

UNITED STATES-HONDURAS - Hillary Clinton's Emails and the Honduras Coup

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September 23rd, 2015 - [Center for Economics and Policy Research \(CEPR\)](#) - Three batches of Hillary Clinton's emails have now been released and, though many emails are heavily redacted, we're starting to get a clearer picture of how Clinton handled major international developments during her tenure at the State Department. One of the first big issues to hit Clinton's desk was the June 2009 coup d'état in Honduras that forced democratically-elected president Manuel Zelaya into exile. Officially the U.S. joined the rest of the hemisphere in opposing the coup, but Zelaya—who had grown close to radical social movements at home and signed cooperation agreements with Venezuela—wasn't in the administration's good books.

The released emails provide a fascinating behind-the-scenes view of how Clinton pursued a contradictory policy of appearing to back the restoration of democracy in Honduras while actually undermining efforts to get Zelaya back into power. The Intercept and other outlets have provided useful analyses of these emails, but there are a number of revealing passages, some in the most recent batch of emails, that haven't yet received the attention they deserve.

A number of Clinton emails show how, starting shortly after the coup, HRC and her team shifted the deliberations on Honduras from the Organization of American States (OAS)—where Zelaya could benefit from the strong support of left-wing allies throughout the region—to the San José negotiation process in Costa Rica. There, representatives of the coup regime were placed on an equal footing with representatives of Zelaya's constitutional government, and Costa Rican president Oscar Arias (a close U.S. ally) as mediator. Unsurprisingly, the negotiation process only succeeded in one thing: keeping Zelaya out of office for the rest of his constitutional mandate.

From the outset, U.S. interests and policy goals in Honduras were clearly identified in the emails that darted back and forth between Clinton and her advisors. On the day of the coup (June 28, 2009), Tom Shannon, the outgoing Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs, provided an update for Clinton and her close staff that noted that he was "calling the new SouthCom Commander to ensure a coordinated U.S. approach [since] we have big military equities in Honduras through Joint Task Force Bravo at Soto Cano airbase." A later email, with talking points for a phone call between Clinton and the Spanish foreign minister, indicated that Clinton's team was already focused on making sure that Honduras' upcoming national elections would take place on schedule (in November of 2009):

We hope Spain will work with us and the OAS to ensure a restoration of democratic order that will allow Honduras to carry through with its electoral timetable (presidential vote scheduled for November).

This talking point would prove to be mostly false. In later emails we see how the OAS is removed from the U.S. agenda, and the "restoration of democratic order" takes a back seat to the State Department's goal of going forward with Honduras' November elections no matter what.

A little over a week after the coup, Shannon sent an email to Clinton, via her aide Huma Abedin, with background notes for a July 6 phone call to then President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia. In it he discusses a burgeoning plan to bypass the OAS—where many governments were growing increasingly impatient with the U.S. appearing to want to bolster the coup regime—and organize direct talks between the coup regime and the exiled Zelaya government in Costa Rica, where they would be closely supervised by president

Arias and U.S. State Department officials. The coup regime agreed to the Arias mediation, while vehemently rejecting OAS mediation. Zelaya understandably balked at the idea at first. In his message, Shannon outlines a plan for getting Uribe to lobby Zelaya to accept Arias' offer of mediation of direct talks:

[Uribe] like many other leaders with an interest in Central America, is worried that Honduras is slipping towards confrontation and violence. He probably does not think [OAS Secretary General Jose Miguel] Insulza is up to the task. [Secretary of State Clinton] should be aware that Arias is prepared to offer his services. I spoke with the Costa Rican [foreign minister], who said the de facto government has reached out to Arias, and that the Costa Ricans will be looking for a way to make the offer to Zelaya. Uribe knows Zelaya and has some influence. Uribe might want to talk with Arias and offer to help move Zelaya in the right direction. (Although Uribe and Zelaya come from different ends of the political spectrum, they are both ranchers and love horses, and this has created some comradeship.)

In addition to this lobbying by proxy, Zelaya was surely under direct pressure from Clinton, who he met with on July 7 in Washington. Following the meeting, Clinton announced to the press that Zelaya had accepted to have Arias mediate but that the U.S. also continued "to support regional efforts through the OAS to bring about a peaceful resolution that is consistent with the terms of the Inter-American Democratic Charter."

