

HONDURAS SEEKS A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT

Tjark Marten Egenhoff

At first glance, the political crisis in Honduras seemed reminiscent of the coups in Latin America of the 1960s and 1970s. However, on closer inspection, things turned out to be far more complicated and contradictory. The military was acting under orders from the Supreme Court. With help from the Liberal Party of the now ousted president, Manuel Zelaya, the National Congress elected Roberto Micheletti as new President, since under the constitution Micheletti, the President of the National Congress, was next in line. And yet the military coup that illegally deposed the president and sent him into exile to Costa Rica is a clear constitutional violation. The fact that the international community raised objections and imposed sanctions is encouraging, in light of memories of the many coups that have plagued Latin America's history. However, the events leading up to the coup have only been taken into account as time has passed. The crisis in Honduras has brought to the fore political and social divisions and increasing political polarization, warning signals that have to be taken seriously by the entire region. Democracies in Central America are under enormous pressure to tackle pressing social issues and at the same time to create political structures that enable sufficient participation and have sufficient power to overcome problems. Trust in democratic institutions has been eroded to such an extent that every political alternative – even those alien to the system – is being considered.

The Honduran crisis is an example of how perceptions and the interpretation of events is subject to media conditioning. Representatives of the ALBA (Alianza Bolivariana de las Americas) community of states, headed by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, skillfully showed how to write the media script for this crisis. The first images showed a pugnacious Manuel Zelaya, dressed in a night shirt, calling from Costa Rica for the international community to resurrect democracy in Honduras. This scene contrasted with the images from Tegucigalpa, which showed a triumphant and less worldly de facto president, Roberto Micheletti, accompanied by the military. Without doubt, this not only gave rise to unanimous condemnation of the coup d'état in the international arena but also meant that the reinstatement of the deposed president, the outcome of a brief moment of international consensus, became a non-negotiable condition. From then on, the existing close-knit front of political actors in Honduras, who did not support the return of President Zelaya in any manner, became even stronger. As a result, the chance of reaching a compromise and an amicable solution to the crisis before the election diminished considerably. Nevertheless, it was clear at the time that individual OAS member states such as the USA, Canada and Columbia, which continued to condemn the coup, increasingly drew different conclusions about the situation in Honduras. At the same time, the different perceptions

of events both within and outside Honduras grew as a result of the one-sided information policy of Micheletti's de facto government, which prevented radio and television channels that supported Zelaya from carrying out their work properly, and in light of the power of the media organizations which had traditionally been close to the two main political parties. The divisions in society, which became clearer with the political crisis, were hardly discussed in public debates in the media. Paradoxically, though, the unanimous international condemnation of the de facto government created a defiant sense of community, particularly among the political actors in the capital, Tegucigalpa, which the international rejection of democratic elections only served to fuel.

In the analysis of the political crisis, the fact is often neglected that the electoral calendar, which paves the way for the presidential elections, had already started in November 2008 with the organization of internal party elections to nominate candidates. Porfirio Lobo won the National Party's nomination and Mauricio Villeda was nominated for the Liberal Party as a stand-in for Elvin Santos, Zelaya's former vice president, until Santos' candidature was retrospectively allowed. The pressure on the electoral process was considerably increased as a result of the coup, even though there had already been debates over a ban on censuses and the authority of the electoral court had been called into question by Zelaya's government. The political isolation of the country, the limitations resulting from night curfews, the state of emergency that was declared for a few days and individual human rights abuses held out little hope of a normal election. The courage that the judges showed during these months and on the evening of the election itself merits mention. Not only did they openly criticize the lack of civil liberties during the months after the coup without politicizing the election as a result, they also carried out their work in difficult circumstances, even after international cooperation was withdrawn.

The National Party candidate, Porfirio "Pepe" Lobo (56 percent), was declared the winner by a considerable margin of 18 percent over his Liberal Party rival, Elvin Santos (38 percent). The presidential candidates from the Christian Democrats (PDCH), the Social Democrats (PINU) and the left-wing Unificación Democrática (UD) each only won about two percent of the votes; nevertheless, they have returned members of parliament. This has given the center-right party's candidate a clear mandate and he will be able to implement the necessary reforms thanks to his comfortable majority in parliament (74 of the 128 seats). Pepe Lobo, who stood twice for the presidency and only just lost in 2005 to Mel Zelaya, has been able to place his conservative Partido Nacional on a new footing over the past four years, which dedicates the party to Christian democratic principles and the social market economy. In light of the convincing victory and the particular situation in the country and the sensitivities of the political and economic elite associated with it, the

Christian democratic project, which is being pushed for by the president-elect, has a good chance of making inroads into the rest of the National Party.

The current Liberal government, to which both Manuel Zelaya and Roberto Micheletti belong, has not succeeded in overcoming its internal divisions and generating voter loyalty. Although on election day Manuel Zelaya called for the election results not to be recognized, since recognition would condone the coup, his call from the Brazilian embassy was ignored by most of the population. His chances of reinstatement came to an end following the parliamentary elections of December 2, 2009.

The newly elected government, which will start work on January 27, 2010, has already signaled a new beginning that would see a unity government sharing responsibility between the other political camps as part of a national coalition – something that goes against the traditional grain of government. Furthermore, a national dialogue was already set up by the president-elect in December, which was accepted by both political forces and civil society. This could be seen by the fact that representatives of organizations that former president Manuel Zelaya had been a member of were also present. There thus arises the possibility – with professional backing of the individual participants – of isolating difficult issues and including civic society members who feel excluded from the decision-making process.

The various parties must use the chance of an open dialog to redefine the social contract that was destroyed over the past few months and to draw lessons from the events. The first hopeful signs of this can be seen from the unity government. The danger that after the new government is sworn in at the end of January it will return to business as usual is still present. Nevertheless, there has never been a better time than now for the necessary reforms and for a further opening up of the political system, as well as the inclusion of people that have previously been highly skeptical of the political system. Honduras must not squander this opportunity.

IN: *Auslandsinformationen* 1/2010, ISSN 0177-7521, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V., Berlin, p.123-126