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Obama's Handling of Honduras Coup Cripples U.S. Influence in Latin America

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By: Jim Meyers

The international community, including the United States, was quick to condemn the ouster of Honduras' President Manuel Zelaya as an assault on democracy.

In fact, it was much more a last-ditch effort to protect the nation from the Hugo Chavez admirer's assault on democracy, according to Ray Walser, senior policy analyst for Latin American at The Heritage Foundation.

After Zelaya was forcibly removed from office by the military on Sunday, President Barack Obama said the ouster was illegal and would set a "terrible precedent" of transition by military force.

Obama's immediate and forceful response to events in the Central American nation stood in sharp contrast to his initially restrained reaction to the disputed presidential election in Iran. It also puzzled some that he would denounce a leader backed by Chavez while declining for days to declare that the election results in Iran were fraudulent.

Zelaya's removal brought to mind another point: "The fact a military coup occurred apparently against U.S. wishes suggests how American dominance in the region has waned," the Christian Science Monitor observed.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo, Latin America Project coordinator for the Cato Institute, told the Monitor: "The days when the U.S. 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 U.S. survived — are long gone."

In addition to Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also denounced Zelaya's ouster, saying the situation in Honduras has "evolved into a coup" and calling for a return to "the rule of law in Honduras."

But Walser insists it was the rule of law that opponents of Zelaya were seeking to enforce when they overthrew the president and sent him on a plane to Costa Rica.

Zelaya, who won election nearly four years ago, "sees Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Cuba's Fidel Castro as beacons for the future," Walser writes in the New York Post.

"As president, he tried to steer Honduras hard left — but succeeded mainly in boosting corruption and cronyism."

Zelaya proposed a national referendum that, if passed, would alter the Constitution and allow him to run for re-election. Presidents in Honduras are limited to one 4-year term. The nation's Supreme Court, attorney general and legislature declared Zelaya's move illegal.

Nevertheless, Zelaya last week asked the army to distribute the ballots for the referendum, in accordance with its role in conducting elections. Gen. Romeo Vasquez, head of the armed forces, considered this an illegal

order and refused to distribute the ballots. Zelaya then removed him from office.

The next day, his removal was declared illegal by the Supreme Court and legislature. Zelaya refused to abide by that decision and set Sunday as the day for his referendum. But on Sunday morning, shortly before the polls were to open, "the Congress, the courts and the military stepped in and pulled the plug on Zelaya's maneuverings," Walser wrote.

He was replaced by the speaker of the legislature, the next in the line of presidential succession, to serve through elections in November.

"This was no coup, but a desperate act to protect the nation's constitution and its institutions from presidential excess and a descent into misrule Chavez-style," Walser asserts.

"Letting a friendly country fall into the Chavez camp does no one any good. The new government of Honduras wants to preserve peace and the constitutional order. Warts and all, it deserves the chance."

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