



Washington's Wars and Occupations Month in Review #65

by Carlos Martinez, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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THE ALCHEMY OF EMPIRE

Standard Operating Procedure: The U.S. deposes governments considered unfriendly to Washington's interests and replaces them with new, more cooperative regimes.

It's not easy to do that without some measure of support – or at least acceptance – from the U.S. people. So the country's majority has to be kept in the dark about the real reasons "regime change" is always on the D.C. agenda. In the government/media 24-hour-a-day misinformation bombardment, it's never about oil or geo-political advantage. It's always about the U.S. fighting for freedom and democracy.

This week's top stories illustrate such imperial alchemy at work in Afghanistan and Israel/Palestine. The *New York Times* front page carries stories about massive fraud in the just-completed Afghan elections and admissions that U.S. soldiers murdered Afghan civilians for sport: still it is "our side" that defends democracy with drone assassinations to boot! No matter that Israel defies international law, world public opinion and even the stated position of the White House by expanding settlements: it's *Palestinians* who must be pressured to keep talking so the "peace process" does not break down! (More on Afghanistan in the latest [Afghan War Weekly](#) and more on Israel/Palestine in Phyllis Bennis' recent [assessment](#).)

If Washington gets its way, bitter experiences in other countries shows what's in store for Afghans and Palestinians. (If you don't want Washington to get its way, support the [Peace Table](#) at this coming Saturday's big demonstration in Washington.) Let's cut through the corporate media's mythology and look at the results of two of Washington's recent "here comes democracy" operations. What kind of freedom has the alchemy of empire brought to Iraq or Honduras?

"NEW DAWN" OR "NEW DOMINATION"?

The U.S. combat troop presence officially ended in Iraq on September 1, ushering in Operation "New Dawn." Fifty thousand U.S. troops remain in the country supposedly only as "advise-and-assist" brigades. Associated Press standards editor, Tom Kent, released a [memo](#) stating:

Combat in Iraq is not over, and we should not uncritically repeat suggestions that it is, even if they come from senior officials. The situation on the ground in Iraq is no different today than it has been for some months. Iraqi security forces are still fighting Sunni and al-Qaida insurgents.

A good step for the media – but not good enough. Robert Naiman of Just Foreign Policy [has pointed out](#) that the U.S. media closes its eyes to Washington's tactics of arm-twisting and coercion in today's much-lamented political impasse in Baghdad.

Since parliamentary elections were held in March, Iraqi politicians have been unable to form a government. The balloting ended in a virtual tie between former Prime Minister (and Washington favorite) Ayad Allawi's Iraqiyya Coalition and current Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law coalition, with Ibrahim al-Jaafari's National Iraqi Alliance coming in a close third. Within the National Iraqi Alliance, the largest share of seats – 40 – went to backers of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite leader who has most forcefully resisted the U.S. agenda in Iraq.

Muqtada al-Sadr has become a formidable leader with a mass following among Iraq's poor Shiite population. Sadr's Mehdi Army played a potent role in resisting the U.S. occupation in 2003 and 2004 and he was the only Shiite leader opposed to the U.S. presence from the beginning of the war. Sadr has gained tremendous political support from this stance, adding to the popularity inherited from his father's legacy. The late Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was assassinated in 1999 by gunmen believed to be working for Saddam Hussein.

Sadr's call for a ceasefire in 2007 and again in 2008 has been credited with reducing blood-shed in Iraq. Determined to fight on the electoral front, al-Sadr said in 2008 that only a select group of Mehdi Army fighters would continue to bear arms. The rest of the militia – estimated at 60,000 members – would focus on civic projects and religious initiatives serving the Shiite community.

COUNTER IRAN, COUNTER IRAQIS

If Washington was actually interested in respecting democracy, it would stand back and let Iraqis determine their own government (Indeed, the U.S. wouldn't have invaded Iraq in the first place.) But Washington is more concerned with "insuring" a government in Baghdad that is hostile to Iran and opens the widest door to U.S. "development" of Iraq's oil reserves. So U.S. diplomats and generals have worked constantly to block the Shiite parties (which are seen as too friendly to Iran) and completely exclude al-Sadr (who not only is too friendly with Iran but dares to demand that Iraqi resources be used for Iraqis themselves!) The new U.S. ambassador to Iraq, James Jeffrey, [let the cat out of the bag](#) in August regarding U.S. arm-twisting when he declared:

We would really have to ask whether we can have much of a future in this country given the Sadrists' political position. They like to be part of the political process and threaten to blow up the political process. Their whole world view and whole vision of relations with the U.S. is incompatible with any relationship we could have.

