

The Honduran Coup: A U.S. Connection

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While the Obama Administration was careful to distance itself from the recent coup in Honduras—condemning the expulsion of President Manuel Zelaya to Costa Rica, revoking Honduran officials' visas, and shutting off aid—that doesn't mean influential Americans aren't involved, and that both sides of the aisle don't have some explaining to do.

The story most U.S. readers are getting about the coup is that Zelaya—an ally of Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez—was deposed because he tried to change the constitution to keep himself in power.

That story is a massive distortion of the facts. All Zelaya was trying to do is to put a non-binding referendum on the ballot calling for a constitutional convention, a move that trade unions, indigenous groups and social activist organizations had long been lobbying for. The current constitution was written by the Honduran military in 1982 and the one term limit allows the brass hats to dominate the politics of the country. Since the convention would have been held in November, the same month as the upcoming presidential elections, there was no way that Zelaya could have remained in office in any case. The most he could have done was to run four years from now.

And while Zelaya is indeed friendly with Chavez, he is at best a liberal reformer whose major accomplishment was raising the minimum wage. "What Zelaya has done has been little reforms," Rafael Alegria, a leader of Via Campesina told the Mexican daily La Jornada. "He isn't a socialist or a revolutionary, but these reforms, which didn't harm the oligarchy at all, have been enough for them to attack him furiously."

One of those "little reforms" was aimed at ensuring public control of the Honduran telecommunications industry and that may well have been the trip wire that triggered the coup.

The first hint that something was afoot was a suit brought by Venezuelan lawyer Robert Carmona-Borjas claiming that Zelaya was part of a bribery scheme involving the state-run telecommunication company, Hondutel.

Carmona-Borjas has a rap sheet that dates back to the April 2002 coup against Chavez. It was he who drew up the notorious "Carmona decrees," a series of draconian laws aimed at suspending the Venezuelan constitution and suppressing any resistance to the coup. As Chavez supporters poured into the streets and the plot unraveled, he fled to Washington DC.

There he took a post at George Washington University and brought Iran-Contra plotters Otto Reich and Elliott Abrams to teach his class on "Political Management in Latin America." He

also became vice-president of the right-wing Arcadia Foundation, which lobbies for free market policies.

Weeks before the June 28 Honduran coup, Carmona-Borjas barnstormed the country accusing Zelaya of collaborating with narco-traffickers.

Reich, a Cuban-American with ties to right-wing factions all over Latin America, and a former assistant secretary of state for hemispheric affairs under George W. Bush, has been accused by the Honduran Black Fraternal Organization of “undeniable involvement” in the coup.

This is hardly surprising. Reich’s priors makes Carmona-Borjas look like a boy scout.

He was nailed by a 1987 Congressional investigation for using public funds to engage in propaganda during the Reagan Administration’s war on Nicaragua. He is also a fierce advocate for Orlando Bosch and Luis Posada Carriles, both implicated in the bombing of a Cuban airliner in 1973 that killed all 73 on board.

Reich is a ferocious critic of Zelaya and, in a recent piece in the Weekly Standard, urged the Obama Administration not to support “strongman” Zelaya because it “would put the United States clearly in the same camp as Cuba’s Castro brothers, Venezuela’s Chavez, and other regional delinquents.”

Zelaya’s return was unanimous supported by the UN General Assembly, the European Union, and the Organization of American States.

One of the charges that Reich levels at Zelaya is that the Honduran president is supposedly involved with bribes paid out by the state-run telecommunication company, Hondutel. Zelaya is threatening to file a defamation suit over the accusation.

Reich’s charges against Hondutel are hardly happenstance.

The Cuban-American, a former lobbyist for AT&T, is close to Arizona Senator John McCain and served as McCain’s Latin American advisor during the Senator’s run for the presidency. John McCain is Mr. telecommunications.

The Senator has deep ties with telecom giants AT&T, MCI and Qualcomm and, according to Nikolas Kozloff , author of “Hugo Chavez: Oil, Politics and the Challenge of the U.S.,” “has acted to protect and look out for the political interests of the telecoms on Capitol Hill.”

