

LATIN AMERICA - The right strikes back

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July 15, 2009 - The presidency of George W. Bush was the moment of the greatest electoral sweep of left-of-center political parties in Latin America in the last two centuries. The presidency of Barack Obama risks being the moment of the revenge of the right in Latin America.

The reason may well be the same - the combination of the decline of American power with the continuing centrality of the United States in world politics. At one and the same time, the United States is unable to impose itself and is nonetheless expected by everyone to enter the playing field on their side.

What happened in Honduras? Honduras has long been one of the surest pillars of Latin American oligarchies - an arrogant and unrepentant ruling class, with close ties to the United States and site of a major American military base. Its own military was carefully recruited to avoid any taint of officers with populist sympathies.

In the last elections, Manuel ("Mel") Zelaya was elected president. A product of the ruling classes, he was expected to continue to play the game the way Honduran presidents always play it. Instead, he edged leftward in his policies. He undertook internal programs that actually did something for the vast majority of the population - building schools in remote rural areas, increasing the minimum wage, opening health clinics. He started his term supporting the free trade agreement with the United States. But then, after two years, he joined ALBA, the interstate organization started by President Hugo Chavez, and Honduras received as a result low-cost oil coming from Venezuela.

Then he proposed to hold an advisory referendum as to whether the population thought it a good idea to convene a body to revise the constitution. The oligarchy shouted that this was an attempt by Zelaya to change the constitution to make it possible for him to have a second term. But since the referendum was to occur on the day his successor would have been elected, this was clearly a phony reason.

Why then did the army stage a coup d'état, with the support of the Supreme Court, the Honduran legislature, and the Roman Catholic hierarchy? Two factors entered here: their view of Zelaya and their view of the United States. In the 1930s, the U.S. right attacked Franklin Roosevelt as "a traitor to his class." For the Honduran oligarchy, that's Zelaya - "a traitor to his class" - someone who had to be punished as an example to others.

What about the United States? When the coup occurred, some of the raucous left commentators in the blogosphere called it "Obama's coup." That misses the point of what happened. Neither Zelaya nor his supporters on the street, nor indeed Chavez or Fidel Castro, have such a simplistic view. They all note the difference between Obama and the U.S. right (political leaders or military figures) and have expressed repeatedly a far more nuanced analysis.

It seems quite clear that the last thing the Obama administration wanted was this coup. The coup has been an attempt to force Obama's hand. This was undoubtedly encouraged by key figures in the U.S. right like Otto Reich, the Cuban-American ex-counselor of Bush, and the International Republican Institute. This was akin to Saakashvili's attempt to force the U.S. hand in Georgia when he invaded South Ossetia. That too was done in connivance with the U.S. right. That one didn't work because Russian troops stopped it.

Obama has been wiggling ever since the Honduran coup. And as of now the Honduran and U.S. right are far from satisfied that they have succeeded in turning U.S. policy around. Witness some of their

outrageous statements. The Foreign Minister of the coup government, Enrique Ortez, said that Obama was "un negrito que sabe nada de nada." There is some controversy about how pejorative "negrito" is in Spanish. I would translate this myself as saying that Obama was "a nigger who knows absolutely nothing." In any case, the U.S. Ambassador sharply protested the insult. Ortez apologized for his "unfortunate expression" and he was shifted to another job in the government. Ortez also gave an interview to a Honduran TV station saying that "I don't have racial prejudices; I like the sugar-mill nigger who is president of the United States."

The U.S. right is no doubt more polite but no less denunciatory of Obama. Republican Sen. Jim DeMint, Cuban-American Republican Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, and conservative lawyer Manuel A. Estrada have all been insisting that the coup was justified because it wasn't a coup, just a defense of the Honduran constitution. And rightwing blogger Jennifer Rubin published a piece on July 13 entitled "Obama is Wrong, Wrong, Wrong About Honduras." Her Honduran equivalent, Ramón Villeda, published an open letter to Obama on July 11, in which he said that "This is not the first time that the United States has made a mistake and abandoned, at a critical moment, an ally and a friend." Meanwhile, Chavez is calling on the State Department to "do something."

The Honduran right is playing for time, until Zelaya's term ends. If they reach that goal, they will have won. And the Guatemalan, Salvadorian, and Nicaraguan right are watching in the wings, itching to start their own coups against their no longer rightwing governments.

The Honduran coup has to be placed in the larger context of what is happening throughout Latin America. It is quite possible that the right will win the elections this year and next year in Argentina and Brazil, maybe in Uruguay as well, and most likely in Chile. Three leading analysts from the Southern Cone have published their explanations. The least pessimistic, Argentine political scientist Atilio Boron, speaks of "the futility of the coup." Brazilian sociologist Emir Sader says that Latin America faces a choice: "the deepening of antineoliberalism or conservative restoration." Uruguayan journalist Raúl Zibechi entitles his analysis "the irresistible decadence of progressivism." Zibechi in effect thinks it may be too late for Sader's alternative. The weak economic policies of Presidents Lula, Vazquez, Kirchner, and Bachelet (of Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile) have strengthened the right (which he sees adopting a Berlusconi style) and split the left.

Myself, I think there's a more straightforward explanation. The left came to power in Latin America because of U.S. distraction and good economic times. Now it faces continued distraction but bad economic times. And it's getting blamed because it's in power, even though in fact there's little the left-of-center governments can do about the world-economy.

Can the United States do something more about the coup? Well, of course it can. First of all, Obama can officially label the coup a coup. This would trigger a U.S. law, cutting off all U.S. assistance to Honduras. He can sever the Pentagon's continuing relations with the Honduran military. He can withdraw the U.S. ambassador. He can say that there's nothing to negotiate instead of insisting on "mediation" between the legitimate government and the coup leaders.

Why doesn't he do all that? It's really simple, too. He's got at least four other super-urgent items on his agenda: confirmation of Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court; a continuing mess in the Middle East; his need to pass health legislation this year (if not by August, then by December); and suddenly enormous pressure to open investigations of the illegal acts of the Bush administration. I'm sorry, but Honduras is fifth in line,

So Obama wiggles. And nobody will be happy. Zelaya may yet be restored to legal office, but maybe only three months from now. Too late. Keep your eye on Guatemala.

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