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*The Washington Post*

## Ideologues hijack a compromise

By Edward Schumacher-Matos  
 Friday, November 6, 2009

Adults learn that human conflicts are seldom black and white. So the way the international community jumped to punish tiny Honduras for the ouster of its president, without knowing the facts, was foolish.

That some Senate Republicans have been extremist in the other direction borders on galling. Opposing a U.S.-brokered agreement reached a week ago by Hondurans to defuse the crisis, the senators, led by South Carolina's Jim DeMint, have been grandstanding on principles that have little to do with reality, contributing to looming chaos in that Central American country and undermining U.S. policy in the region.

In this, the age of fundamentalist ayatollahs, the knee-jerk cold warriors among the Senate Republicans are no better than the knee-jerk anti-military officials in the Organization of American States.

The compromise leaves egg on the face of the OAS and an intelligentsia that refused to see Honduras as more than a banana republic that somehow could infect the region, only to be confronted by a Senate cabal that treats Honduras as . . . a banana republic that somehow could infect the rest of the region.

The former see this impoverished backwater of 8 million people setting off a chain of military coups, while the latter see it setting off a chain of leftist dictatorships. The two share an equally misguided domino theory.

Poor Honduras, in the meantime.

The compromise, put together by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and -- yes -- sensible State Department diplomats, creatively settled on a process instead of an end. Ousted President Manuel Zelaya and de facto President Roberto Micheletti agreed to allow the Honduran Congress, with the advice of that country's Supreme Court, to resolve the question of whether Zelaya should return to office for the last 2 1/2 months of his term.

Zelaya created the crisis by instigating mob rule in June to try to carry out an unconstitutional referendum designed to lift a limit on a president's time in office. The Supreme Court ordered the military to arrest him, but the generals, fearful of riots, went one step further and illegally exiled him. Congress, not the military, then took political control. Zelaya later snuck back into Honduras, however, and is now holed up in the Brazilian Embassy.

The Honduran Congress is likely to allow Zelaya's reinstatement, with limited powers, as a way to gain legitimacy for long-scheduled presidential elections later this month. That is what it should do, but Zelaya has postponed discussing the makeup of the cabinet, and Congress could shut him out. Public tension is high, but DeMint and other Republicans, instead of counseling caution, opposed even the compromise agreement and are demanding that Zelaya be rejected, setting up the country for revolution.

They have been doing reckless damage in Washington as well. Since the spring, they have held up the appointments of the administration's Latin America policy team. DeMint lifted the hold only late Thursday, after Clinton promised him that the United States would recognize the Honduran elections even if Zelaya is not reinstated, an end the Republicans are unwisely pushing.

The intellectual force behind the Republican obstruction is the Wall Street Journal's influential Americas columnist, Mary O'Grady. Beating the Honduran drum for months, O'Grady maintains that Zelaya's return would be a victory for Hugo Chávez, Venezuela's leftist president. She further accuses President Obama of being Chávez's virtual ally. As she wrote this week: "Mr. Chávez and Fidel Castro were supporting Mr. Zelaya, and Mr. Obama apparently wanted to be part of the gang."

O'Grady is a friend and former colleague of mine, so I know that she is concerned for Latin America's welfare. But her scorched-earth accusations against Obama and Clinton are wrong. An obsession with Chávez and Castro also builds both up when their influence is waning in the region. Being ideologically black or white may feel good, but it isn't helpful in resolving gray constitutional -- or human -- affairs.

Anyway, it's the grays that make life interesting.

The administration was right to calibrate its response, working with the de facto government while slowly increasing the pressure for Zelaya's return by cutting aid to Honduras. The policy recognized that both sides have valid arguments. It also deftly sidelined Chávez, making him irrelevant. A deal was possible only as the election approached and both sides became ready to compromise. What the deal needs now is support, not obstruction, from the U.S. Senate.

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