



Obama's Honduran Headache

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Personally I thought it would be some time before President Obama was next forced to put his diplomacy skills to the test, but just a few days after condemning the Iranian authorities' crackdown on protestors, another political crisis is dumped on his doorstep. At first glance, Honduran politics seems like a relative backwater when compared to the heady-mix of theocracy, violent unrest and a hotly contested electoral result in a major Middle Eastern power. Yet a military coup in the Central American state brings its own set of problems, which require just as much attention, if not tact, from the US commander-in-chief.

The first question Obama is probably pondering goes something like this: How do you maintain influence in your backyard, when your own reputation as an impartial arbiter has been severely damaged by previous exploits in the region? Add to this the accusations (albeit from a long-time antagonist of the US, Hugo Chávez) that your own intelligence services are to blame, and the potential for you to play a constructive role starts looking pretty limited.

As difficult as these challenges may sound, it looks as though the Obama administration has hit the right note from the outset. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton labelled the ousting of President 'Mel' Zelaya 'a violation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter', which should help remove any whiff of CIA interference. Obama also called for peaceful dialogue, 'free from outside interference', which while chiming the correct democratic tones also looks like a not-so-subtle threat to other LatAm leaders to keep their hands off Honduras. With the UN, EU, and Organisation of the American States all quick to reinforce their opposition to the military coup, Zelaya's opponents appear to have few international allies, suggesting that an all-out military resolution to the matter is unlikely.

Yet the Honduran debacle brings to the fore another more concerning issue for the US government; namely, how far can and should it go to maintain its traditional dominance in the region? Any answer will no doubt have to take into account a significantly altered global financial, economic and geopolitical setting, particularly the emergence of other regional powers (Brazil's President 'Lula' da Silva has also openly condemned the coup), and the array of problems currently facing Obama's administration means it is unlikely to be answered decisively anytime soon. Fortunately, I expect Chávez's bark to be worse than his bite this time around, which should give the US a little more time to decide how best to proceed.