

Lay missionary: Conflict in Honduras between poor, wealthy

Sheila Archambault Catholic News Service | Sep. 23, 2009



Ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya greets supporters inside the Brazilian Embassy after his arrival in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, Sept. 21. (CNS/ Reuters)

Although ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya returned to his country, the situation is not simply a matter of a conflict between two politicians, said an American lay missionary in Honduras.

The real conflict in Honduras is between the poor and wealthy, said John Donaghy, assistant director of the church charitable agency Caritas in the Diocese of Santa Rosa de Copan, Honduras.

"The issue is not Zelaya," Donaghy told Catholic News Service in an e-mail Sept. 22, a day after Zelaya's return. "It's a system that has kept the poor down for years. Zelaya has been seen by many as a sign that someone in power cared for the poor."

Zelaya was ousted in the early hours of June 28 when Honduran soldiers -- acting on the orders of the National Congress -- shot up his house and took him, clad in pajamas, to the airport. Legislators accused Zelaya of treason and of trying to circumvent the nation's constitution; he was flown on a military plane to Costa Rica.

Canadian-born Bishop Real Corriveau, retired bishop of Choluteca who now lives in Tegucigalpa, said there

had been rumors that Zelaya would return, "but people didn't really believe it."

When word got out Sept. 21 that Zelaya had taken refuge in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa, some of his supporters gathered outside the building. The government imposed a curfew at 4 p.m., however, and the protests broke up, the bishop said. The curfew was to be scheduled to be lifted at 6 p.m. Sept. 22.

"Everything has come to a standstill with the curfew," the bishop told CNS in a Sept. 22 telephone interview. He added that it was not easy to get news, because several TV stations had gone off the air.

Corriveau said the Honduran bishops' conference had not made a statement about Zelaya's return, but he expected the bishops to discuss the issue at their next regular meeting Oct. 5.

Donaghy referred to a previous interview in which Bishop Luis Santos Villeda of Santa Rosa de Copan told CNS that members of the country's wealthy elite were behind Zelaya's ouster and that the country needs dialogue between the elite and Honduras' poor and working-class citizens.

"Some say Manuel Zelaya threatened democracy by proposing a constitutional assembly," the bishop told CNS in mid-September. "But the poor of Honduras know that Zelaya raised the minimum salary. That's what they understand. They know he defended the poor by sharing money with mayors and small towns. That's why they are out in the streets closing highways and protesting [to demand Zelaya's return]."

Oblate Fr. Andrew Small, director of the U.S. bishops' collection for the Church in Latin America, told CNS: "The situation continues to be difficult for the church which, perhaps more than any other group in the country, has the interests of all Hondurans at heart. Of paramount importance is the need for cool heads and a peaceful solution to the current impasse."

Roberto Micheletti, former Congress president named interim president after the coup, said in a Sept. 22 op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* that "the people of Honduras have moved on since the (coup and) our citizens are looking forward to free, fair and transparent elections on Nov. 29."

"Coups do not allow freedom of assembly, either," he wrote. "They do not guarantee freedom of the press, much less a respect for human rights. In Honduras, these freedoms remain intact and vibrant. And on Nov. 29 our country plans to hold the ultimate civic exercise of any democracy: a free and open presidential election."

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Contributing to this story was Barbara J. Fraser in Lima, Peru.

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