

# The Honduras Political Crisis: What's Really Going on, and What You Can Do to Help

## *Leader's Guide*

On Sunday, September 27, 2009, Christians throughout Honduras and around the world will be praying and fasting for an end to the political strife dividing Honduras and for the beginning of true change towards a better future for Honduras. The situation has become even more tense and volatile since September 21, when ousted president Zelaya evaded border guards and returned to Tegucigalpa, where he has taken refuge in the Brazilian embassy. For a few days it seemed that an accord signed by both sides on October 30 would end the crisis, but those hopes have now faded. Honduras needs your prayers more than ever.

Amidst the ongoing controversy, though, there is hope. AJS-supported justice workers in Honduras are spearheading an ecumenical movement, called "Let's Transform Honduras" (*Transformemos Honduras*), urging Hondurans, especially Honduran Christians, to not fall into the trap of divisions created by self-centered politicians, but rather to unite to make Honduras a more just society.



The movement, which in addition to AJS-supported justice workers brings together World Vision-Honduras, Project Global Village, leaders from the Catholic and Evangelical churches, and others, is seeking to collect **1 million signatures** (digital and print) from Hondurans and friends of Honduras around the world urging whoever Honduras' next leader ends up being to make 15 important changes in areas like health, education, employment, and security. Your group can help by praying for this movement's success—and by adding your signatures to the list of those calling for a better future for Honduras!

### What does the leader do?

As a group leader your role is to:

- Familiarize yourself with the context and situation by reading a variety of news and opinion articles
- Lead the group through the Honduras Political Crisis Prayer and Advocacy Packet
- Facilitate group discussion
- Lead a time of prayer
- *Optional:* Facilitate a Skype (teleconference / videoconference) presentation between the group and someone from AJS (available most weekdays, but not on Sunday the 27<sup>th</sup>)

### Understanding the situation

We recommend that you spend some time reading news and opinion articles on the situation in Honduras to be better equipped to lead discussion and answer questions. Read the articles you'll find links to at our Honduras Political Crisis webpage: [www.ajs-us.org/HondurasPoliticalCrisis](http://www.ajs-us.org/HondurasPoliticalCrisis). Search for "Honduras" in Google News to find the latest headlines from most major media. Also read the article by Kurt Ver Beek, an AJS board member who lives in Honduras, and the Open Letter to the People of Honduras, both reproduced below. Finally, the following articles posted under "What's Really Going On" on AJS's Honduras Political Crisis page are recommended reading: "Roberto Micheletti: Defender of the Constitution?," "Manuel Zelaya: Defender of the Poor?" and "The Coup: Constitutional or Not? A Question with Consequences for the Future."

## **The Prayer and Advocacy Guide**

The Prayer and Advocacy Packet provides a framework for the meeting. The timeline will help give the broader context of the political situation. The analysis is a condensed AJS analysis, taken from Kurt's article below. Read through the sections, allowing participants to ask questions.

The short Bible study provides an opportunity to discuss what the Bible has to say about the political situation. Feel free to take a few minutes to discuss the verses and commentary, remembering that there are discussion questions included at the end.

The prayer section provides a few prayer requests, but the group should feel free to make a list of their own prayer requests. You, as the leader, can decide on the structure of the prayer time. You may lead the prayer yourself, or allow the entire group to contribute to the prayer as they feel led.

## **Skype conversation**

AJS staff person Abram Huyser Honig and board member Kurt Ver Beek, both of whom live in Honduras, are available to meet with the group via Skype or conference call during most weekdays. All you need is a computer with the Skype software installed, a microphone, and a Web camera (optional). The software is free and is available at [www.skype.com](http://www.skype.com). (If you this doesn't work for you, simply having a phone with speakerphone ability can also work.) Before the meeting, coordinate with Abram at [abram@ajs-us.org](mailto:abram@ajs-us.org) to set up the time and learn how to use Skype to do a conference call. If you are in western Michigan you could also meet in person with Jill Van Beek from AJS. Her email is [jill@ajs-us.org](mailto:jill@ajs-us.org).

