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## Not So Fast, Amigas y Amigos

Robert Killebrew

The United States has always had mixed feelings about our relationship with Central America, so when the Honduran Army sent President Manuel Zelaya packing last week, we joined with a chorus of regional leaders, including Fidel Castro and Hugo Chavez, in condemning the soldier's *putsch*.

But now that we've exercised our moral indignation, we ought to step back and take a deep breath. As reports continue to come in, it appears that it was Zelaya, not the army, that was most egregiously breaking the law. The president was apparently involved in his own takeover, against the courts and Honduran Congress, and was about to stage a Chavez-style "referendum" on ballots printed in Venezuela and looted from an army warehouse where they were being safeguarded. The army's move was legitimized by the Honduran Supreme Court and applauded by the Congress, which has appointed a stand-in president until regular elections this November.

Certainly we deplore military coups, just as we deplore sin. But in the tangled web of Central American politics, Honduras has long been the U.S.' most staunch ally. Among the four states from Nicaragua north, it has tried hardest to convert from a military-run banana republic to a constitutional democracy and, until just the other day, with some success. It supported U.S. trainers in the Salvadoran civil war. It houses an American military joint task force. At our request, Honduran soldiers fought in Iraq. So while the verdict must be that military takeovers are bad, surely in this case there are extenuating circumstances for a faithful ally, particularly since the bottom-line issue seems to have been the survival of its constitutional form of government.

In some respects, the Administration's swift condemnation has overtones of high-minded objections to U.S. policy in the mid-1980s, when the Reagan Administration fought a backdoor war in Central America to prevent Soviet encirclement of the United States. Honduras was the indispensable ally in that war. The American Left remains furious at the all-too-real atrocities committed during that war, which the U.S. and its mostly-reformed allies eventually won. But in the geopolitics of the time, the dirty civil wars in the region were only a backdrop to a growing and menacing Soviet presence very near our borders, like the East German military engineers I saw there in 1987 and the huge Soviet-built military airport that still lies on the eastern shore of Lake Managua.

As in those days, the Honduran coup needs to be seen in a larger, regional context. Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez may strike many Americans as a clown, but he is persistently steamrolling his way to dictatorship at home, and hatching profoundly anti-U.S. policies abroad.

Chavez is proof of the efficacy of concentrated hostility, particularly toward U.S. allies in the region. Venezuelan support for the Colombian drug gang FARC, for example, has been long established, and prolongs the war there. Additionally, Chavez has established a Caracas-Tehran axis familiar to anyone who keeps track of events in South America. Iran's Hezbollah is active not only in Venezuela, but southward, in the tri-border area of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil, where al Queda has also set up shop, and northward, where the Iranian embassy in Daniel Ortega's Nicaragua is said to be Iran's largest mission overseas, housing an inordinate number of fit, military-age foreigners. Chavez has made no secret of his support for Zelaya; in addition to printing the ballots for Zelaya's attempted coup, it was a Venezuelan airplane that turned up to fly the deposed *presidente* to post-coup meeting with Chavez and Ortega in Managua, and Chavez now pledges to "overthrow" the Honduran interim president, congressman Roberto Micheletti.

The Administration, and the United States, may soon come to a hard spot. It is one thing to properly deplore a military coup, especially in a country that has stood with the United States in good times and bad. It will be quite another to join in the world's condemnation of a government acting against a president attempting to subvert his own constitutional democracy, just as Hitler did in 1933 and as Chavez is doing now in Venezuela. Surely self-defense is defensible.

And it will be still another thing to stand by, as may well become the case, while Chavez and his autocrat cronies assault the Honduran republic to re-install a fellow traveler who was – *probably* illegally, the full story is not yet known – deposed for attempting to do illegal things. There are legalities and then there is justice. In the name of justice, the United States should decry the method, demand the restoration of democracy through fair elections, do all the things we should do to reinforce our displeasure, short of actually damaging the Honduran people and government. But if Chavez' rhetoric escalates; we should be prepared to stand by our friends to the south. This is not a time to look away.

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