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# Manuel Zelaya

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**José Manuel Zelaya Rosales** (born September 20, 1952) is a former [President of Honduras](#). He served from January 27, 2006 to June 28, 2009 when he was exiled during the [2009 Honduran constitutional crisis](#). A son of a wealthy businessman, he finished high school but did not finish college. He inherited his father's nickname "Mel." Zelaya was involved in his ranch, logging and timber trade businesses. During his presidency, Zelaya lost the support of much of his own party.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> His removal from power by the military has caused the suspension of [Honduras](#) from the [Organization of American States](#), by unanimous vote.<sup>[1]</sup> He currently has an [arrest warrant](#) in [Honduras](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

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## Background [edit]

Zelaya was born to Manuel Zelaya Ordoñez and Hortensia Rosales Sarmiento.<sup>[3]</sup>

Zelaya was born the oldest of four children in [Juticalpa, Olancho](#). He attended Niño Jesús de Praga y Luis Landa elementary school and the Instituto Salesiano San

Miguel. He studied civil engineering in The National University of Honduras (UNAH), but left after four years with 11 courses completed, in order to engage fully in the agri-forestry business sector.<sup>[3]</sup> Two of his brothers remain alive, one is Carlos Armando and the other is Marco Antonio, while his mother, Ortensia Rosales de Zelaya, has been described as his best campaigner. He has engaged in various business activities, specifically [timber](#) and [cattle](#), which were handed down to him by his late father. He

## Manuel Zelaya



### President of Honduras

#### In office

27 January 2006 – 28 June 2009

**Vice President** [Elvin Santos](#)

[Aristides Mejía](#)

**Preceded by** [Ricardo Maduro](#)

**Succeeded by** [Roberto Micheletti](#) (Interim)

**Born** 20 September 1952 (age 56)

[Catacamas, Honduras](#)

**Political party** [Liberal Party](#)

**Spouse(s)** [Xiomara Castro](#)

**Alma mater** [National Autonomous University of Honduras](#) (Incomplete)

Manuel Zelaya was [deposed](#) on 28 June 2009 and the [National Congress](#) swore-in [Roberto Micheletti](#).



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- Nederlands
- Norsk (nynorsk)
- Norsk (bokmål)
- Occitan
- Polski
- Português
- Русский
- Српски / Srpski
- Svenska
- 
- Türkçe
- Українська
- Tiếng Việt
- Walon
- 中文

is now a landowner in the [department](#) of [Olancho](#). His family first lived in [Copán](#), then they moved east to Olancho.

In 1987, Zelaya became manager of the [Honduran Council of Private Enterprise](#) (COHEP), as well as the [National Association of Wood Processing Enterprises](#).<sup>[4]</sup> The COHEP occupies a particularly important role in Honduran politics, as the Constitution delineates that the organization elects 1 of the 7 members of the Nominating Board that proposes members of the [Supreme Court of Honduras](#).<sup>[5]</sup>

## Horcones Massacre

[[edit](#)]

*Main article: [Los Horcones massacre](#)*

In 1975, when Manuel Zelaya was 22 years old, his father Jose Manuel Zelaya, Sr. was convicted and later given amnesty for his involvement in the murder of a group of farmers and priests in the [Los Horcones massacre](#).<sup>[6]</sup> The bodies of the murdered social activists were found on the Zelaya family's ranch Los Horcones, but the Zelayas have denied being involved in the murders, claiming that it was a coincidence that the bodies were found on their property.

