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“Honduras will never be the same again”

by CHARLES R. HALE



IN MID-OCTOBER 2009, LLILAS invited experts and protagonists to present their perspectives on the recent political turmoil in Honduras, and to debate the consequences. LLILAS hosted, for a full day of at times heated discussion, Dr. Dario Euraque (Director of the Honduran Institute for Anthropology and History,

INAH), Miriam Miranda (Garífuna activist intellectual, and leader of the resistance to the June 28 military coup), Profs. Jeff Tully and Zach Elkins of the UT Government Department, and Michael Shifter (Vice President of the Inter-American Dialogue and expert on U.S. policy toward Latin America). In addition to presentations by these speakers, the workshop featured an open forum with ample participation from members of the Honduran community. The day's events put on display the profound contention around nearly every facet of this unfolding drama and highlighted a societal crisis in Honduras that would prove extremely difficult to overcome.

Few would disagree with the deep structural roots of this crisis. The majority of Hondurans suffer from grinding poverty and are separated from the tiny political-economic elite by a chasm of social inequality. In recent decades, political power has alternated between two parties that differ little in ideology and have contributed equally to Honduras's dubious status as among the most corrupt states in the hemisphere. Even before the events of June 28, the military had assumed a heavy-handed role in civilian affairs, policing common crime and engaging in selective political repression. True rule of law and a properly functioning criminal justice system were both distant promises. Economic growth, although lively before the 2008 worldwide decline, relied on dynamism in a few key sectors—maquila production, “enclave” tourism, financial services, large-scale agriculture—which tended to exacerbate social inequalities and fuel discontent. Given Zelaya's class background (a wealthy ranching family from the eastern department of Olancho), party affiliation, and political record, most observers expected his approach to these structural problems to be perhaps unusually flamboyant and idiosyncratic, but otherwise more of the same.

Zelaya's actual legacy during his three and a half years in office (2006–2009) is hotly debated, as are the underlying motives for the specific events of June 28. His detractors portray him as quirky, inexperienced, impulsive, and authoritarian; his supporters emphasize the

modest but substantive social reforms that the Zelaya government was beginning to implement, leading to incremental declines in poverty and an upsurge of hope among the marginalized. The fiercest contention, however, revolves around the question of constitutional reform: Zelaya insisted on holding a referendum to gauge popular support for starting a process to reform the Honduran constitution, while his opponents construed this initiative as a breach of the constitution so grave that it justified his removal. The chain of events that followed is well known and, at least in its bare-bones form, uncontested. A military contingent awoke Zelaya at dawn on the 28th, lay him face-down for rough interrogation, and eventually sent him on into exile in Costa Rica; a few days later the Congress “accepted” Zelaya’s letter of resignation, which turned out to be a forgery, and appointed Roberto Micheletti as interim president; these acts received worldwide repudiation as a military coup and served as catalyst for an expectedly strong movement of resistance; meanwhile, the three pillars of the Honduran establishment—the Catholic Church hierarchy, the political-economic elite, and the military—closed ranks behind Micheletti and defied the mounting pressure to return Zelaya to power. The crisis was still in full swing at the time of the LLILAS event in mid-October; our “*foro urgente*” aired the contention around the meanings of these events, and clarified key points of fact along the way.

Dr. Euraque’s presentation brought to the fore the internal heterogeneity of the Zelaya government and some of the less visible consequences of the political rupture that the June 28 coup produced. Euraque was named to this post not for political loyalty, but rather, professional experience and expertise. A U.S.-trained scholar, he holds a permanent teaching position at Trinity College in Connecticut, and is perhaps Honduras’s most accomplished and prolific historian. His presentation detailed a series of initiatives that the INAH had begun under his tenure, involving collaborative research and educational programs with foreign scholars, on the one hand, and grassroots intellectuals, on the other. Euraque spoke with emotion about how he left a secure job in Connecticut in order to serve his country; how he remained in his position even after the June coup; and then was shocked to receive a few months later, a letter announcing his replacement. The new director of INAH, Euraque wryly concluded, is a woman whose prime credential is having been a writer for the Honduran equivalent of *Glamour* magazine.

