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 conten-
tion, 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 repudia-
tion 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 “furo
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 heterogene-
ity 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 presenta-
tion 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 concludes, is a woman whose
prime credential is having been a writer for the Honduran equivalent
of Glamazon 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
levied against resistance activists and warned that powerful actors
would be using this military interlude to settle accounts and push for-
ward 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 presen-
tations 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 con-
traversy. On the one hand, they expressed surprise that world opinion
was running so strongly in favor of Zelaya’s restitution, since a techni-
cal 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 safe-
guards 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 ambiva-
 lent. 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 poli-
tics, 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 presiden-
tial 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 authoritar-
ian governments, there are three reasons instead to view Honduras
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 2011 Maya Meetings: Time and Prophecy, the Mesoamerican World will take place in Austin March 22–27, 2011.

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.utfmesoamerica.org/casa or contact Paola Bueché, Senior Program Coordinator of the Mesoamerica Center, at pbueche@mail.utexas.edu.