

Foreign Policy Reactions of Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the United States to the Honduran Constitutional Crisis of 2009

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Abstract

The nations of the Western Hemisphere took differing policy stances to the removal of Honduran president Manuel Zelaya in July 2009. One group of countries viewed the ouster as a military coup and another group viewed Zelaya's removal as a concerted action by Honduras's legislature, Supreme Court and military as a necessary measure for the preservation of democracy in the country. This comparative study examines the reactions of Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, and the United States to Zelaya's ouster in an effort to determine which factors may have led these nations to respond as they did. For instance, Brazil, an emerging regional power, took an uncharacteristically strong stance against Zelaya's removal, insisting his return to power was the only acceptable solution to the crisis, while other nations sought a negotiated solution. Domestic political situations in each country at the time of the crisis and the strength and autonomy of domestic political institutions, leadership, and a country's physical proximity to Honduras potentially explain the countries' reactions. In Brazil, Lula's PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) government was situated ideologically at the left of the political spectrum, and although pragmatic in many ways, foreign policy was largely controlled by left-leaning PT veterans and could often be used to play to these interests. Additionally, Brazil's physical distance from the crisis and regional clout afforded the leadership a considerable amount of latitude to act, while the other countries had security concerns and domestic political situations that were not conducive to such a position.

The Honduran Constitutional Crisis: Background

During the early months of 2009, reports indicated a rapid decline in public support for Honduran President Manuel Zelaya. With presidential elections slated for November of the same year and the end of his term in sight, Zelaya was on his way to becoming a lame duck president. Zelaya's term in office was marked by a lack of success in combating the problems of crime, corruption, and inflation, as well as a controversial decision to align with the *Alianza Bolivariana de los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (ALBA) in October 2008.¹ The domestic political situation took an unexpected turn in March 2009, when Zelaya proposed the idea of holding a referendum on constitutional reform in association with the November elections. This reform would have addressed the part of the constitution that permitted presidents to serve for one, four-year term with no possibility of consecutive reelection. The following months included legal and legislative debate on Zelaya's proposal for popular consultation, with lower courts and eventually the Supreme Court ruling Zelaya's proposal to have a referendum unconstitutional. Zelaya's *Partido Liberal* (PL) held a minority (62 out of 128) of legislative seats at the time, and the Congress sided with the Supreme Court on the reform issue. Public debate on the issue was divisive, and although many were not opposed to the idea of constitutional reform, they disagreed with the timing.²

The pre-election tensions came to a head in June 2009, when upon disregarding a congressional decision prohibiting the referendum, Zelaya turned to the military to carry out an opinion poll of dubious legitimacy. The opinion poll was to be conducted on June

¹ "Honduras: Country Report," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, March-August 2009.

² *Ibid.*

28, posing the question of whether or not to include another ballot box in the November elections. This ballot box would have determined whether or not to convoke a Constituent Assembly to oversee the modification of the Honduran political system.³ The poll was considered illegitimate for several reasons. For one, the National Electoral Tribunal was the only body authorized to carry out such a poll, and for this reason the Supreme Court ruled this poll unconstitutional. Moreover, an additional ballot box could only be added with approval from the legislature. This sparked an institutional crisis, for Zelaya dismissed the head of the armed forces for refusing to carry out the logistics of the opinion poll, which prompted mass officer resignations. Overestimating his sway over the armed forces, he pushed forward with the opinion poll that was scheduled for the morning of June 28. On June 26 the Honduran Supreme Court warned Zelaya that this would not be tolerated, and the Organization of American States (OAS) held an extraordinary session to discuss the deteriorating political situation in Honduras.⁴ Zelaya did not alter his course despite these warning signs, and in the early hours of the morning of June 28 the military, acting on orders from the Honduran Congress and Supreme Court, took Zelaya from his sleeping chamber and sent him into exile in Costa Rica.

Regional Reactions

Zelaya's ouster elicited a strong reaction from its neighbors and the international community. The action on the part of the military received swift condemnation from the individual governments of the Western Hemisphere, as well as a resolution from the OAS

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Organization of American States, Extraordinary Session CP/ACTA 1699/09, 26 June 2009.

“vehemently condemning” what it labeled a military coup d’état.⁵ Invoking the Inter-American Democratic Charter, Honduras was suspended from the organization the following week. Although largely unified in their initial responses to the crisis, the nations of the Americas had differing visions for its resolution.

One group of countries condemned the Honduran legislature and Supreme Court’s action, while another group supported them. As the nations of the Western Hemisphere all had identifiable policy positions on the Honduran issue, it is instructive to carefully examine differing policies of specific countries to more fully trace the origins of distinct foreign policy stances, and the United States, Brazil, El Salvador, and Guatemala provide this opportunity. El Salvador and Guatemala both initially condemned the military action to remove Zelaya, but then later accepted the legitimacy of Porfirio Lobo’s election in November 2009. The United States followed a similar path, with Secretary of State Clinton visiting with Zelaya in a show of support after his ouster while simultaneously not engaging in any actions that would risk conferring legitimacy upon the government of de facto President Roberto Micheletti. However, the United States too fell short of full condemnation of the ouster and ended up accepting election results as well. By contrast, Brazil was one of the most outspoken actors in the crisis, refusing to acknowledge the provisional government and continuing to insist upon Zelaya’s return to power. Additionally, Brazil provided refuge for Zelaya in their embassy in Tegucigalpa when he made a clandestine return to Honduras in September 2009.

