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Opinion

Honduras: Make it official -- it's a coup

A formal finding would trigger a suspension of U.S. aid.

By Howard L. Berman

September 3, 2009

Official Washington is waiting for the State Department to determine if this summer's events in Honduras constitute a coup. Actions may speak louder than words, but in this case, one word alone could affect the course of democracy in the Western Hemisphere.

U.S. law requires that foreign assistance, with the exception of humanitarian and democracy-related aid, be suspended for "the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree." A formal determination by the State Department would trigger this suspension, whereas previous uses of the word "coup" by U.S. authorities have not. The matter will be on many minds today as Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton meets with ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a "coup d'etat" as "a sudden decisive exercise of force in politics; especially: the violent overthrow or alteration of an existing government by a small group."

So far, the United States has taken a measured approach to this matter, allowing negotiations between Latin American leaders and the de facto Honduran government to run their course. But our patience is not without end, and President Obama, Secretary of State Clinton, the U.N. General Assembly and the Organization of American States have already put the label to good use.

In late June, amid a constitutional impasse with his country's supreme court and military, Zelaya was taken from his home by soldiers, bundled aboard a plane in his pajamas and flown out of the country. Since then, even in the face of united hemispheric and world condemnation of the coup, a de facto government led by the former head of the Honduran Congress, Roberto Micheletti, has dug in its heels.

This one looks, walks and quacks like a duck. It's time to stop hedging and call this bird what it is. And if, for whatever reason, the State Department lawyers do not conclude that this was a coup, Congress should examine other ways by which it can directly affect the flow of aid.

Cutting off assistance is a blunt instrument, one that should not be wielded lightly. It can affect livelihoods and families and industries, in addition to targeting those at the top. But Honduras will hold presidential and parliamentary elections Nov. 29, and every passing day gives Micheletti and his associates the chance to tighten their illegitimate hold on the reins of power.

In negotiations, they have done little more than stall, hoping that the matter of the coup will become moot as elections near. They refuse to participate in a regional agreement brokered under Costa Rican President Oscar Arias and the OAS to restore Zelaya so that he can serve the remainder of his term, even with strict conditions on his exercise of power under international monitoring.

All the while, conditions in Honduras are coming to resemble what we saw in this region in the 1970s, especially for those who are known to have voted for Zelaya. In August, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, an autonomous and respected regional human rights monitor, found in Honduras today "the existence of a pattern of disproportionate use of public force, arbitrary detentions and the control of information aimed at limiting political participation by a sector of the citizenry [and] ... the use of repression against demonstrations ... the arbitrary enforcement of curfews; the detentions of thousands of people; cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment; and poor detention conditions."

The de facto government claims that Zelaya was trying to subvert the Honduran Constitution and convert the country into a satellite of Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez. That may be. But having soldiers take Zelaya out of the country at gunpoint is an insult to decades of Latin America's hard-won, historic struggle with democracy.

No matter what we think of Zelaya (and I don't think highly of him) and his actions to change the Honduran Constitution, it is a fact that his mandate to govern was gained in a fully transparent election.

Democracy and the rule of law are not so fully established in this hemisphere that the coup can be treated in isolation and as an exception that is allowed to stand. The longer it takes to right this wrong, the less legitimate the November elections will be, and the climb out of this hole will be all the steeper for the entire region.

We should wield our influence by withdrawing all but the most necessary assistance, an action that would be in keeping with those of 34 countries in the Western Hemisphere that want to see democracy restored to Honduras.

Howard L. Berman (D-Valley Village) is chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

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