## Political career

[[edit](#)]

He joined the [Liberal Party of Honduras](#) (*Partido Liberal de Honduras*, PLH) in 1970 and became active a decade later. He was a deputy in the [National Congress](#) three consecutive times between 1985 and 1998. He held many positions within the PLH and was Minister for [Investment](#) in charge of the Honduran Social Investment Fund (FHIS) in a previous PLH government. During the government of [Carlos Roberto Flores](#) Zelaya introduced an *Open counties programme* to decentralize decision making and return power to the local communities. He used both the official division according to [Municipality](#) and another method which categorised people according to their [indigenous](#) or traditional communities, with said categorisation creating 297 different groups and he planned to revive this scheme during his presidency.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

In the 2005 presidential primaries, his faction was called the *Movimienta Esperanza Liberal* (MEL). He received 52% of the 289,300 Liberal votes, to 17% for Jaime Rosenthal Oliva



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and 12% for Gabriela Núñez, the candidate of the Nueva Mayoría faction.<sup>[7]</sup> During the election campaign Zelaya promised to double police numbers from 9,000 to 18,000. He also promised to initiate a programme of [re-education](#) amongst the [Mara Salvatrucha](#) gangs.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

## Political Crisis

[[edit](#)]

Zelaya's order to hold a non-binding poll of public opinion<sup>[8][9]</sup> led to a political crisis and a military coup against him.<sup>[10][11][12][13]</sup>

The poll, generally referred to as a referendum by international media, intended to assess the population's desire for a National Constituent Assembly. The [Supreme Court of Honduras](#), Congress, the country's attorney general, and the supreme electoral tribunal opposed the poll.<sup>[14][15][16]</sup> Congress, including Zelaya's own party, discussed whether to impeach Zelaya.<sup>[17]</sup>

A first instance court in the Honduran capital Tegucigalpa deemed the poll unconstitutional, despite Zelaya's claims that it was a non-binding opinion poll, and not, as his opponents claimed, a binding referendum about forms of government, presidential periods, re-election, or Honduran territory. The Honduran Constitution forbids reforms to the articles in the Constitution that refer to these aspects, but it says nothing about the formation of a National Constituent Assembly, with a mandate to write a completely new constitution. Zelaya's non-binding opinion poll intended to ask Hondurans what they felt about including a fourth ballot box in the November 2009 elections, this ballot box asking Hondurans if they wanted to form such a National Constituent Assembly. The November referendum would have

required a 2/3 majority vote in Congress in order to take place. This was the case Zelaya presented to the court, but his participation in the process was denied.

The president was [removed by the Army on June 28, 2009](#) and [expatriated](#) to Costa Rica. Congress named its President, [Roberto Micheletti](#), as President to replace Zelaya, but no country has recognized the change in office.<sup>[18][19][20]</sup>

## Presidency

[\[edit\]](#)

General opinions about his presidency were divided. An Angus Reid survey in October, 2008 showed a 25% approval rating.<sup>[21]</sup>

Political opponents have expressed their opposition to both his foreign policy, particularly his alliance with [Hugo Chavez](#) in [Venezuela](#), friendship with [Cuba's Raúl Castro](#) and his adhering Honduras to the [Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas](#), as well as for his periodic criticism on the [United States](#), and periodic confrontations with the business sector.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

On [February 22, 2008](#), Zelaya called on the [United States](#) to legalize drugs, in order, he said, to prevent the majority of violent murders occurring in Honduras. [Cocaine](#) smugglers have routinely used Honduras as a transit point between [Colombia](#) and the US. Honduras, with a population of 7 million, suffers an [average of 8 murders a day](#), an estimated 70% of which result from the international drug trade, arms traffic, and the trade in people. He also said that [Guatemala](#), [El Salvador](#) and [Mexico](#) face the same problem.<sup>[22]</sup>

On July 22, 2008, Zelaya revealed that he was seeking to incorporate the country into the [ALBA](#). In fact, he said that the country had been "observer member" "four or more months".<sup>[6]</sup>

*The Economist* gave Zelaya mixed reviews for his first year in office, saying that "Despite success in fulfilling some of his campaign promises [...] Zelaya's lack of a coherent programme has limited the government's ability to address Honduras's long-standing problems," and that "introducing far-reaching reforms will be difficult" in the face of vigorous opposition and "simmering social tensions."<sup>[23]</sup> At the time of his ouster, the newsmagazine said "Mr Zelaya's presidency has been marked by a rise in crime, corruption scandals and economic populism".<sup>[24]</sup>

