

Obama and the Military Coup d'État in Honduras

By Arnold August, October 2011

The mirage of change supposedly brought about by the two-party competitive system of the democracy in the U.S. had its most devastating effect on the Honduran people, taking into account the first year since Obama's election.

José Manuel Zelaya was elected president of Honduras in 2006. In May 2008, he announced his government's intention to convert the U.S. Soto Cano (Palmerola) military base in Honduras into an international airport with the aid of Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA — Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of our America). Honduras joined this regional block in August 2008. The following analysis of the Obama administration policy on the Honduras coup is based mainly on a rigorous examination of the innumerable official White House and State Department statements and press briefings held from June 28, 2009, the day of the coup, until November 2009, with one update for October 5, 2011. Given the extensive list of references, they are all placed in successive endnotes in order to facilitate access.^{1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 13; 14; 15; 16; 17; 18; 19; 20; 21; 22; 23; 24; 25; 26; 27; 28; 29; 30; 31; 32; 33; 34; 35; 36; 37; 38; 39; 40; 41; 42; 43; 44; 45; 46; 47; 48; 49; 50; 51; 52}

On June 28, 2009, Hondurans were to vote in regular elections, but with a fourth ballot box. This vote was in the form of a poll asking if voters were in favour or not of holding a referendum in the future on the subject of holding a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution. In the very early morning of June 28, a group of fully armed U.S.-trained military personnel burst into Zelaya's house, kidnapped him and forcefully brought him to the U.S.-run military base in Soto Cano (Palmerola). From there, he was flown into exile in Costa Rica. The Obama administration admitted that it knew beforehand that this type of activity was to take place even though they refused to admit its involvement (skating around the issue); yet, it acknowledged that it has maintained contact with the Hondurans even after the coup had taken place.

In the five-month period under review, the Obama administration maintained one consistent view even though the words, terms and their relative emphasis to qualify the June 28 event were changing from time to time. This Obama position in real, practical terms was to fully support the coup and oppose the return of Zelaya as president. There was no difference between Obama and Clinton, as some proclaim, painting the former as a "dove" and the latter as a "hawk." On the first day of the coup

(June 28), Obama in a formal statement did not call it a coup and made an appeal for both sides to respect democratic norms. He placed the coup perpetrators (“golpistas,” as they are known in Honduras) on the same footing as the expelled Zelaya. At the same time, Obama provides credibility to the military, who falsely charged Zelaya with organizing a referendum that would have been anti-constitutional, for their excuse for the coup; in fact, the fourth ballot box was only a poll, completely legal according to the Constitution. Obama did not call at that time for the unconditional restoration of Zelaya as the legally constituted president. In order to show continuity to the Trinidad and Tobago Summit-projected “new face,” Obama said that the issue should be “resolved peacefully through dialogue and without outside interference.” As the situation evolved, both Obama and Clinton soon had to use the word “coup” and even called for the return of Zelaya to Honduras as president. This shift in wording took place because the Organization of American States (OAS) passed resolutions under the pressure of the furious Latin-American states on June 28 and again on July 5. The resolutions not only labelled June 28 as a coup d’état, but also called for the return of Zelaya as president and the expulsion of Honduras from the OAS as long as the golpistas ran the country. Obama was forced to change some wording in order to save face. This was done in order to try to remain part of the family of the Americas, as promised in Trinidad and Tobago. However, for Obama “the return of Zelaya” had to pass through a mediation process sponsored and led by the U.S. and the golpistas. On both occasions when Zelaya attempted to return to Honduras, on July 5 by airplane accompanied by an international Latin-American delegation and on July 24 by land from neighbouring Nicaragua, the Obama administration opposed his return and thus supported the golpistas’ continuing hold on power. This position was fully supported by the golpistas leader, Michelitti, in a *Washington Post* op-ed. The reluctant sheriff proved to be not so unwilling or averse to play the role of sheriff when it came to opposing the only concrete way in which Zelaya could return as president.

The U.S. 2009 Appropriations Act, approved by the U.S. Congress, Section 7008, bluntly entitled “Military Coups,” states that “none of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available ... shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by *military* coup or decree” (emphasis added). The U.S. had to pay lip service to the term “coup,” from the time of the first reporters’ question on June 29 to November (close to six months) as to whether the U.S. is legally considering it to be a “military” coup or just a coup. The answer was always

the same both in the State Department and White House. On every one of the numerous occasions when the issue was raised by reporters, the State Department and White House spokespersons delayed the answer, indicating that no legal decision had yet been taken. This shows the real sheriff nature of the Obama administration. If it had legally ruled the coup to be a military coup, the U.S. would have been obliged to withdraw far more military and economic aid than the largely symbolic extraction it took after the coup. While some aid was withdrawn, funds through the NED (National Endowment for Democracy) and USAID (United States Agency for International Development) “democracy promotion” programs were still being put into the hands of the golpistas and their political parties. A decision to classify legally the coup as a military one according to Section 7008 would have major political implication: a military coup had taken place while the U.S. is still involved with the golpista government.

Using different terminology over the months as well as different tactics, such as U.S.-led negotiations and mediation, the basic goal was to stall, maintain the military regime in power and, under its aegis, to organize so-called elections, thus “legitimizing” the coup. The Frente, as the alternative political power to the golpistas at the grass-roots level, refused to field a candidate as the election was fraudulent, being held under the auspices of the U.S.-backed coup regime. In addition, the main candidates were those who had actually participated in the coup. The Frente organized a massive abstention campaign. In order for the elections to be considered legitimate on the international scale, the U.S. and the golpistas needed at least a 50 percent voter turnout. In order to create the impression that the majority voted, the electoral council fraudulently announced the night of the elections that more than 60 percent had turned out, while even a U.S.-backed NGO (nongovernmental organization) claimed that only 48.7 percent voted; and so, much later on, the official electoral council had to revise its figures down to a 49 percent voter turnout. However, it was too late; the impression was given internationally that the majority had participated in the electoral process. The Frente for its part in its own estimate calculated that the voter turnout was as low as 35–40 percent. One of the main collaborators of the golpistas, Lobo, came out on top as president in elections that were boycotted by the anti-golpista Frente. It considered the polling to be illegitimate. The U.S. and much of the international community in North America and Europe recognized the regime. Elections in such circumstances are the preferred manner in which the U.S. has traditionally sanctified regimes to its liking, even if they are born out of military coups. On October 5, 2011, Obama received in the White House Honduran President Lobo. Side by side with Lobo,

Obama remarked that the coup in Honduras in 2009 “threatened to move the country away from democracy... [and for various reasons] and also because of the strong commitment to democracy and leadership by President Lobo, what we’ve seen is a restoration of democratic processes.” Notice that he says that the coup only “threatened” democracy, returning to his original statement of June 28, the day of the coup when he completely understated the nature of it. Both Obama and Lobo conveniently shut their eyes to the ongoing violent repression and assassination against Frente leaders, journalists and farmers. Neither Obama nor Lobo mentioned Zelaya or the new political party emerging out of the Frente. From the U.S. media, there has been a virtual stony silence, on the one hand, about the violent repression and, on the other hand, the increasingly important role and political standing of the Frente and its new electoral arm. This blackout makes it easier for the U.S. and its allies to manipulate the elections as the basic information is kept away from international public opinion.

While Obama presented the “new face” of the U.S. financial oligarchy in Trinidad and Tobago in April 2009, plans were already under way to establish and/or expand seven U.S. military bases in Colombia. However, this was revealed only on August 18, 2009, two months after the military coup d’état in Honduras. This provoked very strong reaction by many Latin-American heads of states, while others asked for Obama to come and explain or justify this to them.

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