

## Constitutional Crisis in Honduras -- Who Cares?

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The Honduran constitutional crisis has been resolved. Maybe. But why should Americans care?

More than four months ago Honduran President Manuel Zelaya was ousted. Backed by the Obama administration and most governments in Latin America, Zelaya demanded reinstatement. Now he and the interim Honduran government have reached an agreement to bring him back with limited powers to serve out the rest of his term, which expires in January.

The controversy is legally complex and politically charged. Zelaya's critics contend that he intended to violate the constitution, and his behavior warranted suspicion. So too did his friendship with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who has used the formal democratic process to limit liberty.

Zelaya argued in turn that the case against him was unproved. He also claimed that the method used to unseat him -- he was tossed out of the country at gunpoint by the military -- was a de facto coup. The interim



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government admitted that forcing him into exile may have been improper, but argued that his ouster was valid. Although the constitution is ambiguous, the military's action came at the behest of a warrant issued by the Honduran supreme court and was endorsed by the Honduran congress. A majority of Hondurans believe that Zelaya's ouster was legal.

The controversy would make for an interesting case study in law school. In fact, the Congressional Research Office reviewed the legal issues and concluded that while Zelaya should not have been exiled, his ouster was consistent with Honduran law. Zelaya's defenders, including Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-Mass.), have attacked the CRS report.

Oddly, the issue became one of great partisan contention in Washington. The administration and top Democrats like Sen. Kerry lined up behind left-populist Zelaya while leading Republican legislators such as Sen. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) supported the more centrist Honduran opposition. All very interesting, but why should anyone in America care?

Grant that a political confrontation like this is quite unsettling for the country involved. Honduras, only recently recovered from the effect of past authoritarian rule, has suffered from significant political strife, with the popular majority critical of Zelaya. However, instability in Honduras has little impact on the United States. Had not the Obama administration chosen to champion Zelaya's cause for reasons obvious only to itself, virtually no one in America would even have noticed the controversy.

Nor is the issue one of human rights. Zelaya has fomented demonstrations and threatened to launch an insurrection. The interim government responded in kind, leading to charges of overreacting. But any abuses are comparatively modest, not characteristic of a military dictatorship. Moreover, the Honduran legislative and presidential campaigns have proceeded freely, with the vote scheduled for November 29. Cuba or North Korea Honduras ain't.

What other reason could there be for the U.S. to interfere with Honduras' political crisis?

Certainly not because Washington is so good at constitutional interpretation and political restraint. Today the U.S. Constitution has only a vague relationship to the operation of the U.S. government. The basic document still controls the number of Senators and the age of the president, but not much more. Certainly the Constitution, an accord creating a national government of only limited, enumerated powers, no longer governs the activities of the federal Leviathan. Surely no Honduran, viewing the way that the U.S. Supreme Court has tortured the American Constitution until the latter confessed to all manner of legal atrocities, would want to import U.S. constitutional law into Honduras.

And if you were going to ask foreigners to help resolve a messy political

squabble, would the average Honduran choose the evidence-destroying liberal ideologue turned secretary of state and the Chicago ward-heeler turned president? No doubt the two want to intervene in as many foreign controversies as possible as a matter of principle: liberalism is built on the determination to meddle in other people's lives, so why stop at the border? But the majority of Hondurans have not welcomed Washington's not so kind attention.

Obviously, that hasn't stopped the administration from acting as the worst sort of Yanqui imperialist. First, it pulled aid to the Honduran military. Actually, it made sense to cut off American assistance, but Washington did so for the wrong reason.

The U.S. never should have been subsidizing Honduras. So-called development assistance just doesn't work -- Americans have wasted a trillion dollars over the last half century on government-to-government economic programs which failed to promote economic growth. And why has the U.S. been underwriting the Honduran military? American "aid" turned out to be just another interventionist tool for Washington to manipulate when convenient, as in this case.

The administration also canceled most visas for Hondurans to visit America. The State Department did not simply penalize those Hondurans directly involved in removing Zelaya from office. Washington imposed collective punishment against all Hondurans, presumably hoping that they would march on Tegucigalpa and demand Zelaya's return. That didn't happen, but some business leaders, disproportionately affected by the administration's attempt to isolate Honduras, eventually advocated yielding to U.S. blackmail.

Still, the Honduran authorities said no. The frustrated administration then threatened not to recognize the outcome of the upcoming election. The candidates were chosen before Zelaya's ouster, but President Obama and his aides were ready to destroy Honduran democracy in the name of saving it. About the only steps not taken were a trade sanctions and military invasion, measures typically limited to the most brutal regimes.

So far, however, the U.S. has resisted the temptation to seize control of Honduras in the name of the Honduran people. However, the Obama administration has continued to insist on a "compromise," meaning conceding Washington's demands. Interim Honduran President Roberto Micheletti said that Secretary Clinton has emphasized her "impatience," as if Honduras owed obedience to American politicians.

Under the recent accord, Honduras is supposed to reinstate Zelaya, though his return will require a vote of the Honduran congress, advised by the Honduran supreme court. A yes vote is not guaranteed, so U.S. officials apparently have been threatening legislators to do Washington's bidding, or else. Again, democratic process is being sacrificed in the name of promoting democracy.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exulted over the so-called compromise, calling it a "historic agreement." However, contrary to the common assumption in Washington, most people around the world are not waiting for the U.S. to show them the way to the future.

Americans always have been willing to help other peoples. But that doesn't mean Washington should make every other nation's problems America's problems. To the contrary, only Hondurans can solve their own problems. The U.S. government should learn when to mind its own business. Like in Honduras today.

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