In 2008, Zelaya's popular approval dropped amid the [2007–2008 world food price crisis](#) and worsening drug-related violence that gave Honduras one of the highest homicide rates in Latin America.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Conflict with media

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Since taking office in 2006, president Zelaya, has had a somewhat adversarial relationship with his country's large media outlets. Ownership of the news media in Honduras is highly concentrated: according to Inter Press Service, the vast majority of radio and TV stations, and print publications, are owned by just six families.<sup>[26]</sup>

According to a paper written by Manuel Orozco and Rebecca Rouse for the [Inter-American Dialogue](#) think tank in the United States, the Honduran media operate as arms of political parties.<sup>[27]</sup> Honduran journalists say that most of the news media there are unabashedly partisan, allied with political parties and local power brokers.<sup>[28]</sup> The Orozco and Rouse report states that "One of the largest threats to Honduran democracy is the lack of independence of the Honduran media . . . The media have failed to fulfill their social function as government watchdogs, are controlled by business and political interests and do not practice fair reporting practices."

Zelaya complains that the main media outlets in Honduras are biased against him and do not provide



George W. Bush and Manuel Zelaya greet each other in New York, 18 September 2006.



coverage of what his government is doing: "No one publishes anything about me. . . . what prevails here is censorship of my government by the big media."<sup>[29]</sup>

On May 24, 2007, Zelaya ordered ten two-hour *cadena*s (mandatory government broadcasts) on all [television](#) and [radio](#) stations, "to counteract the misinformation of the news media."<sup>[30]</sup> The move, while legal, was fiercely criticized by the country's main journalists' union, and Zelaya was dubbed "[authoritarian](#)" by his opposition.<sup>[31]</sup> Ultimately, the broadcasts were scaled back to a one-hour program on the government's plans to expand telephone service, a half hour on new electrical power plants and a half-hour about government revenues. According to the [University of New Mexico's](#) electronic bulletin *NotiCen*, "Zelaya's contention that the media distort his efforts is not without merit," citing reports which gave the public the impression that murder rates were rising, when they actually fell by 3% in 2006.<sup>[30]</sup>

A journalist who often criticized Zelaya was murdered by unknown gunmen in 2007.<sup>[32]</sup> Inter-American Press Association (IAPA) and the United Nations criticized the threat to journalists in Honduras.<sup>[6]</sup> Other critical journalists, such as Dagoberto Rodriguez and Hector Geovanny Garcia, have fled into exile because of constant murder threats.<sup>[33]</sup>

In 2008, The Organization of American States (OAS) accused Zelaya of imposing "subtle censorship" in Honduras. A study, "Censura sutil en Honduras: abuso de publicidad oficial y otras formas de censura indirecta", (Subtle Censorship in Honduras: Officially Public Abuse & Other Forms of Indirect Censorship) was released in September 2008.<sup>[34]</sup>

## Constitution

[\[edit\]](#)

President Zelaya came to international attention in June 2009 when he was overthrown and sent into exile. The crisis that led to his ouster centred around his efforts to change the 1982 [Honduran Constitution](#). Those efforts were strongly opposed by some in Honduras; the forces behind his ouster justified their action on the grounds that Zelaya's efforts towards convening a constituent assembly to draft a new constitution were illegal. They alleged that his real motive was to increase his time in office; his term was due to end in January 2010 and the 1982 constitution prohibits presidents from serving a second term. Zelaya denied that his motive was to stay in office, stating that he intended to step down as scheduled in January 2010 and noting that his successor would be elected at the same time the vote on whether to convene a constituent assembly would occur.<sup>[35]</sup>

Debate over changing the constitution began early in Zelaya's presidency. *Central America report* of 4 August 2006 stated that proposals were being made to reform some articles of the constitution. It did not say whether Zelaya was behind those proposals. It said that the proposals were causing "tension."<sup>[36]</sup>

Zelaya's wife, [Xiomara Castro de Zelaya](#), charged that the expatriation of her husband was a violation of the Honduran Constitution.<sup>[37]</sup> Article 102 of the Honduran Constitution forbids expatriating or handing over of Hondurans to foreign countries.<sup>[38][39][40]</sup>