The emails provide strong evidence that the State Department had in fact no intention of pursuing a resolution to the crisis at the OAS. In the weeks that followed, a regional tug-of-war took place, with various OAS member governments trying to keep Honduras on the agenda at the OAS, and get members to agree to stronger measures against the coup regime, and the U.S. only showing interest in the Costa Rica mediation.

On July 23, the Bolivian government introduced a draft OAS resolution that, among other things, called for the "immediate, secure and unconditional return of [Zelaya] to his constitutional functions," the non-recognition of "any government that would emerge from the constitutional rupture" in Honduras, and for OAS member states to implement vigorous economic and trade sanctions so long as democracy was not restored.

Though there appeared to be broad support at the OAS for such measures, the U.S. wasn't interested in seeing them discussed and worked to try to ensure that the San Jose negotiations would take precedence above all else. A July 31 email from Craig Kelly—deputy to Shannon and U.S. point person for the negotiations—couldn't have expressed U.S. policy more clearly:

The OAS meeting today turned into a non-event [it was canceled]—just as we hoped. We want Arias out front. We will keep at it.

Predictably, the coup regime only seemed to be interested in making the negotiations drag on indefinitely. An August 18 email from Kelly acknowledged that the "de factos" were engaging in "a deliberate delaying tactic designed to move the country toward elections without Zelaya." But Clinton was reluctant to take more decisive measures, despite some of her closest advisors urging her to do so. Anne-Marie Slaughter, then director of Policy Planning at the State Department, sent an email to Clinton on August 16 strongly urging her to "take bold action" and to "find that [the] coup was a 'military coup' under U.S. law," a move that would have immediately triggered the suspension of all non-humanitarian U.S. assistance to Honduras.

In her email, Slaughter correctly diagnosed the region's deep disappointment with the administration's handling of the Honduras crisis:

I got lots of signals last week that we are losing ground in Latin America every day the Honduras crisis continues; high level people from both the business and the NGO community say that even our friends are beginning to think we are not really committed to the norm of constitutional democracy we have worked so hard to build over the last 20 year [sic]. The current stalemate favors the status quo; the de facto

regime has every incentive to run out the clock as long as they think we will have to accept any post-election government. I urge you to think about taking bold action now to breathe new life into the process and signal that regardless what happens on the Hill, you and the president are serious.

“Regardless what happens on the Hill,” was a reference to the aggressive maneuvers of a few Republican Congressional members who strongly supported the coup regime. With the help of arcane Senate procedural rules, Florida Senator George Lemieux and South Carolina Senator Jim DeMint had been blocking two key State Department appointments—Shannon as ambassador to Brazil and Arturo Valenzuela as Shannon’s replacement at the helm of Western Hemisphere Affairs. An August 31 email from State’s legislative liaison described a conversation with DeMint’s foreign policy staffer that clearly laid out what DeMint was after:

Chris [Socha, DeMint’s staffer] warned that DeMint is monitoring closely the Administration’s position with regards to sanctions. He warned that if a coup determination is made and new sanctions levied, this could very well have an adverse impact on how Arturo’s nomination moves forward.

Meanwhile, many Democrats were pushing hard and publically for a “military coup” determination. In early August 15 House Democrats signed a letter asking the State Department to “fully acknowledge that a military coup has taken place.” On September 3, Chief of Staff Cheryl Mills sent Clinton an LA Times op-ed by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard Berman entitled “Honduras: Make it official—it’s a coup.” Berman emphasized that it was critical for Clinton to make the determination quickly:

Honduras will hold presidential and parliamentary elections Nov. 29, and every passing day gives Micheletti and his associates the chance to tighten their illegitimate hold on the reins of power.

In the end, as we know, Clinton spurned the advice of Slaughter and fellow Democrats and never used the words “military” and “coup” together to describe what had happened in Honduras. Though some U.S. assistance was temporarily put on hold, other critical assistance, like a \$205 million Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) Honduras grant, continued to flow (while in other countries that experienced coups in 2009, namely Madagascar and Mauritania, MCC funds were suspended within 1–3 days, and MCC compacts were terminated).

On October 30, President Arias presided over the signing of an agreement between Honduras’ constitutional government and the coup regime that stipulated the return of Zelaya for the final weeks of his mandate, but with limited powers and with a “unity government” that would include coup supporters. Under the agreement, the national elections would take place on November 28. In addition to being a far cry from a complete restoration of democracy, the agreement text included a dangerous loophole: Honduras’ congress would be called on to endorse Zelaya’s restitution. In an earlier email discussing the San José negotiations, Craig Kelly underlined that “the understanding is that [Zelaya] would resume limited functions with a national unity cabinet until he hands over power to an elected successor.”