## **Updates**

If anyone in your group would be interested in getting email updates about what AJS does and about the political situation in Honduras, please pass around a sign-up sheet (can just be a blank piece of paper) and a pen and ask people to write their first and last names and email addresses. Then email this info to [abram@ajs-us.org](mailto:abram@ajs-us.org) or [jill@ajs-us.org](mailto:jill@ajs-us.org), or fax the sheet to 1 (800) 897-1135.

## **AJS condemns both Zelaya and his ouster**

by Kurt Ver Beek and Andrew Clouse

*Originally published on the Christianity Today blog*

*([http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2009/07/honduras\\_coup\\_w.html](http://blog.christianitytoday.com/ctliveblog/archives/2009/07/honduras_coup_w.html))*

Political leaders from around the world are racing to be the first and loudest to condemn this past Sunday's coup in Honduras. Everyone from President Obama to Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, from the United Nation's general secretary to Fidel Castro, are denouncing the coup, threatening sanctions and calling for the return to office of ousted President Manuel Zelaya. Yet why are so many Hondurans, including key evangelical leaders, so divided about the coup and Zelaya's return?

It all starts with the constitution. The Honduran constitution has 379 articles—and all but four can be reformed. It's one of these four non-negotiable that's causing all the fuss. The article states that a Honduran president cannot be re-elected. Ever. One four-year term is the only shot a president can have. Nearly all Latin American countries wrote this into their constitutions during the 1970s and 1980s in an attempt to avoid their presidents' tendency to use second terms to consolidate power and stay in office permanently.

So starting with president-turned-dictator-turned-fugitive Alberto Fujimori in Peru, and more recently including Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and now a little

closer to home—Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua and Zelaya in Honduras—Latin American presidents have sought to reform their constitutions to permit re-election. In the last few years Venezuelan president Chavez has been building ALBA, a block of Latin American presidents designed to challenge the U.S. hegemony in the region. His country's oil income in the form of finance grants, loans and political advisors serves as the carrot to entice presidents to join ALBA. And predictably enough, six of the nine members of the ALBA countries have or are trying to reform their constitutions to pave the way for their possible re-election.

Honduran president Zelaya began a full-out effort to reform the constitution in March of this year by announcing a referendum to be held Sunday, June 28—the day the coup took place—to determine whether the people wanted an assembly called to rewrite the constitution before presidential elections in November. Almost immediately, the country's political, economic and many religious leaders began lining up against this effort. The Supreme Court ruled the referendum illegal; the Congress voted to sanction the president; the attorney general's office began investigations into possible charges; both political parties—including the president's own—condemned his actions; and church leaders like Evelio Reyes, pastor of one of the largest evangelical churches in Honduras, began holding high-profile prayer vigils each morning in front of government offices.

Had the president done a better job during his first three years in office, his efforts may have been more popular. However his administration has been plagued by ineffectiveness and myriad accusations of corruption. During his first year in office, his administration received over \$4 billion in debt forgiveness—with the chief condition that any money not spent on debt was to be invested in reducing poverty. Many organizations, including Christian NGOs, worked for over a year to define how this money could be best invested. However, Zelaya ignored their efforts and instead tried to buy votes by spending 70 percent of the money on raises for teachers and health workers, and the rest on ineffective but politically powerful “cash coupons” for the rural poor. Zelaya has also failed to deliver on promises to build houses, promote land reform, build a new international airport and fight corruption. In the meantime, he has used public funds to finance a pro-government newspaper and TV station, flashy TV and radio ads and pro-government demonstrations. Zelaya did move beyond rhetoric early this year when he impetuously hiked the minimum wage by 60 percent. The raise was desperately needed, but its overnight implementation in an already-struggling economy led to thousands of minimum-wage job losses as many businesses found it impossible to make payroll.

In short, Zelaya's record is dismal. And that fact has led many Hondurans, including most evangelicals, to be relieved to see his ineffective and corrupt administration come to an unexpected end. Pastor Evelio Reyes, in a speech to support the new government said, “We cannot tolerate these kinds of actions. No country in the world puts up with these types of barbarities, and Honduras won't either because we have dignity.”

