



On June 28, the Honduran military ousted elected President Manuel Zelaya and installed in his place Roberto Micheletti, president of the Honduran Congress. Most American news organizations labeled the event a “coup,” and so did every country in the hemisphere. In contrast to the Bush administration’s embrace of a coup against President Hugo Chávez in 2002, President Obama joined the chorus of condemnation.

So why has the Obama administration been subject to so much domestic criticism for refusing to recognize the new government? Have American news media accurately conveyed the degree of U.S. resolve to restore Zelaya? Is there anything to the claim that the media got the story wrong in the first place—that is, that the military’s action was not really a coup but a defense of the Honduran constitution against an illegal grab for power by Zelaya?

merly known as the “School of the Americas,” at Fort Benning, Georgia.

- The “constitutional referendum was not focused on extending Zelaya’s term limit. The referendum on the constitution marked the beginning of a popular process of participative democracy, which is extremely threatening to the local and transnational elites.”

These first four claims go to sins of omission, but the fifth goes to the heart of an issue that has become a drumbeat among conservative pundits and is frequently raised in blogs and op-eds, including a widely circulated one by Roberto Micheletti.

An initial spate of reporting suggested that anything less than the restoration of Zelaya would encourage coups elsewhere. President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica endorsed the position that Zelaya be re-installed with his powers curtailed.

From the very start, American news outlets have stressed Zelaya’s friendship with Chávez as an ominous sign. For example, an Associated Press story that ran on the front page of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch (“Honduran President is Ousted by Military,” June 29) had this lead: “Soldiers ousted the democratically elected president of Honduras on Sunday, and Congress named a successor, but the leftist ally of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez denounced what he called an illegal coup and vowed to stay in power.”

The Post relied almost exclusively on abbreviated wire service reports. The best local coverage was provided on July 14 by Eric Becker in the St. Charles edition of the Suburban Journals, not normally known for international news.

Becker’s story told of the difficulties besetting “Because We Care,” an effort by a St. Charles couple to

provide health and education support for poor children.

Becker reported that the couple’s main contact in Honduras backed the ouster of Zelaya, invoking fear of his alliance with Chávez and accusing the Honduran president of undermining democracy. But Becker accurately reported on the complex opinions held by Hondurans and the opposition of the country’s teachers to the coup, something many prestigious news outlets have failed to do.

Becker also was perhaps the only mainstream reporter in the U.S. to report accurately that Micheletti himself tried to change the Honduran constitution in 1985 to extend the terms of then-president Roberto Suazo Cordoba.

What does Zelaya want?

To implement “citizen power” Zelaya would have to confront the power of his own social and political class. Elites in Honduras had come to rely heavily on the military to keep popular movements for change in check. To keep their own competition from drawing military intervention, and to comply with the global pressure to democratize, the often fractious political elite decided to include in the 1982 constitution a clause limiting the president to one term.

Although often portrayed as a violation of the constitution’s prohibition on using a referendum to amend it, in fact Zelaya’s referendum was advisory, so at least technically it would not violate the constitution. Furthermore, it was to be held simultaneously with the election for a new president, so it would not have resulted in his re-election. Yet, there is little use denying that Zelaya was aiming at constitutional change and



A Washington Post editorial on June 30 condemned the “arrest and deportation by the country’s military” but went on to call Zelaya a “threat to democracy.” On July 2, the Washington Times editorialized that the Obama administration “stands with tyrants.”

Distortions in the media

The Dominion, a Canadian media cooperative of independent journalists, lists “five things that the corporate media don’t want you to know about the coup in Honduras.”

- The coup was “carried out on behalf of corporate and transnational elites.”
- Corporations have been bussing employees to pro-coup marches.
- Zelaya is really a centrist who moved left because of popular pressure for change at home.
- The coup and subsequent repression are being carried out by officers who have trained at WINSEC. for-

hoped someday to return to the presidency.

In January 2007, Zelaya gave his own account of why he had chosen to confront the country's political elite. "Undoubtedly, the principal problem of Honduras is that its political system throughout history has conceded laws, contracts, privileges and concessions that favor certain sectors but discriminate immorally against the great majority of the Honduran nation."

Proposing sweeping constitutional changes, he argued, "It is not possible for the President alone to make these changes. . . . it requires the cooperation of other powers of the state, of the owners of capital, of the means of production, of the private sector, of the owners of the means of communication, of journalists, and of the people in general."