⁵ *Ibid.*

This study will attempt to explain why Brazil remained steadfast in their support for Zelaya throughout the crisis, while the United States, El Salvador, and Guatemala accepted the results of the November 29 elections.

Democracy has historically been a fragile institution at best in many Latin American nations. As a region with a tradition of centralized authority and strong leaders, peaceful transition in Latin America has proven difficult on many occasions. While the arrival of Huntington's Third Wave of democratization explains the move away from authoritarian rule and consolidation of democracy in the region during the last two decades of the 20th century, the region remains sensitive to disruptions in democratic rule.⁶ Arturo Valenzuela, both a statesman and academic, mentions that during the Third Wave itself, 13 different interruptions in democratic rule have occurred. For instance, Serrano and Fujimori attempted to shut out the legislatures in Guatemala and Peru, and the military ousted Aristide through a coup d'état in Haiti. Moreover, undesirable conditions in Venezuela and Brazil led to the impeachments of Pérez and Collor, and deteriorating economic and social situations forced Alfonsín and de la Rúa from office in Argentina.⁷ Valenzuela states that although now less military-driven than in the past, these threats to democracy are still "grave and deeply worrying."⁸ In association with this claim, however, it must be noted that Mexico remained under authoritarian one-party rule for the greater part of the 20th century with no substantive role for the military. Recently, actions taken by populist leaders in Venezuela and others in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua to perpetuate their mandate add a serious new dimension to these

⁶ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20th Century*, (University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

⁷ Arturo Valenzuela, "Latin American Presidencies Interrupted," *Journal of Democracy*, 15.4 (Oct. 2004), 8-9.

⁸ *Ibid*, 18.

concerns. Thus, when the Honduran military removed Zelaya in 2009, many paid close attention to this incident in an otherwise small and unimportant country in the region due to a belief that it might be a harbinger of sorts.

In the Honduran case, Zelaya's proposed referendum represented a clear violation of the Honduran Constitution. This action was, in and of itself a threat to the democratic process and legitimate exercise of power. The inability of the legislative and judicial branches of the Honduran government to check Zelaya's actions demonstrates this clear threat to the future of the Honduran democratic process. Thus, the debate is whether Zelaya's removal by the military was a threat to democratic institutions in Honduras, or whether this was a necessary action taken to preserve democracy. Regardless, the incident did expose the fragility of democratic rule in Honduras. This is reflected clearly in a statement by the U.S. Permanent Representative to the OAS that, "[in order] to maintain the constitutional order and democracy, no branch of government or individual is, or could be, above the law."⁹ This is reminiscent of John Adams' statement that "[we are] A government of laws and not of men."

What can explain the discrepancy between the strong Brazilian position and the other more nuanced approaches to the crisis? There are six potential reasons. An approach to this issue based on culture or identity is unlikely to offer compelling explanations, because with the exception of the United States, these countries arguably share a similar Iberian cultural heritage.¹⁰ Additionally, size, clout, and economic power

⁹ OAS, Extraordinary Session, 26 June 2009.

¹⁰ See the following works for a discussion of Iberian cultural identity and cultural differences that have affected the cultural development of Latin America vis-à-vis English-settled America: Richard Morse, "The Heritage of Latin America," in *The Founding of New Societies* ed. Louis Hartz (Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964): 123-177.

do not seem to determine foreign policy outcomes in this case. The United States and Brazil are the two largest regional powers in economic terms, and two of the largest democracies in the world and yet they had widely different foreign policy responses in this case. On the other hand, Guatemala and El Salvador are small states with low GDPs. Given that the Brazilian position on the Honduran crisis contrasted with all three of these countries' approaches, size and economic power are not indicative of foreign policy decisions in this case. Lastly, ideology does not seem to explain the differences. At this time political parties with similar ideologies governed in both Brazil and El Salvador. Brazil's *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) and El Salvador's *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) both emerged from the left of the political spectrum in their respective countries, representing the reformed or pragmatic opposition. Yet the FMLN condemned the actions of Zelaya while the PT supported him. Thus, an examination of the broader ideological makeup of the ruling parties in these countries would not provide an explanation for the differing policy positions.

However, several factors can be examined in order to explain the difference between the four cases at hand. On the political side of the issue, it is useful to consider (1) domestic political situations at the time of the crisis and domestic institutions as they relate to the foreign policy process, along with the (2) individual leadership of presidents. Another factor that will be examined is (3) physical proximity to Honduras, for while Brazil and the United States could approach the crisis from distance, economic and security concerns may have been more present for El Salvador and Guatemala when considering the crisis.

