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Gaining Gratitude (and Ground) in Latin America: The Foreign Policy Effects of Brazil's Honduran Houseguest

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While the Brazilian reputation for warmth and hospitality contributed to the success of Rio de Janeiro's bid to host the 2016 Olympics, the Brazilian government has recently had its hospitality put to the test in quite another way at its embassy in Honduras. Since returning to the country on 21 September, reportedly aided by Cuba and hidden in the trunk of a car belonging to the Central American Parliament, ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya has been holed up in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa, having gone from exile abroad to de facto house arrest in his own country.

The situation appeared intractable, until a sudden breakthrough was achieved 31 October when a tentative agreement was brokered by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Thomas Shannon. The deal would allow Zelaya to return to the presidency

and hold that office until a new elected president steps in January, but Zelaya could not participate in the presidential elections of 29 November. These conditions are in keeping with the country's law before the crisis, which would have barred Zelaya from seeking another term as president. Furthermore, the agreement calls for the establishment of a national unity government and a truth commission in Honduras, along with the resumption of foreign aid payments.

However, the agreement must be approved by the Honduran National Congress, which may either accept or reject Zelaya's return to the presidency. So far, a committee has refused to send the agreement to the full Congress, preferring to wait for clarifications of possible legal options from the Supreme Court and stalling any decision on Zelaya's future, possibly until after



the 29 November elections. The Congress gained even more flexibility when the U.S. and the Organization of American States backed down on their earlier demands that Zelaya be reinstated and de facto President Roberto Micheletti now is also claiming that he is meant to lead the unity government called for in the agreement and has begun naming cabinet members without any input from Zelaya, further clouding an already convoluted situation. In spite of initial optimism that the agreement would succeed and there could be some form of reconciliation in Honduras, there may be no new concrete developments until the elections. As former Costa Rican Vice President Kevin Casas-Zamora, now at the Brookings Institution, said, "The champagne corks popped out too early."

Thus, it is still unclear how long Zelaya will remain Brazil's guest, though at the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh in September, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva said that Zelaya may stay at the embassy as long as he wants. While the crisis in Honduras fades in and out of the front pages, and was overshadowed in Brazil by the success of the Olympics bid and the subsequent crackdown on organized crime in Rio de Janeiro, the Brazilian government's decision to play host to Zelaya and its position of firm support for him throughout the crisis have broad and overall positive implications for Brazilian foreign relations.

Zelaya's removal from power and exile from Honduras in a coup d'état on 28 June was roundly condemned by the international community, with the Organization of American States and the United Nations quickly call-

ing for Zelaya's reinstatement. Across Latin America, the coup brought back fearful memories of past decades, when coups and repressive, right-wing military regimes were common. The Honduran military justified these fears, violently suppressing protests and menacing Zelaya. When Zelaya first attempted to return to Honduras on 6 July, the military threatened to shoot

down his plane and blocked the runways of the Tegucigalpa airport with military vehicles, while outside the airport, soldiers clashed with Zelaya supporters, two of whom were killed. The post-coup civilian government led by Micheletti has curtailed freedom of the press and freedom of expression, and the Brazilian embassy has been turned into a prison, surrounded by soldiers and police and with access severely restricted.

Despite the demands of the U.N. Security Council, the de facto government has continued to harass Zelaya and the other embassy occupants by shining lights in the windows, blasting loud music toward the compound, and keeping snipers constantly trained on the building. At one point over one hundred supporters were in the embassy with Zelaya, but as the crisis has dragged on and the harassment has continued, their numbers have dwindled and the

psychological warfare tactics seem to have been effective in unbalancing the president. He tactlessly referred to the embassy as a "neo-Nazi concentration camp" and has been growing increasingly paranoid. He claims he is the victim of "electron bombardment with microwaves" designed to scramble his thoughts, a threat which has been 'counteracted' by covering the embassy windows

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with tin foil. A bodyguard also has the specific function of holding Zelaya's trademark white cowboy hat whenever he removes it. More substantively, though, the psychological pressure may have worn on Zelaya to the point that he was willing to accept the 31 October agreement despite the fact that under its terms his return to office is contingent on Congressional approval, rather than assured.

For Brazil, this siege of its embassy has been inconvenient, and the government has issued frequent calls for an end to the harassment. However, from the perspective of international relations, continuing to shelter Zelaya actually may have great strategic benefits for Brazil. It remains unclear what degree of coordination went into Zelaya's arrival at the Brazilian embassy and how aware the Brazilian government was of Zelaya's plans. When asked about this issue at the G20 Summit, Lula was evasive, saying, "Well, he had to stop in some embassy. I believe that our concern is not to know which embassy he is in or how he got to the embassy, because I received information already in New York City. That's when I found out."

While much of Latin America has taken a leftward turn in the past decade, Lula has remained relatively moderate and pragmatic, despite initial expectations that he would move Brazil in a more socialist direction. Though Zelaya

was a rancher before becoming a politician, and thus a member of the traditionally conservative landed elite, he changed his orientation to leftist populism after taking office, aligning himself with Venezuelan President

Hugo Chávez and pushing for Honduras to join the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), which it did in 2008. Relations between Brazil and Honduras were not particularly close before this year's coup, with relatively negligible bilateral trade (Honduras's main trading partner remains the United States, followed distantly by neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala).

