HONDURAS: A COUNTRY AND A COUP

Honduras has undergone the least development of all the Central American republics. Traditional liberal-conservative party rivalries persisted throughout the twentieth century, popular agitation was minimal, and power rested in the hands of a triangular alliance: landowners, foreign investors (mainly the United Fruit Company), and the military. Because of its economic and political weakness, Honduras has been especially vulnerable to outside influence. It has remained, in many respects, a stereotypical “banana republic.”

History and Background

With vivid clarity, Honduran history reveals a fundamental fact of Central American political life: the emergence of the military as an autonomous caste and as a supreme arbiter in national affairs. In Honduras, as elsewhere in the isthmus, a career in the armed forces (or national guard) offered chances for upward mobility to middle-sector ladinos. Land was already controlled by the aristocracy, the universities were restrictive, there was hardly any industrial development; an ambitious young person of middling origin had almost no other alternative. As a result, recruits and cadets took immense pride in the honor and dignity of the military as an institution, and officers tended to look down on politicians and civilians. To this extent the armed forces stood apart from civil society—but their consent (if not support) was essential to the survival of any political coalition.
The leading figure in early twentieth-century Honduras was Tiburcio Carías Andino, whose conservative-oriented National Party was prevented from taking the presidency in 1923. After some dispute, Carías’s candidate was permitted to govern until 1929, when the Liberals recaptured office. In 1932 Carías himself won the presidency, and he held that position until 1948.

In 1957 a group of young military officers supervised the election of Dr. Ramón Villeda Morales, a progressive Liberal who became an outspoken supporter of John Fitzgerald Kennedy and the Alliance for Progress. But senior commanders resented his reformist tendencies, and in 1963 they dismissed him in favor of armed forces leader Oswaldo López Arellano, who remained in power until 1975 (when he was toppled by, of course, a military coup).

Officers retained control of national politics until 1981. Partly as a result of international pressure, especially from the United States, fairly open elections took place in that year. The candidate of the Liberal Party, Roberto Suazo Córdova, won 54.1 percent of the vote; the military decided to accept the result. Until further notice, at least, Suazo had a chance to govern, and in 1985 peaceful elections led to the triumph of another Liberal Party candidate, José Azcona Hoyo.
Strife with neighboring countries has played an important part in Honduran history. There was long-standing tension with El Salvador. And in the 1980s, Honduras became deeply enmeshed in the U.S.-sponsored Contra war against the Sandinistas. The United States rapidly transformed Honduras into a launching pad for Contra attacks against neighboring Nicaragua. The land was soon dotted with airfields, supply dumps, and base camps for Contra troops. Thousands of regular U.S. military and National Guard units rotated duty in Honduras, and the economy was inundated by the influx of hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars. All these activities reinforced the power of the Honduran military.

Civilian government survived, at least in name, when Rafael Leonardo Callejas ascended to the presidency in 1990 in a smooth transfer of office. Electoral victory in 1993 went to Carlos Roberto Reina, of the Liberal Party, who as president struggled to deal with economic decline. His biggest political challenge came from the armed forces, which resisted the president’s efforts to crack down on military collusion with international drug traffickers. And to protest investigations into alleged abuse of human rights, the army sent tanks into the streets of Tegucigalpa in August 1995. Triumph in the 1997 presidential election went to Carlos Roberto Flores Facussé, from the conservative wing of the Liberal Party, who also struggled to stimulate economic growth and to assert civilian control over the armed forces.
In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch inflicted massive devastation on Honduras—nearly 6000 people dead, more than 20,000 injured or missing, approximately $3.6 billion in damages. The rains destroyed more than 60 percent of the national infrastructure and around 70 percent of agricultural output (including three-quarters of the banana crop). It would take years, and perhaps decades, for this small and impoverished country to recover. But even in the wake of the destruction, there were signs of hope. One stemmed from the incompetent performance in the rescue effort of the Honduran military, which lost a good deal of credibility as a result—and thus, paradoxically, promoted the cause of demilitarization and democratization. The other came from a recognition that the extent of human suffering and economic damage resulted not only from the natural force of the hurricane itself, but also from a long-standing disregard of the environment and overexploitation of natural resources. As Monsignor Oscar Andrés Rodríguez said of Mitch: “It’s our punishment for destroying all our forests and removing all the tree cover on the hills,” referring to illegal logging and the lack of environmental protection. “Let’s not reconstruct the old Honduras. Let us build something new, a different country.”

The 2001 elections ousted the Liberals from power and brought victory to Ricardo Maduro of the conservative National Party. In search of debt relief for his country, Maduro undertook negotiations with the International Monetary Fund. As happened so often elsewhere, efforts to implement IMF-mandated economic reforms led to protest in the streets.
Voters responded to these developments in 2005 by bringing the Liberal Party back into power, under the leadership of Manuel Zelaya. The son of a wealthy businessman, Zelaya was himself involved in ranching, logging, and the timber trade. A longtime party member, he had served three terms in the national congress. There was every reason to expect that Zelaya would preside over a pragmatic, moderate, middle-of-the-road administration.

The political climate changed markedly in 2008. Early in the year Zelaya called on the United States to legalize drugs, partly in order to reduce gang-related violence in Honduras. In July he announced his intention to join the leftist Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA) formed and promoted by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. Meanwhile the 2007-08 world food price crisis led to increasing poverty and despair, giving tiny and picturesque Honduras one of the highest homicide rates in all of Latin America.

In November 2008 Zelaya issued a decree for a nonbinding poll to determine whether to convene a constituent assembly for the purpose of writing a new constitution. This provoked widespread fears that Zelaya wanted to rescind the country’s historic no-reelection rule and perpetuate his hold on power.