## Referendum

[\[edit\]](#)

*Main article: [Honduran constitutional referendum, 2009](#)*

On November 11, 2008, Zelaya issued a decree organizing a non binding poll to determine if the electorate wanted a fourth ballot box installed at polling places for the upcoming November 29, 2009 general election – an addition to the usual three for Presidential, Congressional, and municipal candidates. The fourth ballot would be to ask voters whether they want to convene a National Constituent Assembly for the purpose of writing a new constitution. Later, in March 2009, Zelaya announced that first he wanted to have a preliminary poll – he suggested 28 June 2009 as a date – to ask voters whether they wanted the fourth ballot to be included in the November 2009 election. On 24 March 2009, Zelaya issued executive decree PCM-05-2009 for the National Statistical Institute to hold

the national referendum by June 28, 2009.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

There has been considerable debate as to why Zelaya wanted to convene a constituent assembly. Article 373 of the Constitution states that the Constitution can be amended by a two-thirds majority of the normal National Congress. Only eight articles can not be amended in this fashion; they are specified in Article 374 of the Constitution and include term limits, system of government that is permitted, and process of presidential succession.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> Because the congress can amend 368 of 375 articles without any constituent assembly, some observers charged that Zelaya's true intention of holding a referendum on convening a constitutional convention on the same date as his successor's election was to extend his term of rule.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> In a newspaper interview shortly before his ouster, Zelaya stated that he had every intention of stepping down when his term ends in January 2010.<sup>[35]</sup> The Associated Press, citing Manuel Orozco of the Inter American Dialogue, said that "His [Zelaya's] campaign for changing the constitution has energized his support base of labour groups, farmers and civil organisations who have long felt marginalized in a country where a wealthy elite controls the media and much of politics."<sup>[41]</sup><sup>[*dead link*]</sup>

The Supreme Court in Honduras ruled that the referendum would be unlawful.<sup>[42]</sup><sup>[*dead link*]</sup>

Despite the opposition of the other branches of the government, Zelaya moved forward with his plan to hold a consultative poll on 28 June 2009. In Honduras it is a function of the military to assist with election logistics; accordingly, in late May 2009, Zelaya issued a request to the military to distribute ballot boxes and other materials for the poll. The chief of the military, General **Romeo Vásquez Velásquez**, refused to carry this out, however, saying that to do so would be illegal given the court's earlier pronouncements. In response, Zelaya dismissed Vásquez on 24 May. Subsequently, defense minister Edmundo Orellana and several other military commanders resigned in support of Vásquez. Both the Honduran Supreme Court and the Honduran Congress deemed the dismissal of Velásquez to be unlawful.<sup>[42]</sup><sup>[*dead link*]</sup><sup>[43]</sup> By 25 June, the military had deployed hundreds of troops around Tegucigalpa, to "prevent possible disturbances by popular and indigenous organisations that support Zelaya," according to the newspaper *La Tribuna*. The troops were deployed from the First Infantry Battalion, located 5 km East of the city, to the vicinity of the presidential residence in the West, and the airport, in the South.<sup>[44]</sup>

By this time, the United States and the OAS (Organization of American States) were expressing fears of a pending coup d'état.

There is some doubt, however, that Zelaya ever actually fired Vásquez. CNN news on 27 June reported that Zelaya on 24 June had *said that he would* fire Vásquez; but that on 26 June Zelaya said that he had never carried through on his threat and the general had not been fired. "I didn't do it," CNN quoted him as saying.<sup>[45]</sup>

Besides the Supreme Court, the Congress, the attorney general, and the top electoral tribunal declared Zelaya's proposed referendum to be illegal.<sup>[15]</sup><sup>[*dead link*]</sup><sup>[16]</sup><sup>[17]</sup> Congress began to discuss means to impeach Zelaya.<sup>[46]</sup> On June 27 and again on June 30, 2009, thousands of protesters opposed to Zelaya's rule marched through the capital city.<sup>[46]</sup>

