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July 02, 2009

Ask the Experts: What's Happening in Honduras?

A few weeks ago, RealClearWorld [asked](#) several experts and academics for their feedback on the presidential election in Iran and its subsequent aftermath. With a new political crisis now unfolding in Honduras, we thought it might be time once again to turn to the experts.

With the sitting president ousted at the hands of an apparent military coup, and heavy international criticism raining down on Tegucigalpa, RCW asks: what exactly is going on in Honduras?

Kevin Casas-Zamora, [Brookings Institution](#):

"What has happened in Honduras is, undeniably, a step back in the process of democratic consolidation in Latin America. Even though the ousted President, Manuel Zelaya, is largely to blame for the political crisis, the military takeover is entirely unjustified. It belongs to a dark past that an overwhelming majority of people in Latin America do not want to return to. Not surprisingly, the reaction of the international community and, in particular, the Latin American governments has been swift and uncompromising. Everyone is demanding, correctly, that Mr. Zelaya returns to power as the legitimately elected President of Honduras. Yet, that may turn to be the easy part. The truth is that the return of Mr. Zelaya to Honduras in and of itself would solve very little. The underlying issue is how to make Honduras governable, for it wasn't when Mr Zelaya was in office, and it isn't now due to the immense international pressure that the new Honduran authorities find themselves under. If it is not to worsen an already bad situation, Zelaya's return must be accompanied by a process of political negotiation in which compromises will have to be made. Most likely Zelaya will return to power to serve out his term while giving up on his plans to engineer his own reelection. And in all likelihood all parties will end up turning a blind eye on the pervasive illegal behavior that all have engaged in.

The U.S. administration to the coup has been very adequate. This crisis presents President Obama with a golden opportunity to make a clean break with the past and show that the U.S. is siding unequivocally with democracy in the Western Hemisphere, a very powerful and sensitive message given the troubled past of U.S. □□" Latin America relations. So far, President Obama has made good use of this opportunity."

Jesus Rios, [Gallup World Poll](#):

"The survey conducted by Gallup in Honduras (and other 20 Latin American countries) in 2008 suggests that the overthrow of President Zelaya is not just the result of his failed attempt to conduct a referendum that had been ruled illegal by the supreme court, but the culmination of a process that started at least one year ago. At the time the survey was

conducted (August 2008) Honduras' public opinion environment [reflected levels of tension](#) above "normal" by Latin American standards. Back then, roughly half of Hondurans (47%) expressed concerns over the health of their democracy, and an unusually high number (29%) agreed that their country was headed toward a coup d'état (again, high compared to the median for Latin American of 15%).

The international community has unanimously condemned Zelaya's ousting, and the latest indications point in the direction of his imminent return to Honduras. Whether he will be reinstated in office is still a question, but what seems clear is he will face important challenges at home. Back in 2008, Hondurans placed the blame for the country's political tension primarily on his government and "other countries." The latest remarks by interim leader Micheletti suggest Zelaya's increasing alignment to President Hugo Chavez's regime is at the core of the crisis. So, if Zelaya does in fact return to power before the November presidential election, the question then becomes: how will he manage to govern amidst an adverse public opinion environment and among institutions that backed his ousting, including his own political party? And, what role, if any, will Chavez play in Honduran politics from now on? Will Zelaya drop or moderate his pro-Chavez stance to regain political support? According to the 2008 Gallup survey, just 20% of Hondurans approve of President Hugo Chavez."

Shannon O'Neil, [Council on Foreign Relations](#):

"What complicated the situation in Honduras is that before the coup, the president was venturing into his own legal transgressions, planning on holding a non-binding referendum that both the Congress and Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional. His approval ratings at the time were very low, and many do not want him to return □ □" worried that he was (and might continue) to threaten Honduras' democracy. But the ends does not justify the military means, particularly in a country and region known historically for military interventions and limits on democracy.

In the end, negotiations will most likely occur, with Zelaya potentially returning to complete his term, and then stepping down (with no new referendum or movement to allow reelection). He will also likely be subject to Honduras' own laws, be it impeachment or something else. What this whole episode shows is the real and continued weakness of Honduras' institutions. This is worrisome not just for today's democracy, but because of other trends happening in the region. A big part of U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Central America policy today revolves around the fight against drug trafficking organizations through the Merida Initiative. If Mexico is successful in lessening the reach of these criminal organizations, then they will move to other countries (as we have seen in the past with the pressure brought on by Plan Colombia among other initiatives). This episode shows just how weak Honduras is, and is a red flag for the country, for its neighbors, and for the United States in thinking through these security relations going forward."

Leonardo Vivas, [Harvard Kennedy School](#):

"Quite independent of President Zelaya coming to power again, what is happening in Honduras is a tragedy in at least three ways. Firstly, it brings us back to old times when Latin American armies were the arbiters of last resort. Secondly, it reveals the entanglements of hyper-presidential regimes in seeking solutions when they face confrontations between powers. Finally, it shows how the OAS Inter American Charter has become a one way street in which country sovereignty only rests on its presidents instead of

on all elected representatives, be them Congress or governors. What occurred in Honduras only favors the advance of *caudillos*."

Juan Carlos Hidalgo, [Cato Institute](#):

"The Honduran constitution does not provide an effective civilian mechanism for removing a president from office after repeated violations of the law, such as impeachment. Honduras' Supreme Court nonetheless ordered Zelaya's removal and Congress bestowed the presidency on the civilian figure □□" the president of Congress □□" next in the line of succession according to the constitution.

To restore credibility on the country's democratic institutions, it is imperative that the transitional government respect the civil liberties and individual rights of the Honduran people. Also, the Electoral Tribunal and Congress should call for general elections earlier than they are scheduled in November. This would give Hondurans a democratically elected president with international legitimacy. In the longer term, Honduras should pass a constitutional amendment that allows for removal of the president in instances of grave violations to the law, such as was the case with Zelaya.

The international community should respect the constitutional transition of power in Honduras. Instead of applauding and embracing would-be despots, it should condemn the efforts of those democratically-elected leaders who have come to regard their election as a blank check that allows them to run roughshod over a country's democratic institutions and rule of law."

Michael Derham, [Truman National Security Project](#):

"Zelaya was elected three years ago on a center-right ticket but in his time in the office swung him to the left, aligning himself with Hugo Chávez. But while those who previously supported Zelaya might not be thrilled with the direction he's taken politically, it's his questionable move to go for a second term □□" disallowed under the Honduran constitution□□"that caused the military to move against him.

While one can question the wisdom of Zelaya's policies or his motivation for seeking a second term, the solution imposed by the military is worse than the problem. While during the Cold War such a coup might get the quiet backing from international supporters, today the Micheletti government is finding itself isolated internationally - even from neighbors El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua, which have cut off trade relations with Honduras. A likely outcome would be a compromise, where Zelaya is allowed to return and serve out his term, with the understanding that his attempts to seek a second term are at an end."

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