The Supreme Court and Congress rejected the referendum as unconstitutional according to the present charter. Zelaya then led a march to a warehouse in order to seize ballots and deploy them in the election. When the military commander subsequently refused to follow the president's order, Zelaya tried to fire him, prompting the coup.

However, a number of problems cropped up immediately in the story as told by coup supporters. Initially, the military announced that Zelaya had actually resigned in a written notice, but then in the face of denials by the president the coup-makers could not produce the letter. Then, a number of Honduran politicians backing the coup admitted that even if the ouster was constitutional, the virtual kidnapping of the president by masked soldiers who immediately flew him out of the country was not in any way legal.

Colonel Bayardo Inestroza, the military adjutant general, who advised the coup makers on legal matters, contended the military had to act as it did to "avoid a bloodbath," acknowledging that Zelaya's supporters would have massively protested the president's jailing inside the country. "We committed a crime," said the military lawyer, "but we had to do it."

The Honduran media

To this mixture must be added the influence of the Honduran media, which are owned by the same economic elite that controls the economy based on agricultural exports and labor intensive manufacturing. The reorientation of this economy implied by Zelaya represented a direct attack then on the economic interests of those who own the media.

"A small group of powerful entrepreneurs linked together by commercial, political and family ties own the majority of communications media in the country." This conclusion was drawn in 2008 by the Bush administration in the State Department's annual human rights report. Honduras has four national circulation newspapers that are owned by three families, with most radio and television stations controlled by a fourth group. The three most important television stations are owned by a single family, Ferrari, which also dominates radio.

In May 2007, Zelaya complained that the media refused to cover the accomplishments of his administration, especially in education. Taking a page from the Chávez playbook, he began to periodically demand that the country's media broadcast his speeches. The media owners refused. To add fuel to fire, the Supreme Court, composed of judges drawn from the two mainstream parties, attempted to force Zelaya to sell the frequency of the state television station to the private group Teleunsa.

In October 2007, Zelaya traveled to Miami to denounce the Honduran media before the InterAmerican Press Association (IAPA). The media oligopoly, he said, "is limiting the right to information and freedom of expression of all Hondurans."

In 2008, the French Press Agency (AFP) denounced the sorry state of journalism in Honduras. In an investigative report, a special rapporteur for the Organization of American States found "disquiet in many sectors over the low ethics of certain journalists and communications media that are motivated by personal interest, economics or to harm the honor of people."

The AFP investigation, coauthored by the Honduran representative for the United Nations Program for Development, charged that "corrupt journalism navigates on a sea of impunity in the country" and reported on many threats against reporters. Radio and television journalists were especially susceptible to bribery, said the AFP.

PR offensive in US

Coverage of Honduras has focused on two sides of a three-sided battle for public opinion. Supporters of Zelaya generally gain access to the American public only via alternative news shows, like Democracy Now! and Internet sites. The Obama administration and some liberal outlets promote the point of view that "both sides are wrong and should compromise"—that is allow Zelaya back but stripped of power. Meanwhile, Micheletti's supporters have waged a counter-offensive against the characterization of Zelaya's ouster as a coup, hiring some high-powered Washington lobbyists and lawyers to make the case.

An AP report (July 21) characterized the Hondurans trying to influence Washington as "the soldiers, politicians and businessmen who ousted left-leaning President Manuel Zelaya" and said they are "waging a lobbying campaign to paint themselves as a bulwark against 'dictatorship' and 'communism'."

Kevini Bogardus reported in The Hill on July 28 that seven trade associations affiliated with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce wrote a letter to President Obama stating, "Predictability and stability are absolutely critical to U.S. companies, especially in these difficult economic times. Key to that predictability is that the United States maintain a secure bilateral and regional economic relationship with Honduras."

Robert White, former ambassador to El Salvador, summarized the story behind the coup—the story missing in accounts stressing respect for the Honduran constitution—this way: "Coups happen because very wealthy people want them and help to make them happen; people who are used to seeing the country as a money machine and suddenly see social legislation on behalf of the poor as a threat to their interests. The average wage of a worker in free trade zones is 77 cents per hour." ■

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MEDIA AMNEISIA ON HUMAN RIGHTS IN HONDURAS

By DAN HELLINGER

Should news coverage of the Honduran crisis provide context in the form of human rights abuses that happened 25 years ago?

