

Chicago Novelist A.C. Frieden Investigates the Honduran Coup

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (Aug. 7, 2009) – This weekend author A.C. Frieden arrived in Tegucigalpa, a capital thrown into turmoil by a coup d'etat. Currently writing a political thriller set in Latin America, Frieden quickly set his sights on Honduras after President Manuel Zelaya was overthrown. “This is far worse than an ideological quarrel between rich and poor,” observed Frieden shortly before landing at Toncontin International Airport, known for its short runway and treacherous approach. “This could be the first successful coup in Central America in over thirty years, but the political consequences may be more perilous than the coup leaders ever imagined.”



***Photo above:** Author A.C. Frieden stands with soldiers on a hill overlooking the Presidential Palace in Tegucigalpa. Security around the compound remained tight after numerous riots in recent weeks.*

The political tension had been building over the spring but turned into a full-blown crisis when on the morning of June 28, dozens of elite troops stormed the *Palacio Presidencial*, quickly neutralizing the President's guards. Zelaya was whisked to the airport and forced onto the presidential jet bound for Costa Rica. Within hours, Roberto Micheletti, the Speaker of the National Congress and next in the line of succession, was sworn in as Interim President. He then authorized numerous other arrests after declaring a state of emergency. “Unlike what's said on mainstream media, U.S. diplomats in Tegucigalpa and Washington were not surprised by the events,” Frieden said, after interviewing local sources. “The coup was on the table for some time.”

Intense negotiations began after Hillary Clinton's visit to Honduras in early June, including talks between U.S. and Honduran military and intelligence officials (a key meeting was held at the U.S. Ambassador's hillside residence just days before the coup), to decide how best to preempt Zelaya's push for a non-binding public poll on whether to consider abolishing constitutional presidential term limits, albeit at a later date. Many Hondurans, particularly the nation's most influential business leaders and the military elite led by General Romeo Vasquez, feared the poll was a power grab styled after Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. “The U.S. government's tepid public response to the coup,” Frieden added, “is transparent evidence of the White House's internal conflicts, with some officials supporting it, others resenting the precedence, and yet others wanting

to play a neutral role.” So far, the U.S. State Department revoked four A-1 visas—for officials serving in Micheletti’s government and has suspended some financial aid.

“The situation is particularly difficult here,” Frieden said. “Honduras is one of the poorest Central American nations and depends heavily on foreign trade and aid, which are at risk due to the harsh condemnation from many countries and the Organization of American States (OAS).” Using his room at the Hotel Intercontinental—just two blocks from the Presidential Palace—as a makeshift research post and with the help of a Reuters driver and guide, Frieden crisscrossed Tegucigalpa in search of the real pulse behind the coup. The scars of the crisis are evident. Anti-coup graffiti has become a common tool of decent throughout the city. Military checkpoints and patrols are everywhere. Curfews are set and lifted, and the movements of outspoken pro-Zelaya supporters are closely monitored by the security services. Ordinary Hondurans are uncertain of the days ahead and afraid of the kind of violence that gripped the city during Zelaya’s attempted return on July 5. “But things are heating up, and know one really knows how it will end.”



Photos above: (left) Riot police keeping a close eye on pedestrians in the Parque Central, the colonial-era center of Tegucigalpa; (right) A.C. Frieden observes an anti-Micheletti demonstration in the Parque Central.

Photo below: A.C. Frieden stands in front of a military checkpoint at the National Congress, the government body that sealed the fate for President Zelaya by approving the transfer of power to Roberto Micheletti.



As evidence of U.S. support for the coup, Zelaya supporters point to his proposal to transfer civilian flights from Toncontin Airport to Soto Cano Air Base, a facility used partly by U.S. military and intelligence services. The possible disruption of such a strategic base has been a thorn to both the Bush and Obama Administrations. The U.S. used the airbase as far back as the 1980s to transfer weapons and supplies to the Contras in Nicaragua. U.S. military units and law enforcement now conduct various internal and cross-border counternarcotics operations from Soto Cano with the use of helicopters and SIGINT fixed-wing aircraft. "Uninterrupted use of Soto Cano by U.S. forces was part of General Vasquez's pitch to gain the backing of the White House," says Frieden as he toured the heavily guarded grounds of the Honduran Defense Ministry. "Since early last year, Zelaya has been slowly weakening his country's military collaboration with the U.S."



Photo above: A.C. Frieden stands by a guarded entrance to the Honduran Defense Ministry headquarters.

To date, mediation efforts by the OAS and Costa Rican President Oscar Arias have failed, mostly from due to the unwillingness of Micheletti's government to consider Zelaya's reinstatement, even under a power-sharing deal. But the U.S. has not pulled all its diplomatic, security and economic levers on the coup leaders. "Little will happen unless those levers are pulled," said Frieden, "or unless larger South American countries, such as Brazil, play a more aggressive role."



Photo above: View of the National Stadium and downtown Tegucigalpa from the top of Parque La Paz.



Photo above: Pedestrians walk past soldiers guarding the National Congress in downtown Tegucigalpa.

About the author: A.C. Frieden is a Swiss-Brazilian novelist and lawyer living in Chicago. He is currently working on several political novels and thrillers, including one set in Latin America. For more information, visit his website at www.acfrieden.com and his literary travel blog.

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Avendia Publishing Inc.
Attn: Media Relations Dept.
444 N. Michigan Ave., Suite 1200
Chicago, IL 60611
Email: media@avendiapublishing.com