

Obama's opportunity in Latin America begins with closure

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Soon after Honduras President Manuel Zelaya was removed from his post by the congress and the military, U.S. President Barack Obama expressed deep concerns by the reports of the coup. Obama called "on all political and social actors in Honduras to respect democratic norms, the rule of law and the tenets of the Inter-American Democratic Charter." He also called for a peaceful resolution to "existing tensions and disputes ... through dialogue free from any outside interference."

But this statement was quickly dismissed by many on the left because, in their view, the Obama administration was splitting legalistic hairs. Why not call the events what they were: a coup d'etat, a golpe de estado, a military coup. A few days later Obama told reporters his administration was still trying to determine whether this was an illegal coup. The left cried foul: An "illegal coup"? Aren't all coups, by definition, illegal? This gave some credence to statements that the United States had prior knowledge of the coup, and even that it had been the main instigator. Venezuelan-American author and lawyer, Eva Golinger, released a statement on June 28 calling the Honduras events "Obama's first coup d'etat."

Despite the aggressive rhetoric, there is little evidence to support the notion that the current U.S. administration had any involvement in the removal of President Zelaya. The main argument is that the U.S. ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens was aware of the tensions between Zelaya and the Honduran congress, and that he had some influence in preventing a coup days before the June 28 actions took place. That, and the fact that Obama, Secretary of State Clinton and others have called for a peaceful resolution through negotiations.

One of the reasons why the U.S. did not want to rush to conclusions as to the events in Honduras was because legally, the U.S. would be required to cut most aid to one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere. The legal determination was complicated by the fact that Zelaya was not removed from power and the country by the military alone. The Honduran congress voted 122 to 6 to remove Zelaya, and the courts all concurred in the determination that Zelaya's actions were illegal.

(A brief recount of events is necessary here: For several months prior to the June 28 events, President Zelaya was making every effort to include a question to the

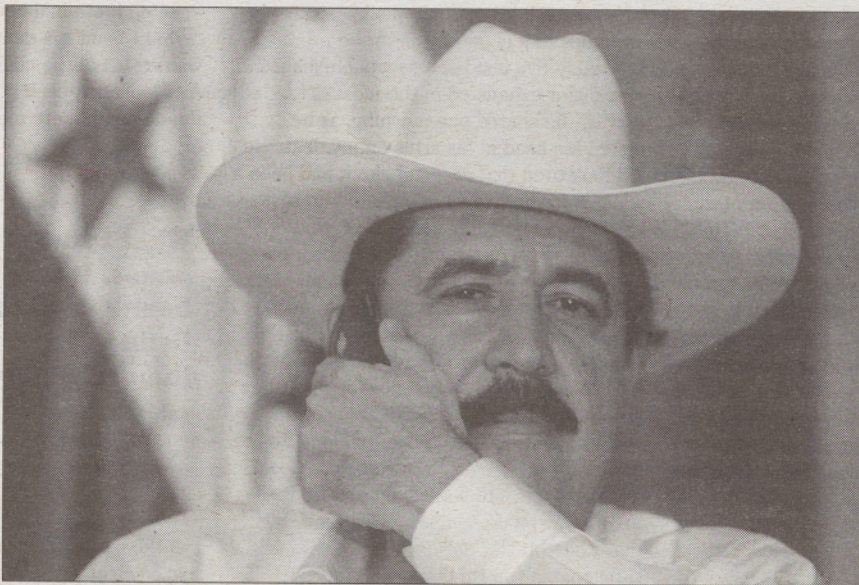
public in the ballot for the June elections. The question asked whether voters wanted the government to call for a Constitutional Assembly, which would explore the possibility of constitutional reform. But the main reform that Zelaya sought was the

complaint about the Obama administration appears to be more about its overall approach to foreign relations, especially with respect to Latin America. Golinger sharply points out that the U.S. administration is "manipulating the outcome and attempting

economic) to achieve its national objectives. The Obama administration, however, appears to be more interested in re-defining its relationship with Latin America by adopting a form of diplomacy that's more inclusive and balanced than previous administrations. This new form of diplomacy focuses on giving Central American countries a leading role in resolving regional problems. This is likely why the U.S. agreed to give the role of broker to Costa Rican president Oscar Arias, a well-respected leader in the region.

