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Update on Honduras from Central America:

LSE Ideas

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In recent days several things have become clearer about the recent coup in Honduras, and its effects are being felt around the region.

Firstly, there is a significant difference between the story being sold around the world by the mainstream media, and that which is being relayed in Central America via local radio stations in Honduras, and local journalists who are still managing to report on the situation in the country. On the day when another 3 people have been reportedly murdered by the illegal regime, this information gap is more than interesting.

A quick look at the 'western' media indicates that Zelaya was indeed overthrown, but he provoked this coup by carrying out policies he wasn't elected for, pushing for re-election through a 'popular survey', and allying his government with the arch-villains of the region, Cuba and Venezuela.

Some critical analysis and context for the situation in Honduras:

Firstly, in the region there are several governments with shaky claims to democracy and the rule of law – Mexico, where it has been conveniently forgotten, the second major electoral fraud in 20 years was carried out in 2006. A series of irregularities led to the right-wing candidate winning by 0.64%, hundreds of thousands demonstrated on the streets, and an alternative government existed for a while, but the international media was at the time obsessing about the 'orange revolution' in Ukraine, and this outrageous fraud conveniently passed into history. Colombia, where Alvaro Uribe, at the head of a regime that has seen thousands of politically motivated murders and disappearances, has also been making efforts to alter the constitution to allow his own re-election, partly motivated by fears of a Fujimori-esque end to his political career. In Costa Rica, President Oscar Arias was himself only re-elected after the constitutional court ruled void the legislation outlawing re-election, in rather murky circumstances. In Peru, Alan Garcia has just overseen the brutal repression of indigenous demonstrations, which have seen him add at least 100 lives to his already macabre CV. Surely Zelaya's sins pale in comparison?

His main crime appears to have been the non-binding vote on the constituent assembly, which has been used as the pretext for the coup. This vote, if it won, would have opened the path to calling a constituent assembly, which could not have been held before Zelaya had already left office, given that his term finishes in November. Thus any re-election would take place in at least 4 years time, hardly the mark of a megalomaniac. The real desire for the constituent assembly came from the need to reform a constitution that was written in the shadow of military dictatorship, and thus blocked significant social reforms.

The policies he began to carry out were part of his promises to bring economic growth and change. This programme was stymied when the World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the US government offered only moderate sums of aid in response to Zelaya's appeal, sums which were doubled by ALBA. ALBA further guaranteed Honduran fuel supplies for the next decades, allowing a measure of long-term economic stability. This turn to ALBA, was followed by assistance in social programmes and by an increasing political alignment with the ALBA countries. This alliance was further bolstered by the economic failure of the 2006 FTA signed with the US, which has seen the Honduran exports dwarfed by imports causing rising unemployment, especially in agriculture, as NAFTA did in Mexico. The poverty gap has widened, and it is this that President Zelaya was trying to tackle, by adopting measures that threatened the future of the FTA.

Here we have the clues for the curious involvement of the US in this crisis. Honduras under Zelaya became an ally of the ALBA, and thus a political enemy of US pushed neo-liberal economic policies, which coincidentally took the world into the current economic crisis. He also threatened US economic interests, since joining ALBA was incompatible with any FTA.

What is the evidence of US involvement? Well, the US government has admitted that representatives were in talks with the plotters for a week before it took place, 'trying to find another way' out of the situation. Furthermore, the appearance of several people linked to past and present administrations points towards a deeper involvement.

Just in the month before the coup a civic democratic forum was formed from a variety of Honduran 'civil society' organisations, many of which received funds from the \$50 million dollars that USAID and the nefarious Reagan-founded NED distribute each year. Just this year the International Republican Institute, part of the NED, received 1.2 million dollars to use in Honduras. This Civic Democratic Forum immediately declared that the coup had 'saved democracy' in Honduras. This recipe is similar to that followed in 'colour revolutions' in Eastern Europe and to the functions of opposition groups in Venezuela and Bolivia.

Furthermore, a series of the State Department actors in this crisis have links to US policy areas characterised by overt and covert hostility. The current US ambassador, Hugo Llorens – a Cuban exile – was formerly in charge of the Andean Affairs section of the NSC, and as such, was reporting to Otto Reich and Bush during the 2002 coup against Chavez in Venezuela. He joins a series of other ambassadorial appointments in Central America, which include people linked to US Intelligence (Nicaragua), the campaign against Cuba (El Salvador), and support of the Venezuelan opposition (Guatemala). There is also a strong pro-putschist lobby in the US, headed by John McCain and the Cormac Group, which brought a delegation from the junta to Washington to meet Congressmen and Senators.

Lastly there is a military element to this crisis. The Honduran constitution does not allow foreign bases on national soil, and yet the US has had an installation in Soto Cano since the 1950s, headquarters of Joint Task Force-B, which has about 500 men and several aircraft at its disposal. Zelaya, incidentally, had decided to open the airport to civilian air traffic, which would seriously affect the bases military functions. Then there are the large numbers of officers trained in the School of the Americas and its successors, with two of the putschist generals having attended the School.

All of this points towards a more active US role in events in Honduras than has been recognised in the English speaking media, and also helps explain the US inaction over the coup. Although there have been references to the coup, and to the 'restitution of constitutional order' there has been no official characterisation of the coup as such, as this would necessitate the immediate cutting of military and economic aid to Honduras, and beginning active measures against the putschists.

What next?

For the putschists, the future to a large extent depends on the US attitude towards their government. If economic sanctions are applied, it will rapidly force them to step down. They also face significant social mobilisation, which they cannot respond to with overwhelming force, without forcing the US government's hand. However, without using force, the social mobilisation may well grow and become uncontrollable. None of its neighbours can afford to close the border for long, and the 3 day closure last week reputedly cost the region some 200 million dollars in lost revenue, but how long can the business sectors allied to the coup withstand the economic disruption being caused by road blockades and strikes?

Their hope must be that the regime will be able to stagger along until the elections in November. If these pass without major disruption and can be internationally verified somehow, then it is foreseeable that the US and its closest allies would be able to recognise the new government, without seeming to have backed the coup.

This outcome will become impossible if Zelaya manages to enter Honduras, and become the focal point for popular resistance to the coup. However, it is yet to be seen whether Zelaya has the courage to do this, considering the personal risk it entails. But a Zelaya in prison, or dead would make it nigh on impossible for the regime to claim any legitimacy, and this is why the actions of the deposed president will to a large extent determine the outcome of the crisis.

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