AT&T is McCain’s second largest donor, and the company also generously funds McCain’s International Republican Institute (IRI), which has warred with Latin American regimes that have resisted telecommunications privatization. According to Kozloff, “President Zelaya was a known to be a fierce critic of telecommunications privatization.”

When Venezuelan coup leaders went to Washington a month before their failed effort to oust Chavez, IRI footed the bill. Reich, as then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice’s special envoy to the Western Hemisphere, met with some of those leaders.

In 2004, Reich founded his own lobbying agency and immersed himself in guns, rum, tobacco, and sweat. His clients include Lockheed Martin (the world’s largest arms dealer), British American Tobacco and Bacardi. He is also vice-chairman of Worldwide Responsible

Apparel Production, a clothing industry front aimed at derailing the anti-sweat-shop movement.

Republicans in Congress have accused the Obama Administration of being “soft” on Zelaya, and protested the White House’s support of the Honduran president by voting against administration nominees for the ambassador to Brazil and an assistant secretary of state.

But meddling in Honduras is a bi-partisan undertaking.

“If you want to understand who is the real power behind the [Honduran] coup, you need to find out who is paying Lanny Davis,” says Robert White, former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador and current president of the Center for International Policy.

Davis, best known as the lawyer who represented Bill Clinton during his impeachment trial, has been lobbying members of Congress and testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee in support of the coup.

According to Roberto Lovato, an associate editor at New American Media, Davis represents the Honduran chapter of CEAL, the Business Council of Latin America, which strongly backed the coup. Davis told Lovato, “I’m proud to represent businessmen who are committed to the rule of law.”

But White says the coup had more to do with profits than law.

“Coups happen because very wealthy people want them and help to make them happen, people who are used to seeing the country as a money machine and suddenly see social legislation on behalf of the poor as a threat to their interests,” says White. “The average wage of a worker in free trade zones is 77 cents per hour.”

According to the World Bank, 66 percent of Hondurans lives below the poverty line.

The U.S. is also involved in the coup through a network of agencies that funnel money and training to anti-government groups. The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) contribute to right-wing organizations that supported the coup, including the Peace and Democracy Movement and the Civil Democratic Union. Many of the officers that bundled Zelaya off to San Jose were trained at the Western Hemispheric Institute for Security Cooperation, the former “School for the Americas’ that has seen torturers and coup leaders from all over Latin America pass through its doors. Reich served on the Institute’s board.

The Obama Administration condemned the coup, but when Zelaya journeyed to the Honduran-Nicaragua border, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton denounced him for being “provocative.” It was a strange statement, since the State Department said nothing about a report by the Committee of Disappeared Detainees in Honduras charging 1,100 human rights violations by the coup regime, including detentions, assaults and murder.

Human rights violations by the coup government have been condemned by the Inter American Commission for Human Rights, the International Observer Mission, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Reporters Without Borders.

Davis claims that the coup was a “legal” maneuver to preserve democracy. But that is a

hard argument to make, given who some of the people behind it were. One of those is Fernando Joya, a former member of Battalion 316, a paramilitary death squad. Joya fled the country after being charged with kidnapping and torturing several students in the 1980s, but he has now resurfaced as a “special security advisor” to the coup makers. He recently gave a TV interview that favorably compared the 1973 Chilean coup to the June 28 Honduran coup.

According to Greg Grandin, a history professor at New York University, the coup makers also included the extremely right-wing Catholic organization, Opus Dei, whose roots go back to the fascist regime of Spanish caudillo Francisco Franco.

In the old days, when the U.S. routinely overthrew governments that displeased it, the Marines would have gone in, as they did in Guatemala and Nicaragua, or the CIA would have engineered a coup by the local elites. No one has accused U.S. intelligence of being involved in the Honduran coup, and American troops in the country are keeping a low profile. But the fingerprints of U.S. institutions like the NED, USAID and School for the Americas—plus bipartisan lobbyists, powerful corporations, and dedicated Cold War warriors—are all over the June takeover.

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