But the president does have his supporters. Despite his decidedly non-leftist background, Zelaya has managed to gain the support of some of the most radical social groups in Honduras by funding their organizations and protests and promising them seats at the constitutional assembly that would have rewritten the constitution. These groups are expert mobilizers and are now returning the favor by leading the increasingly violent protests seeking Zelaya's return to office.

But other, less radical Hondurans and church leaders also disapprove of the coup. First, the rhetoric Zelaya used during the last three months to promote a rewrite of the constitution touched a nerve for many Hondurans, including evangelicals. Zelaya's speeches as well as very professional TV and radio ads (designed by Venezuelan advisors) argued that the 70 percent of the Honduran population who live on less than \$2 a

day have seen little benefit from 20 plus years of democratic rule in which a political and economic elite have run the country and everything in it for their own illicit gain. Zelaya said it was time to hear the “voice of the people” and that reforming the constitution was a good first step in getting that voice heard. This message resonated with the poor and those, including many Christians, concerned about issues of poverty and injustice. Mario Cantor, an evangelical pastor in a marginal urban community, said this:

“The majority of people who supported the cuarta urna (the “fourth ballot box”) believed that the constitution needed to be reformed to be more inclusive. According to some, the constitution excluded certain sectors of the community. So they believe that there is a need to create a constitution that allows the people to have more participation in the country’s decisions. Zelaya himself was talking about a more equitable society, where distribution of wealth is fairer, talking about the common good, as Jesus did.”

In addition, many Hondurans and Honduran Christians are uncomfortable with the military’s role in Zelaya’s ouster, fearing a return to the situation of the 1970s and 1980s when the military was clearly the power behind the president. This was an era of fear, violence and corruption that few Hondurans care to relive. They argue that like him or not, if Zelaya was breaking the law, he should have been charged and tried instead of forcibly removed from his home and flown to Costa Rica. And they are uneasy hearing reports of suspended civil liberties and protesters detained.

They want the democratic system to work the way it is supposed to. As mega church pastor Rene Peñalba stated, Zelaya’s goal “in itself was not bad, but he got the method wrong. And I would say the same about the other side. [Zelaya] deserved to go to trial, but they got the method wrong. Both sides got it wrong.”

While the fear of an oversized role of the military is understandable, it seems clear that they were an ambivalent partner in the ouster, directed by a small but powerful political and economic elite. Although initially Zelaya’s allies in carrying out the referendum, the military has shifted since there was clearly little enthusiasm for the task. Just days before the referendum, Zelaya fired the chief general and the rest of the general’s staff quit in solidarity. Zelaya and his supporters staged a dramatic showdown at a military warehouse to get the ballots while the military stood silently by. And most obviously, while the military carried out the arrest and flew Zelaya to Costa Rica, they did not seize power but immediately installed the president of Congress as President of the country.

What’s clear among all the conflict is that all the existing powers in Honduras—the ruling elite, the Zelaya administration, and the military—show by their rhetoric that they recognize what most ordinary Hondurans want—to live in a country where their voice will be heard and where true democracy and rule of law flourish.

Carlos Hernandez, president of the *la Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa* (AJS’s Honduran sister organization), a Christian social justice organization in Honduras, argues, “As Christians we need to make the legal systems work for everyone—from the poorest Honduran to the most powerful. So first of all, Zelaya should return to the country and there should be a full investigation into his actions. If he has broken laws, he should be tried and sentenced—not sent to Costa Rica without a trial. Second, we should also push for an investigation into who was responsible for this coup and they should also be investigated and tried. It is only then, by showing that neither side is above the law and that neither side can take the law into their own hands, that we can show the world that justice for all is possible, even in Honduras.”

## **An Open Letter to the People of Honduras**

Originally published in Spanish by AJS's Honduran sister organization, *Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa (ASJ)*, on AJS-supported alternative news website [www.revistazo.com](http://www.revistazo.com).