Domestic Politics

Brazil: Lula and the PT

In the past, many have seen Brazil as a difficult country to govern. Fragmentation has made it impossible for one single party to control the political scene and has necessitated rule by coalition. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) achieved election through formation of a broad coalition (both in size and spread across the political spectrum), although the PT itself contains a strong leftist contingent. Individual parties tend to be regionally focused or reliant on a single personality, rather than an aggregation of national interests. Moreover, a significant amount of elected legislators switch party affiliation during their tenure.¹¹ A longtime analyst with privileged access to Brazil's political elite, Riordan Roett notes that in recent years two ideological poles have emerged in Brazilian politics, situated at the center/center-right and center/center-left of the political spectrum.¹² This decrease in polarization, coupled with a politically active electorate, has facilitated more coherent rule by coalition. While not an ideal system, this has become the reality of Brazilian politics. Ministry post distribution among the ruling coalition, as well as a significant amount of arm-twisting and even corrupt practices, allowed Lula to govern effectively.¹³

¹¹ Scott Mainwaring, "Brazil: Weak Parties, Feckless Democracy," in *Building Democratic Institutions: Party Systems in Latin America*, ed. Scott Mainwaring and Timothy R. Scully (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995): 376-378.

¹² Riordan Roett, *The New Brazil*, (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2010), 14.

¹³ "Corrupt practices" refers primarily to the *mensalão* scandal that was exposed by Roberto Jefferson in 2005. This involved large monthly payments to federal deputies in order to secure their participation in the PT-led legislative coalition. For a complete discussion of *mensalão*, see: Amaury de Souza, "The Politics of Personality in Brazil," *Journal of Democracy*, 22.2 (April 2011).

Wishing to continue and build upon the economic successes realized by the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula found himself torn between the leftist contingent of the PT and calls for him to continue the orthodox free market policies that helped Brazil successfully curb hyperinflation in the 1990s. These policies were incorporated into the 1994 Real Plan, and represented the long awaited solution to Brazil's chronic inflation problem. In order to deal with domestic political pressures effectively, Lula appointed Henrique Meirelles, a fiscal conservative, from the center-right PSDB (Cardoso's party) to the Central Bank presidency, while he filled other ministries such as the Itamaraty (Brazil's highly distinguished ministry of foreign relations) with the left-leaning but pragmatic Celso Amorim.¹⁴ Amorim is a special case, for he is a highly respected global thinker with much experience in foreign policy and diplomacy. Amorim's intellectual capacity and moderate stance made him an agreeable and logical choice for the post. This give and take associated with broad coalition rule could explain the lack of coherence between various decisions made in the foreign policy realm and rather pragmatic economic policies domestically. Upcoming national elections and pressure from the populist contingent of the PT both provide possible explanations as to why their position on the Honduran issue was rather illogical considered together with their aspirations for greater leadership in the region.¹⁵

El Salvador: Mauricio Funes and the FMLN

By contrast, the Salvadoran political party system differs from Brazil's in significant ways. The ARENA and FMLN parties are the two major players, and various

¹⁴ Sean W. Burges, *Brazilian Foreign Policy After the Cold War*, (Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 2009), 160-161.

¹⁵ Roett, *The New Brazil*, 144-148.

other parties control a small number of seats in the national assembly. After four consecutive electoral victories by ARENA, the FMLN came out on top with the election of Mauricio Funes in 2009.¹⁶ The FMLN originated from a guerrilla movement in El Salvador, but has recently moved toward representing a somewhat more pragmatic position. Within the FMLN, Funes is considered to be more moderate than the traditional FMLN party members, and his election has moved the party in this direction. While not as much a necessity as it is in Brazil, parties in El Salvador build coalitions in order to draw more voters into the fold to back a major party candidate or to build a united front for appearance's sake.¹⁷ El Salvador's political climate is highly polarized, and is becoming increasingly so with each election.¹⁸ In the months leading up to the 2009 elections, the FMLN attempted to draw in the center-left CD (2 seats in the national assembly) and the FDR (no national assembly seats). While ARENA concerned itself with attracting the PCN (10 seats in the national assembly) to appeal to rural conservative voters, the FMLN was less concerned with broad coalition building and was able to bank on Funes' high popularity among the moderate electorate.¹⁹

Receiving 51% of the vote, Funes entered office with a fair but not overwhelming mandate. In contrast to Lula's situation in Brazil, high level cabinet posts were not ceded to other parties as a result of coalition building agreements. However, the FMLN's 35

¹⁶ In speaking with a former Salvadoran government official, he implied that the transition of power began under the presidency of Tony Saca, and may have been part of a deal brokered between Saca's government and the FMLN opposition party. It should be noted that Saca later broke from ARENA and formed the right-wing GANA party that curiously formed a legislative coalition with the leftist FMLN. He compared this situation to the transition of power in Nicaragua from the Constitutionalist Liberal Party to the Sandinista National Liberation Front.

¹⁷ "Parties Seek Pre-Election Alliances," *EIU Country Monitor* (May 19, 2008): 4.

¹⁸ "Change on the Horizon, but Path for Funes and FMLN as Rough as Ever," *Washington Report on the Hemisphere*, 29:10 (June 5, 2009): 1.

