



JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

ZELAYA'S MILITARY AND POLITICAL COUP:
A STEP BACK FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE HEMISPHERE.

BY

ERIKA DE LA GARZA

PROGRAM DIRECTOR, LATIN AMERICAN INITIATIVE
JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY
RICE UNIVERSITY

JULY 1, 2009

Zelaya's Military and Political Coup

THE FOLLOWING OPINION PIECE WAS WRITTEN BY A RESEARCHER, FELLOW OR SCHOLAR. THE RESEARCH AND VIEWS EXPRESSED IN THESE PAPERS ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL RESEARCHER(S), AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

© 2009 BY THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY OF RICE UNIVERSITY

THIS MATERIAL MAY BE QUOTED OR REPRODUCED WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION,
PROVIDED APPROPRIATE CREDIT IS GIVEN TO THE AUTHOR AND
THE JAMES A. BAKER III INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY.

Zelaya's Military and Political Coup

The military and political ouster of Honduran president Manuel Zelaya on June 28 was a painful reminder of a not-too-distant past when governments in the region were routinely overthrown. Coups don't take place in vacuums. For months, Honduras has been living a political crisis as President Zelaya attempted to lift presidential term limits. His insistence on continuing Sunday's "referendum" or "poll" on the issue — even after the country's Supreme Court and Congress had declared it illegal — was the straw that broke the camel's back.

Those of us watching CNN en Español on Sunday witnessed the political coup in progress. We went from a live transmission from the San José, Costa Rica, airport — where President Zelaya said he had been kidnapped by the Honduran military and transported out of the country against his will — to watching the secretary of the Honduran Congress read a letter of resignation from President Zelaya and his cabinet. Two minutes later, President Zelaya emphatically denied stepping down from office or writing the letter. Yet Congress continued its extraordinary session and unanimously accepted his "resignation."

Congressmen from Zelaya's Partido Liberal, as well as from other parties, expressed their sadness for "having" to resort to such "necessary" measures. The unanimity of the resolution sends a clear message about Zelaya's lack of support. We could argue that for all members of Congress — the majority of which is from Zelaya's party — to agree on this radical measure, Zelaya must have been doing his job very poorly. Assuming this was the case, and assuming all democratic channels to replace Zelaya had been exhausted, the next step in a democracy would have been to wait until his term expires in six months.

Regardless of the reason or the context, a military coup is an unacceptable method of replacing a democratically elected president. This is a huge step back on the road toward democratic consolidation in the hemisphere. And unfortunately, given President Zelaya's inflammatory rhetoric about Honduras' elites, his fall from power will further deepen social divisions in the hemisphere's third-poorest country.