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Honduras: the international impact of last year's coup

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The opposition of several Latin American leaders against the attendance of the Honduran leader, Porfirio Lobo, at the upcoming EU-Latin America summit in Madrid later this month highlights the continuing fallout from the coup in Honduras last year. At the same time the contrasting stances of the Europeans and Latin Americans also arguably reveals deeper fault lines between the two sides concerning the basis of democracy. Like the US, the EU appears inclined to a limited and formal form of democracy, which emphasises representative institutions. Meanwhile, the Latin American governments that have taken a critical stance against Honduras have largely adopted a position that sees democracy as requiring deeper social legitimacy that goes beyond holding elections.

In June last year President Zelaya was bundled out of the country following his proposal to seek constitutional reform. Following widespread condemnation, including from the US and Europe, Honduras was also thrown out of the Organisation of American States (OAS). During the second half of 2009 Zelaya managed to return from exile and seek refuge within the Brazilian embassy. His presence was insufficient to affect his return to power though. The interim government held on, announcing that it would be replaced by a new government formed following the upcoming presidential election in November. That poll was won by Porfirio Lobo, who had also stood against Zelaya at the previous contest in 2005.

The interim government's apparent commitment to institutional parameters (even claiming that its removal of Zelaya was justified on constitutional grounds) meant that despite international criticism it was not completely isolated. In the long months between Zelaya's removal and the November election the interim government accepted demands for international mediation, which led to the Tegucigalpa/San José accord between it and Zelaya, the provisions which included a truth commission and a national unity government. However, not only was such a government not set up, but Congress voted against reinstating Zelaya until the end of his term in January 2010.

Having managed to hold onto power in the months after June and then holding the presidential election, the coup plotters may congratulate themselves that they appear to have been largely vindicated through their institutional approach. Domestically, the regime claimed that it was not interested in holding onto power, but to transfer it in a democratic and peaceful manner. As a result, international opposition began to weaken.

This was most apparent in both Washington and Brussels. Following the election, the US State Department for example noted that the fact that the poll had happened was significant and changed the situation. With the transfer of power to Lobo in January Honduras's rehabilitation looked to have advanced further: with Lobo seemingly committed to a truth commission, Washington seems supportive of Honduras's readmission to OAS. Meanwhile, the EU noted the failure to implement all of the Tegucigalpa/San José accord, the new foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton responded positively to the new government's acceptance of a truth commission. At the same time it hoped that Zelaya's status would be resolved. In addition, Honduras's drive for greater international respectability has also been helped regionally. Peru and Colombia were among the first within UNASUR to recognise the new Lobo government.

That said, the democratic situation in Honduras is far from complete – and continues to be challenged by many, both inside and outside the country. Internationally, a number of Latin American governments refused to recognise Lobo's victory, claiming that it had taken place under an illegitimate administration. In the current row the presidents of Argentina, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Paraguay and Chile all made their displeasure of Lobo's presence at the Madrid summit.

Domestically, the wounds from last year have not fully healed. An AmericasBarometer survey of Honduran public opinion by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (Vanderbilt University) in March revealed that although a majority (70%) opposed a constituent assembly and Zelaya's plan to hold a referendum for a constituent assembly (75%), they were also critical of the way in which the former president was handled: over sixty percent believed that Zelaya's removal constituted a coup.

At the same time, just as the truth commission began working this month, the worker and peasant groups that make up the National Front for Popular Resistance took to the streets, much as the movement did during the months following the coup. Criticising the truth commission as a way for coup leaders to evade justice, they have reiterated their demands for a new constituent assembly, an investigation into the political crimes committed after June 2009 and Manuel Zelaya's unconditional return to the country. The latter points have particular resonance: the OAS's Inter-American Commission on Human Rights reports continuing attacks on the former president's supporters since Lobo's inauguration and corruption charges brought by the new government against Zelaya (and which he argues are a form of 'political persecution').

Yet given the split between formal and socially-rooted democracy, what implications will this have for Honduras and Latin American relations in the long term?

The immediate result was Lobo's decision not to attend the summit. This may seem like a victory for the regional consensus that has been in place against the coup since last June and for the notion of idealist foreign policy over *realpolitik*. However, this may well prove to be its highpoint. But this was only a partial result for his critics. Lobo will still go to Madrid but only to the smaller, Central America-oriented event scheduled the day before. In addition to this, a more long-term perspective suggests that developments since the election may well fracture the unity of purpose shown by Latin America or show it to be irrelevant.

Although Honduras remains a regional pariah, most notably remaining outside the OAS membership, it has achieved some degree of international legitimacy. That Lobo will still be able to attend the EU's event with Central American states is one demonstration of this. More importantly though are the growing acceptance of actors such as the US and both the World Bank and IMF, which restarted financial support last month. The impact of these events may well undermine any Latin American solidarity and ensure that Honduras returns to the international community, with or without the support of its regional neighbours.

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