¹⁹ "Parties Seek Pre-Election Alliances," *EIU Country Monitor*, 4.

seats in the national assembly was far from reaching the 84 needed for a majority, and an ARENA/PCN bloc held a 42-seat majority in the senate, making it in Funes' interest to pursue a moderate path as opposed to a radical one.²⁰ Rather than worry about coalition building, Funes had to concern himself with divisions within his own party. As a more moderate figure than the radical leftist contingent of the FMLN, there may have been pressure to represent these views through appointments or policy decisions. Funes' position on the Honduran issue was directly in line with his moderate views, and reassured the inter-American community that El Salvador would not simply hitch its wagon to the radical populist movement in Latin America. The leftist contingent of the FMLN may have desired a stronger position on the issue in favor of Zelaya, but security concerns due to geographic proximity likely played a larger role than national politics in the Salvadoran case.

Guatemala: Álvaro Colom and the UNE

In Guatemala, Álvaro Colom was just over a year into his first term, and already at risk of becoming a lame-duck president.²¹ Economic hardship and violent crime ranked high on the list of issues affecting Guatemala, and Colom's proposed social spending program to shelter vulnerable groups of people from the effects of the financial crisis failed to materialize. The ruling center-left *Unidad Nacional de Esperanza* (UNE) party only held only 38 seats in Guatemala's 158-seat legislature, necessitating the formation of legislative coalitions. Moreover, during the first half of 2009, Colom was implicated in a murder case, weakening these alliances and necessitating further

²⁰ "Change on the Horizon," *Washington Report on the Hemisphere*, 6-7.

²¹ "Guatemala: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, July 2009.

concessions in order to maintain them. Reports also note that the judicial action that implicated the president tested Guatemala's already precarious institutional structure.²² Colom's ability to push agendas such as tax reform, social spending, and other issues was essentially non-existent, and legislative paralysis essentially precluded any progress on attempting to combat economic hardship and high crime rates.

The United States: The Obama Administration

The domestic political situation in the United States at the time of the Honduran crisis is much easier to analyze, despite the range of different viewpoints and the United States' ambiguous response. Many Latin American nations welcomed the Obama Administration, expecting it to bring about a new chapter in U.S.-Latin America relations that had been strained during the Bush years. However, the measurable successes have been few and far between in the hyperpolarized climate that is Latin America policy in the United States. Although members of the Obama Administration joined the chorus of the region in referring to Zelaya's ouster as a coup initially with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meeting with Zelaya, concerns for the stability of the region led them to be one of the many nations that recognized the Lobo government that was elected in November. The U.S. government strongly supported the mediation talks by Costa Rican President Óscar Arias, although they did push for Zelaya's return to power or at the very least his ability to return to Honduras. However, they fell strategically short of referring to the ouster as a *military* coup, reflecting some restraint when analyzing this complex policy issue.

²² *Ibid.*

Interestingly enough, the Obama Administration received pushback from both the right and left of the political spectrum as a result of their actions. Initially, conservative Senator Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) criticized the administration for referring to Zelaya's removal as a coup, and traveled with some members of Congress to show support for Micheletti's interim government. DeMint went so far as to hold up Arturo Valenzuela's nomination as Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs for a period of six months.²³ This small ideological confrontation was powerful enough to hold up nominations to other key diplomatic posts such as the experienced and respected Ambassador Thomas Shannon. Conversely, as the crisis wore on, leftist groups such as "Democracy Now" criticized the administration for not taking a stronger stance in favor of Zelaya, and however ambiguously, agreeing to respect election results.²⁴ The amount of attention that was given to this small incident pales in comparison to the interests of security and stability in the region, especially when considering the issues of the drug trade and migration.

Domestic Political Institutions

When analyzing foreign policy decisions, such as the choice on whether or not to push for Zelaya's return to power, it is worthwhile to look at the political institutions in the respective countries. As Samuel P. Huntington states in *Political Order in Changing Societies*, "institutionalization is the process by which organizations and procedures

²³ Christopher Sabatini, "Rethinking Latin America," *Foreign Affairs*, (March/April 2012).

²⁴ "Honduran Coup Regime Blocks Zelaya's Return," *Democracy Now*, July 6, 2009.

acquire value and stability.”²⁵ Huntington provides four criteria for analyzing this value and stability, which this study uses to assess these countries’ respective foreign policy institutions: adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence.²⁶ The four countries considered in this study score very differently on institutionalization as defined by Huntington. For example, the United States has some of the oldest and most complex political institutions in the world, and would score highly when considering the four criteria at hand. Additionally, in comparison with its Latin American counterparts, Brazil’s Itamaraty has historically played a significant institutional role in the Brazilian foreign policy process. Founded in 1822, Itamaraty has rigorously trained and well-respected diplomats carrying Brazil’s presence abroad. On the other hand, El Salvador’s *Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores* (henceforth MRE) and Guatemala’s *Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores* (MINEX) play a less substantive role in the policy-making process and are considerably less autonomous than the U.S. Department of State or the Itamaraty.

