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NEWS ANALYSIS

Region Finds U.S. Lacking on Honduras

By [GINGER THOMPSON](#)

WASHINGTON — [Drug cartels](#) are running amok in Mexico, [Raúl Castro](#) is tightening his grip on Cuba and [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela is making mischief with Russia and Iran, but it is a relatively obscure backwater, [Honduras](#), that has provided the Obama administration with its first test in Latin America.

The ouster of [Manuel Zelaya](#), the Honduran populist president, five months ago propelled the deeply impoverished country onto [President Obama](#)'s packed agenda. The question now is whether his administration's support for the presidential election being held there on Sunday will be seen as a stamp of approval for a coup or, as senior administration members maintain, the beginning of the end of the crisis.

Most countries in the region see it as the former. Haunted by ghosts of authoritarian governments not long in the grave, countries like Brazil, Argentina and Chile have argued that an election held by an illegal government is, by definition, illegal.

They worry that if Mr. Obama appears to set aside that principle in Honduras, where the United States has long been a power broker, what would Washington do if democracy were threatened in a more powerful country where it wields less influence?

Last week, Marco Aurélio García, a senior adviser to the Brazilian president, [Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva](#), said his country "continues to have great hopes" for good relations with the United States. But, he added, "the truth is so far we have a strong sense of disappointment."

While there have been other issues — new United States bases planned for Colombia and a slow movement toward engagement with Cuba — much of the disappointment stems from the administration's handling of the crisis that began June 28 when Honduran troops [detained Mr. Zelaya and forced him into exile](#).

Mr. Obama was one of the first to condemn the coup and call for Mr. Zelaya to be restored. Rather than impose a strategy for handling the crisis, the White House collaborated with the rest of the region in support of negotiations between Mr. Zelaya and the conservative leaders of Honduras's de facto government.

Since then, the United States policy toward Honduras has been marked by mixed signals and vague objectives. The State Department was pulled in one direction by Democrats, who supported Mr. Zelaya, and [another by Republicans](#), who sought to weaken the administration's resolve to reinstate him.

The administration suspended some \$30 million in assistance to Honduras, but continued the bulk of its aid — worth hundreds of millions of dollars — saying it did not want to punish the majority of Hondurans living

in poverty.

The United States was slow to criticize human rights abuses by the de facto government, but swift to scold Mr. Zelaya for political stunts that culminated with his sneaking back into Honduras, where he remains camped inside the Brazilian Embassy.

The move that seems to have most undermined Mr. Obama's clout came last month when the administration reversed course by signaling that it would accept the outcome of Sunday's elections whether or not Mr. Zelaya was restored to power.

Latin American governments accused the administration of putting pragmatism over principle and of siding with Honduran military officers and business interests whose goal was to use the elections to legitimize the coup.

"President Obama's credibility in the region has been seriously weakened," said Kevin Casas-Zamora, a Latin America expert at the [Brookings Institution](#) and a former vice president of Costa Rica. "In a matter of five months, his administration's position on the coup has gone from indignation to indifference to confusion to acquiescence."

In interviews, senior administration officials rejected that view, saying that their strategy shifted as the crisis evolved, but that they never abandoned the region's shared principles.

Mr. Zelaya, once a darling of the Honduran upper classes, fell from favor when he began increasing the minimum wage, reducing the price of fuel and allying himself with President Chávez. His critics say he crossed a line when he defied the Supreme Court and pushed a referendum to change the Constitution so that he could run for another term. The court called in the military.

The longer the crisis went on, administration officials said, the more they feared Honduras would become another Haiti, where sanctions against a military regime pushed the hemisphere's poorest country to the brink of collapse.

"We understand that we have to build consensus and that we have to work multilaterally, but we can't sacrifice a country to do that," said a senior administration official, who like others interviewed for this article asked not to be identified because he or she were discussing diplomatic deliberations. "Not recognizing the elections unless President Zelaya is restored to power doesn't get us anywhere."

On Sunday, President Obama sent a letter to President da Silva laying out his arguments. And on Monday, the assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs, Arturo Valenzuela, made the administration's case before the [Organization of American States](#), saying the election was not an effort to "whitewash a coup d'état." Instead, he said, it was an opportunity to permit "the Honduran people to exercise their sovereign will."

With the exception of Panama and Costa Rica, no other countries in the region have publicly said they will join the United States in recognizing the vote.

"They really thought he was different," said Julia Sweig of the [Council on Foreign Relations](#), referring to

Latin America's view of Mr. Obama, adding, "But those hopes were dashed over the course of the summer."

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