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OPINION

Why Honduras Sent Zelaya Away

In a perfect world former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya would be in jail in his own country right now, awaiting trial. The Honduran attorney general has charged him with deliberately violating Honduran law and the Supreme Court ordered his arrest in Tegucigalpa on June 28.



AMERICAS
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But the Honduran military whisked him out of the country, to Costa Rica, when it executed the court's order.

His expulsion has given his supporters ammunition to allege that he was treated unlawfully. Now he is an international hero of the left. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Cuban dictator Raúl Castro, and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez are all insisting that he be restored to power. This demand is baseless. Mr. Zelaya's detention was legal, as was his official removal from office by Congress.

If there is anything debatable about the crisis it is the question of whether the government can defend the expulsion of the president. In fact it had good reasons for that move and they are worth Mrs. Clinton's attention if she is interested in defending democracy.

Besides eagerly trampling the constitution, Mr. Zelaya had demonstrated that he was ready to employ the violent tactics of *chavismo* to hang onto power. The decision to pack him off immediately was taken in the interest of protecting both constitutional order and human life.

Two incidents earlier this year make the case. The first occurred



Associated Press

Zelaya supporters attack the stand of a newspaper they don't like.

in January when the country was preparing to name a new 15-seat Supreme Court, as it does every seven years. An independent board made up of members of civil society had nominated 45 candidates. From that list, Congress was to choose the new judges.

Mr. Zelaya had his own nominees in mind, including the wife of a minister, and their names were not on the list. So he set about to pressure the legislature. On the day of the vote he militarized the area around the Congress and press reports say a group of the president's men, including the minister of defense, went to the Congress uninvited to turn up the heat. The head of the legislature had to call security to have the defense minister removed.

In the end Congress held its ground and Mr. Zelaya retreated. But the message had been sent: The president was willing to use force against other institutions.

In May there was an equally scary threat to peace issued by

the Zelaya camp as the president illegally pushed for a plebiscite on rewriting the constitution. Since the executive branch is not permitted to call for such a vote, the attorney general had announced that he intended to enforce the law against Mr. Zelaya.

A week later some 100 agitators, wielding machetes, descended on the attorney general's office. "We have come to defend this country's second founding," the group's leader reportedly said. "If we are denied it, we will resort to national insurrection."

These experiences frightened Hondurans because they strongly suggested that Mr. Zelaya, who had already aligned himself with Mr. Chávez, was now emulating the Venezuelan's power-grab. Other Chávez protégés—in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua—have done the same, refusing to accept checks on their power, making use of mobs and seeking to undermine institutions.

It was this fondness for intimi-

ation that prompted Mr. Zelaya's exile. Honduras was worried that if he stayed in the country after his arrest his supporters would foment violence to try to bring down the interim government and restore him to power.

It wouldn't be a first. Bolivia's President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada was removed in 2003 using just such tactics. Antigovernment militants, trained by Peruvian terrorists and financed by Venezuela and by drug money from the Colombian rebel group FARC, had laid siege to La Paz. As the city ran short on supplies, Mr. Sánchez de Lozada issued a decree to have armed guards accompany food and fuel trucks. The rebels, who had dynamite and weapons, clashed with the guards. Sixty people died. The president was pressured to step down.

Mr. Sánchez de Lozada told me by telephone last week that he only presented a letter of resignation to the Bolivian Congress when the U.S. threatened to cut off aid if he left the country without doing so. He signed under duress but the letter was then used by the international community to endorse what was in effect a brutal Venezuelan-directed overthrow of the democracy.

The fact that the Organization of American States and the U.S. never defended the Bolivian democracy cannot be lost on the Hondurans or the *chavistas*. You can bet that Venezuela will try to orchestrate similar troubles in an attempt to bring condemnation to the new Honduran government. Honduran patriots have better odds against that strategy with Mr. Zelaya out of the country, even if Washington and the OAS don't approve.

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