

Rights Action

Day 55, Honduran Coup Resistance = What is Canada Waiting for?

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BELOW:

Articles by Jen Moore:

- "Liberal Party in Honduras is split into pro-coup/ anti-coup sectors"
- "What is Canadian Minister Peter Kent waiting for, as beatings and killings mount?"

Reminder: Early July, the OAS (Organization of American States) called for the "the immediate and unconditional return" of President Zelaya and his government.

AT BOTTOM:

- to donate tax-deductible, urgently needed funds to pro-democracy movement in Honduras
- what to do?
- more information

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THE LIBERAL MAJORITY AND SMALL BUSINESSPEOPLE ARE AGAINST THE COUP REGIME

By Jennifer Moore (in Honduras), jenmoore0901@gmail.com,
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A conversation with Carlos Eduardo Reina, General Director of the Coordinating Committee of Liberals Against the Coup

It has been 51 days since the coup ousted President Manuel Zelaya; Carlos Eduardo Reina, member of the Liberal Party and leader of the Coordinating Committee of Liberals Against the Coup, states that President Zelaya has support from 70% of liberal party members across the country.

He says that the liberal bases reject the parliamentarians from the same political tendency who betrayed the President and that they will eventually be expelled from the party, beginning with coup leader Roberto Micheletti and those in his inner circle.

In this interview we discuss several key themes such as political fragmentation, opposition to the de facto regime among small and medium business sectors, internal problems within the Armed Forces, and the Coordinating Committee's position on the question of elections. Under normal circumstances, the official electoral campaign would begin on August 29th.

HOW FRAGMENTED ARE THE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL PARTIES RIGHT NOW, IN PARTICULAR THE LIBERAL PARTY, SINCE THE COUP ON JUNE 28TH?

Since the coup, divisions within the country are greatest at the political level. For its part, the National Party is entirely on side with the coup, so it was not divided. But the leadership of the Liberal Party turned out to be on side with the coup as well, while its bases across the country condemn the coup and support President Zelaya. So, we have been organizing liberals against the coup. This organization was a spontaneous and immediate response to the coup and has received the support of leaders from all over the country, in the 18 departments and 298 municipalities. It is heavily consolidated.

WHAT DOES SUCH POLITICAL FRAGMENTATION MEAN FOR THE DE FACTO GOVERNMENT THAT WOULD LIKE TO DEMONSTRATE HOW WELL IT HAS CONSOLIDATED ITS OWN POWER?

The state's power is sustained only with support from the armed forces and through repression. This is a typical of a government that, faced with a revolutionary situation, is only sustained by force and ever increasing repression against its people. We hope that President Zelaya is reinstated in power before the repressed people begin to respond with revolutionary measures that will lead to bloodshed in the country, which as leaders of the front against the resistance and of the liberals against the coup, we need to avoid. Because the blood of no Honduran should flow in order to re-establish peace in the country.(1) We want to do this in peace, through demonstrations and marches that are singularly peaceful.

COULD YOU COMMENT ABOUT YOUR ALLIES WITHIN THE BUSINESS SECTOR?

There are several groups, but they do not include big business. Big business, almost in its entirety, is with the coup. It is the small and medium

business person that sees danger in the coup because the oligarchy that funded it would like to take control over all business within the country, and create enclaves, making small and medium businesses - that are really what sustain Honduras' economy - uncompetitive.

WHAT IMPACTS HAVE SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESS SECTORS SUFFERED AS A RESULT OF THE COUP?

The first impacts take place when neighbouring countries close their borders. If you recall, the first week after the coup: the borders were closed. Generally, what travels across those borders are goods and merchandise that small and medium sized businesses sell and trade. That's the first impact.

The second impact is when regional exchange is restricted and remittances drop. Where do people buy things? They buy them in the local market, and the local market has been depressed as a result of measures that have been taken at the international level.

All the while, big business is digging in and dividing up state contracts amongst themselves. They invested in the coup and so they expect their investments to reap profits of a thousand, two thousand or five thousand percent.

HOW MANY SMALL AND MEDIUM BUSINESSES ARE THERE IN THE COUNTRY?

