

The Honduran Coup And US Involvement

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From afar, the June 28 coup in Honduras might appear to be one of those perennial power struggles among corrupt strongmen in a distant “Banana Republic.” After all, democratically elected and now deposed Pres. Zelaya and coup leader Micheletti came from the same political party. But the picture is quite different for those of us with the opportunity to have contacts with the popular civic groups in Honduras.

I am with the Marin Task Force on the Americas, a 25-year-old human rights organization. Two of our members are now in Honduras on delegations, and we have been in contact with other activists reporting back from what is alarmingly becoming an increasingly violent situation.

Zelaya’s “Crime”

Here are the words of our friend Lisa Sullivan, a lay member of the Catholic Maryknoll order working with the poor in Latin America. Lisa had gone to Honduras just a month before the coup at the invitation of a leading human rights group representing families of those disappeared in the previous military dictatorship in the 1980s. They went to a meeting with Honduran President Zelaya.

“It was not just an ordinary meeting, but one in a series of gatherings between the president, some of his ministers, and leaders of most of Honduras’ social movements. It was a six-hour, heart-to-heart, head-to-head real dialogue on deep issues such as whether to continue with the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), to keep the Palmerola military base open to U.S. soldiers, how to create a sustainable water system, whether to pull Honduran troops from the School of the Americas. I have been in Latin America for 32 years, but this kind of president-to-the-people consultation was a first. And, it made me realize that something very interesting was happening in Honduras.”

A month later Pres. Zelaya was kidnapped out of Honduras and civil liberties suspended. Zelaya’s “crime” was that he threatened the privileged position of the elites in his country. With over 65 percent of the Honduran population below the poverty level (U.S. AID), the Zelaya administration was beginning to listen to the social movements and give their needs consideration.

Zelaya had raised the minimum wage, gave out free school lunches, provided milk for the babies and pensions for the elderly, distributed energy-saving light bulbs, decreased the price of public transportation, made more scholarships available for students, and passed legislation to protect forests from logging.

U.S. Involvement

The U.S. State Department freely admitted it had consulted with the perpetrators prior to the coup (Wall Street Journal, 6/29/09). With the U.S. as Honduras' largest trading partner, its army heavily subsidized by the U.S., and some of the coup leaders including the head of the military trained in the U.S. School of the Americas, at least some tacit involvement in the coup by U.S. is evident. The popular saying among Latin Americans is "The Honduran army breathes through the noses of its U.S. advisers."

But the world is a different place than it was in 1954 with the CIA-backed coup in Guatemala or even the Nixon-Kissinger coup in Chile in 1973, which brought the reign of terror under Pinochet to Chile. Attempted coups with U.S. backing against democratically elected and popular leaders failed in Venezuela in 2002 and in Bolivia in 2008 (but succeeded in Haiti in 2004).

Internationally the coup in Honduras has received universal approbation. The United Nations and the Organization of American States have both unanimously condemned the illegal coup and called for the immediate restoration of the constitutional government.

Specter of Repression

If this coup is not overturned, we fear Honduras will return to a period when disappearances and arbitrary arrests of those willing to speak out against injustice were common place. Such fears are not unwarranted as repression by the coup government escalates against the popular movement.

The Huffington Post (7/23/09) reported the coup government has been responsible for the targeted killing of at least four individuals, including two political opposition leaders. The death toll, all of them Zelaya supporters, has since more than doubled. Over a hundred people have been assaulted by the armed forces, and over a thousand of those associated with the social movements have been illegally detained. Press and media outlets have been shut down, while journalists have been arrested and detained.

The U.S. has partially gone along with the international community in opposition to the coup. Pres. Obama has publicly denounced the action, calling it a "coup," and withdrew some U.S. military and economic aid to Honduras. Now is the time for the U.S. to take leadership and suspend all military, diplomatic, and economic relations with the coup government in Honduras, as is mandated by U.S. law when a coup has occurred, until the entire constitutional government is reinstated in Honduras.

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