

## Zelaya's scrap of paper

*Unless outsiders continue to press, a deal to end a stubborn political conflict risks coming unstuck even before it is implemented.*

Even before it was signed on October 30th, the Tegucigalpa-San José Accord was hailed as a diplomatic breakthrough. For four months after Manuel Zelaya was roused from bed at gunpoint, flown to Costa Rica and replaced as president of Honduras by Roberto Micheletti, outsiders failed to reverse what they universally saw as a coup. Despite the withdrawal of foreign aid, the severing of diplomatic ties and the cancellation of dozens of American visas, Mr Micheletti refused to contemplate Mr Zelaya's restoration. Yet diplomats from the United States took just two days to get the two men to strike a deal that, on paper, ends Honduras's political stalemate. "I cannot think of another example of a country in Latin America that, having suffered a rupture of its democratic and constitutional order, overcame such a crisis through negotiation and dialogue," said Hillary Clinton, the American secretary of state.

In fact it is too soon to declare victory. The agreement requires Mr Zelaya to drop his plan for a referendum on constitutional reform, which his foes saw as a bid to allow him another term. A national-unity government is to be formed by November 5th. Next year a truth commission will be set up to look at the coup. Another committee, of four people, will oversee the accord's implementation; Ricardo Lagos, a former president of Chile, and Hilda Solis, Barack Obama's secretary of labour, were named as its international members.

But the crucial question of Mr Zelaya's reinstatement has been left to Honduras's Congress, which shows no sign of discussing it soon. This week Mr Zelaya was still trapped in the Brazilian embassy, where he has been since sneaking back into the country six weeks ago. The de facto government still says it will arrest him if he ventures outside.

Time is short. A presidential election is due on November 29th. This offers the best way out of the impasse, and Mr Micheletti is desperate for the world to recognise its outcome. Conversely, Mr Zelaya's supporters vow to boycott the poll unless their leader is back in office before then.

The phrasing of the accord seems calibrated to allow both sides to maintain mutually incompatible positions. The de facto government argues that the pact gives free rein to Congress—which voted to name Mr Micheletti president hours after Mr Zelaya's forced exile—to decide on the presidency. Unless and until it restores Mr Zelaya, Mr Micheletti will remain in office. Meanwhile, Mr Zelaya's aides insist that Congress is merely being asked to ratify a pre-existing commitment to reinstate him. If it delays or rejects this, the pact becomes void, they say. "It's an agreement without an agreement," says Efraín Díaz Arrivillaga, a left-of-centre former presidential candidate. "It was designed to leave the key elements open to interpretation."

The assumption has been that the agreement carried a tacit corollary that Congress would swiftly restore Mr Zelaya. His aides encouraged these rumours. "We're almost sure the vote will be in favour," says Carlos Eduardo Reina, his political adviser. "That's what we sense. But I can't provide details."

This confidence may be misplaced. Hitherto Congress, the courts, the army and a seeming majority of Hondurans have been determined to see the back of Mr Zelaya, a Liberal rancher who disillusioned his party by entering a far-left alliance with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and who defied the courts in trying to organise the referendum. According to CID Gallup, a local pollster, support has recently grown for Mr Zelaya, but 49% still oppose his restoration (47% favour it). In Congress Mr Micheletti commands two-thirds of the Liberal votes. So Mr Zelaya

needs the backing of the conservative National Party, whose presidential candidate is leading in the polls. One of its leaders says his party will try to delay a vote until after the election.

If that happens the united front against the coup in the outside world may buckle. The United States, which has already reopened its visa office in Tegucigalpa, the capital, appears willing to recognise the elections whether or not Congress votes to restore Mr Zelaya. But most of Latin America is unlikely to follow suit unless Mr Zelaya is reinstated before the ballot—especially since the head of the electoral tribunal says that anyone calling for a boycott will be jailed.

Honduras urgently needs political peace. The months since the coup have seen a collapse in tourism, frequent curfews, roadblocks by Mr Zelaya's supporters and a sharp fall in public investment because of the suspension of foreign aid. All this will shave 2.5% from GDP this year, reckons Manuel Bautista, a local economist. Although Mr Micheletti is hardly an Augusto Pinochet or a Fidel Castro, his government has occasionally been heavy-handed. At least three people have been killed by the security forces. Leftist NGOs blame the government for a further 17 deaths. The attorney-general's human-rights office has received around 200 reports of beatings by security forces. "I don't think there's a state policy of repression," says Sandra Ponce, the unit's director. "But there is a complacency regarding abuses by police." Opposition broadcasters have often been blocked.

The conflict has damaged Honduras's previously stable politics. The army, having submitted to civilian authority for the past decade or more, has re-emerged as a political actor. An old-established two-party system is giving way to a far more polarising class divide. And the rule of law has been circumvented by both sides. "This is the repetition of 100 years of Honduran history," says Mr Díaz Arrivillaga. "It's the same ghosts: stopping communism, selective violations of human rights, constitutional breaches, and agreements among elites and caudillos sponsored by the United States. It's nothing new." In one of the poorest countries in the region, that lack of novelty is all the more depressing.

ZELAYA'S scrap of paper. **The Economist**, New York, Nov. 5<sup>th</sup> 2009. Disponível em: <[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)>. Acesso em: 6 nov. 2009.