Brazil has not joined ALBA, and while that group has tended to reflect Chávez's anti-American bent, Lula has maintained good relations with the U.S. across the Bush and Obama administrations, though he also remains on good terms with Chávez. Some in Brazil have criticized Lula for taking such a centrist approach both domestically and externally, arguing that he has betrayed the principles of his party, the *Partido dos Trabalhadores*, which played a key role in opposition to the military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964-1984. Yet while many of Brazil's social problems remain un-

solved, it is undeniable that under Lula the country has enjoyed economic growth and consequently expanding geopolitical power. Brazil has been largely unaffected by

Brazil's strength and middle-of-the-road approach appear to have been factors in Zelaya's decision to seek refuge in the Brazilian embassy, rather than placing himself under the care of his most vocal supporter, Venezuela's Chávez. There is much speculation that Zelaya wanted to dissociate himself somewhat from Chávez, both to prevent Chávez's polarizing influence from hurting his relations with Western leaders and the Honduran people, and to distance himself from the pre-coup allegations that he was seeking to consolidate his power in the same way Chávez has done in Venezuela.



the global economic crisis, with continued growth projected thanks to bio-fuels production and new oil and gas discoveries, and its rising prestige can be seen in its successful bids to host the globe's premier sporting events, the 2012 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics.

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For Brazil, playing host to Zelaya has a number of benefits. First, Brazil has proven itself to be friendly to a leftist leader in what is for it a win-win situation. In spite of the suspicions prior to the coup that he was trying

The Honduras crisis provides Brazil with an opportunity to increase its diplomatic standing with other Latin American states, especially in Central America, beginning to curb Venezuelan power and expanding its own, a project given greater weight by Brazil's rising military spending. Brazil has already made its presence felt in South America, where it was instrumental along with Venezuela in the formation of the South American Defense Council (SADC), and in the Caribbean, where it has been leading the U.N. Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) since 2004, but until now Brazil has not had significant influence in Central America.

to undemocratically expand his powers and change the law to allow himself to serve as president beyond the legal term limit, Zelaya has managed to market himself as a democratic leader and painted his removal from office as a contravention of the will of the people, thus making himself more palatable to the West. At the same time, Zelaya is lionized within ALBA as a fellow leftist who was attacked by reactionary capitalists seeking to put a halt to his pro-poor reforms. Thus, Brazil is able to protect Zelaya with the approval of the West and the admiration of the ALBA countries.

This admiration is especially important to Brazil, which has been less aggressive than Venezuela in expanding its influence throughout Latin America. While Venezuela has inserted itself into the civil war in Colombia, carrying Ecuador along with it, Brazil has avoided major international disputes, preferring to build economic

ties and concentrate on economic integration in South America through the Union of South American Nations (UNASUL) and the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA). How-



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Brazil has aspirations to a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council, and so it is important to demonstrate that its dominance in Latin America extends beyond the economic and into the political. While U.S. negotiators were able to move the crisis closer to resolution, they still have not had definitive success, and the Obama administration has been unable to devote as much attention as past U.S. governments might have, distracted by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and economic recession at home. Zelaya himself has called into question the U.S. commitment to his now internationally popular cause after Shannon, the U.S. negotiator, suggested that the U.S. would accept the 29 November elections as valid, regardless of stalling by the Honduran Congress on Zelaya's reinstatement. This U.S. indecisiveness belies Latin American worries about the implications of expansion of the U.S. military presence in Colombia and Paraguay. Despite perhaps the best

intentions of the Obama administration, the U.S. currently appears to be taking a more hands-off approach in Latin America, which in turn provides space for Brazil to assert itself.

Brazil has been tactful in its dealings with the Honduran crisis so far, calling for an end to the siege of the embassy

and Zelaya's reinstatement, while also cautioning Zelaya against provoking the coup leaders, who have demanded that he be turned over to face charges of treason and corruption. Brazil's continued refusal to hand over Zelaya has irked the Micheletti government to the point that it lodged a formal complaint against Brazil at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, accusing Brazil of meddling in Honduras's internal affairs by sheltering Zelaya. As the international consensus holds that the current, post-coup government is illegitimate, nothing is likely to come of the suit, which was dismissed by a Brazilian foreign ministry spokesman saying, "The de facto Honduran government has no legitimacy to lodge a law suit in the International Court of Justice."

The crisis as a whole has been negative for the Honduran people, who have had their rights trampled and their economy severely impacted by a loss of foreign aid, resulting in a drop in gross domestic product (GDP) of approximately

6 percent, and over US\$50 million per day in lost revenue, in a country that is one of the poorest in the Americas. For Brazil, however, the crisis has provided an opportunity to gain greater popularity and influence with the leftist regimes of Latin America, undercutting Chávez, but at the same time not antagonizing him. If Zelaya or his sup-

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porters are able to return to power, Brazil will find itself with closer relations with Honduras and the potential for increased trade. However, if Zelaya's opponents win out and continue to regard Brazil as a foe, this will be of little concern, as bilateral trade with Honduras was so limited to begin with and Brazil has gained greatly in political capital.

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