

THE US IS PUSHING FOR normalisation with Honduras, but violence and political repression are rising and the communities are in the crossfire. ROSIE WONG reports from Tegucigalpa.

Honduras: after the coup

Last June marked the first anniversary of the military coup that ousted the elected president Manuel Zelaya. On 28 June heavily armed Honduran soldiers invaded the president's home, forcefully removing him and taking him to a US military base where he was put on small plane and flown to the airport and then to Costa Rica. The same day the then-president of the congress Roberto Micheletti was sworn in by the congress as the new president of Honduras.

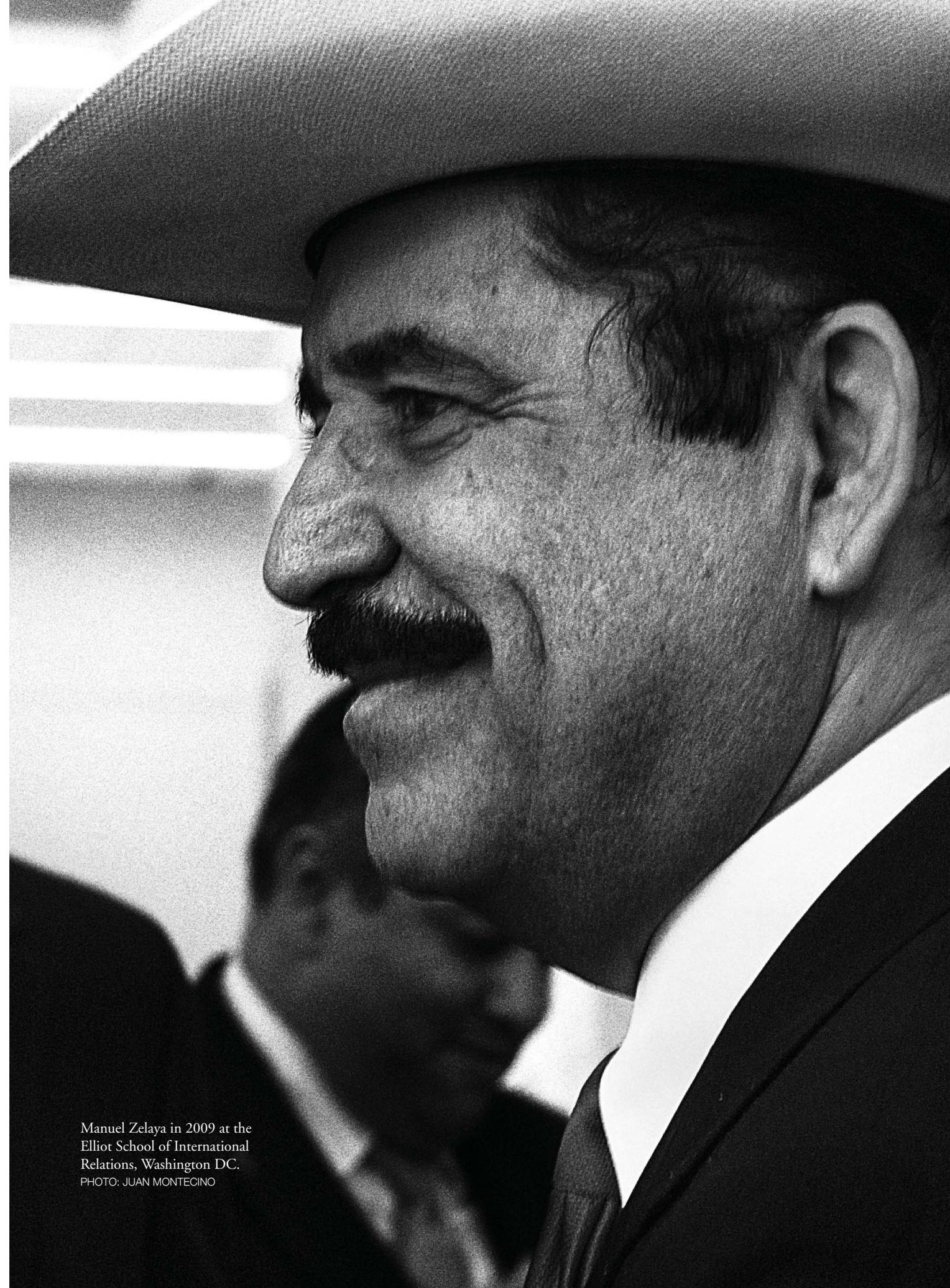
The coup was staged at a time when the government was initiating social and economic change in this country of 7.3 million, and the second poorest in Latin America after Haiti. Zelaya had surprised many Hondurans when he responded to grassroots demands and implemented a number of social reforms. These included increasing the minimum wage by 60 per cent, opposing the privatisation of the national telephone company, suspending mining concessions, banning open-pit mining and joining Petrocaribe – a scheme giving Hondurans access to cheaper petrol.