Brazil’s Itamaraty is highly regarded both domestically and internationally, and has consistently articulated a foreign policy based on peaceful diplomatic solutions and the principle of non-intervention in the affairs of other states. They have also played a key role in expanding Brazil’s participation in multilateral institutions of global governance, and demonstrate significant coherence and complexity. One potential shortcoming of the Itamaraty vis-à-vis the U.S. Department of State would be autonomy. In Brazil, the executive and close advisors make key decisions, while regional experts and top diplomats at the U.S. Department of State have more determinative capacity on these decisions. Moreover, while political appointments make up the top diplomatic

²⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 12.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 12-24.

corps in both Brazil and the United States, Brazil's executive makes appointments in order to appease domestic political factions and to maintain a ruling coalition, demonstrating another shortfall of institutional autonomy. U.S. executives have to run cabinet and upper-level diplomatic appointments by the Senate for confirmation, although making concessions to political factions and various fragmented parties is not the reality in the United States and affords institutions more autonomy.

The United States wins out in institutional adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence, but Brazil still ranks high when compared with MRE and MINEX. As should be expected given the asymmetries between the United States and Brazil and countries like El Salvador or Guatemala, institutions in these small Central American states play a less substantive role. When administrations change in El Salvador or Guatemala, the organizations and institutions of these countries are completely taken over by groups in power. In Brazil or the United States, top ministerial/secretarial positions change hands, but there is a confirmation process for some appointees and a relatively low level of bureaucratic turnover. Brazilian diplomats trained at the Rio Branco Institute and U.S. career foreign service officers in high positions do not lose their jobs when administrations change, and continue to implement and participate in key policy decisions, demonstrating a stronger degree of institutional autonomy than MRE and MINEX, in which executives clean house during a transition of power.

This is not to say that MRE and MINEX do not play a key role in carrying out foreign policy, but neither has a high degree of complexity nor a trace of autonomy. The Honduran case raises many questions on the Brazilian side of the issue. Roett refers to the Brazilian position as "somewhat baffling," for on the surface level it appears highly

incongruent with Brazil's greater foreign policy goal of responsible regional leadership.²⁷ Brazil could have just as easily used its influence in order to act as a mediator to preserve peace and democracy in Honduras. While the presence of Zelaya in their embassy in Tegucigalpa could have slanted their position in a certain way, it seems unlikely that Zelaya simply showed up without prior notice (as the Brazilians claim). The enduring and unconditional support for Zelaya's return to power resonates more with a PT populist-driven position, rather than a carefully formulated Itamaraty response with the interests of peace and stability clear in mind. It is likely that Celso Amorim and the Itamaraty were called in for damage control, or that this was a miscalculation on their part. Although Brazil did not make a change to its policy as the crisis wore on, this was likely due to the difficulties in extricating Brazil from this situation without losing face and credibility.

Individual Leadership

While the domestic political scenes in each of these countries can help explain certain decisions, individual leadership can also play a role in key decisions such as this one. Latin American nations have a history of strong leaders, and whether speaking historically about the *caudillo*, dictator, or president, these leaders have traditionally been afforded considerable latitude in determining policy. In relation to the Honduran situation it is relatively safe to say that Guatemala and El Salvador's decisions were made from the top with little dissent. A former government minister from El Salvador shared in a personal interview that the respective ministries would have no impact upon the

²⁷ Roett, *The New Brazil*, 144.

president's decision in cases like this one.²⁸ It is safe to assume that the same can be said about Guatemala. Brazil's foreign policy process has a personalistic component as well, although Lula was known to delegate different foreign policy portfolios to both the Itamaraty and key advisors. In the United States, the Department of State, National Security Council, and other advisors all play into the process. In comparing the leadership of Lula and Funes, the two are similar in several ways. Both are charismatic and pragmatic leaders whose views are left of center. When speaking about Latin America's "left turn," distinguished analyst and former Mexican government official Jorge Castañeda distinguishes between the reformed, pragmatic left, and the radical populist ALBA movement championed by Hugo Chávez.²⁹ Both Lula and Funes have clearly behaved in ways that put them into the category of 'moderate left.'

In the case at hand, context is extremely important. In Brazil, Lula was nearing the end of his second term and was on his way out of office. Since Brazil's 1988 constitution, Brazilian presidents have exercised considerable influence vis-à-vis the Congress as well as the Itamaraty bureaucracy.³⁰ Lula took a highly personal approach to foreign policy, making more foreign trips than any of his predecessors, forming coalitions with non-traditional partners, and hosting a variety of summits with leaders from all around the world. This foreign policy activism by Lula has served to increase Brazilian interests and commitments abroad.³¹ However, the curious nature of Lula's foreign policy was how different portfolios were delegated among key advisors. Foreign Minister Celso Amorim handled the big picture global issues from the Itamaraty Palace,

²⁸ Former Salvadoran government minister, interview by Seth A. Wyngowski, February 14, 2012.

²⁹ Jorge Castañeda, "Latin America's Left Turn," *Foreign Affairs*, 85.3 (May-Jun 2006).

³⁰ Vicente Palermo, "Cómo se Gobierna Brasil?," *Desarrollo Económico*, 40.159 (Oct-Dec 2000), 495.

