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How to Save Democracy in Honduras

By Doug Bandow



Honduras will be holding an election next month. Washington is threatening not to recognize the result. Would the Obama administration prefer a full-blown military dictatorship take power?

The saga of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya has entered its fourth month. On June 28 the Honduras military, in response to an arrest warrant from the nation's Supreme Court, roused Zelaya from his bed and deported him.

Since then the U.S., the Organization of American States (OAS), and most of Honduras' neighbors have pressed for his return.

The controversy can best be described as a muddled mess. Zelaya's term was set to expire in January. But Zelaya, who moved sharply left after his victory and allied himself with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, proposed a National Constituent Assembly to amend the Honduran constitution.

Zelaya was suspected of wanting to follow Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez's example of using a national plebiscite to drop term limits, which are enshrined in the Honduran constitution. Indeed, the constitution specifies that to even propose their elimination is grounds for immediate removal from office.

The Honduran high court voided the poll. Zelaya attempted to hold the vote anyway, causing the Supreme Court to issue the warrant. The National Congress named legislative head Roberto Micheletti interim president.

The result is a perfect legal imbroglio. One of the few objective analyses, from the U.S. Congressional Research Service, concluded: "Available sources indicate that the judicial and legislative branches applied constitutional and statutory law in the case against President Zelaya in a manner that was judged by the Honduran authorities from both branches of the government to be in accordance with the Honduran legal system."

People can disagree with this conclusion, but the U.S. had no reason to get involved. The Micheletti government has been heavy-handed, especially after Zelaya covertly returned to Honduras and camped out at the Brazilian Embassy. However, this is not Cuba, in which liberty has been extirpated.

Nothing required Washington to do anything. Let the Hondurans work it out themselves.

Alas, Zelaya has become a cause celebre. Left-wing activists who earlier demonstrated denouncing U.S. intervention in Latin America now want Washington to "restore democracy" in Tegucigalpa.

The Obama administration, OAS, and neighboring countries insist that Zelaya be returned to power. The Micheletti government, backed by most of the nation's traditional power centers, refuses to consider any Zelaya restoration.

So the U.S. is attempting to force Tegucigalpa into line. The administration has suspended some foreign aid and frozen all non-immigrant visas.

The U.S. State Department also suggested that it might not accept the winner of the upcoming election. Spokesman Philip J. Crowley opined: "Based on conditions as they currently exist, we cannot recognize the results of this election. So for the de facto regime, they're now in a box."

Actually, this policy places the Honduran people in a box. The interim administration has nothing to do with the election — the holding of which offers further evidence that there was no real coup.

Balloting is scheduled for Nov. 29, with the new president to take over on Jan. 27. Which means the Obama administration is threatening to reject the free electoral choice of the Honduran people in order to pressure the outgoing authorities to give a

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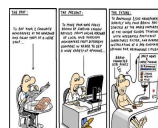
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former president of dubious legitimacy three more months in office.

The Obama administration's position would most hurt not the temporary regime, but its successor — headed by a president who would have replaced Zelaya even had the latter never been removed.

Moreover, what happens on Jan. 27 if the Honduran authorities still say no? Would the Obama administration refuse to recognize the new government because the previous administration refused to restore to power a man no longer authorized to serve under any interpretation of the Honduras' constitution?

How then would Washington allow Tegucigalpa to escape the box — delay the inauguration of a new chief executive so Zelaya could serve a couple more months as president?

Talk about being in a box: the Obama administration either would have to stick with sanctions which had lost their raison d'etre or make a humiliating climb-down from its moral high horse.

Washington is attempting to destroy democracy in the name of saving it. All the while behaving like the worst sort of Yanqui-imperialist from yesteryear. Ironically, successfully imposing an unpopular outcome via foreign diktat likely would deepen political divisions within Honduras.

Even if something important was at stake for America and other nations in the Zelaya controversy, neither side in Tegucigalpa wears all white or black hats. The crisis should be up to Hondurans, not outsiders, to resolve.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire" (Xulon Press). He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com.

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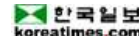
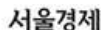
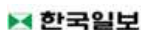
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