

The Honduran Coup: The Specter of Democracy, and of the Past

By Medea Benjamin

SOON AFTER SOLDIERS BURST INTO THE HONDURAN presidential palace at dawn on June 28, held President Manuel “Mel” Zelaya at gunpoint, and whisked him away to Costa Rica in his pajamas, the country’s elite declared Honduras safe for democracy. Zelaya had been plotting to crown himself “president for life,” according to Roberto Micheletti, the newly installed president, who conjured the specter of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez and his regional allies descending on Honduras to help Zelaya stage a Communist takeover.

In fact, Zelaya had called only for a non-binding poll, slated for the day he was deposed, on whether Hondurans favored convening a constituent assembly to rewrite the country’s constitution. The poll had nothing to do with extending Zelaya’s term in office, which was slated to end in January following the presidential election in November, in which he was not running. Rather, the referendum represented a push, coming from the grassroots, to follow the path of other countries in Latin America that have rewritten their constitutions to make them more inclusive, living documents. It was a push to transform Honduras from merely an electoral to a participatory democracy.

It’s ironic that Zelaya, a wealthy rancher and timber magnate elected on the ticket of the traditional Liberal Party, should have become a cause célèbre among social movements. But after coming to power in January 2006, he was pushed to the left by a variety of factors—among them, the failure of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which he once enthusiastically endorsed, and the havoc wreaked on Honduras by drug trafficking aimed at supplying the U.S. market. By 2008, Zelaya had joined the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), the trade and development alliance spearheaded by Venezuela, declared that drugs ought to be legalized, and taken ever more populist positions.

At a pro-Zelaya march in July, I asked Alejandra Sánchez, a young woman from the countryside who had traveled to Tegucigalpa, why she supported Zelaya.

“The government says he is guilty of 18 crimes for calling for the June 28 poll,” she said. “Do you know what his crimes really are? He raised the minimum wage, gave out free school lunches, provided milk for the babies and pensions for the elderly, distributed energy-saving lightbulbs, decreased the price of public transportation, made more scholarships available for students.”

As she spoke, a crowd gathered and started chiming in.

“He fixed the roads,” said one.

“He put schools in remote rural areas, like my little village, that never had them before,” someone else said.

“He let anyone go into the presidential palace and converted it from an elite residence to the people’s house,” added another.

“You see?” Sánchez said, smiling. “He is guilty of even more than 18 crimes. That’s why the elite classes can’t stand him and why they are cracking down on his supporters all over the country.”

On July 15 the Committee of Relatives of the Disappeared in Honduras (COFADEH), a group founded in 1982, released a report detailing more than 1,100 human rights violations committed by the Honduran government and security forces after the coup, including arbitrary detentions, assaults and murders, and media repression. On July 5, when Zelaya tried to fly home but was blocked by military tanks on the runway, the military opened fired on the demonstration that had gathered at the airport, killing Isis Murillo, 19, and injuring dozens.

The International Observation Mission on the Human Situation in Honduras, made up of representatives from 13 countries, released a preliminary report July 23 indicating that at least

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six political murders and two forced disappearances had taken place since the coup, all against Zelaya supporters, with some of the bodies bearing signs of torture. At the time of this writing, two more apparently political killings have taken place: Roger Vallejo, a teacher, was shot in the head at a peaceful pro-Zelaya march, and Martín Florencio, also a teacher, was stabbed 27 times after leaving Vallejo's wake.

"We all have this terrible fear that we are sinking back into the dark days of the 1980s," said indigenous leader Berta Cáceres as we walked home from the airport demonstration.

Indeed, the *golpistas*, or coup makers, include many well-known figures from the Reagan era of U.S.-sponsored counterinsurgency wars in Central America. Back then, Honduras served as a launching pad for the Contras, the U.S.-trained force that attacked Sandinista Nicaragua. In 1981 the U.S.

military opened the Soto Cano base (also known as Palmerola) to support the Contras; meanwhile, Honduras itself became the scene of brutal domestic repression, as death squad leaders trained at the Georgia-based School of the Americas targeted dissenters.

One of Micheletti's top security advisers, Billy Joya, was a member of the much hated Battalion 316, which tortured and disappeared students, union leaders, and other opposition activists. So was General Nelson Willy Mejía, the newly appointed director of immigration. The Honduran military has continued to receive millions of U.S. tax dollars every year, and both countries regularly conduct joint military exercises.

The Foreign Operations Appropriations Act requires that U.S. military aid and training be suspended when a country undergoes a military coup. Although President Obama initially condemned Zelaya's ouster as a coup,

his administration has backed off, even as every Latin American and European nation has cut off diplomatic relations with Honduras.

Most U.S. economic aid continues, and as of August 15, the administration had revoked the diplomatic visas of only four coup leaders. Meanwhile, the conservative Business Council of Latin America (CEAL) hired Lanny Davis, former president Clinton's impeachment lawyer and a friend of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to sell the coup in Washington.

"We need people in the United States to pressure President Obama to take stronger measures against the golpista government," said Rafael Alegria, an adviser to Zelaya on land reform. "We need the United States to freeze the accounts and deny visas to all coup leaders, cut all military and economic ties, condemn the repression and media censorship, and insist on Zelaya's return." ■

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practice and ideals of the Sandinista revolution. One need not idealize the Sandinistas of the past to come to this conclusion; just look at the facts.

The very candidacy of Ortega for the presidency in 2006 was rooted in opportunism and stood in sharp contrast to the platforms and campaigns that he and the Sandinista party ran on in 1984 and 1990. How else, other than opportunism, can one explain Ortega's pact with Arnoldo Alemán, a representative of the very Somoza regime that the Sandinista revolution overthrew in 1979? And then there is Ortega's public conversion to Catholicism under the auspices of Cardinal Miguel Ovando y Bravo, who did so much to undercut the Sandinista revolution in the 1980s. To further secure the support of the most reactionary sectors of the Catholic Church, Ortega then had the Sandinista party support legislation in the National Assembly banning all abortions, even in cases in which they would save women's lives.

Once in power, Ortega moved to establish a regime based on sectarianism and clientelistic politics, a far cry from the Sandinista government's openness in the 1980s and its close ties with nascent social movements. Indeed, Ortega has persecuted Sandinistas like Dora María Téllez with a particular vehemence precisely because they refuse to accept his authoritarianism within the Sandinista party. Last year's government raids of the offices of the Autonomous Women's Movement and the Center for Communications, because they allegedly "laundered" funds

from international organizations like Oxfam, stand as a dramatic illustration of the Ortega government's desperate efforts to destroy independent social organizations in Nicaragua.

The Nicaraguan constitution does not allow for the immediate reelection of a president after one five-year term, but Ortega is determined to run again in 2011, hoping he can rig the elections as he did the municipal voting in November 2008. Ortega knows he cannot win a plebiscite on reelection and is trying to forge a new pact with Alemán to change the constitution in the National Assembly. As my article was going to press in January, judges loyal to Ortega released Alemán from prison, where he was serving time for embezzling government funds. That same day deputies from Alemán's party began voting with the Sandinistas in the National Assembly, giving them a majority.

Ortega wants to use this majority to change the constitution such that Nicaragua adopts the French system, which provides for a president and a prime minister with no term limits. But it appears that Alemán, now free from jail, will have no part of this. Looking toward his own candidacy for president, Alemán, just before his party's political convention in July, made it clear that the deputies he controls in the assembly will not support presidential reelection nor change the political system. Ortega might be muttering to himself "Et tu, Arnoldo?" This crude power struggle is about as far removed from the ideals and practice of the Sandinista revolution as one can imagine. ■