

## CRITICAL QUESTIONS

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**Military Coup in Honduras: Under What Circumstances Did President Manuel Zelaya Leave Honduras?**

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On Sunday, June 28, members of the Honduran military stormed the presidential palace, arrested President Manuel Zelaya, and placed him on a plane to San José, Costa Rica, in the first Central American coup since the end of the Cold War. In a hastily convened special session, the Honduran legislature then approved Roberto Micheletti, president of the Congress, to serve as interim president for the remainder of Zelaya's term, which ends in January 2010. A resignation letter, dated June 25 and purportedly signed by Zelaya, was touted as proof of the new government's legitimacy even as Zelaya himself declared from Costa Rica that he was still the legitimate leader of the country.

**Q1: What events led to the military action in Honduras?**

**A1:** The political controversy arose over the president's right to call a referendum on constitutional reform. On March 24, President Zelaya called for a referendum on the creation of a National Constituent Assembly, to be tasked with drafting a new constitution. The referendum was to be held June 28. Critics, including opponents in the legislature, judiciary, and military, claimed it was a move by Zelaya to do away with the current limit of one four-year term for president and pave the way for him to run for a second term. On June 23, the Congress and Supreme Court rejected the referendum as unconstitutional, and the armed forces, which in Honduras are tasked with the logistical role of distributing ballots, refused to do so. This prompted Zelaya to dismiss the armed forces chief General Romeo Vasquez, though the Supreme Court ruled to reinstate him the next day, raising tensions in Tegucigalpa. Zelaya pushed ahead on Friday with his intent to hold the referendum, instructing supporters to continue distributing ballots at voting stations throughout the country. As late as Saturday, he declared in an interview with *El País* that the political situation was under control.

**Q2: What international legal norms have been breached by this military coup?**

**A2:** The coup is in violation of the Inter-American Democratic Charter, which was signed in Lima, Peru, in 2001. This charter, affirming defense of democracy in the hemisphere, has been ratified by all member states of the Organization of American States (OAS). Article 9 of the charter specifically addresses coups and the actions to be taken—including suspension from OAS membership—as a result of an illegal takeover of government. Not one government in the Americas has recognized the newly installed government, all citing it as an illegal entity in violation of international law.

**Q3: What options exist to restore President Zelaya to his democratically elected post?**

**A3:** The OAS, in its condemnation of the coup, demanded the "safe and unconditional return of President Zelaya to his constitutional functions," in accordance with the Charter of the OAS and the Inter-American Democratic Charter." This commitment to use the good offices of the OAS, coupled with the support of other governments in the hemisphere, which have condemned the acts of the Honduran military and its civilian leaders, will serve as the basis for negotiations for a return to office. Diplomatic pressure, along with the suspension of U.S. assistance as required by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, can also be used to persuade the coup leaders that their position will not be easily sustained. The United States supported Honduras through a Millennium Challenge Grant of \$215 million (2005–2010), a significant aid passage for this poor nation. Honduras also receives assistance from the Merida Initiative, a counternarcotics support effort, and is also part of the Central American Free Trade Agreement, giving the country preferential treatment on exports to the United States.

**Q4: What is the position of the U.S. government toward Honduras?**

**A4:** The U.S. government, like every other country of the region, has condemned this coup. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton did not use the term "coup" because the fluidity of the situation did not yet allow for a formal legal determination. She noted, however, that Sunday's events did have the look and feel of a coup. At this writing U.S. diplomats continue to work with their colleagues in the hemisphere to seek a democratic resolution of the crisis. The OAS is scheduled to meet on June 30 to

continue its deliberations on restoring President Zelaya to office. The U.S. government has stated that the action taken against the Honduran president violates the precepts of the Inter-American Democratic Charter and thus should be condemned by all. A resolution passed by the OAS at a special session on June 28 states: “We call on all parties in Honduras to respect the constitutional order and the rule of law, to reaffirm their democratic vocation, and to commit themselves to resolve political disputes peacefully and through dialogue. Honduras must embrace the very principles of democracy we reaffirmed at the OAS meeting it hosted less than one month ago.”

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