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My Thoughts on Honduras

By: Robert E. White

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It appears that the crisis in Honduras is coming to a satisfactory conclusion. It is possible that things could still go badly wrong, but Assistant Secretary of State Tom Shannon has made it clear that unless Mel Zelaya sits in the presidential chair prior to the November 29 election neither the United States nor any other government of the hemisphere will recognize the election results. While we can expect some face-saving maneuvers and delays, it is reasonable to conclude that the coup is over and that it has failed.

I am worried by one statement that appeared in the Honduran press today attributed to Shannon in which he seems to say that regardless of how the congressional vote comes out the U.S. government would accept the result. If this is an accurate quote it could be asking for trouble.

As I looked back at the rationale for the present coup, I was struck by the many similarities between the coup of 1963 and the overthrow of the constitutional government in 2009.

In 1963, toward the end of his term of office, President Villeda Morales could look back with some satisfaction on his record. His reform program had included social security, welfare payments to the poor, and a labor code.



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Fearful that Villeda's likely successor, Modesto Rodas, would continue his program of moderate change, those who held the reins of economic power convinced the nation's military leaders that it was their patriotic duty to protect democracy by overthrowing President Villeda Morales and sending him into exile.

In 2009, toward the end of his term of office, President Mel Zelaya could look back with some satisfaction on his accomplishments. He had pushed through legislation to preserve the country's plundered forests, blocked efforts to privatize the national telecommunications company, revoked concessions to mining companies that harmed the environment, and raised the minimum wage. Encouraged by the broad appeal of his populist agenda, Zelaya scheduled a straw poll to determine public support for a constitutional convention to reform the constitution.

Fearful that the Honduran people might approve the reform referendum, and with it, the possibility of a second term in office—not for Zelaya, but for future presidents—those who hold the reins of economic power convinced congressional and military leaders that it was their patriotic duty to protect democracy by overthrowing President Zelaya.

In 1963, those who provoked the coup used their dominance of the press and radio to falsely accuse Villeda Morales of acting as a tool of Cuban leader Fidel Castro.

In 2009, those who provoked the coup used their dominance of the press and TV to falsely accuse President Zelaya of acting as a tool of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez.

In 1963, the successful coup ushered in a series of military dominated-governments that set limits on the exercise of civil liberties, including restrictions on free speech and assembly. Then, during the



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1980s the Honduran military, with U.S. help and encouragement, established the infamous Battalion 316 that tortured and killed citizens whose only crime was to oppose the use of Honduran territory as a launching pad to attack Nicaragua and destabilize the Sandinista government.

In 2009, the coup not only failed, it damaged, perhaps fatally, the cohesion of the Liberal party, and succeeded in creating a new sense of empowerment among the leadership of the poor.

For decades, most poor Hondurans have viewed politicians with indifference and contempt. Bishop Luis Santos Villeda spoke for them when he said "There has never been a real democracy in Honduras. All we have is an electoral system where the people get to choose candidates imposed from above." He accused the wealthy elites of overthrowing Mel Zelaya because "he defended the poor."

It was true that the genuine concern Mel Zelaya had displayed for the poor had to some extent shaken people out of their political lethargy and suddenly large numbers of poor Hondurans had a cause. Guided by leaders of labor union and campesino organizations, protest marches broke out across the country. One young woman, a teacher, told an onlooker: "I am not marching for Mel Zelaya, I am marching to demand the return of constitutional government."

During the past four months of sporadic repression and declarations of martial law, that young teacher and many thousands like her have experienced a political awakening. They have discovered that in a democracy, peaceful change is possible and that corrupt leaders may eventually fall to concerted action.



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These newly-minted democratic activists are also political realists. They understand that they are citizens of a small impoverished nation and require the support of the international community to achieve practical progress and to promote economic justice. They feel a justifiable pride that with the eyes of the world upon them, they have, with help from their hemispheric partners, gone a long way toward abolishing the stock description of Honduras as "the quintessential banana republic."

At the Summit of the Americas, President Obama promised a new vision for the Americas, a democratic Western Hemisphere composed of equal partners engaged with one another on a basis of common interest and shared values. When the Honduran military seized President Zelaya at gunpoint and forced him into exile, Obama immediately declared the overthrow "illegal" and said "we don't want to go back to a dark past."

While U.S. diplomats occasionally wavered in carrying out the presidential guidance, Assistant Secretary Thomas Shannon did not. He told those responsible for the results of this month's coup that elections would not be recognized by the Obama administration unless constitutional order was restored. Secretary Clinton talked to coup leader Roberto Micheletti who accused her of having a vocabulary limited to the one word: "restitution."

Those who argued that to bring back President Zelaya would only serve to extend the influence of President Chavez have it precisely wrong. Had President Obama failed to play a leading role in restoring constitutional government, he would have fulfilled the dreams of every anti-American demagogue who accuses the United States of talking democracy but practicing expediency.



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By refusing to be separated from our hemispheric partners, by working through the Organization of American States, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have played a key role in achieving a victory for democracy in the Western Hemisphere. The Organization of American States made an important contribution to the successful outcome by keeping pressure on the coup government and by reminding the lead actors, including the United States, of their duty and responsibilities under the charter.

Honduras is notorious for its economic inequality. The wealthy few who hold the means of power are literally above the law. These oligarchs have learned an expensive lesson. More than that, the coup they sponsored may have awakened the Honduran people from their long Rip Van Winkle sleep of political indifference.

It would not surprise me if Mel Zelaya did not fade into the role of Olancho cattle baron, but instead emerged as the symbolic leader and unifier of a new populist movement whose first objective would be the calling of a constitutional convention to draft a new governing document that would give elected leaders more power to curb the excesses of the Honduran economic elite.

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