The problem now it seems, is the U.S. legacy in Latin America in general, and in Central America in particular. The CIA's illegal activities in Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador (in addition to its covert action in Chile and elsewhere) from the early 1950s to the late '80s left a legacy that will make it very difficult for the Obama administration to implement a new approach to diplomacy.

Leftist critics of the U.S. administration have also pointed out that many of the military leaders involved in the coup were trained at the School of the Americas, or SOA, a U.S.-funded military school where many Latin American forces have been trained to wage war, even though most of the Honduran military leaders involved in



Ousted Honduras President Manuel Zelaya

REUTERS/OSWALDO RIVAS

possibility of extending the number of terms the president could serve. To many in Honduras and elsewhere, this seemed like the same approach taken by Hugo Chavez in Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia. And the Honduran congress along with the courts determined that such a referendum would be illegal.)

The assertions are based on speculation and extrapolations of history. For instance, Golinger argues that U.S. aid to Honduran groups aimed at "promoting democracy" are actually fronts to encourage the political opposition to regain control of power, through democratic means or otherwise. That's because much of the money is being funneled through the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and USAID, which in the past have been linked to opposition groups in other Latin American countries. Golinger's own book, "The Chavez Code," presented strong evidence of NED's involvement in the 2002 Venezuelan coup that temporarily removed Hugo Chavez from power. But that evidence is non-existent with respect to Honduras — for now, at least.

At the end of the day, however, the main

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to appear as though one position has been assumed when in reality, actions demonstrate the contrary." She calls this approach part of the strategy of "smart power," which she defines as "the capacity to combine "hard power" with "soft power" to achieve a victorious strategy. "Smart power" strategically uses diplomacy, persuasion, capacity building, military power and economic and political influence, in an effective way with a political and social legitimacy.

But this is nothing new. Every country has its own national interests in mind and will use diplomacy, persuasion and every kind of power available (military and

the coup had attended the SOA in the 1990s.

Clearly, the SOA is a powerful symbol of repression and a reminder of the US legacy in Latin America. President Obama has a unique opportunity to send a strong message that the old U.S. policies toward Latin America no longer apply by ordering the SOA closed for good. Not only would this silence some critics, but it would also allow the Obama administration to apply a new form of "smart power" to the region by making regional actors responsible for what goes on in their backyard.

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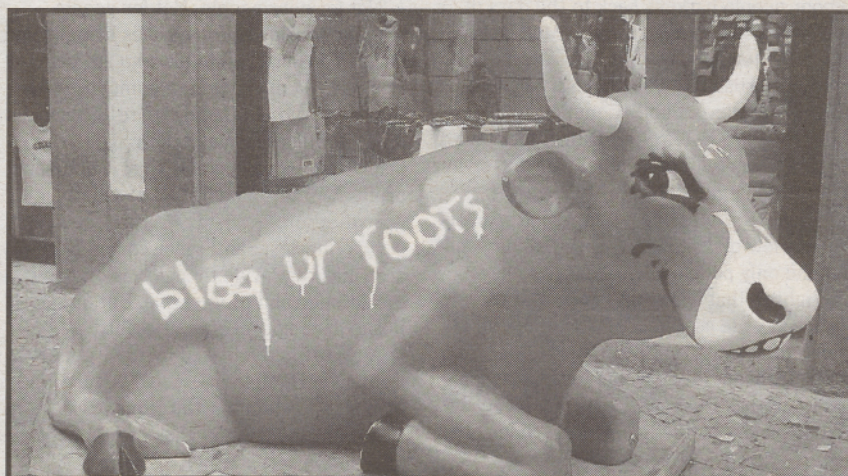
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