There are about 50,000 small and medium business people. That is a lot of people. They are the owners of small shops in the municipalities, of small neighbourhood pharmacies, and of small commercial centres in each community. There are a lot of them. They are coffee growers, corn producers and producers of all sorts of other things. This is small scale industry in Honduras. This is what generates the capital that circulates in the country. These are the profits that make the economy grow.

Because the oligarchy in Honduras do not keep their money in Honduras. They send their money away.

As a result, it is necessary to break up the oligarchy because a million lempiras (1 lempira is equivalent to approximately 18 US dollars) in the hands of one hundred mid-sized business people is better than a million lempiras in the hands of one business person who will put their money in a bank in the US or Switzerland.

The small business person will invest their money in their business and generate more economic activity in the country such that the economy will grow.

ARE THESE BUSINESS PEOPLE ORGANIZED AND HAVE THEY TAKEN A POSITION WITH REGARD TO THE COUP?

They are organized, but they are afraid. If they are outspoken at the moment, they could feel the full force of the state tax collector and things could take place that would damage their businesses. We have seen tremendous repression in the country. The things that we have observed during the last 51 days, we have never seen in the history of Honduras. Even during periods of military governments and during the dictatorship of the 30s and 40s, the repression did not reach the extremes that it is reaching today because this regime can only sustain itself by force. If the army were to withdraw its support from Micheletti today, his government would not last 20 minutes.

So, beyond the people that we see each day in the streets, would you say that there is more broad, diffuse support for the National Front Against the Coup amongst the population?

Definitely. If you look at the range of demonstrators, they are from diverse social sectors, diverse living conditions. There are people from both middle and lower class households. We have public employees, small producers, store clerks. They represent a broad social base in the country. At the moment, seven out of ten Hondurans support the resistance. Two out of ten are undecided and only one out of ten supports the coup regime.

HOW SOLID IS THE SUPPORT OF THE ARMED FORCES FOR THE COUP REGIME?

The Armed Forces have serious problems at the moment. They have about 200 soldiers and officials who are being held prisoner within the battalions because they have not accepted and carried out orders to repress. They have an internal crisis.

And that crisis is evident in the debate within National Congress to reinstate obligatory military service.

It means that they do not have enough capacity. They are contracting private security guards to help contain and maintain their supposed sense of order. But they do not have enough capacity. Also, the army has never been organized and trained to defend the country. All they have done

since they were established is strike against the poor, carry out coups against the state and carry on illicit businesses, covering up for drug-trafficking. This is what the Honduran military has always done.

There are five generals and they divide \$250 million lempiras between them. What does this leave for the next rank of officials? What are the lieutenant, the captain, and the major thinking? If these generals withdraw, in what state will things be left? What will happen? What will happen with them? To the institution?

The Honduran people are saying that the army should be abolished. It is their responsibility now, they control their troops. And they should know that if they do not reverse the coup that the army will disappear in Honduras because the people will not tolerate it anymore.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN FOR CONSTITUTIONAL ORDER TO BE RE-ESTABLISHED AND WHERE DOES THE PRESSURE NEED TO COME FROM?

President Zelaya has to come back. needs to come from inside and outside. The Arias plan is what the North Americans have been betting on. But if the coup leaders do not sign the plan, President Obama has said that he will begin to take stronger measures.

In the meantime, the United Nations are discussing another resolution this week in order to give an ultimatum to the de facto government such that if Manuel Zelaya is not reinstated by September 1st, the electoral process will not be recognized by any country in the world. These are escalating pressure tactics.

AND WILL THE LIBERALS AGAINST THE COUP PARTICIPATE IN THE ELECTIONS IF ZELAYA DOES NOT RETURN?

No. As long as Zelaya does not return, we will not support the electoral process. If Manuel Zelaya is not here, the electoral process is not reliable because they will not allow a political campaign to take place. They will do what they like with the ballot boxes because the world will not be watching.

(1) Author's note: Blood has already been spilled. At least ten deaths have been registered that can be demonstrated to be related to aggression by the armed forces against the resistance opposed to coup. More than 150 people have also been subject to maltreatment and other forms of violations of the right to personal integrity.

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'WHAT IS MINISTER KENT WAITING FOR?' --- AS BEATINGS AND KILLINGS MOUNT IN HONDURAS

By Jennifer Moore (in Honduras), jenmoore0901@gmail.com,
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Minister of State of Foreign Affairs Peter Kent has repeatedly urged "restraint" until a negotiated solution can be achieved regarding the return of ousted President Manuel Zelaya to Honduras. He has said that Zelaya was subject to an illegal coup, but suggests that if he were to return too soon there would be an outbreak in violence.

