



**Honduras:
the military has played out the
clock on the November elections**



Our interest as we analyze Honduras is not to complete a deep review of influences and events. This is important for the understanding of the coup, but right now we want to look at what is at play in the nation and society of Honduras, and try to trace a way forward in which the social and political problems exposed in the coup can be moved toward paths of resolution based on a realistic sense of public opinion.

There has been plenty of mischief in the origins, execution and consequences of the Honduras coup of this summer. There has been even more loose talk and posturing, but the fundamental fact is that the coup government has played out the clock,¹ and there can be no valid election in November under the current circumstances, and no ordinary transmission of power to a new administration.

It is all about elections. That was the trigger for the coup, and it will be the heart of the way forward. It was always about elections, or the distortion of the electoral process, or the negation of the electoral process. This puts the problem squarely in the area of the development of democratic institutions for Honduras.

Elections require party candidates in competition, reasonably balanced available media for all sides, and a solid electoral procedure. This can be done to redeem the current impasse, especially if it is to be done mainly by Hondurans and with a new clock and calendar. The core issues, underlying all the fussing, are three:

- 1) Honduras is a very poor society, exceeded in the indices of poverty only by Haiti in this Hemisphere, and its people have been ill served for decades by the small economic/political elite in both the Liberal and National parties, with some tentative moments of reform, inevitably cut short by military coups. Opinion polling is showing that the banner held up by Zelaya has become a rallying point for poor people in the country, not because Zelaya has the answers, but because the circumstances of his destitution have created something like another Central American earthquake.



¹ The clock metaphor was used in an August 15, 2009 NYT editorial, but it is worth exploring a bit. In basketball, when one team is playing out the clock the other team needs to force play, opening up turnovers, shot clock violations, out of bounds and fouls. When the pressure needs to be highest, there has to be a full court press. From the beginning of the crisis, the OAS and the Constitutional President were forcing play, but no one was doing a full court press.



- 2) Current polling shows that Honduras is a very divided society, with divisions manifest in rural and urban populations, in churches, in government institutions, in the political parties, even within the military itself. These divisions can only be worked out over time in an extended process of democratic elections and reforms, and such a process will need the general support of the political parties and the confidence of their social bases.
- 3) Historical studies have shown that the Honduran Army has never been reticent about intervening in the politics of the country.² There may be some evidence of outside influence and manipulation of the military in the current coup, but in Honduran history the army is the army and on balance the challenge is not to explore conspiracies as much as to bring under control this oversized political institution.³

What is the way forward? A road map is not our specialty, but we can see some of the markers, even from here:

- ▶ The timing of the elections set for November 29, 2009 is now a straight jacket, especially in the context of current confusion, the emergency decree (set to expire in November 11th), the complex media situation (an open and truly fair media being the sine qua non for an election of this significance), and the need for enough reconciliation to give confidence to the whole process.
- ▶ Personalities and traditional institutions will continue to play outsized roles, as in any crisis, but the fundamental roles could best be played by the political parties, taking on more responsibility and assuming more initiative. There are the two traditional parties, and a third likely new party in gestation: the Nationalists (who have won power in two of the last six national elections, and whose current candidate is probably the frontrunner in the current election); the Liberals (who have won in four of the last six national elections, but who are now divided as Zelaya's Vice President resigned last year to prepare his own run); and, a new party in process of forming from anti-coup liberals, nationalists and the still inchoate elements of the resistance to the coup. Some time should be given to this process, though it is likely to require weeks not months, at least for the next election.

² Reviewing the historical studies, we can find scores of coups, depending on how one counts a coup. In the period since the Second World War there have been five: in 1956 Roque Juan Rodriguez was deposed in favor of Ramon Villeda Morales (not a military man himself); then, just 10 days before finishing his term, Dr. Villeda was overthrown when the election appeared to be heading toward a candidate who represented continuity with some of the new reforms of Villeda in 1963; General Oswaldo Lopez took over, and was formally elected in 1965; Lopez' own handpicked successor was overthrown by him in 1972; returning to the Presidency by coup, General Lopez himself served again but was overthrown in 1975 by even more conservative elements in the army, headed by General Juan Alberto Melgar, who was replaced in 1978 by General Policarpo Paz Garcia.

³ The Army, in fact, may be the most developed political institution in the country, in historical terms but its coups have not brought stability, nor have the some 31 different constitutions enjoyed by Honduras over time been respected. Given the Army's importance and role it would not be surprising if the army itself is the site of political conflict and internal debate.



► The Honduran electoral commission can be supported and its capacities upgraded by an international consortium with experience in Latin America. The US State Department has backed off on economic and technical assistance to the Commission as one of its pressures on the coup government, but an adequate assistance would require more than just US aid in any event; neighbors El Salvador, Costa Rica and Panama would be able and could do what is required with grace.

► International observation and monitoring will be inevitable, but it needs to be of high quality and not contentious.

► As important as the international observation and monitoring of the elections themselves would be observation and monitoring of the media so that the parties and candidates are confident of a fair shake.

► Dickey as this issue is, those who can restrain the military need to do so, if this process is to avoid the darker traditions of Honduran history. This includes those national as well as international elements who can make sure this process is a break with the past. There have already been enough coups, and there has been more than enough mischief in the current process.

This is the institutional core that can guarantee the initiation of a transition: let people wrestle over who gets credit for forcing the transition, or concluding this step of the transition, but for now let the election process be respected internally and externally. This will be but the first step in a series of Honduran political transitions, affecting not only elections but the military itself.

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