

The other 9/11 returns to haunt Latin America

It was inevitable that the people at the top would fight to preserve their privileges

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The ghost of the other, deadlier 9/11 has returned to stalk Latin America. On Sunday morning, a battalion of soldiers rammed their way into the Presidential Palace in Honduras. They surrounded the bed where the democratically elected President, Manuel Zelaya, was sleeping, and jabbed their machine guns to his chest. They ordered him to get up and marched him on to a military plane. They dumped him in his pyjamas on a landing strip in Costa Rica and told him never to return to the country that freely chose him as their head of state.

Back home, the generals locked down the phone networks, the internet and international TV channels, and announced their people were in charge now. Only sweet, empty music plays on the radio. Government ministers have been arrested and beaten. If you leave your home after 9pm, the population have been told, you risk being shot. Tanks and tear gas are ranged against the protesters who have thronged on to the streets.

For the people of Latin America, this is a replay of their September 11. On that day in Chile in 1973, Salvador Allende – a peaceful democratic socialist who was steadily redistributing wealth to the poor majority – was bombed from office and forced to commit suicide. He was replaced by a self-described “fascist”, General Augusto Pinochet, who went on to “disappear” tens of thousands of innocent people. The coup was plotted in Washington DC, by Henry Kissinger.

The official excuse for killing Chilean democracy was that Allende was a “communist”. He was not. In fact, he was killed because he was threatening the interests of US and Chilean mega-corporations by shifting the country’s wealth and land from them to its own people. When Salvador Allende’s widow died last week, she seemed like a symbol from another age – and then, a few days later, the coup came back.

Honduras is a small country in Central America with only seven million inhabitants, but it has embarked on a programme of growing democracy of its own. In 2005, Zelaya ran promising to help the country’s poor majority – and he kept his word. He increased the minimum wage by 60 per cent, saying sweatshops were no longer acceptable and “the rich must pay their share”.

The tiny elite at the top – who own 45 per cent of the country’s wealth – are horrified. They are used to having Honduras run by them, for them.

But this wave of redistributing wealth to the population is washing over Latin America. In the

barrios and favelas, I have seen how shanty towns made out of mud and rusted tin now have doctors and teachers and subsidised supermarkets for the first time, because they elected leaders who have turned the spigot of oil money in their direction. In Venezuela, for example, the poorest half of the country has seen its incomes soar by 130 per cent after inflation since they chose Hugo Chavez as their President, according to studies cited by the Nobel Prize-winning US economist Joseph Stiglitz. Infant mortality has plummeted.

No wonder so many Latin American countries are inspired by this example: the notion that Chavez has to “bribe” or “brainwash” people like Zelaya is bizarre.

It was always inevitable that the people at the top would fight back to preserve their unearned privilege. In 2002, the Venezuelan oligarchy conspired with the Bush administration in the kidnapping of Hugo Chavez. It was only a massive democratic uprising of the people that forced his return. Now they have tried the same in Honduras.

Yet the military-business nexus have invented a propaganda-excuse that is being eagerly repeated by dupes across the Western world. The generals claim they have toppled the democratically elected leader and arrested his ministers to save democracy.

Here’s how it happened. Honduras has a constitution that was drawn up in 1982, by the oligarchy, under supervision from the outgoing military dictatorship. It states that the President can only serve only one term, while the military remains permanent and “independent” – in order to ensure they remain the real power in the land.

Zelaya believed this was a block on democracy, and proposed a referendum to see if the people wanted to elect a constituent assembly to draw up a new constitution. It could curtail the power of the military, and perhaps allow the President to run for re-election. The Supreme Court, however, ruled that it is unconstitutional to hold a binding referendum within a year of a presidential election. So Zelaya proposed holding a non-binding referendum instead, just to gauge public opinion. This was perfectly legal. The military – terrified of the verdict of the people – then marched in with their guns.

But there has been progress since the days of 1973, or even 2002. The coups against Allende and Chavez were eagerly backed by the CIA and White House. But this time, Barack Obama has said: “We believe the coup was not legal and that President Zelaya remains the President of Honduras.” He called the coup “a terrible precedent”.

His reaction hasn’t been perfect: unlike France and Spain, he hasn’t withdrawn the US Ambassador yet. He supports the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which are vast brakes on Latin American democracy, and he bad-mouths Chavez while arming the genuinely abusive Colombian government. But it is a vast improvement on Bush and McCain, who would have been mistily chorusing “We are all Honduran Generals now”.

The ugliest face of the Latin American oligarchy is now standing alone against the world, showing its contempt for democracy and for its own people. They are fighting to preserve the old continent where all the wealth goes to them at the end of a machine gun. I have seen the price for this: I have lived in the rubbish dumps of the continent, filled with dark-skinned scavenging children, while a few miles away there are suburbs that look like Beverly Hills.

This weekend, Zelaya will return to the country that elected him, flanked by the presidents

of Argentina and the Organisation of American States, to take his rightful place. Whether he succeeds or fails will tell us if the children of the rubbish dumps have reason to hope – and whether the smoke from the deadliest 9/11 has finally cleared.

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