Miriam Miranda, a longtime leader of the Fraternal Organization of Black Hondurans, OFRANEH, made a quick transition after June 28 from activist in favor of Afro-indigenous rights to a member of the national coordinating committee of the resistance. Miranda was emphatic that neither she personally nor OFRANEH were supporters of Zelaya before the coup, and that the principal goals of the resistance revolved not around the restitution of Zelaya, but rather, the defense of Honduran democracy. In this sense, she argued forcefully that the Honduran constitution was flawed—mandating a weak president, too much authority to the military, not enough attention to social rights—and urgently needed revision, whether Zelaya returned to office or not. She spoke with grave concern about the level of political repression leveled against resistance activists and warned that powerful actors would be using this military interlude to settle accounts and push forward private agendas. Yet, she also noted that Honduran civil society had mobilized to confront the crisis with unprecedented strength and

determination, and for this reason, she averred, “... after June 28, Honduran society will never be the same.”

Professors Elkins and Tully, experts on constitutions and constitutional change, helped the audience understand the broader stakes of the specific debate around Zelaya’s ouster. In the first place, their presentations framed the broader dilemma, which provided the backdrop for the Honduran crisis: quite possibly, the constitution served to uphold basic conditions of inequality and exclusion, such that one could be forced to choose between defending the constitution and defending broader principles of democracy and social justice. They also delved more deeply into the complexities of the Honduran constitutional controversy. On the one hand, they expressed surprise that world opinion was running so strongly in favor of Zelaya’s restitution, since a technical reading of the constitution could show Zelaya in violation of an article that keeps the charter intact. On the other hand, they brought to light the contradiction of that very provision, which essentially safeguards the status quo by criminalizing any elected official who acts in favor of constitutional change, and provides no viable procedure for addressing this contradiction. Regardless of the particulars, the debate over these issues made it very clear that constitutional reform, and its relationship to social inequality, will continue to be a central force in Latin American politics in the years to come.

Michael Shifter brought the discussion of the crisis in Honduras back home, to the Obama administration and the relationship between domestic political strife and foreign policy toward Latin America. He described the administration’s stance toward the de facto government as cautious, judicious, but also in certain respects, markedly ambivalent. His analysis also highlighted Obama’s predicament, in the face of domestic political polarization, and the hard right’s decision to make Honduras their “line in the sand.” A series of visits to Honduras already had been made by Republican members of Congress, most prominently Senator Jim DeMint, who made strident proclamations in favor of the Micheletti government, in direct defiance of the U.S. State Department; more pointedly, these same congresspeople vowed to block key Obama administration appointments for Latin America—Undersecretary of State Arturo Valenzuela, U.S. ambassador to Brazil Thomas Shannon—unless Obama allowed the de facto government to stand. Trapped within its own resolutely pragmatic approach to politics, the Obama administration found itself forced to sacrifice support for democracy in Honduras, in return for a negotiated solution to the impasse with its Republican adversaries. (Sure enough, even though Zelaya and Micheletti eventually did sign an agreement, the presidential elections of November 29 and the installation of Pepe Lobo as the new president in January 2010 occurred without Zelaya’s agreed-upon return.) Shifter’s analysis brought the forum to a close, and left those who had attended the entire event with an unsettling conclusion. In many ways, the day’s interactions had been a testimony to the crucial value of dialogue across political difference—intense debates, with an occasional breakthrough of mutual recognition. Yet, reflection on Obama’s predicament yielded a different lesson: in some disputes there is no splitting the difference; further negotiation simply obscures or postpones the hard political choices to be made.

Although many observers of the Honduran crisis and its aftermath have harkened back to the past era of military coups and authoritarian governments, there are three reasons instead to view Honduras

as a portent of times to come, both for better and for worse. William Finnegan, in an excellent report published in the *New Yorker* in late November, concluded with the conventional wisdom: “It looked as if an old-fashioned coup could still succeed in Latin America, after all.” Granted, the military operation proper does appear chillingly similar to that terrible recent chapter in Latin American politics when military dictatorships prevailed. But not so with the quick handoff to a hastily composed civilian government, the immediate scramble to refocus attention on the November presidential elections, and the careful solicitation of support from all three pillars of the Honduran establishment. This interweaving of state violence and formal democratic procedure seems much more characteristic of the current era, when social mobilization from below is on the rise, and states are virtually obliged to choose between substantive social change and coercive preservation of the status quo. Second, the overwhelming response to the Honduran coup portends a very different regional arena for thinking through that very choice. Latin American governments took a remarkably strong and uncompromising stance against the coup, in favor of rule of law, even while the U.S. government vacillated. Not only does this signal a Latin American vote of no confidence for military intervention, but more important still, a new era of relative independence from the United States, bolstered by the rising influence of southern powerhouse states like Brazil.