Consider the response of Colonel Bayardo Inestroza, the military's top lawyer, to the question of whether the Honduran military was more comfortable with a right-wing military commander than a left-wing one. Inestroza replied, "In 1980, when I was a second lieutenant, we found subversive movements here, and we were the only ones that didn't have a fratricidal war. It would be difficult for us with our training to have a relation with a leftist government. This is impossible."

In the early 1980s, Honduras was used as a secure base for U.S. training and support of the Contras army trying to reverse the Sandinista, and for training and support of the Salvadoran military, which was fighting to repulse a leftist insurgency. During the confirmation hearing on John Negroponte's nomination to be the first Director of National Intelligence, Human Rights Watch urged he be asked to explain his record as ambassador to Honduras.

HRW said, "Negroponte served in Honduras from 1981 to 1985, when the Honduran security forces were implicated in the abduction, torture, and murder of scores of people. Despite these abuses, the country was receiving millions of dollars of U.S. military aid, training and operational support."

Conditions have not improved much. In 2007, the U.S. State Department reported the following "human rights problems" in the country: "Unlawful killings by members of the police, arbitrary and summary executions committed by vigilantes and former members of the security forces, the disappearance of a former dissident, beatings and other abuse of detainees by security forces, harsh prison conditions, failure to provide due process of law, lengthy pretrial detention, political interference in the judicial system, judicial corruption and institutional weakness, illegal searches, erosion of press freedom, violence and discrimination against women, child prostitution and abuse, trafficking in persons, discrimination against indigenous people, discrimination against persons based on sexual orientation, ineffective enforcement of labor laws, and child labor."

An International Observer Mission of 15 different European and Latin American human rights organizations have documented at least nine slayings of grass-roots leaders opposed to the coup, as well as threats against many journalists, intellectuals, and progressive Catholic clergy.

Reporters may have a hard time sorting out the claims and counterclaims on human rights in Honduras. The country's National Commission on Human Rights is appointed by the government. In this particular case its members owe their selection to Roberto Micheletti, in his capacity of president of Congress and head of the Liberal Party.

Ramón Custodio heads the commission, and his job is to provide cover for Micheletti on human rights issues. For example, on July 3, the military shut down Radio Globo, the only station willing to report on the coup. When a reporter for the station called Custodio to

complain, she says he responded, "Why are you speaking about what you shouldn't be speaking about?"

Before the coup, Custodio referred to Zelaya's supporters as a mob. After the shooting of several anti-coup demonstrators, Custodio dismissed charges that the military was responsible, saying that the bullets were of a different caliber than those used by the army.

Human rights groups independent of the government tell a different story about conditions than does Custodio. A United Nations mission to investigate media conditions since the coup reports that uncooperative media have largely been militarized. The owner of the small TV Atlantica (Channel 26) told the delegation that his station was explicitly warned by the military not to transmit any information not provided by the de facto government. The mission detailed many incidents of threats against independent journalists, blocked transmissions, and interference with Internet communications. One journalist, Gabriel Fino Noriega, reporter for Radio Estelar, was assassinated by paramilitaries.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, which often severely criticizes the Venezuelan government, has condemned various acts of violence and intimidation against journalists, but the Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) has maintained a stony silence. A search of the group's web site in late July found no press release commentaries on the situation in Honduras since late 2007. Since the coup, of 21 press releases issued by the "Impunity Project," which operates out of the IAPA's headquarters in Miami, only one was on Honduras—the discovery of the body of a journalist missing for three months. ■

SARAH PALIN

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short political resume became prima facie evidence of small-town values. Her lack of education, credentials or professionalism was transmuted by similar alchemy into populism. While not particularly truthful or accurate, she uses colorful language and name-calling as the mannerisms of forthrightness and thus cultivates an image of candor, rather like George W. Bush.

It is uncertain whether Palin will be able to sustain that role, now that she will be making much more money on one hand, but without upholding the responsibilities of elected office on the other. The current consensus of punditry—that she has a lock on the Republican "base"—may be simplistic. The genuinely religious portion of the conservative "base" tends to prefer modest means as well as modest credentials, in its public heroes.

Meanwhile, however, the corporate-funding brick in the "base" will undoubtedly support Palin. Her first major public relations offensive has been her well-publicized accusations, later dialed back, that health insurance reform includes "death panels" to kill off old people and people with disabilities. Whatever becomes of Palin's relationship with grass-roots Christian conservatives of modest means, the corporate-lobbying brick in the base should remain tight for her. ■

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