On 26 June 2009, Zelaya and hundreds of supporters made a peaceful march to a military base to take possession of ballots to be used in the June 28th poll. They loaded boxes of ballots onto trucks and took them to the presidential palace, thus preventing them from being voided or destroyed by parties opposed to the poll.<sup>[45]</sup> Also on the 26th, according to the Associated Press, government supporters began distributing ballots to the 15,000 voting stations around the country.<sup>[42]</sup>

The Supreme Court, the Congress, and the military have recommended that voters stay home because the referendum would be neither fair to nor safe for voters. The National Human Rights Commissioner, Ramón Custodio, an opponent of Zelaya's, said, "I would tell the people to stay calmly at home in order not to get involved in any incident or any violence by going to vote 'no,' because they might be assaulted by these mobs," referring to Zelaya's supporters. However, unions and farm groups supported

the referendum as a necessary precursor to economic reforms favoring Honduras's poor majority.<sup>[25]</sup><sup>[*dead link*]</sup>

## Deposition

[[edit](#)]

*Main article: 2009 Honduran constitutional crisis*

On June 28, 2009, President Zelaya was seized by soldiers, acting on the orders of the Honduran Supreme Court,<sup>[47]</sup> and taken to an air force base.<sup>[48]</sup><sup>[49]</sup> Honduran radio station



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HRN reported that Zelaya had been sent into exile. He was taken to [Costa Rica](#), a [neutral country](#).<sup>[50]</sup>

The reason given for the arrest order was primarily Zelaya's alleged violation of the constitutional ban on proposing presidential re-election.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> The decision to ostracize him was, however, taken by the military themselves, knowing full well that it violated the constitution.<sup>[51]</sup><sup>[52]</sup> Some<sup>[*who?*]</sup> therefore label it a mutiny rather than a military coup, since the military never held power.<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup>

Following his ouster, Zelaya spoke to the media from his forced exile in San Jose and described the events as a coup and a kidnapping. He stated that soldiers pulled him from his bed and assaulted his guards. Zelaya stated that he will not recognize anyone named as his successor and that he wants to finish his term in office.<sup>[53]</sup> He also stated that he would begin to meet with diplomats,<sup>[54]</sup> and attended the Summit of Central American Presidents held in [Managua](#), [Nicaragua](#), two days later (June 30, 2009).

The National Congress unanimously voted to accept what they said is Zelaya's letter of resignation, but Zelaya said he did not write the letter.<sup>[55]</sup><sup>[*dead link*]</sup>

National Congress President [Roberto Micheletti](#), the next person in the presidential line of succession, assumed the presidency following Zelaya's removal from office.<sup>[56]</sup> The National Congress approved Micheletti as interim president by a show of hands, although five members of the pro-Zelaya [Democratic Unification Party](#) were not allowed to vote.

Latin American nations, as well as the United States, Spain, France, and others, have publicly condemned the forced removal of Zelaya and many have labeled it as a coup d'état. U.S. President [Barack Obama](#) said, "We believe that the coup was not legal and that President Zelaya remains the President of Honduras."<sup>[57]</sup><sup>[58]</sup> Hugo Chávez threatened to invade Honduras if the Venezuelan embassy or ambassador were attacked.<sup>[59]</sup> Venezuela has said it would suspend oil shipments, and Honduras's neighbors—El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua—suspended overland trade for two days.<sup>[60]</sup> A one-page [United Nations](#) resolution, passed by acclamation in the 192-member body, condemned the coup and demanded his "immediate and unconditional restoration" as president.<sup>[61]</sup> The resolution calls "firmly and categorically on all states to recognise no government other than that" of Mr Zelaya.<sup>[62]</sup>

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[[edit](#)]

- [Westwind \(Honduran presidential plane\)](#)

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## External links

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- UN Backs Manuel Zelaya, Ousted Honduran Leader  by Will Weissert, *The Huffington Post*, June 30 2009
- Ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya Discusses Coup, Costa Rica Talks, U.S. Role  - video by *Democracy Now!*



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