

Foreign Policy Watch

July 14, 2009

[The Dangers of Presidential Systems](#)



A quick note about the past few weeks' events in Honduras. I've stayed away from the whole mess because, frankly, I've been really confused as to the legitimacy of both sides' actions. Shortly after the Honduran military removed Zelaya, I managed to track down a copy of the [Honduran constitution](#), run it through Google translator, and become thoroughly perplexed as to whether Zelaya's ouster had some constitutional basis or not. Even [this article](#) by the Cato Institute's Juan Carlos Hidalgo, which supports the military's actions and attempts to explain some of the constitutional niceties, doesn't help matters much. What has seemed reasonably clear from the coverage, though, is that 1) Zelaya was trying to steamroll legitimate constitutional opposition to his policies, and 2) the legislative and the judicial branches of the Honduran government employed what were at best dubious legal means of stopping him. Best I can tell, everyone in this situation is sort of breaking the law, because Honduran law only sort of lays out the proper procedure for legislative and judicial checks on the executive.

I don't want to dwell on Honduras, though, because my lack of Spanish proficiency and/or a law degree makes me a poor judge of who is right (though, as an aside, my instinct is usually to support the side that *isn't* shooting protesters). The larger point that this whole episode brings to light is the dangers inherent to presidential systems of government. Governments based on a separation of powers, with strong directly-elected executives, do seem to lend themselves to constitutional crises, because the nature of the system sets various branches of government against each other, and encourages executive overreach as a matter of course.

Now, before readers jump all over me, I'm not going the [Matt Yglesias route](#) and stating an explicit preference for parliamentary models of democracy. One look at Italy since World War II or Israel since at least the 1970s should be enough to demonstrate that parliamentary systems have their own problems. When the legislature, which has the power of the purse, also essentially runs a country's civil service and government bureaucracy, the potential for corruption skyrockets. There's also the problem that, over time, certain parties can use their governance portfolios to pack particular ministries with their own supporters, creating bureaucracies colonized in different areas by different

kinds of ideologues. The Israeli education system, for example, has been served poorly by the fact that its ministry is often given to the religious parties in a given governing coalition. Finally, there is something to be said for the people getting to directly elect their executive from a wide slew of candidates, rather than being legally limited to those people who were able to claw their way up the power-structure of a particular political party.

All that said, the dangers of presidential, balance-of-power type systems, particularly in democracies that are not yet fully consolidated, means that political architects need to be especially careful to provide clear, unambiguous checks on executive power and clear, unambiguous means of resolving constitutional crises. The unambiguous ability to impeach a president without having to resort to illegal or even quasi-legal means is a really, really important feature to have. Honduras is a great example of why.

Posted by Matt Eckel at [2:16 PM](#) [0 comments](#)