

Obama's Honduran test

Dana Frank

Wednesday, July 1, 2009

The Honduran military surrounded the Presidential Palace in Tegucigalpa on Sunday morning, kidnapped President Manuel Zelaya in his pajamas and packed him off to Costa Rica in a plane. Within hours, a bare quorum of the Honduran Congress had sworn in Robert Micheletti, the president of Congress, as a new, bogus president, backed by the Honduran Supreme Court and the military.

Latin American heads of state have been quick to condemn this coup and isolate Micheletti. Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua have cut off commercial ties with Honduras. Along with them, every country in South America has withdrawn its ambassador.

But in response to this first Latin American coup since 1993, President Obama has been foot-dragging. On Sunday, he was merely "concerned" and urged the parties to resolve their differences "peacefully through dialogue" - after the military had already deported the president and seized the country at gunpoint. By Monday, he was condemning the takeover as illegal. But he has yet to take concrete action against it.

Why isn't Obama taking a stronger stance at this crucial turning point in Latin American politics?

Micheletti and his Honduran co-conspirators overthrew Zelaya because he was going forward with a national referendum on whether Hondurans should elect delegates to a Constitutional Convention later in the fall.

Micheletti claims Zelaya wanted the convention so he could machinate a second term. But we don't really know that.

We do know that ordinary Hondurans, after a century of military domination, are fiercely protective of the *cuarta urna*, or fourth ballot, in which they have the right to vote for a constitutional convention. They were about to turn out in huge numbers to protect that right. And the ruling oligarchs know that a constitutional convention might open the Pandora's box of popular demands in the face of poverty in Honduras - among the worst in Latin America.

Zelaya himself has been no friend of the Honduran masses. A rancher, born into the oligarchy, Zelaya has done almost nothing to alleviate poverty. But in the past two years, as the Latin American political wind has blown leftward, he's begun to ally himself with Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Nicaragua rather than remain politically isolated.

As a result, Zelaya's own party, the Liberal Party, and his heir apparent, Micheletti, have turned against him. The other longtime ruling party, the more right-leaning National Party, has been happy to endorse the coup as well.

With Zelaya out of the country, intense repression began. On Sunday morning, the Honduran military shut down all independent media outlets in the country, cut off cable television access from outside and seized government buildings nationwide. Journalists, ambassadors, opposition mayors, trade unionists and others continued to be arrested and held.

In response, the labor movement began a general strike on the north coast on Tuesday morning. Popular movements have set up anti-coup roadblocks all over the country. As of this writing, the crackdown has escalated. In El Progreso, police and the military attacked a demonstration led by the Coalition of Honduran Banana and Agro-industrial Workers, arrested 40 people, sent 10 to the hospital and evidently kidnapped two others, according to trade unionists in El Progreso.

Why isn't Obama doing more to stop all this? The administration says that the Honduran military surprised it with Sunday's coup and that the United States as late as Saturday told the military not to go forward with it. Whatever was said, those admitted conversations underscore the close ties between the United States and the Honduran military. Gen. Romeo Vasquez, the head of the Honduran military, who started the coup by refusing to distribute ballots last week, was trained at the School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) in Panama. The United States maintains a major air base in Honduras at Palmerola, from which Reagan famously started the Contra war against the Nicaraguan government in the 1980s.

It's time for Obama to make a clear break with the United States' interventionist past and aggressively join Latin American heads of state to immediately end the coup. The United States should immediately withdraw its ambassador to Honduras. The United States, too, should cut its commercial ties. Obama should shut down Palmerola Air Base now, and for good.

Zelaya, the legitimate president of Honduras, has announced he will return to Honduras on Thursday. As of this writing, Argentine President Christina Fernandez Kirchner and José Miguel Isulza, the president of the Organization of American States, have said they will accompany him on the plane, as has Rafael Correa, the president of Ecuador.

Join them on that plane, President Obama. It would have huge symbolic importance, signaling that the United States is willing to cast off a century of support for military dictatorships in Latin America and instead embrace a new era of Latin American politics.

Dana Frank is professor of history at UC Santa Cruz, and the author of "Bananeras: Women Transforming the Banana Unions of Latin America."

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This article appeared on page **A - 11** of the San Francisco Chronicle