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FERNANDO BOTERO - 'Untitled' (1978)

A very traditional coup

The reaction was unanimous, from the Organisation of American States (OAS) to the UN, from the European Union to President Barack Obama. Everybody condemned, without qualification, the 28 June coup that deposed the Honduran head of state Manuel Zelaya, and removed him by force to Costa Rica. Miguel d'Escoto, president of the UN General Assembly, called for Zelaya to be reinstated without delay in the office and functions to which he had been appointed by the will of the people; no other option would be acceptable to the international community (1).

Doubts had been expressed about Zelaya's legitimacy. It was claimed he had sought, unconstitutionally, to amend the 1982 constitution so he could seek a further term of office in the presidential elections on 29 November (2). But this was not true. The constitution remains in force until further notice and the head of state cannot stand for re-election. With 400,000 signatures to support him, Zelaya had planned to organise a voluntary survey on election day to find out whether or not Hondurans want a Constituent National Assembly to be convened at some point.

A peculiar feature of the present constitution is that it contains a number of articles set in stone, including article 4, which prohibits re-election of the president and which cannot be amended in any circumstances – a curious rule to impose on the people, supposedly the source of all state powers (3). Zelaya was ousted not for seeking re-election but for contemplating reform of the basic charter.

He made three big mistakes: from a base in the centre-right Liberal Party, he severed his ties with the ruling political and economic elite, increased the minimum wage by 60% and joined the Bolivarian Alliance for Our Americas (ALBA), which includes Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Venezuela and others who advocate breaking with neo-liberalism. The right has just attacked the weak link in that organisation.

President George Bush supported the attempt to overthrow Hugo Chavez in Venezuela in April 2002; President Barack Obama joined the condemnation of the man who led the Honduran putsch, Roberto Micheletti. But while Obama declared that Zelaya alone was president of Honduras, his secretary of state Hillary Clinton suggested that Costa Rica's president Oscar Arias act as mediator, keeping the left and centre-left OAS out of the picture.

Powerful anti-Zelaya forces are at work in Washington. The Pentagon has a strategically important military base in Honduras, at Palmerola. It has already lost its base at Manta in Ecuador (a member of ALBA), which was closed at the request of the president, Rafael Correa. Hugo Llorens, US ambassador to Honduras appointed by Bush in September 2008, was director of Andean affairs in the National Security Council in 2002 and 2003, covering Venezuela at the time of the coup. Just before 28 June, he attended meetings with "military officials and opposition leaders".

Zelaya has rejected Arias's proposal for a government of national reconciliation – for Zelaya to be reinstated as president but without any real power. So has Micheletti, to the annoyance of Clinton, who offered him a chance to emerge from the crisis in pole position. Was this Washington duplicity or a difference between the White House and the State Department/Pentagon partnership? If order is not restored, and/or if Honduras succumbs to violence, Obama's standing will be seriously impaired in Latin America, where he had been welcomed with sympathy and hope.

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TRANSLATED BY BARBARA WILSON

(1) BBC Mundo, 29 June 2009.

(2) Theory advanced in LeMonde.fr on 29 June 2009, and supported by *El País*, Madrid, 29 June 2009, *Liberation*, 30 June 2009, *The Economist*, 2 July 2009 and others.

(3) Article 2 of the constitution.

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ETHNIC CONFLICT ERUPTS IN BEIJING'S 'NEW FRONTIER'

China's wild west

With July's violence in Urumqi following last year's riots in Tibet, is China under threat in its frontier provinces? Xinjiang's minorities, the Muslim Uyghurs in particular, face discrimination. Though their dislocation is more social and cultural than religious, without real autonomy Islamic fundamentalism is set to grow

BY MARTINE BULARD

My journey to China's westernmost province began this May in the backroom of an ordinary brasserie in one of Paris's eastern suburbs. The Uyghur man I had come to see was accompanied by a plainclothes policeman, but even so, his hands trembled and there was a look of fear in his eyes: had I really come to interview him or was I in the pay of the Chinese political police? He was a member of the dissident World Uyghur Congress (1) and had just been granted political asylum in France. His was a run-of-the-mill story: he had protested about an injustice at his workplace in Xinjiang, which led to him being arrested and imprisoned. After that he had fled. That was all he would say. His fear of being tracked to a Paris suburb may seem excessive but it's indicative of the moral and physical pressure facing the Uyghurs, China's Turkic-speaking Muslims.

A few days later, I arrived in Urumqi, the capital of the vast Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of China, which is nearly 4,000km from Beijing. There were no immediate signs of tension, even in the city's Uyghur district. Here, members of the region's Muslim minorities – Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Kirghiz – coexist with Han Chinese, who are the largest group in the city (though not throughout the Xinjiang region) as they are in China as a whole. Some Han families have lived here for several generations.

Hidden differences

The district's small mosque was open to visitors. In noisy, narrow streets lined with stalls near the recently spruced-up bazaar, traders were selling a bizarre mix of goods: combs and hair dyes, herbal remedies, phone cards etc. Skewers of chicken and mutton with noodles were also on offer. Unlike the Han Chinese, the Uyghurs don't eat pork, but that's the least of the differences separating these two peoples.

Between 5 and 8 July, there was an unprecedented outbreak of violence in this and neighbouring districts of Urumqi, in particular outside the University of Xinjiang. For several hours on the 5th, Uyghur demonstrators armed with clubs, knives and other makeshift weapons set fire to buses, taxis and police vehicles. They looted shops and beat and lynched Han Chinese. The next day, the Han hit back, attacking and killing Uyghurs. By the end of July, the official statistics registered 194 dead and 1,684 wounded, but the figures are not broken down by ethnic group.

Even if no one could have predicted interethnic violence on this scale two months earlier, there had already been signs of a build-up of anger in a humiliated and often harassed community. Even making appointments with Uyghurs, whether they were political activists or not, turned out to be far from straightforward. I had to make repeated phone calls, and conversations begun in public places would be concluded in streets where no one was watching. Sometimes I even had to introduce my interviewee to the Han party secretary in order to show that everything was above board. Anyone who receives a foreigner may immediately be suspected of "nationalist activities", an accusation second only to terrorism in its gravity, which can lead to loss of your job, demotion or even arrest and imprisonment.

According to Abderrahman (2), an Uyghur civil engineer, "suspicion and repression are the rule for Uyghurs, but the Han Chinese have also got cause for concern if they're suspected of involvement in politics". I had met him in one of the best Uyghur restaurants in Urumqi, patronised by Han Chinese, Muslim families (that included both veiled women and girls in jeans and make-up) and foreign tourists. Abderrahman runs a small business with five staff from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. He's not naturally fearful but when he discusses the discrimination his community suffers, he lowers his voice. And when we talk about what is taught in schools, he writes on his hand: "It's brain-washing."

Surveillance is widespread, particularly around mosques. In Kashgar (Kashi to give it its official name) in the south of the region, Friday prayers can draw as many as 20,000 people. The whole event takes place under the watchful eye of plainclothes police. Here, the appointing of imams needs official approval from the authorities and their sermons are carefully controlled: the Xinjiang government's official website, which publishes a *History of Islam in China*, explains that the (carefully chosen) religious authorities and the Communist Party of China (CPC) leadership have produced a four-volume set of sermons, time-limited to 20-30 minutes, from which the busy imam can choose.

It wasn't always like this. Religious freedom was written into the Chinese constitution in 1954. Until the mid-1960s, Muslims could practise their faith with little impediment. Ahmed, who's a guide in Kashgar, remembers women of his grandmother's generation wearing the veil when

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