Zelaya also lowered interest rates, allocated funds for agricultural technology and provided free electricity

to 7,000 poor families. He joined the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas, the economic cooperation scheme that provides educational and health programs and promotes literacy, abolishes school fees and finances micro enterprises. During his term he increased the international reserves and opposed the devaluation of the Honduran currency. He also initiated land-reform negotiations in favour of the campesinos and replaced the US military base in Honduras with a commercial airport.

According to observers, he was not a radical, but his reforms were seen as extreme by the ultra-right, ultra-conservative ruling class.

Lisa Sullivan, Director of the Latin American Office of the School of the Americas Watch reported she had witnessed hope and excitement for grassroots driven change just a month before the coup. She had visited the president and other leaders to ask them to stop sending troops for training to the US Army School of the Americas, now renamed Western Hemisphere Institute of Security and Cooperation. This is a school that has trained over 60,000 Latin American soldiers and whose graduates have participated in torture, death squads, mass killings and military coups.



Manuel Zelaya in 2009 at the Elliot School of International Relations, Washington DC.
PHOTO: JUAN MONTECINO

Sullivan was impressed by the meeting president Zelaya held with grassroots representatives. The president wanted to include a fourth ballot box on election day in November 2009 to find out whether or not Hondurans wanted to form a national constituent assembly to reform the constitution. Zelaya talked with grassroots representatives about problems with the existing constitution and the need for reform led by a new constituent assembly.

But after the coup the proposal for the non-binding consultation was declared illegal. The Supreme Court ordered the reinstatement of the head of the military forces, Romeo Vasquez Velasquez, after Zelaya had dismissed him for disobeying orders to distribute the ballot boxes, and the Congress passed a decree to make illegal the holding of popular consultations 180 days before or after general elections.

State institutions were not alone in supporting the coup. The Honduran Business Council, the Civic Democratic Union, the Honduran Catholic Church, (led by Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga Rodriguez), the media and other international interests also supported it.

The International Republican Institute, for instance, allocated \$1.2 million alone in 2009 to think tanks and lobbying. Analysts say that these organisations campaigned to manipulate public opinion, making it believe that the proposed constituent assembly was just about Zelaya's re-election, and that by promoting the fourth ballot box the president had broken the law (since the constitution only allows representative democracy through the congress, rather than participative democracy) and that Zelaya had written a resignation letter. But these rumours had no substance. Despite misinformation by the mainstream media many people rebelled, organising daily marches.

International pressure was ignored by the new regime. The Organisation of American States (OAS) immediately suspended Honduras's membership. The United Nations General Assembly unanimously condemned the military coup, and did not recognise any government other than Zelaya's constitutional government, and continued to call on his immediate

and unconditional restitution. In July the countries of the European Union decided to withdraw their ambassadors from Honduras. But the Honduran Congress ignored the international pressure and ratified a decree restricting individual liberties. The European Union then announced it was to suspend aid.

Cardinal Oscar Maradiaga Rodriguez appeared on television and radio telling Zelaya not to return, warning there would be bloodshed if he did. When he tried to return to Honduras a month later, the military prevented his landing by blocking the path. Masses of people went to welcome back their president. Isis Obed was shot dead by the police.