³¹ Carlos Santiso, "The Gordian Knot of Brazilian Foreign Policy: Promoting democracy while respecting sovereignty," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 16.2 (2003).

while top advisors Marco Aurelio Garcia and Samuel Pinheiro Guimarães Neto were known to have significant influence over the Latin America and Mercosul portfolios, respectively.³² Garcia is a PT veteran, and has experience dealing and associating with Cuba and other members of the radical left. The divided nature of Latin America policy under Lula makes it seem that the decision to come out strong against the coup in Honduras, and to go farther and house Zelaya at the embassy in Tegucigalpa, may have been a heat of the moment decision gone wrong. The Brazilian position on the issue ran contrary to their goal of greater regional leadership, creating a difficult situation to step out of without losing face. While Lula and Amorim jumped right on this issue and foreign policy appeared unified from the outside, the Brazilian position was possibly the result of poor policy advice formulated by those with leftist inclinations. Regardless, officials appointed to high positions of relevance in the Lula government and the PT itself had clear and well-known inclinations toward support of the anti-imperialist left. Some might suggest that rather than an attempt to build and assert regional leadership, this unsuccessful intervention in the Honduran crisis is an example of how Brazil has been willing to stand up against the United States on foreign policy issues and associate ideologically with the anti-imperialist left of Latin America.³³

While El Salvador or Guatemala's foreign policy is not nearly as robust and influential as Brazil's, the executive is not significantly constrained in making key decisions and substantive appointments. It is safe to say that Funes and Colom had a high level of autonomy in shaping their respective countries' responses to the Honduran crisis, but it is unlikely that individual differences account for their divergence from

³² Matthew Taylor (Assistant Professor at American University), interview by Seth A. Wygowski, February 29, 2012.

³³ Paulo Sotero, "Brazil's Rising Ambition in a Shifting Global Balance of Power," *Politics*, 30 (2010), 77.

Brazil on the issue. These leaders had similar issues to consider in forming a response, for security concerns and potential spillover effects would have affected El Salvador and Guatemala in similar ways. Within both of these countries, the executive's decision is determinative in major domestic and foreign policy decisions, so Funes and Colom would not have the competing interests involved in a ruling coalition like Brazil's interfering in decisions on the Honduran issue. The major determinant in this case would likely have been the U.S. decision on the issue, as well as the Central American regional consensus. Both countries have a traditionally close relationship with the United States, and rely on trade and remittances originating there. Additionally, the Central American nations hold a regional trade agreement; further supporting the hypothesis that regional consensus on the issue is likely to factor in to the executive's decision on key intra-regional issues.

On the U.S. side of the issue, decision-making is less concentrated in the hands of the executive. While the Honduran crisis certainly warranted Obama's close attention, opinions of regional specialists and career foreign policy analysts are likely to be determinative in these types of cases. It remains unclear who was responsible for this initial response, although this situation in the small nation of Honduras may have been one that the United States was willing to side with regional allies on. Alternatively, the initial support of Zelaya could have been a reaction sparked by what the situation appeared to be on the surface (a military coup d'état), with many details such as the unconstitutionality of Zelaya's actions and continued defiance of checks on his power still forthcoming. Congress also holds significant power, exemplified by the case of Senator DeMint and others who traveled down to show support for the transitional government against the wishes of the administration. These actions demonstrate the

ability of those in the legislature to take actions independently of the administration in order to express discontent with such decisions. This is not to say that the executive cannot make decisions on key international issues, but rather that foreign policy is a more developed and involved process in the United States than in the other nations being considered. Given the relative autonomy of Brazil's foreign policy institutions, appointments of top advisors and officials involved in the process bear some responsibility for the foreign policy position taken by Brazil in the Honduran case. The Lula government and the PT had clear leftist, anti-imperialist sentiment, and this has continually factored into their policy decisions in the hemisphere. Strong relations, investment, and ties to Cuba represent another example of the PT's ideological inclinations. When considering their response to the Honduras issue, it is likely that the ideological tendencies of the party and appointed officials in charge of the foreign policy process led Brazil to their rather curious position.

The Proximity Factor

Geographic proximity to Honduras cannot be ignored when discussing the foreign policy outcomes in this case. As previously alluded to in the discussion of several of the cases, approaches to the crisis are inherently shaped by proximity to Honduras. The solution to the Honduran issue was not at all clear throughout the process, and while the situation has arguably been resolved through the November 2009 elections, this was neither what the inter-American community originally called for nor the solution that Brazil and the ALBA countries were willing to accept. What is clear is that the threat to democracy was taken seriously throughout the region. Seligson and Booth's public

opinion data shows that a majority of Hondurans were highly dissatisfied with the government and its poor economic performance, remaining receptive to non-democratic methods of regime change and authoritarian rule.³⁴ In fact, the Honduran people demonstrated a lower commitment to democratic institutions than the citizens of any other country in the region, evidenced by a 2008 Americas Barometer poll that found 39% of Hondurans supporting rule by a strong leader without elections.³⁵ As a region plagued by gang violence and severely affected by the global financial crisis, the spillover effects of a democratic interruption would have strong implications for the prospects for democracy in Central America. This situation of dissatisfaction, while an extreme case, could have feasibly been mirrored in countries with struggling economies such as El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