But more than seven weeks since the coup, human rights violations are mounting in the democratically-elected leader's absence.

First Lady Xiomara Castro de Zelaya, during an interview with The Tyee last week, showed the back door of her Tegucigalpa home that was shot at sixty times on the morning of June 28 when military officers hauled President Zelaya away in his pyjamas to Costa Rica. She also spoke with dismay about repression against protesters and the lack of medicine in hospitals for people who have been beaten or shot by police.

HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS MOUNT

Most recently, last week, police and military brutally repressed demonstrations calling for the return of Zelaya. On Wednesday, August 12, armed forces cracked down on a protest in front of the National Congress building where legislators were debating if they would reinstate obligatory military service or not.

International observers and press watched as police chased protesters and beat men, women and youth. Various testimonies indicate that they attacked people who had not even been participating. Police were also photographed hitting a reporter who had been filming the protest.

Dozens were detained and sent to various police dispatches across the capital city. Most notably, a group of people, many bleeding or otherwise injured, were taken to a post belonging to the Special Police Forces, called COBRAs. In the 1980s, their headquarters were associated with numerous cases of disappearances and torture.

Later the same day, hundreds of soldiers and police locked down the Pedagogical University, which became a virtual holding cell for dozens of people who were forced to give declarations as a result of Molotov cocktails that had been found on location. Strangely, the lock-down occurred after those inside had already reported the presence of home-made explosives to a public attorney.

Other organizations also came under attack. The offices of a farmer's organization and a union hall belonging to groups integrally involved in the opposition to the coup were shot at during the night. In one case, the shooting took place after curfew, at which time only police and military are permitted to be in the streets.

In this context, and in response to Kent's position to keep urging patience on the part of Hondurans, the First Lady exclaims, "How can this not be the moment to restore constitutional order and respect of this people? How can it not be the moment to restore democracy to my country?"

NEGOTIATIONS DRAG ON

But Kent has remained hopeful in ongoing negotiations led by Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. Negotiations began in early July, despite that fact that they help legitimate the de facto government and go against the spirit of a July 5th OAS Declaration which demands Zelaya's return "so that he may fulfill the mandate for which he was democratically elected."

President Arias presented the current proposal, called the San José Accord on July 22. Zelaya has accepted the agreement even though it strips him of power and provides amnesty for political crimes taking place before and after his ouster. Coup leader Roberto Micheletti Bain, however, has so far refused.

Since August 5, Hondurans have been anticipating the visit of an OAS Commission in which Kent is expected to participate and which is meant to pressure Micheletti to concede to Arias' proposal. But the high level visit has yet to happen.

Meanwhile, violence and human rights violations have been racking up and Kent has failed to take his own advice.

In a July 19 statement, the Minister said, "We call on all parties to condemn any and all incitement to violence in this ongoing crisis and to respect the right of Hondurans to peace, order and good governance."

To date, around 10 assassinations have been registered in relation to the coup. There have also been various attacks on the press, thousands of arbitrary arrests, about 150 documented cases of mistreatment or abuse, and at least one young man who is the son of a long-time social activist has been missing for more than a month. Human rights organizations in Honduras are also questioning who is responsible for roughly 100 assassinations that have taken place during curfew.

Kent has not issued another official statement since July 24, and has not condemned these incidents. Nor has he suggested, considering Micheletti's intransigence, that Canada could take further measures to pressure the de facto leader to accept any negotiated agreement.

BACK TO THE '80S

Independent Presidential Candidate Carlos H. Reyes, whose hand is severely fractured after being struck by police and falling from a five-meter high wall during a march two weeks ago, thinks that Kent has things backwards when the Minister suggests that Zelaya's return will lead to violence. "Those using repression and violence are not the protesters," he states.

"Your minister of foreign relations is poorly informed," says Reyes, also president of the Bottling Workers Union (STIBYS, by its initials in Spanish). "The disinformation is so great at the moment that even our cardinal of the Catholic Church in Honduras has said that if Zelaya returns that there would be blood spilled. But whose blood? Those who are governing? We are not armed."

