

Reversing Honduras's coup

Why and how to reinstate Zelaya

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Restoring legitimacy in Central America will take pressure as well as persuasion

EPA



ALMOST a month after the army ousted Manuel Zelaya, the elected president of Honduras, the danger has grown that a conflict of powers in an otherwise insignificant Central American country may turn into a wider and more worrying regional confrontation. This week the attempt by Óscar Arias, the president of neighbouring Costa Rica, to mediate between Mr Zelaya and his de facto successor, Roberto Micheletti, limped on. Mr Zelaya unhelpfully called on his supporters to stage an “insurrection”. Three weeks ago an abortive return by Mr Zelaya saw one person die when troops opened fire against demonstrators trying to storm the main airport. Mr Arias is surely right to warn of worse bloodshed unless a deal is reached. But as *The Economist* went to press, his “final” plan hung in the balance. Who is to blame for the menacing deadlock and what can be done to overcome it?

The view in conservative circles, especially in the United States, is that what happened was not a coup at all, but a constitutional succession. By sacking the head of the army for his refusal to help organise an illegal referendum on changing the constitution, this argument goes, Mr Zelaya himself violated that document. In ousting him the army scotched a power grab of the kind pioneered by Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez, who also just happens to have become an unlikely ally of Mr Zelaya. His removal has the backing of the legislature and the Supreme Court and many Hondurans. Better to let deadlock drag on until a presidential election due in November, say Republicans, who are trying to block Barack Obama’s nominee to handle relations with Latin America over this issue.

This argument is short-sighted and wrong. Mr Zelaya’s many faults did not justify his early-morning arrest and summary deportation. Coups are bad whatever the political colour of their victims. That is a lesson Latin America learned the hard way. Any election held under Mr Micheletti will be seen by many as illegitimate. But it is similarly wrongheaded to seek to reverse the coup through violence, as Mr Zelaya, egged on by Mr Chávez, seems to wish. The evidence suggests that only about one Honduran in three supports Mr Zelaya.

Back the Arias plan with sanctions

That is why Mr Arias's mediation still offers the best way out. His proposal is sensible. Mr Zelaya would be restored to office, but with an all-party government and international supervision; the election might be brought forward by a month; Mr Zelaya would drop his plan for a constituent assembly; and an amnesty would cover both sides. While Mr Zelaya has seemed reluctant to accept some of these conditions, Mr Micheletti has been even more intransigent, saying he would "never" allow the president's reinstatement.

The United States is now best placed to secure an accord. If mediation fails, Mr Obama's administration should cut aid and consider further sanctions against the de facto government. If there is a last-minute deal, it must press all sides to honour it. But Brazil and others could help too—by pushing Mr Zelaya to be patient, accept the Arias plan and distance himself from the likes of Mr Chávez and Cuba's Raúl Castro, whose commitment to democracy ranges from dubious to non-existent. Mr Micheletti is right that democracy can be undermined by autocratic presidents. But this caveat should not cloud the central issue: a coup in a region which has shed authoritarianism should not be allowed to stand.