The referendum was slated to take place on June 28, 2009. Early that morning, military personnel roused Zelaya out of bed and whisked him off to Costa Rica. Although tensions had been building within the country for months, the coup took most outside observers by surprise.
Aftermath of the Coup

In order to offer a veneer of legitimacy to the military takeover and following constitutional provisions, the Congressional opponents of Zelaya immediately swore in Roberto Micheletti, the former President of the Honduran Congress, as interim president. At the same time, Zelaya’s supporters took to the streets and protested the illegal seizure of power. Regular marches and government-imposed curfews paralyzed the capital, and the images of military troops beating up protesters reinforced international opposition to the coup d’état. The United Nations General Assembly condemned Zelaya’s ouster. The Organization of American States (OAS) suspended Honduras’s right to participation in that institution while reinforcing “diplomatic initiatives to restore democracy and the rule of law in the Republic of Honduras and the reinstatement of President José Manuel Zelaya Rosales.” The European Union backed the OAS’s position and also stopped aid to Honduras. No country officially recognized the new regime.

Yet the Obama administration offered an ambiguous response. Soon after Zelaya’s ouster, President Obama condemned the coup and the United States suspended some aid to Honduras, but the State Department resumed development and military assistance several weeks later. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton criticized the military regime, but advised caution and moderation to Zelaya and his supporters. Washington policymakers let the OAS take the lead in resolving the Honduran crisis and endorsed negotiations that were brokered by the Costa Rican president, Oscar Arias. Talks stalled in July 2009.
On several occasions, the Honduran military blocked attempts by Zelaya to cross the border into the country. Then in an effort to break the political deadlock between the deposed president and the new regime, Zelaya carried out a 15-hour trek through mountainous back roads in September 2009 and quietly slipped into the country. He immediately sought political asylum in the Brazilian embassy. Micheletti’s government proceeded to disrupt utility services to the embassy and close off the area to Zelaya’s supporters. The following day the military suspended five constitutional rights: personal liberty, freedom of expression, freedom of movement, habeas corpus, and freedom of association and assembly. It restored these rights a month later after significant international criticism.

Costa Rican President Oscar Arias continued the attempt to broker an agreement between Zelaya and Micheletti, known as the Tegucigalpa–San José Accord. In part the document stated: “We, Honduran citizens, men and women convinced of the necessity to strengthen the state of law, to aid our constitution and the laws of our Republic, deepen democracy and assure a climate of peace and tranquility for our people, have carried out a frank and intense process of political dialogue to seek a negotiated and peaceful exit to the crisis in which our country has been submerged in recent months.” Terms of the accord included calling on the Honduran Congress to vote on whether to reinstate Zelaya, establishing a national unity government, and setting up a truth commission to investigate events that led up to the coup and its aftermath. The deal began to unravel in late October 2009 when the Honduran Congress announced it would postpone a vote on Mr. Zelaya’s return to power until after constitutionally scheduled elections that were set for late November 2009. In protest, Zelaya refused to submit names for the coalition government
and called on his supporters to boycott the presidential elections. The Obama administration, breaking with its allies in Latin America, announced it would recognize the results of the upcoming election, even if Zelaya were not reinstated. Costa Rica and Panama followed suit in announcing that they would also recognize the election results.

Brazil led other Latin American nations in denouncing the presidential race as a backhanded means of legitimizing the military’s power grab. Zelaya sent an impassioned letter to President Barak Obama criticizing the U.S. backing of the elections. Some critics of Washington’s policy have argued that the Obama administration prioritized pragmatism over principle. After the attempted accord unraveled, Oscar Arias admitted that “Micheletti never had the will to collaborate and that on the contrary he was mocking the international community and only sought to extend the time to never turn over the power that he has.”

With Zelaya’s supporters boycotting the race, the presidential frontrunner was Porfirio Lobo, a wealthy conservative who raises corn, soy, and sorghum on one of the country’s largest farms and who had lost the last election four years previously to Zelaya. Trailing behind Lobo was Elvin Santos, the former vice president, who had resigned from that office in December 2008 in order run for president. Carlos H. Reyes, a Zelaya supporter, withdrew from the race protesting election fraud. Although government officials proclaimed a 62 percent turnout on election day, independent observers with access to information from the Supreme Electoral Tribunal indicated that voter participation hovered around 49 percent. Lobo received approximately 55 percent of the votes, leading Santos by sixteen percentage points.
The Obama administration declared that the post-coup election was “a significant step forward” in solving Honduras's political crisis, while regretting that a deal to restore the ousted president had not been implemented. Panama and Colombia were the first to congratulate Mr. Lobo, and Oscar Arias of Costa Rica said his government would recognize the outcome if there was no evidence of fraud. Peru also followed suit. The Honduran Congress then voted against restoring the ousted president to serve out the last two months of his term. Brazil and twenty other Latin American and Caribbean countries refused to recognize the election results, calling into question the legitimacy of the newly elected president.

This political crisis has placed additional economic burdens on Honduras, the poorest country in Central America. Remittances from Hondurans working in the United States make up almost a quarter of the nation’s gross domestic product. The ongoing recession in the United States has had a negative effect on the country, with remittances dropping 12 percent and the economy expected to shrink as much as 4.5 percent in 2009. In January 2010 when Porfírio Lobo is sworn in as the new president, Zelaya and the political opposition to the new government will likely shift their focus toward mobilizing in favor of a constitutional convention to write a new constitution. As the year 2009 drew to its end, the crisis in Honduras remained to be resolved.