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Honduran coup tests waning US clout in Latin America

The coup happened apparently against US wishes, showing the erosion of America's influence in a region it once controlled.

By [Howard LaFranchi](#) | *Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor*

WASHINGTON

Sunday's military coup in Honduras is a reminder of democracy's shallow roots in much of Latin America, and it provides a major test of US and international influence in what was once the quintessential banana republic.

The White House said Monday that its goal is to see democratic order reestablished. But the US refrained from formally declaring Sunday's actions a "coup": a move that would require a cutoff of US aid.

Instead, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton says the US will work with the international community to see that Honduras returns "to the rule of law and constitutional order within a relatively short period of time."

The Organization of American States is set to take up the issue in an emergency session Tuesday.

But the fact a military coup occurred apparently against US wishes suggests how [American dominance in the region has waned](#).

"The days when the US had a decisive say in the region about what happened in a particular country – whether it had a coup, or a leader friendly to the US survived – are long gone," says Juan Carlos Hidalgo, Latin America Project coordinator for Washington's Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "Since the cold war, the US has shifted its strategic focus to the Middle East and Asia, which is a good thing, but it also means the US is less influential in the region and can be taken by surprise."

The deposed president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, attended [a summit of leftist Latin American presidents](#) in Nicaragua Monday, a day after his country's military awakened him in Tegucigalpa's presidential palace and put him on a plane to Costa Rica. The Honduran Congress named an interim president, Roberto Micheletti, [who said the military action came in defense of the Honduran constitution](#) – and who rebuffed any external effort to reverse the military action.

The State Department says it was aware of the political tensions leading to Sunday's coup, actually working behind the scenes to head off military action. On Saturday, the day before the coup, Mr. Zelaya

had told the Spanish newspaper El Pais that [he would have been deposed if not for the support of the US embassy](#) in Tegucigalpa.

While acknowledging that the US no longer calls the shots in Latin America as it once did, other regional analysts say it is hard to imagine that the Honduran military acted without at least an assumption of tacit US support.

As a result, they say Obama will have to move beyond rhetorical condemnation to show that he and US partners won't let the coup stand.

"Remember that the general in charge of this is a graduate of the School of the Americas," the US military training center for the region's militaries, says Miguel Tinker Salas, a Latin America specialist at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif. "You have to assume they were communicating with someone in the US."

The general in question, Romeo Vásquez, had refused Zelaya's order to provide security for a referendum Zelaya had called for Sunday to test the public waters for [a constitutional reform to allow reelection of presidents](#), currently outlawed by the Honduran constitution. When General Vásquez refused the order Zelaya fired him, but the Supreme Court reinstated him.

Mr. Tinker Salas says the crisis over use of the referendum has its roots in Honduras's cold war era constitution, which was written by the country's "liberal elites" and does not provide for referendums.

"The referendum is the primary vehicle through which change has occurred in countries like Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia, and the elites know it," says Tinker Salas. "They wanted to nip this thing in the bud."

Given the international pressure now bearing down on Honduras, he adds, "they may have shot themselves in the foot."

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