

## ***Coup***

### **Why Europe and the UN are mistaken concerning Honduras**

Christian Lüth, Project Director, Friedrich Naumann Foundation Tegucigalpa, Honduras

*The United States, Europe and the United Nations have solely shown support for the ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. By doing so, they are however doing wrong those that ousted Zelaya. After all the supposed putsch was decided upon by the elected representatives of the people and it was done so as to preserve the country's constitution.*

Honduras, a small and for many an unknown country, has had to endure many misfortunes. Laid between Maya Temples and Caribbean beaches Honduras with its friendly people has much to offer. Nevertheless it has had to brace natural catastrophes such as Hurricane “Mitch” in 1999 from which the country has yet to fully recover. Just like the people the capital – Tegucigalpa – is friendly and slightly dozy. With just about one million inhabitants living in a tightly built city it also rather belongs to the provincial parts of Central America.

This is part of the reason why people there have been so unsettled by the latest events. When just a few days ago people would discuss soccer – the latest sensation being that the national team kept alive their chances of participating at the World Cup in South Africa – and the latest soaps in supermarkets and canteens, now there is no other topic than the political events. The current curfews have brought the enjoyable evenings in the capital to an abrupt ending.

It has been 33 years since this slow-paced folk had to endure the last coup d'état. Back then the military junta violently took over power and governed Honduras with an iron fist until 1981. With that in mind it is easy understandable that the world's public, foremost the EU-States, felt reminded of that time in the first moment of shock when, last Sunday, they learned that the President of Honduras had been deprived of power by the military.

When in the middle of the night an ousted President is flown out of the country by the military while still in his pajamas just to appear half an hour later on all TV channels in exactly that dress, it is easy to understand that one feels reminded of military coups. Even more so when the accusation of a state coup is made by the military. This image is only reassured by the fact that the new ruler proclaimed a gag order for all news the next day, praised the military and let himself be shown and photographed in a victory pose with them.

From afar this must seem like a violent coup by rightwing militaries in Honduras. Why look more closely, why ask more questions? The toppled president has to be returned and reinstated right away, democracy has to be reestablished. It is a scandal that such a thing could happen in this day and age anyway!

What a pity that next to nobody did care to ask more questions on June 28<sup>th</sup> and on the following days. If they had, they would have noticed that this “military coup” was ordered by the lawfully elected representatives of the people, the members of the national parliament

and the Supreme Court – with a parliamentary majority of 124 to four votes – crossing all party lines. Another piece not fitting the puzzle of a military coup is an arrest warrant for the ousted president which was a result of a number of pending court cases. How does this all fit together?

### **Zelaya substantially has to blame himself**

The current political development surrounding the ousted president “Mel” Zelaya begins not only on June 28<sup>th</sup>, the day of his disempowerment. Zelaya has a long political history and he himself substantially is at fault for his disposition. There are reasons why nearly nobody has critically questioned the toppled president, or analyzed the political development in Honduras in a differentiated and neutral way: for the last few weeks and months, nobody really was interested in the political developments of Honduras and now Zelaya presents himself as the victim, a role he played to perfection during the last few days.

After the European Council in Korfu and the United Nations General Assembly reacted accordingly, requesting the reinstatement of Zelaya and denouncing the “military coup” the situation was just as Zelaya wanted it to be. Just one thing: There never was a military coup – *that* everyone who knows the situation in Honduras agrees upon – diplomats, journalists, but most importantly the Honduran people, who can barely believe what is being written and reported about what they are experiencing.

The Honduraneans’ view is the following: Parliament and Judiciary acted entirely constitutional, the military did not get involved in political decisions, but rather was following orders given by the Attorney General and the Supreme Court. After doing so the army retreated into the barracks. No general is in power, quite to the contrary: the majority of the newly sworn-in cabinet members already were members of Zelaya’s government. No sign of a military junta.

### **Zelaya aimed for endless government**

In reality Zelaya was able to get out of his self-made tight spot in the last minute in which he had put himself by repeatedly breaking the law. This is the key to understanding the parliament’s decision and the actions of the military. For example Zelaya refused to sign this year’s budget so as to prevent the elections whose dates preassigned by the constitution. This would have worked since the preparations for the November 2009 elections would have had to be covered by the budget. The president’s critics claim that Zelaya wanted to prevent the financing of the elections of his successor which would have meant that he could have stayed in office for a longer period of time than the constitution permits.

Especially questionable, but definitely unconstitutional, is the “referendum” initiated by Zelaya. This referendum was supposed to be held just hours after he was removed from power. The goal of the referendum was to ask the people if, in November – parallel to the presidential elections – they would want to decide on a – again not constitutional – referendum concerning the arrangement of a “constituent assembly”. However neither the referendum nor the “constituent assembly” is called for in the Honduran constitution. Thus Zelaya effectively was trying to get around the democratic institutions of the country. The reason was that he would never have reached the three quarter majority in parliament required to change the constitution. Even if he may now deny it, it is still obvious: He wanted to enable his re-election which following the constitution would have impossible.

The situation escalated when Zelaya ordered the armed forces support him logistically in his attempt to conduct the unconstitutional referendum, and the armed forces' leadership – backed by a decision of the Attorney General – denied this request. Zelaya consequently deposed of the military leadership. He accepted that his conduct could result in a constitutional crisis, since the Armed Forces in Honduras report to the president but of course also have the duty to protect the constitution.

### **Disempowerment occurred so as to protect the constitution**

If one follows the chain of events, the deposition of Zelaya looks quite different: the disempowerment Zelaya's was conducted by the military, however in a correct manner and under the supervision and order of the judiciary and the parliament. Thus one can not speak of a "military junta" currently holding power in Honduras. Rather the speaker of the parliament took control of the government in the name of the parliament. This is exactly what the constitution calls for in such situations: a speaker who sticks to the parliamentary elections in November and assumes responsibility for the country during this interim period.

The Parliament's Vice-president, Mary Elizabeth Flores, adds: "The world should know that CNN has informed it wrongly. It is necessary for the international community to be informed correctly and to know who the real enemy of the constitution is." This is exactly how those demonstrating on Tegucigalpa's Plaza Central see it. They protest against "Mel" Zelaya returning and go to the streets to demand peace. Marvin Redono, an employee of a private phone company: "If Mel had been to remain in power we all could have packed up". "Just imagine", he says, "he wanted to govern forever! We do not want a Hugo Chávez copy in Honduras!"

### **Honduras needs mediation instead of sanctions**

The situation has not been defused yet. Zelaya still wants to return to power: He would be sure of the support of the United States and the international community and would – if necessary with military support from Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez – return to office within 72 hours. In the meantime Chávez is not letting any doubt come up about his commitment to support Zelaya: "We will dispossess Micheletti" [the leader of coup] he rants; claiming that troops at the Honduran-Nicaraguan border were ready to do so. This is the greatest fear of Hondurans at the moment – loss of their national sovereignty and outside interference. In the meantime Micheletti offered to pull ahead the presidential elections, so as to leave no doubt about his intent to defuse the crisis.

Precisely because the two opponents feel so strongly that they are occupying both the moral and legal high ground the situation is so dangerous. It calls for international mediation. Honduras won't be helped if Micheletti simply insists on the constitution in this standoff, while the dreadfully poor country suffers under international political and economical sanctions. Thus the situation calls for a neutral and experienced international mediator. At the same time it is however necessary for the international media to show a realistic picture of the situation in Honduras.

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