In comparison with El Salvador, Guatemala, and the United States, Brazil was the actor most removed from the crisis in terms of physical distance. Moreover, contrary to the El Salvadoran and Guatemalan cases, Brazil is a regional power that openly contradicted U.S. policy in the region and internationally without consequence at various times during the Lula administration – examples include support for Iran’s nuclear program and opposition to unilateral action in the Middle East. Although Brazilian action and rhetoric in this case was rather unyielding and uncharacteristic, it does not appear to have permanently damaged their international reputation. After the dust settled from the crisis, their strong and contending negotiation position on the Honduran issue is just another small bullet point cited as a mark against their record. As a country vying for a permanent seat of the UN Security Council, they will need to work to clean up their

³⁴ Mitchell A. Seligson and John A. Booth, “Trouble in Central America: Crime, Hard Times, and Discontent,” *Journal of Democracy*, 21:2 (April 2010): 129.

³⁵ J. Mark Ruhl, “Honduras Unravels,” *Journal of Democracy*, 21:2 (April 2010): 97.

record in the coming years. Regardless, Brazil's economic clout, size, and strong but still mildly flawed democracy provide it with certain agency to push the envelope in certain cases. Additionally, in the Honduran case, this ideological confrontation in a small nation far removed physically from Brazil posed no direct threat to Brazilian security, economic, or social interests.

In El Salvador, Mauricio Funes encountered considerable domestic challenges from the day he took office. As an example to demonstrate how the Honduran and Salvadoran situations resembled each other, El Salvador's minimum wage was in desperate need of a dramatic raise. When Zelaya enacted a similar reform in Honduras, he angered the private sector to an extreme degree and turned many people against him.³⁶ As they were dealing with a very credible threat to their own democracy and security, El Salvador could not afford to take an approach as strong as Brazil's – practical concerns clearly outweigh principle or conviction in their case. Additionally, as previously discussed, Álvaro Colom enjoyed an arguably less favorable situation in Guatemala than Funes in El Salvador at the time of the crisis. Colom's failed efforts to deliver on promises for more social spending in order to cushion the effects of the economic crisis, compounded by deteriorating economic conditions and his implication in a murder case, would have made the deterioration of democracy in Honduras seem like a credible threat to Guatemalan security and democratic institutions. It is certainly significant that both of these nations share sizable borders with Honduras, so spillover effects represented a clear danger to both El Salvador and Honduras. After the hard-line negotiation position of Zelaya's supporters in Honduras and throughout the region precluded a mediated

³⁶ "A New Day in El Salvador: The FMLN Victory and the Road Ahead," *NACLA Report on the Americas*, 42.6 (Nov/Dec 2009): 15.

solution, it is logical that these neighbors were inclined to accept elections as an acceptable step in the process of reconciliation.

Although El Salvador and Guatemala would have been able to relate more directly to the Honduran breakdown, the United States also has a vested security interest in the Central American region. Migration, drug and arms trafficking, and gang violence are transnational issues that directly affect the U.S. homeland. Groups that engage in these types of activities thrive in environments of instability and the inability of states to effectively administer security for their citizens within a given territory. Thus, it is no surprise that the primary lingering effect of the Honduran constitutional crisis has been gangs moving their operations to parts of the region affected by this unstable environment. The United States has demonstrated its preoccupation with the security situation in Central America, exemplified by President Obama's decision to visit El Salvador on his Latin American tour in March 2011 as well as Vice President Biden's engagement with the region on drug-related issues. After recognizing that different negotiation efforts headed by Óscar Arias and OAS Secretary General Insulza had failed to yield any significant results, acceptance of the November election results in Honduras may have appeared as the logical way out of this impasse. Rather than prolonging the situation, bringing Honduras back into the inter-American system and aiding its people in this transition driven by democratic elections represents the best possible outcome for the United States given their geographic proximity and security interests.

Conclusions

In considering the reactions of these four nations to the Honduran crisis, the Brazilian case is particularly difficult to understand. The factors examined do help to explain how policy is formed in Brazil – the domestic political situation, relative autonomy of Brazilian foreign policy institutions, and significant physical distance from the crisis created a situation in which Brazil could act on its own accord without any immediate negative repercussions. Their position as a regional leader and a flourishing democracy makes their contending negotiation position on the action against Zelaya seem poorly guided. This gets at the inherent contradiction in Brazilian foreign policy, for stressing respect for sovereignty and non-intervention in other states' affairs can at times be mutually exclusive with defending democracy and speaking out on human rights issues. The leftist and anti-imperialist ideological tendencies of the PT and top advisors and ministers in the Lula administration provide a reasonable explanation as to why Brazil decided to speak out and act in the way it did, leading the charge for Zelaya's return to power along with the ALBA nations during the Honduran crisis. It appears that this decision was made in haste, and that Itamaraty was carrying out damage control when policy guided from the top created a situation that was difficult to step away from without losing face.