The repression and violence have been so intense that activists and human rights advocates are seeing links with the past to a time when government-supported death squads disappeared, tortured and murdered hundreds of suspected leftists. Not only do they say that the degree of repression is comparable, but they recognize many of the same actors.

Micheletti's security advisor is Billy Fernando Joya Améndola. Billy Joya is recognized as a former operative of Batallion 3-16, a group of military officers who received training at the School of the Americas, and which is associated with hundreds of cases of kidnapping, torture and murder.

Joya himself has numerous unresolved charges, most notably for the illegal detention and torture of six university students in 1982. He recently

told the New York Times that, "The policy [in the 80s] was, 'The only good Communist is a dead Communist,' and 'I supported the policy.'"

However, the de facto government and most coverage by corporate media presents Zelaya and opposition to the coup as representing the threat. "They say that they're investigating," notes Reyes, "whether I or another leader in the resistance is receiving money from narco-trafficking, Chávez or the FARC."

The labour activist raises his right arm to help stop the swelling in this hand, revealing bruising all along the soft tissue of his upper arm. "The idea of a 'red scare' has not changed since the '80s," he says, when leftist activists were supposedly receiving funding from Moscow.

He suggests that Kent's position is off-base, and offers that he would be happy to meet with him to clarify anything that the Minister might like to know.

'WAITING FOR ANOTHER COUP?'

"One makes the conditions, one doesn't wait for them," says Bertha Oliva, Director of the Committee for the Families of the Detained and Disappeared of Honduras (COFADEH). "Positions like this do not help at all."

Not only has the delay in Zelaya's return led to a rise in human rights violations, the de facto government has also had time to install its supporters throughout the state. Notably, she points out, they are seeing a growing military or retired military presence in public institutions.

She is also critical of negotiations with a coup government that the international community has presumably not recognized. Beyond conditions in the San José Accord that would leave Zelaya as a decorative leader for the brief remainder of his term, she is concerned about the possibility of an amnesty.

For Oliva, who has been working since the 1980s to ensure that those who were disappeared are not forgotten and that their cases are not dropped, she says, "Impunity is non-negotiable."

Other critics of the delay in restoring Zelaya to the presidency raise questions about why Minister Kent has not taken a tougher position. They note that Canadian companies such as Gildan Activewear and GoldCorp have important interests in the country, and it could be that

they were not pleased with the recent hike in the minimum wage or with growing pressure for mining law reforms. If not, why has Canada not withdrawn support for its Military Training Assistance Program or been considering other economic sanctions that could help advance the negotiation process?

And why, some ask, has Canada not vigorously condemned human rights violations taking place given Honduras's important position as the second largest recipient of Canadian aid money in the Americas after Haiti?

First Lady Xiomara Castro de Zelaya has questions of her own for Minister Kent: "Is he waiting for another country to suffer a coup? Or until they kill who knows how many people? He says it is not the right moment. But this is not about President Zelaya. The President represents the restoration of rights to the people." His return, she says, "is a mechanism to find peace and tranquility."

[Jennifer Moore is a free-lance journalist covering Latin America. Her previous reports for The Tyee on Ecuador and Canadian mining interests are here]

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WHAT TO DO

TO DONATE TAX-DEDUCTIBLE FUNDS TO PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN HONDURAS, MAKE CHECK TO "RIGHTS ACTION" AND MAIL TO:

- UNITED STATES: Box 50887, Washington DC, 20091-0887
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AMERICANS AND CANADIANS SHOULD CONTACT YOUR OWN MEDIA, MEMBERS OF CONGRESS, SENATORS & MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT - EVERY DAY, DAY AFTER DAY - TO DEMAND:

- an end to police, army and para-military repression and respect for safety and human rights of all Hondurans

- unequivocal denunciation of the military coup
- no recognition of this military coup and the 'de facto' government of Roberto Micheletti
- no recognition of the November 2009 elections, that candidates are campaigning for, even as the country is militarized and repression is widespread
- unconditional return of the entire constitutional government of President Zelaya
- concrete and targeted economic, military and diplomatic sanctions against the coup plotters and perpetrators
- application of international and national justice against the coup plotters
- reparations for the illegal actions and rights violations committed during this illegal coup

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See Rights Action's previous Honduras Coup Alerts: www.rightsaction.org