A few weeks later, Zelaya made another attempt to cross into Honduras, this time by land from Nicaragua. On this occasion a massive military contingent prevented his return, the police captured 24-year-old Pedro Magdiel Salvador Munoz, who was found dead and tortured the next morning.

In September 2009, Zelaya clandestinely returned to Tegucigalpa. His arrival was announced after he safely entered the Brazilian Embassy. A curfew was announced that lasted 40 hours. He remained in the embassy accompanied initially by hundreds of supporters for four months. During this time the Brazilian Embassy and surrounding streets were closed off from journalists and controlled by the military.

At the request of the US government, Costa Rican president Oscar Arias mediated negotiations between representatives of the Zelaya government and the de facto regime, but these failed after three rounds because the de facto regime said Zelaya's proposal of a return to power was unacceptable. A month later, a delegation of seven ministers and the secretary general of the OAS also tried to negotiate a solution with no outcome. Then Zelaya called for people to demonstrate for his restitution. The de facto regime responded by emitting a decree restricting freedoms of movement and expression for 45 days and forbade meetings.

In October the OAS began mediation between representatives of Zelaya and Micheletti. Zelaya demanded to be restituted by 15 October to ensure

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On the day that ousted President Manuel Zelaya was slated to return, thousands of supporters gathered at the Pedagogica University in order to march towards Toncontin Airport in July 2009. PHOTO: JAMES RODRIGUEZ

legitimate elections but had to extend the deadline several times.

Finally the US Sub-Secretary of State for Hemispheric Affairs, Thomas Shannon arrived in Honduras to break the stalemate. Micheletti announced congress would decide on Zelaya's return to power. Zelaya accepted on the understanding it would return him to power, but congress didn't make a decision until after the elections and the majority of the members voted against the return of Zelaya to power.

Since the election was carried out by an illegitimate regime under militarised conditions, none of the international organisations had sent observers. On election day many resistance leaders' homes were invaded by the military and many people marched in protest. Many were beaten and 80 people were detained. The local media reported having the highest ever participation rate in the election but the reality was different.

The inauguration of the new president Porfirio Lobo took place on 27 January 2010. The same day 300,000 people marched in Tegucigalpa alone, to

farewell Zelaya who left Honduras for the Dominican Republic.

The Obama administration initially denounced the coup but afterwards appeared to have a change in policy, lobbying Latin American governments to recognise the Lobo regime. Adrienne Pine, Professor of Anthropology at the American University explains, "The State Department has been pushing very hard for the recognition of this new president and they are doing this against the demands of the resistance movement and human rights organisations who are demanding justice and democracy.

"They are denouncing the human rights abuses that are still being perpetrated. Seven journalists have been killed and there is a need for a new constitution which allows for participatory democracy as the current one does not."

Pine says, "They [the US] talk about 'strengthening' the institutions of the police and the military, but it is the police and the military that are killing people every day in Honduras and when they are killing people they are doing it in a targeted fashion. They are killing those who have been actively involved in the non-violent resistance

movement, so pouring money into those institutions is going to do the opposite to what the State Department and the Obama administration say it is going to do.”

International pressure has continued. The South American Nations Union has opposed the coup and the Lobo regime. They have to date been successful in blocking the re-entry of Honduras to the OAS, and have boycotted the Lobo regime from a number of regional diplomatic conferences and events. The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and the United Nations have sent delegations and have issued reports condemning the human rights violations perpetrated since the military coup.

According to the Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared, there have been 83 assassinations against members of the National Front for National Resistance and countless numbers of people have been injured and wounded by the military. There is a constant flood of people leaving the country because they have been perceived to be members of the resistance and have been tortured and raped.

Last December the founder and coordinator of the Committee of Families of the Detained and Disappeared was awarded the prestigious Tulip award for her exceptional human rights work by the Dutch government. She immediately returned to Honduras for a celebration with the people. Awards such as that one are in fact helping to strengthen the credibility of the Honduran struggle.