El Salvador and Guatemala's physical proximity to the crisis, coupled with similar problems of economic hardship and social problems to deal with, must have indeed been a cause for alarm. The Honduran situation could have just as easily been mirrored in each of these countries, and regional instability and interruption in democratic rule needed to be mitigated and/or prevented at any cost. While on the

surface restoring the democratically elected Zelaya to power would have overridden this action carried out by the military, it is important to consider the context. The military did not take over and act autonomously; rather they carried out the decision of the democratically elected legislature. Zelaya's actions were viewed as a threat to the future of democratic institutions in Honduras, and he contemptuously defied checks on his power by the other two branches of government, arguably leading to action that can be justified by the preservation of said institutions. The Salvadoran and Guatemalan acceptance of the November election results was motivated by rather practical concerns.

While the United States joined with other nations in the region in accepting election results, their conduct during the crisis can be examined critically as well. When it comes to Latin America policy, the political climate in the United States can turn volatile on issues like Cuba, Venezuela, and other nations with whom they have strained relations. Although the military-implemented ouster in Honduras is not something to be lauded, the United States could have taken a stronger role in contributing to the resolution of the crisis. As the crisis wore on, the United States remained strategically silent as successive mediation efforts failed. In order to remain engaged in the region as a leader, positions on issues such as these must be clearly and strongly articulated. Regional specialists must have seen this issue at a deeper level, recognizing that Zelaya's actions were contemptuous toward democratic institutions and that his removal was a result of his insistence upon superseding the repeated calls of the legislature and courts to desist in his constitutional reform efforts. However, their acceptance of election results was rather last minute, and positions on the issue were divided among prominent politicians.

The situation that unfolded in Honduras after President Zelaya's removal was unforeseen, complex, and presented what was perceived as a very real threat to democracy both in Honduras as well as in other Central American nations. While coming out to strongly condemn the action on the part of the military was the logical and unanimous response of the inter-American community, the coup d'état was much different than those of the past. Ruhl gets it right in stating, "this was not your father's military coup," rather, the Honduran military had a court order and was hardly acting autonomously.³⁷ The Honduran legislature and the Supreme Court both ruled that Zelaya was in direct violation of the constitution, and the military fell largely on their side. It appears that it was a miscalculation on Zelaya's part that caused this confrontation to reach its breaking point. Connecting back to Valenzuela's analysis of "interrupted presidencies," this begs the greater question of what to do in a case in which there exists no other lawful mechanism for removal or at least an effective check on a president who attempts to undermine the constitution.

The Inter-American Democratic Charter has rarely been invoked since its inception in 2001, the only other occasion being during the attempted coup d'état against Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2002. Moreover, Cuba has been blocked from participation in the inter-American system since 1962 due to its authoritarian regime that has prevailed on the island for 53 years. The Honduran situation raises important questions, for Zelaya's attempt to make institutional reforms in order to perpetuate his rule is mirrored to an extreme degree in countries like Venezuela and Nicaragua. Leaders like Hugo Chávez and Daniel Ortega maintain the farce of democracy, although their

³⁷ Ruhl, "Honduras Unravels," 93.

actions are hardly conducive to strong and robust democratic rule. The Charter as it currently stands is open to the interpretation of member states, and does not protect against leaders who may undermine institutions and rule in a non-democratic fashion, hold unfair elections, or attempt to perpetuate their mandate. The Honduran situation, along with other cases in the Western Hemisphere, demonstrates the need to define democracy in a stricter sense. As the central component of a participatory democracy, elections must not only be free and fair, but also competitive, frequent, and free of irregularities. Institutions in many Latin American nations do not demonstrate the adaptability necessary for continuity and strong democracy, and can be easily shaped by whoever holds power. The tone here should not be seen as alarmist, although institutional capacity and democracy in Latin America do face significant challenges in many nations.

Manuel Zelaya was not conducting himself in a manner becoming of a democratic leader, and his removal may have been more of a blessing than curse for the future of democracy in Honduras and in the region. This also signaled that democracy in the region remains fragile, despite the fact that important gains have been made in recent years toward its consolidation. This case serves as a reminder that the era of democratic interruptions has not fully come to its close. Now that the Honduran case has been resolved, what are its implications? This case certainly adds another dimension to the academic debate on whether presidential or parliamentary systems of governance are more appropriate for Latin American democracies.³⁸ Additionally, the OAS's ability to

³⁸ For a discussion of the presidential vs. parliamentary debate, see: Juan J. Linz, "The Perils of Presidentialism," in *The Global Resurgence of Democracy* ed. Diamond and Plattner (Johns Hopkins, 1996): 124-142.

invoke the democratic charter and then lift Honduras' suspension after the crisis came to an end demonstrates that despite the changing playing field of regional organizations and representative bodies, the OAS remains relevant and useful as a forum to discuss actions in situations of crisis. Although Brazil and the ALBA nations joined together to voice their dissent from the consensus that eventually came to accept the November 29 election results, the Honduran crisis was resolved relatively effectively. It remains to be seen what structural changes can and will be made in order to prevent situations like this from occurring. Nascent regional arrangements such as UNASUR and CELAC that exclude the United States may gain relevance and potentially grow to overlap and overshadow some functions of the OAS. Regardless, given another comparable situation, Brazil would almost certainly consider its approach and its consequences before adopting such a contending position. Regional consensus on these types of issues, however, remains difficult to arrive at.

Notes

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