

Prepared Statement of Sarah Stephens  
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Before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere  
“The Crisis in Honduras”  
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Thank you, Chairman Engel, Ranking Member Mack, and members of the Subcommittee, for holding this hearing on the crisis in Honduras.

I'd like to begin by simply expressing my sympathies to the people of Honduras for the violence and political turmoil they have experienced since June 28. It is understandable, and perhaps inevitable, that their crisis has triggered a larger debate about policy and politics, democracy and diplomacy. But, neither their humanity nor their dignity should be forgotten as we discuss the implications of the coup for all of us, inside and outside Honduras.

In fact, their interests and ours are in alignment. In that context, let me make three basic points.

First, I believe that the goal of our policy and our diplomacy should be resolving this crisis in a manner that restores the constitutional order to Honduras and returns President Zelaya to office.

Second, we need to stand with the region in saying, loudly and clearly, that military coups cannot be regarded ever again as acceptable alternatives to democracy.

Third, we need to understand that there is a principled debate occurring in the Americas about democratic institutions and the constitutions which protect them.

At times, some nations will make choices through democratic means that may disturb and discomfort us. But our long-term interests in democracy and stability in the Western Hemisphere can only be vindicated if by our words and actions we are seen as respecting rather than undermining their sovereignty and their decisions.

While we may disagree about some of these issues, I would hope that we could speak with one voice on whether it was appropriate for military force to be used against the presidency of Mel Zelaya. After all, the top legal advisor for the Honduran armed forces told the *Miami Herald*, "We know there was a crime there," and I would say, so do we.

Similarly, Edmundo Orellana, a congressman who served as Mr. Zelaya's defense minister and resigned from his position just days before the coup because he believed Mr. Zelaya was breaking the law, wrote Congress this week that President Zelaya's ouster was "illegal" and that he would refuse to take his legislative seat until Mr. Zelaya was reinstated.

This drives home the most important theme of the recent events in Honduras.

Regardless of ideology or one's opinion of President Zelaya's behavior prior to the coup, can't we say this with clarity? Military coups are wrong, they are undemocratic, and they taint the hands of everyone who touches them.

When violence becomes a substitute for politics, everything falls apart. That has been the sad history in many places across Latin America, and that is why so many people in the region are as proud as they are for having tried to put that history behind them.

As President Lula said recently "What we have achieved in these years was, in truth, the result of the deaths of many people, many young people, who decided to take up arms to bring down authoritarian regimes in Chile, in Argentina, in Uruguay, in Brazil, in almost all countries. They died and we are doing what they dreamed of doing – and we have won this by democratic means."

None of us want to see that progress rolled back, which is why being clear about why this coup is unacceptable is so important to the region and to our national interest.

Against this backdrop, it is extremely important that President Obama has taken the position – from the inception of this crisis – that reversing the coup and returning President Zelaya to his nation and to his office were political and diplomatic priorities for the United States.

As he said just three days ago during his trip to Russia:

"America cannot and should not seek to impose any system of government on any other country ... Even as we meet here today, America supports now the restoration of the democratically elected president of Honduras, even though he has strongly opposed American policies."

Against the expectations of some in the region, the United States has reacted with prudence to these events, and that strengthens us and our long-term interests in the Western Hemisphere.

The crisis in Honduras came at a particularly crucial moment. There are debates taking place in Latin America about the role of the state, and what democracies should do when their institutions fail to deliver what their people need and want.

This is hardly a new phenomenon. Governments of all ideological stripes have rewritten their constitutions in Latin America for decades, centuries.

This is not a question, as some would have it, simply of left versus right. Colombia is discussing right now whether President Uribe will have the chance to run for a third term.

Nor is it only a debate about centralizing power in the executive.

Nations do this to improve governance, to end exclusion, and to open opportunity. As Jennifer McCoy of the Carter Center pondered recently, does democracy allow for its own renewal living within the rules of the game?

There are real and legitimate questions about when that does get out of hand, but we have to be very careful in light of the region's history – and ours – about how and when we ask those questions. These are serious issues and we place a lot at risk if we treat them lightly. We should support democracy in places like Honduras not only when we like the choices that people are making, but also when they use elections rather than violence to make those choices for themselves, even when we disagree with the outcome.

We share a common border with this region and confront a common set of problems. Diseases, criminality and security, environmental challenges and proliferation; none can be solved without us being good partners, not by imposing but by listening and operating multilaterally.

If we identify with their democratic aspirations, our country will be much more successful in the region moving forward. It is that interest, and those concerns, which I believe are at stake for us in the crisis in Honduras today.

Thank you.