U.K. *Guardian* writer Patrick Cockburn cut to the heart of U.S. [hypocrisy](#): "Accommodating and controlling Muqtada and the great numbers of Iraqis he represents is essential to stabilizing Iraq, but instead the U.S. seems intent on trying to marginalize or eliminate him."

Washington is using its full bag of tricks to try to get a Baghdad government of its choosing. (All the while pretending the U.S. is just a concerned supporter and failure to form a government is the Iraqis own fault.) One of the U.S.' main weapons is the tried-and-true weapon of economic threats.

Nearly eight years after the fall of Sadaam Hussein, Iraq remains under sanctions based on Chapter 7 of the U.N. charter, whereby five percent of its oil revenues go to Kuwait in compensation for Iraq's invasion 20 years ago. Iraq has already paid \$30 billion and it still owes

more than \$22 billion. When signing the U.S.-Iraq Status of Forces Agreement approved by the Iraqi Cabinet in 2008, the U.S. agreed to push hard at the U.N. to help Iraq emerge from Chapter 7. Recent statements by Ambassador Jeffries and other U.S. officials are not-so-veiled threats to renege on that commitment if Iraqis selects the “wrong” government.

This is Operation “New Dawn”? More like “New Domination.” The U.S. military footprint diminishes (but far from disappears); the less visible economic strong-arming by the empire remains. This is the substance of ongoing U.S. “assistance” to Iraq. Vice President Joe Biden’s adviser Tony Blinken called the relationship “a long-term partnership” and even the U.S. media that doesn’t hype the “surge” as a brilliant victory buys the story. Iraqis suffer from shortages of basic necessities, lack of electricity and continuing violence. But if the U.S. gets the government it wants, count on a government press release and banner headlines saying democracy is on the march.

DEMOCRACY IN HONDURAS: NOW YOU SEE IT...

On the morning of June 28, 2009 more than 100 soldiers surrounded the residence of Honduran President Manuel Zelaya in Tegucigalpa. They pulled the man elected by the Honduran people out of bed and sent him packing on a plane for Costa Rica.

Before becoming President in 2005, Zelaya was a large rancher and business owner. Though he emerged from the traditional Honduran elite – he was elected as candidate of the Liberal Party – Zelaya began to move more towards the left as his presidency progressed. This surprising turn angered other Liberal Party leaders and lawmakers but brought him support from grassroots organizations and popular movements.

Under Zelaya, Honduras joined the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), an alternative regional cooperation agreement initiated by Venezuela and Cuba. ALBA seeks to foster stronger ties between member countries based upon mutual aid and a vision of social welfare rather than upon the neoliberal model associated with free trade agreements. Zelaya also made moves towards re-nationalizing energy generation plants and the telephone system. He signed a bill that vastly improved labor conditions for teachers. Perhaps the most significant and arguably most dangerous move Zelaya made was approving a 60% increase in Honduras’ minimum wage, which up to that time had been one of the lowest in Central America.

Going even further in a democratic direction, towards the end of his term Zelaya proposed holding a non-binding consultative referendum where Hondurans could vote on whether or not they favored including a plan for convening a constituent assembly in the November 2009 election. If convened, such an assembly would have the power to redraft the Honduran Constitution. Zelaya’s opponents charged that his goal was to rewrite the electoral laws to allow him to run for another term, though no evidence of that intent was ever produced.

The consultative referendum was at first viewed with some suspicion by activists in Honduras’ progressive social movements. But over time sentiment shifted, and the grassroots movements began to see the referendum as a historic opportunity to have their voices heard. Members of teacher, student, indigenous and union groups marched to demand that Congress back the referendum.

A week before the referendum was to be held, the elite-dominated Honduran Congress and Supreme Court rejected the referendum as unconstitutional. Honduran General Romeo Vasquez, a graduate of the notorious School of the Americas, refused to distribute ballots to citizens or participate in preparations for the referendum. Zelaya fired the general, but the Supreme Court

ruled that the president's action was illegal. Zelaya refused to recognize this anti-democratic attack on civilian control of the military and, accompanied by some popular movement leaders, personally seized ballot boxes that were stored at a military base and announced plans to move ahead with the vote. The following morning soldiers under orders from the military brass and right-wing political leaders carried out their coup d'état.

