

**Opening Statement
Chairman Eliot L. Engel**

House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Western
Hemisphere

The Crisis in Honduras

Friday, July 10, 2009

A quorum being present, the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere will come to order.

I am deeply concerned with the recent events in Honduras and have called today's hearing to focus our attention on the crisis. Before delving into the details, I would like to state clearly that the military should not have deposed President Manuel Zelaya and whisked him out of the country. We can all discuss the events leading up to the removal of President Zelaya – and I intend to do just that – but in the end, our hemisphere cannot tolerate what is essentially a military coup.

That being said, President Zelaya's efforts to hold a referendum on whether to create a "constituent assembly" to change the Honduran Constitution troubled me greatly. It is my understanding that the Honduran Constitution contains several clauses which cannot be altered. Among those provisions are those limiting the terms of Presidents. According to one interpretation, even trying to amend these clauses or proposing their reform, automatically and immediately ended Manuel Zelaya's presidency for at least ten years.

As for me, I am not a scholar of the Honduran constitution and will not even pretend to be an arbiter of Honduran law or these clauses. This is for the Courts and political institutions of Honduras.

But, as an observer of the region and having watched the run-up to the recent crisis, I think it was clear that virtually all major Honduran political institutions and actors opposed President Zelaya's efforts. Not only were the Supreme Court, Congress, and Zelaya's own Attorney

General against him, even members of his own political party and the influential Catholic Church were hostile to Zelaya's efforts to change the constitution.

I think this matters. When the entire political establishment speaks and expresses dire concerns, the President needed to listen. From everything I can see, he did not.

This is not to say that those who deposed him were angels, either. Not only am I deeply troubled by their by the removal of President Zelaya, but also I have heard credible reports of human rights violations. If the de facto government wants to live up to its assertion that it was defending democracy, there is no better way to do so than to respect the views of those with whom you disagree, end the clamp-down on fundamental freedoms, and protect all peaceful dissenters.

Moving forward, I would now like to discuss the ongoing diplomatic process. President Obama went to the

Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago pledging that the United States would be a true partner of countries in the region and would treat our neighbors with respect. I think the Administration has taken a giant step toward in fulfilling that commitment with its excellent diplomacy and mediation efforts on the Honduran crisis.

The Administration condemned the removal of President Zelaya and called it illegal. They stood with our partners in the hemisphere by supporting a resolution at the Organization of American States (OAS) calling for President Zelaya's restoration to office. And, now Secretary Clinton has jump-started a mediation effort led by the Nobel Peace Prize-winning President of Costa Rica Oscar Arias. With this very strong U.S. diplomatic effort in the background, President Zelaya and de facto President Micheletti have begun meeting, under the auspices of President Arias in Costa Rica.

I would like to personally congratulate Secretary Clinton and her excellent team as they navigated the

diplomatic waters at this difficult time. However, I must say that I was deeply disappointed that the Administration did not send a witness to today's hearing. The Congress is a co-equal branch of government and when we ask for a witness, I think it is important that one be provided – even if he or she must avoid answering certain questions due to the sensitivity of ongoing negotiations.

However, as much as I praise Secretary Clinton and her staff for adept diplomacy, I must however question the expelling of Honduras from the OAS. I am a strong supporter of the OAS and spoke on the floor of the House of Representatives last night in support of the Inter American body, but I am concerned that suspending Honduras at a time we drop the suspension of Cuba sends an inconsistent message to the region and the world.

Second, I am increasingly troubled by efforts throughout the hemisphere to change constitutions so that leaders of certain countries can stay in power after their terms end, and I believe that we must shine a bright light on

the dangers of this anti-democratic trend. While the OAS rightly condemned the removal of President Zelaya in Honduras, I believe it should also criticize this drift away from respect for constitutionalism and the normal transfer of democratic power.

Friends, I would like to conclude the same way I began. I believe what took place in Honduras was wrong and deserves to be condemned. But, the complicated story does not begin or end there. It is my hope that this hearing will draw out many of the issues surrounding the removal of President Zelaya which add color and depth to our understanding of the crisis with the hope that such a series of events will not repeat itself.

With that, I would like to invite my friend, the Ranking Member, to give his opening statement.