A President's Ouster Highlights a Yawning Divide in Honduran Society

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One woman started a kind of kaffeeklatsch with her high-powered friends that grew into the driving force behind a movement that toppled the Honduran president. The other preferred to stay out of politics until the president's ouster compelled her to protest.

Armida Villela de Lopez Contreras, a lawyer and former vice president, has become one of the most visible critics of the ousted Honduran president, Manuel Zelaya. And Hedme Castro is one of the thousands of teachers who have banded together to demand Mr. Zelaya's return.

Between them is a yawning political and socioeconomic divide that still threatens the stability of what was once one of the United States' principal staging grounds in Latin America during the cold war. And what they have to say about how this country's political crisis began -- and about the sacrifices they are willing to make to defend their views -- leaves little hope that it will end any time soon.

To Ms. Lopez Contreras, a prominent member of this country's small upper class, Mr. Zelaya was ousted because his blossoming leftist alliance with President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela had become a threat to Honduran democracy.

She is a founding member of a coalition representing some of the most powerful business and political forces in the country. And she says the coalition members are willing to do, or spend, whatever it takes to keep their country afloat in the face of mounting economic pressure resulting from the rest of the world's condemnation of the coup.

"Zelaya was suffocating all other powers of government," Ms. Lopez Contreras said. "Now that he's gone we are breathing the air of freedom. This is a conquest we are not willing to surrender."

To Ms. Castro, who lives a solidly working-class existence, Mr. Zelaya was ousted because people like Ms. Lopez Contreras felt threatened by his efforts to lift up the poor -- most notably with a 60 percent increase in the minimum wage to about $9.60 a day from about $6 a day. An estimated 60 percent of Hondurans live in poverty.

Last week, Mr. Zelaya's supporters, led by an estimated 50,000 teachers, tried to put more pressure on the de facto government by keeping schools closed, staging days of demonstrations and blocking traffic along highways around the country's two major cities.

"I don't think I have ever seen a president like him," Ms. Castro said of Mr. Zelaya. "Maybe he made mistakes, but he
always erred on the side of the poor. That is why they will fight to the end for him."

While political leaders on both sides have played to the most passionate emotions of their constituencies, everyday life has taken on a surreal tinge here. The de facto government contends that life in the country has returned to normal. But public schools remain closed, troops have been deployed to protect most government offices, clashes between the police and protesters erupt most days, and reports of attacks against the press and government opposition leaders have begun to increase.

Most of the news media, both in print and over the airwaves, offer a steady drumbeat of vague accusations of corruption, drug trafficking and insurrection against Mr. Zelaya and his cabinet.

On the other extreme, graffiti portrays the leader of the de facto government, Roberto Micheletti, as "Pinocheletti," a reference to Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the former Chilean dictator. Human rights groups accuse the coup-installed government of using "death squad" strategies against its opponents. So far, however, only two people have been killed in the weeks of political strife since the coup; as many people died in unrelated clashes at a soccer game, underscoring the high level of violence in the country.

More than a month after Mr. Zelaya's ouster, diplomatic efforts to end the political crisis are stalled in off-again-on-again talks that have been mediated by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica. Political observers said that rather than negotiating in good faith, Mr. Micheletti was using those talks as a way to run out the clock until the presidential election scheduled for November.

The latest stalling tactic, they said, came two weeks ago when Mr. Micheletti asked Mr. Arias to send a new international envoy to meet with representatives from different sectors of Honduran civil society. In response to that request, the Organization of American States will send a delegation of foreign ministers to meet with the de facto government on Tuesday.

Those same political observers were critical of Mr. Zelaya, who they charge is playing with political fire, whipping up his supporters with incendiary political stunts along the border between Honduras and Nicaragua.

"The problem with the Arias proposal is that neither side really sees it as a solution," said Victor Meza, who served as Mr. Zelaya's interior minister. Mr. Meza noted that Mr. Micheletti saw Mr. Arias's idea of creating a temporary power-sharing government as a way to prolong his power, while Mr. Zelaya was increasingly viewing the compromise as a trap.

Perhaps most poignantly, however, the divide wreaking havoc in this country is embodied by people like Ms. Lopez Contreras, 61, and Ms. Castro, 50. As educated, professional leaders of their communities who came of age at the height of this country's transition from military to civilian rule, it would seem that they would have a lot in common. In fact, like so many other Hondurans, some of their views still seem frozen in those times.

They stand squarely, and somewhat contemptuously, on opposite sides as far as Mr. Zelaya is concerned. Ms. Lopez Contreras speaks with deep conviction when she argues in support of the coup, saying that Mr. Zelaya, whom she described as afflicted with megalomania, had planned to use his powers and popularity to dissolve the other branches of government and to rewrite the Constitution in order to extend his presidency.

Her activism against Mr. Zelaya began in earnest in June, after he refused to obey a court order that prohibited him from holding a referendum to ask voters whether they would support rewriting the Constitution.

Gripe sessions with small groups of friends, she said, turned into the formation of a political action committee that led protests of tens of thousands people who marched on Congress, the Supreme Court and military installations to demand that authorities stand against the executive branch's attempts to override their authority.
Their marches, with participants dressed all in white as a symbol of peace and transparency, brought together groups that had previously been adversaries, including the Roman Catholic and Evangelical churches, chambers of commerce and several labor unions, and both of the country's main political parties.

"The poor have always protested, and the rich always speak their minds, but the middle class never protested until now," Ms. Lopez Contreras said of the demonstrations. "It was as if Honduras woke up."

The day Mr. Zelaya was ousted, Ms. Castro said, she experienced her own awakening. The principal of an elementary school with about 800 students, she said she was not a supporter of Mr. Zelaya. And before the coup against him, she was not a big supporter of the teachers' union, which she said was plagued with corruption.

But she said that the president's ouster was an attack on her own freedom. And so she has closed her school and attended every union march and meeting to demand that he be returned to power.

"This is not about President Zelaya," Ms. Castro said. "This is about my country. Many people gave their lives so that we could have a democracy. And we cannot let a group of elites take that away."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTOS: To Armida Villela de Lopez Contreras, a former vice president, President Manuel Zelaya was ousted because his closeness to Venezuela's leader had become a threat to Honduran democracy. To Hedme Castro, at right, the principal of an elementary school, the president was ousted because people like Ms. Lopez Contreras felt threatened by his efforts to lift up the poor. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY EDGARD GARRIDO FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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