The UN Development Program reports that Honduras has an extremely high murder rate of 61.3 per 100,000 people. Professor Pine has estimated a nine per cent increase in the murder rate since the coup, “I have never seen worse security conditions in this country... while in the previous decade, the victims of extrajudicial assassinations and other forms of state violence were disproportionately young men identified (often incorrectly) as gang members, today a large percentage of the victims fall into two primary categories: people who are involved in or are openly critical of drug trafficking, and individuals who are seen as being critical of the Lobo regime, which is controlled by two forces: the military, and a small group of powerful business elites, united in their opposition against anyone opposing the coup ... the atmosphere of impunity ensures there is virtually no investigations or prosecutions.

“Moreover, victims are posthumously slandered by the police and the media as having brought their deaths upon themselves, either for involvement in drugs or as calling for a more participatory democratic government.”

Meanwhile, the attack against freedom of expression and information continue. Anarella Velez of C-Libre – an

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organisation that sends alerts about violations and crimes against freedom of expression – said that C-Libre’s work has multiplied since the military coup. She says alternative media stations, such as Radio Globo, Cholutec Sur TV, and Radio Progreso, were closed down after the coup, and the regime continues to persecute community radios and the feminist radio programs.

The Guardian journalist Jonathon Glennie reported that in 2002, before Zelaya took office, 60 per cent of Hondurans lived below the poverty line, rising to 66 per cent in 2005, with urban unemployment at 6.5 per cent, and 47 per cent of income being earned by 10 per cent of the population, while 2.1 per cent was earned by the bottom 10 per cent.

During Zelaya’s term, improvements were shown with slight reductions in inequality – in 2006, 42.4 per cent of income was earned by 10 per cent of the population, 2.5 per cent was earned by the bottom 10 per cent. In 2007, urban unemployment declined to 4 per cent and those living below the poverty line dropped to 60.2 per cent. The minimum wage increased by over 60 per cent and economic growth in Zelaya’s first three years averaged 5.6 per cent

However the economy contracted three per cent in the year following the coup. The Lobo regime has introduced countless neoliberal policies, including the casualisation of labour, a national plan to lock the country into neoliberal policies for the next 15 years that include anti-terrorist laws that force NGOs to declare information about any donation they receive that is over \$2,000 and allowing state powers to fine, imprison



Ousted Honduran president Manuel Zelaya, who returned to Honduras on Sept. 21, 2009, celebrates by waving the national flag. PHOTO: INFOSURHOY

and suspend the legal status of any organisation whose activities are considered to be terrorist – the Security Minister Oscar Alvarez said that NGOs are not allowed to finance marches that de-stabilise the country.

Lobo’s government has awarded concessions to private companies to open 41 hydroelectric dams against the wishes of the communities including Indigenous communities. He has increased military spending and has decreased educational spending.

Wilfredo Mendez, Executive Director of Centre for the Investigation and Promotion of Human Rights, wrote a report in which he recommends the congress should elaborate on a master plan for the modernisation of parliament – which, according to Mendez, Micheletti appears to have turned into a rubber stamp for public-works contracts.

Mendez presents an analysis of the institutional output of the congress, showing that the congress under Micheletti and Jose Alfredo Saavedra is one of the least transparent, democratic, least representative and least

effective political institutions Honduras has had in the last 30 years.

While 90 per cent of the motions and projects passed have to do with contracts of public works, in 2009, 27 bills were left without approval, including the general law for the access of women to a life free from violence; the law that protects students in schools and the law to eradicate kidnapping, extortion and assassination.

The report also establishes that the president tends to manipulate congress to his whims because the legislation allows him to do so. The regulations governing congress are 25 years old. It grants complete power to its president. Reforms are needed to achieve a greater legitimacy and representation. “The process of national reconciliation will not be achieved without establishing a new social pact and this pact is the national constituent assembly,” he writes.

INTERVIEW WITH DR JUAN ALMENDARES >>>