But, four days after the agreement was signed, the U.S. official position grew much more flexible. On November 3, Shannon announced to CNN en español that the U.S. would be prepared to recognize the elections even if Zelaya wasn’t first reinstated. The rest of the region reacted with shock and anger. Major regional groups like the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) had already declared back in August that they wouldn’t recognize elections held under the de facto government. They then restated this position on the eve of the Honduran elections.

But, with the U.S. being by far the most powerful external actor in Honduras, the coup regime had little incentive to allow the restoration of democracy. The congress voted against Zelaya’s reinstatement and the elections took place under a so-called “unity government” that included no one from the constitutional government, despite the fact that nearly every country in the region besides the U.S. considered them to be illegitimate. Shannon, in an email written the day after the elections, encouraged Clinton to portray the electoral process as deeply democratic:

The turnout (probably a record) and the clear rejection of the Liberal Party shows our approach was the right one, and puts Brazil and others who would not recognize the election in an impossible position. As we think about what to say, I would strongly recommend that we not be shy. We should congratulate the Honduran people, we should connect today's vote to the deep democratic vocation of the Honduran people, and we should call on the community of democratic nations (and especially those of the Americas) to recognize, respect, and respond to this accomplishment of the Honduran people.

As was later revealed, the election turnout numbers had actually been grossly inflated by Honduras' electoral authority. And the elections themselves had been marred by violence and media censorship.

A few days later, Craig Kelly emailed Clinton—via Clinton's deputy chief of staff—with a statement from Senator Lemieux announcing his “decision to allow the nomination of Tom Shannon to move forward.” In his statement, Lemieux said:

I have received sufficient commitments from Secretary Clinton that the Administration's policy in Latin America, and specifically in Honduras and Cuba, will take a course that promotes democratic ideals and goals.

Were the holds on Shannon and Valenzuela's nominations a major factor in Clinton's decision to allow the Honduran coup regime to have its way? Did Clinton confidante Lanny Davis, who was paid by Honduran businesses to lobby in favor of the coup, also play an important role in influencing Clinton, as some have suggested?

Perhaps these factors did influence Clinton, but it's pretty clear that another factor played a major role in her decision to allow the coup regime to prevail: long-standing U.S. policy to assert political control in the region. A careful reading of the Clinton emails and Wikileaks U.S. diplomatic cables from the beginning of her tenure, expose a Latin America policy that is often guided by efforts to isolate and remove left-wing governments in the region (see “Latin American and the Caribbean” and “Venezuela” in the new book *The Wikileaks Files*). The chapter on Latin America in Clinton's memoir *Hard Choices* reaffirms this vision of U.S. Latin America policy, and one short passage from the chapter is particularly telling:

We strategized on a plan to restore order in Honduras and ensure that free and fair elections could be held quickly and legitimately, which would render the question of Zelaya moot.

Needless to say, Honduras' elections weren't seen as legitimate by most of the rest of the Western Hemisphere, and the question of Zelaya was anything but moot. Despite heavy U.S. lobbying of “friendly” governments in Latin America—Valenzuela's first big mission after taking over Shannon's WHA job in December 2009—many countries would refuse to recognize the Honduran government until Zelaya was finally allowed to return to his country in May of 2011. Latin America also shifted further away from the U.S. In a context of growing frustration with U.S. policy, a new multilateral group was created—the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (with the initials CELAC in Spanish)—with the participation of every government in the region except the U.S., Canada (that had backed U.S. hemispheric policy all the way), and the de facto government of Honduras (only admitted after Zelaya's return to Honduras in 2011).

The “hard choices” taken by Clinton and her team didn't just damage U.S. relations with Latin America. They contributed to the enormous damage done to Honduras. In the years following the coup, economic growth has stalled, while poverty and income inequality have risen significantly. Violence has spiraled out of control. Meanwhile, the U.S. government has increased military assistance to Honduras, despite alarming reports of killings and human rights abuses by increasingly militarized Honduran security forces. Many Congressional Democrats have asked for a complete suspension of security assistance while human rights violations continue with impunity. But neither the Clinton nor Kerry State Departments have heeded their call.

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