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THE COUP IN HONDURAS AND APPROACHES TO SEMI-DEMOCRACIES

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In the early hours of 28 June, the Honduran armed forces occupied the President-elect's residence, arrested him and then expelled him from the country, flying him to Costa Rica in a military aeroplane. This event represented the repetition of a phenomenon that had seemed to have been banished from the Americas: State coups perpetrated by the military forces.

Admittedly, this time the military forces did not carry out the coup with the aim of setting themselves up in power. They know that the cost of taking over the country's government would nowadays be unbearable for the armed forces over the medium term. Instead, it represents what Alfred Stepan has referred to as a "Brumairian moment", in memory of the kind of links of instrumentalisation between the French bourgeoisie and the armed forces, as described by Karl Marx in his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

In fact, this is a coup that was organised by the political classes – including the judicial powers – and backed by the media, the ecclesiastical hierarchy and big business. But how did this situation come about? It has many different causes, but basically it boils down to the precariousness of Honduras' democracy and the mistakes made by President-elect Manuel (Mel) Zelaya who, in contravention of the current constitution, began the process of preparing for re-election by including a fourth ballot box in the general elections of Sunday 28 June with which to consult the citizenry on the subject of constitutional reform, all the while knowing full well that both Parliament and the judicial powers considered such a move illegal. Furthermore, the President requested that the Armed Forces distribute these fourth ballot boxes to the electoral colleges. On refusing to do so, the head of the Joint Chiefs of Staff was then summarily dismissed by the

President, only to be returned to his post hours later by Parliament. It was the same general who ordered the arrest and expulsion of Mel Zelaya.

Honduras' entry into ALBA and Zelaya's progressive leanings toward stances held by Hugo Chávez were decisive factors behind the coup. But the United States would be making a mistake if it acted in accordance with the aforementioned factors – an approach that unquestionably had a certain bearing on the passivity of the US ambassador in Tegucigalpa, given that in the case of Honduras, it is inconceivable that the coup could have been organised and carried out without his knowledge. The best way to encourage the interests of Hugo Chávez in the region is to give up the defence of democracy in one of his allied countries.

In spite of all the mistakes Zelaya has made, the international community – including the US government – has reacted unanimously: the coup is intolerable and represents an unacceptable precedent. However, we have already seen how difficult it will be to restore the situation, despite the unwavering international response. This is not just about the return of the constitutional president; the question should be asked as to whether certain military chiefs who arrested the President and expelled him from the country can continue to hold their posts. Or the member of the Supreme Court who signed the arrest warrant without waiting for the due legal process to take place. We could carry on listing conditions here, until we reached the need to reform this very inflexible constitution, or to create the conditions of a true secular State in which churches do not set themselves up as supporters or arbiters in the political arena...

All this is very difficult to carry out, but it is what really matters, and we should not allow ourselves to become sidetracked

by aspects that are more striking but less important, such as the fact that the expulsion was carried out by the military, or the continual interventions – before and afterwards – by the President of Venezuela. The necessary military reform, for example, is impossible in a country in which the different political parties do not desire it, because what they want is for the military to align itself behind their respective positions.

The basic problem is the stagnation of the processes of democratic transition taking place in many countries in Latin America, and in most of those in Central America. This is an issue that has been widely analysed by political scientists, who have coined names for these situations such as “delegative democracy” and “semi-democracies”. A brief examination – in the case of Honduras – of the stances of the political actors, the institutions and even of the legal texts shows how difficult it is going to be to find points of support for solving the crisis that will also contribute to advancing democracy in Honduras. The international community must not opt for a solution to the Honduran conflict that simply papers over the cracks; instead it should encourage the construction of a more solid democracy in the country.

To accept this precedent would be to increase the risk of similar postures in other countries in the region, in the same way that accepting the murders perpetrated in Guatemala would mean, or the electoral fraud in Nicaragua, or the growing violence in El Salvador. It has now become quite clear that *Chavismo* will end up establishing itself sooner rather than later in these countries that are so lacking in democracy.

In conclusion, it is of vital importance that the international community, the Organization of American States and, particularly, the United States should realise that it is not sufficient to simply settle the conflict created by the coup in Honduras, or to merely call for the democratic reform of the Honduran armed forces. If we want a non-cosmetic solution, we will have to face up to the institutional situation that has made this violation of democratic rules possible. And one compelling reason for this is that Honduras’ democracy is no weaker than that of several of its neighbouring countries. Thus, we cannot passively accept such fragile democracies with the argument of “They’re better than the ones before them”.

The main responsibility for drafting a new policy of democratic demands and promotion in Latin America falls to the large countries in the hemisphere, particularly the United States, as well as Brazil and Mexico. But as with other conflicts and problems that have international repercussions, the European Union should also remain aware of its responsibilities and its capacity for influence.