THE U.S. JUMPS IN, AND NOW YOU DON'T...

The overthrow of Zelaya sparked massive internal resistance and universal international condemnation. Enraged Hondurans took to the streets, called for strikes and formed the National Popular Resistance Front. Washington's initial statements regarding the coup were relatively weak compared to the responses from Honduras' neighbors in Latin America. But the U.S. did join other countries in condemning the coup. However, Washington refused to join the OAS, the United Nations, and other international organizations in calling for the "immediate and unconditional" reinstatement of President Zelaya. Nor would U.S. officials join human rights organizations from throughout the hemisphere and the world in condemning the violent repression that the coup-makers immediately used against Honduran popular movements. [Amnesty International](#) and the [Inter-American Commission on Human Rights](#) documented over 4,000 human rights abuses carried out by the *de facto* regime against Hondurans who opposed it in the months following the coup. Further, though the coup regime was utterly dependent on the continuing flow of aid from Washington, the U.S. refused to do more than "suspend" a small portion of its financial assistance.

After months of internationally sponsored negotiations between Zelaya and the *de facto* government, an agreement was finally reached mandating a vote in the Honduran Congress on whether to reinstate the country's ousted president. The deal – a loophole-filled compromise pushed by Washington against Latin American demands for unconditional reinstatement – laid out no deadline for the vote. The Honduran Congress predictably stalled. State Department representative Thomas Shannon declared that the U.S. would recognize new elections whether or not Zelaya was reinstated. Meanwhile, the U.S. blocked the OAS from taking a unanimous position that it would not recognize elections that took place under the dictatorship.

In November 2009, the *de facto* government moved towards holding a new election in which neither the President installed by the coup nor Zelaya would appear on the ballot. According to the coup government, approximately 60% of eligible voters turned out on election day. This percentage was unquestioningly repeated in major media outlets and continues getting used today. But as a [report](#) by video journalist Jesse Freeston reveals, this 60% voter claim was fabricated by the coup government and has no way of being verified.

Still, on November 30, Porfirio Lobo, a former opponent of Zelaya, was declared winner of a majority of votes and the new President-elect of Honduras. The balloting had been boycotted by dozens of anti-coup candidates and was carried out under conditions of state-sanctioned violence. The U.N., European Union, OAS and the Carter Center refused to send monitors to Honduras under these conditions, declaring that elections organized by the coup regime could not be free and fair. But the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute – faithful alchemists of empire that they are – characterized Lobo's election as democratic.

Then Washington went on a full-scale campaign to legitimize the illegitimate. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that the U.S. had done all it could to support democracy and that Honduras under new President Lobo should be readmitted to the OAS. In March 2010, Clinton announced that the portion of U.S. aid to Honduras that had been held up, approximately \$37 million, would now be restored. Once the U.S. took this step, powerful international institutions

under Washington's influence such as the World Bank began to loan Honduras more money, officially welcoming the illegal government into the "world community." A triumph of modern alchemy: the original alchemists failed in their effort to turn lead into gold back in the middle Ages. But today's imperial alchemists seem to have mastered the art of turning anti-democracy not just into democracy, but into gold for their coffers as well.

And the corporate media hails their success. Reports come across the wire about Honduras' "progress"; nothing is said about the still-active social movements that through the National Popular Resistance Front continue to demand Zelaya's reinstatement, the convening of a new constituent assembly and the re-founding of the Honduran state on a democratic basis. You can keep up with their efforts at [Honduras Resists](#).

Hondurans and Iraqis still need our solidarity, as do Afghans and Palestinians and other peoples across the globe. Pushing the empire back will require not only spreading facts to counter alchemist mythology, important as that is. It requires political muscle. A big peace turnout October 2 would be a step in that direction.

Carlos Martinez is the coordinator at the Bay Area [Center for Political Education](#), a movement-building organization providing activists and organizers a space for developing theory and strategy. He is co-author of [Venezuela Speaks! Voices from the Grassroots](#), a collection of interviews with members of Venezuela's grassroots social movements published by PM Press in January of this year. He is a member of **War Times** new "Month in Review" writing team.

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