In parallel fashion, the Honduran crisis also marks the gradual redefinition of the role of the United States in the hemisphere. At an early moment in the crisis, Obama made what at first appeared as an astute riposte to his critics on the left, who urged more vigorous action to reverse the coup: “The same critics who say that the United States has not intervened enough in Honduras are the same people who say that we’re always intervening,” he observed, “and the Yankees need to get out of Latin America. You can’t have it both ways.” As the crisis dragged on, however, this response revealed a deeper reality of U.S. policy toward Latin America in the current era: even if we have abandoned definitively the imperial prerogatives of times past, the United States remains too big and powerful for true neutrality to be an option. Once the U.S. diplomat (and soon to be ambassador) Thomas Shannon announced publicly in mid-November that Zelaya did not have to return in order for the November 29 elections to be recognized, Micheletti supporters knew that his opponents in the U.S. State Department had blinked. As long as the U.S. eventually could be expected to recognize the newly elected government, even though the election’s legitimacy was questioned by almost every other country in the hemisphere, the new government would prevail.

This conclusion does not, however, bode especially well for Honduran society. The newly installed government of Pepe Lobo is limping back toward international normalization but still faces stiff resistance, led by Brazil. Honduran economic indicators remain down, even more than global conditions would dictate, since key sectors of the economy, such as tourism and maquila production, are so sensitive to internal unrest. The militarization of Honduran society, especially evident in the coup’s aftermath, has not subsided, drawing attention to the deep entanglement of political violence with democratic procedure. One silver lining in the whole affair is the mobilization of civil society, which developed a voice and vision that reached well beyond the standoff between Zelaya and Micheletti: focusing on the structural roots of

social misery and imagining constitutional reform as part of a broader process of political change. While it may appear on the surface that Honduras has returned to the dismal status quo ante of the 1970s, Miriam Miranda’s suggestion to the contrary lingers. If indeed Honduras “will never be the same again,” it is because lessons learned during the past ten months will have been archived in the collective memories of civil society actors who will be even more clear about what they want, and more determined to achieve it, next time around.

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MESOAMERICA CENTER HOLDS MAYA MEETINGS IN GUATEMALA

The Mesoamerica Center at UT Austin aims to facilitate knowledge and learning about the indigenous cultures and peoples of what is now Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador. Its primary focus is on the arts, languages, and archaeology of Mesoamerican civilizations. The Mesoamerica Center oversees the Maya Meetings, a premier gathering on Mesoamerican culture in the United States that brings scholars and interested individuals together once a year to study and explore the richness of ancient Maya art, archaeology, and writing. The entire event is designed to promote collaboration among professionals, students, and all interested people from around the globe, including the significant involvement of modern Maya.

The 2010 Maya Meetings: Early Iconography and Script was attended by more than 200 registrants. It featured four workshops: Beginner Hieroglyphs (in both English and Spanish), Advanced Hieroglyphs, and Iconography. The symposium featured renowned academics such as Dr. David Stuart, Director of the Mesoamerica Center, Dr. Karl Taube, Dr. Alfonso Lacadena, Dr. Oswaldo Chinchilla, and Dr. Heather Hurst, to name just a few.

With the acquisition of Casa Herrera by the Mesoamerica Center, the Maya Meetings were hosted for the first time in Antigua, Guatemala. The conference will alternate each year between Austin and Antigua. *The 2011 Maya Meetings: Time and Prophecy, the Mesoamerican World* will take place in Austin March 22–27, 2011.

For more information on the Maya Meetings and Casa Herrera, please visit <http://www.utmaya.org> and www.utmesoamerica.org/casa or contact Paola Bueché, Senior Program Coordinator of the Mesoamerica Center, at pbueche@mail.utexas.edu.