The *Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa (ASJ)*, continually fighting for justice in Honduras, expresses to the general public its position on the events of June 28, with the hope of contributing solutions to the profound crisis in which Honduras finds itself.

### **Not with Mel nor Micheletti...a true transformation of the country**

Everyday there are more of us that believe that neither Mel nor Micheletti, nor a coup, nor violence, nor any politician will save us. Transformation requires sacrifice from everyone for the common good. Peace requires justice.

### **Why does neither government offer the solution?**

In 30 years of democracy a select few have received the most benefits and the vast majority have had little to no access to education, health services, personal security, or accountability and transparency in the management of public funds. In exchange we have experienced more corruption and broken promises. They look to us every four years for our votes.

### **Why is Mel not the solution?**

We at ASJ do not support Manuel Zelaya despite powerful rhetoric his government has used to defend the poor, call for the participation of the citizenry, and denounce the elite that manipulate and corrupt the system. Many of his criticisms are true and have awoken a justified resentment in many people.

But we doubt that “Mel” and his group are the people who will succeed in achieving true transformation; his government misspent 70 percent of the \$4 billion that were earmarked for poverty reduction in raises for government officials. His government was known for improvisation and corruption. We do believe that he intended to find a way to stay in power, which would have meant more of the same—corruption, improvisation, and many benefits for a small group of people.

### **Why is Micheletti not the solution?**

At ASJ we do not support the Roberto Micheletti government despite the powerful arguments that it uses to legitimize itself: asserting that it defends the constitution and the rule of law, and that its actions on June 28 were necessary to preserve democracy through a constitutional succession. We remember that it was “Micheletti’s Congress” that approved ALBA, the purchase of petroleum from Venezuela, and that Micheletti was the candidate Mel supported in the primary elections. If he believes in democracy and liberty, why does he support curfews, illegal detentions, violence, and the closing of media outlets with an opposing point of view? We believe that the Micheletti government, as well as future governments run by Pepe Lobo or Elvin Santos, will not bring about true transformation—only the maintenance of the status quo.

And even though they say they are defending the Constitution and the rule of law, where in the Honduran Constitution does it discuss sending accused criminals to Costa Rica? They want us to believe that the Honduran justice system functions, but they themselves do not believe in the system. A coup d’état weakens the little confidence the people already had in the democratic system that the Micheletti government says it is defending.

As Pope John Paul II said, “If you want peace, work towards justice.” We will not have true peace until those responsible for the overthrow and all other abuses of power—Mel, Micheletti, and all previous governments—are investigated and tried. Then we will show the world that in Honduras we can do justice.

### **What do we believe?**

We at ASJ are not willing to die for Mel nor Micheletti. But we are willing to risk our lives in protest and sacrifice for a true transformation of Honduras. We believe that more and more people every day are joining us in this movement. But that transformation, a true democracy for the good of all, is not achieved through people who are paid to protest, slick advertising, and violence. It is built through the sacrifice of the workers, politicians, business owners, teachers, journalists, and Christians that are willing to work for the common good. This is how a true democracy will be achieved.

Now is the time for those of us who do not believe any single politician will save us to change and sacrifice in order to demand the same of others. This is how Honduras will be transformed. We will forge the path by walking. Perhaps like Gandhi's followers—refusing to purchase salt and walking to the sea to make their own. Perhaps like Martin Luther King's followers—marching and singing peacefully but with a clear purpose. We will achieve it by praying and fasting.

If you also do not support Mel or Micheletti BUT ache for a true transformation of the country and are willing to sacrifice to achieve it, UNITE WITH US! Visit our Web page, [www.revistazo.com](http://www.revistazo.com), sign the open letter, and write your suggestions on how to protest. Tell us how you will sacrifice for the common good, or upload a video that challenges others to transform the country. Together we will build a more just society.

“Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this.” –Psalm 37:5

[www.ajs-us.org/HondurasPoliticalCrisis](http://www.ajs-us.org/HondurasPoliticalCrisis)

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