honduras and the Honduran people do not have to ask permission of any imperialism to join the ALBA.” Speaking in the Honduran capital of

Tegucigalpa before a crowd of 50,000 unionists, women's groups, farmers and indigenous peoples, Chávez remarked that Venezuela would guarantee cheap oil to Honduras for "at least 100 years." By signing onto ALBA, Zelaya was able to secure access to credit lines, energy and food benefits. As an act of good faith, Chávez agreed to forgive Honduran debt to Venezuela amounting to \$30 million.

Infuriating the local elite, Chávez declared that Hondurans who opposed ALBA were "sellouts." "I did not come here to meddle in internal affairs," he continued, "but...I cannot explain how a Honduran could be against Honduras joining the ALBA, the path of development, the path of integration." Chávez lambasted the Honduran press which he labeled pitiyanquis (little Yanqui imitators) and "abject hand-lickers of the Yanquis." For his part, Zelaya said "we need no one's permission to sign this commitment. Today we are taking a step towards becoming a government of the center-left, and if anyone dislikes this, well just remove the word 'center' and keep the second one."

It wasn't long before private business started to attack Zelaya bitterly for moving Honduras into Chávez's orbit. By joining ALBA, business representatives argued, the President was endangering free enterprise and the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Former President Ricardo Maduro even claimed that the United States might retaliate against Honduras by deporting Honduran migrants from the United States. "Don't bite the hand that feeds you," Maduro warned, alluding to Washington. Zelaya was piqued by the criticisms. "When I met with (U.S. President) George W. Bush," he said, "no one called me an anti-imperialist and the business community applauded me. Now that I am meeting with the impoverished peoples of the world, they criticize me."

Zelaya's Letter to Obama

In September, 2008 Zelaya further strained U.S. relations by delaying accreditation of the new U.S. ambassador out of solidarity with Bolivia and Venezuela which had just gone through diplomatic dust ups with Washington. "We are not breaking relations with the United States," Zelaya said. "We only are (doing this) in solidarity with [Bolivian President] Morales, who has denounced the meddling of the United States in Bolivia's internal affairs." Defending his decision, Zelaya said small nations needed to stick together. "The world powers must treat us fairly and with respect," he stated.

In November, Zelaya hailed Obama's election in the U.S. as "a hope for the world," but just two months later tensions began to emerge. In an audacious letter sent personally to Obama, Zelaya accused the U.S. of "interventionism" and called on the new administration in Washington to respect the principle of non-interference in the political affairs of other nations. According to Spanish news agency EFE which saw a copy of the note, Zelaya told Obama that it wasn't his intention to tell the U.S. President what he should or should not do.

He then however went on to do precisely that. First of all, Zelaya brought up the issue of U.S. visas and urged Obama to "revise the procedure by which visas are cancelled or denied to citizens of different parts of the world as a means of pressure against those people who hold different beliefs or ideologies which pose no threat to the U.S."

As if that was not impudent enough, Zelaya then moved on to drug trafficking: "The legitimate struggle against drug trafficking...should not be used as an excuse to carry out interventionist policies in other countries." The struggle against drug smuggling, Zelaya

wrote, “should not be divorced from a vigorous policy of controlling distribution and consumer demand in all countries, as well as money laundering which operates through financial circuits and which involve networks within developed countries.”

Zelaya also argued “for the urgent necessity” of revising and transforming the structure of the United Nations and “to solve the Venezuela and Bolivia problems” through dialogue which “yields better fruit than confrontation.” The Cuban embargo, meanwhile, “was a useless instrument” and “a means of unjust pressure and violation of human rights.”

Run Up to June Coup

It’s unclear what Obama might have made of the audacious letter sent from the leader of a small Central American nation. It does seem however that Zelaya became somewhat disenchanted with the new administration in Washington. Just three months ago, the Honduran leader declined to attend a meeting of the System for Central American Integration (known by its Spanish acronym SICA) which would bring Central American Presidents together with U.S. Vice President Joe Biden in San José, Costa Rica.

Both Zelaya and President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua boycotted the meeting, viewing it as a diplomatic affront. Nicaragua currently holds the presidency of SICA, and so the proper course of action should have been for Biden to have Ortega hold the meeting. Sandinista economist and former Nicaraguan Minister of Foreign Trade Alejandro Martínez Cuenca declared that the United States had missed a vital opportunity to encourage a new era of relations with Central America by “prioritizing personal relations with [Costa Rican President] Arias over respect for Central America’s institutional order.”

Could all of the contentious diplomatic back and forth between Tegucigalpa and Washington have turned the Obama administration against Zelaya? In the days ahead there will surely be a lot of attention and scrutiny paid to the role of Romeo Vasquez, a General who led the military coup against Zelaya. Vasquez is a graduate of the notorious U.S. School of the Americas, an institution which trained the Latin American military in torture.

Are we to believe that the United States had no role in coordinating with Vasquez and the coup plotters? The U.S. has had longstanding military ties to the Honduran armed forces, particularly during the Contra War in Nicaragua during the 1980s. The White House, needless to say, has rejected claims that the U.S. played a role. The New York Times has reported claims that the Obama administration knew that a coup was imminent and tried to persuade the military to back down. The paper writes that it was the Honduran military which broke off discussions with American officials. Obama himself has taken the high road, remarking “I call on all political and social actors in Honduras to respect democratic norms [and] the rule of law...Any existing tensions and disputes must be resolved peacefully through dialogue free from any outside interference.”

Even if the Obama administration did not play an underhanded role in this affair, the Honduran coup highlights growing geo-political tensions in the region. In recent years, Chávez has sought to extend his influence to smaller Central American and Caribbean nations. The Venezuelan leader shows no intention of backing down over the Honduran coup, remarking that ALBA nations “will not recognize any [Honduran] government that isn’t Zelaya’s.”

Chávez then derided Honduras’ interim president, Roberto Micheletti. “Mr. Roberto

Micheletti will either wind up in prison or he'll need to go into exile... If they swear him in we'll overthrow him, mark my words. Thugetti—as I'm going to refer to him from now on—you better pack your bags, because you're either going to jail or you're going into exile. We're not going to forgive your error, you're going to get swept out of there. We're not going to let it happen, we're going to make life impossible for you. President Manuel Zelaya needs to retake his position as president."

With tensions running high, heads of ALBA nations have vowed to meet in Managua to discuss the coup in Honduras. Zelaya, who was exiled to Costa Rica from Honduras, plans to fly to Nicaragua to speak with his colleagues. With such political unity amongst ALBA nations, Obama will have to decide what the public U.S. posture ought to be.

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