

Endorsement of Lobo sullies Taiwan's democracy

Written by Taiwan News Editorial
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President Ma Ying-jeou's attendance at last Wednesday's inauguration of Honduran President Porifino Lobo of the conservative National Party of Honduras sullied the reputation of Taiwan's hard-won democracy and marked a grave diplomatic misjudgement.

Ma, who is concurrently chairman of the rightist ruling Chinese Nationalist Party (Kuomintang), endorsed as "democratic" the new Honduran government, which was created by general elections held by a repressive "interim" regime formed in the wake of the coup against former president Jose Manuel Zelaya of the Honduran Liberal Party last June 28 after the Liberal Party president proposed constitutional reforms that could open the Honduran political system to wider popular participation.

Shortly before returning to Taiwan Taoyuan International Airport Saturday afternoon, Ma

said the fact that he was one of only three presidents to attend Lobo's inaugural along with Dominican Republican President Fernandez and Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, "manifested Taiwan's commitment to democratic values" and asked rhetorically "should we not affirm the restoration of democratic constitutional rule and should we not celebrate the return of Honduras to the ranks of democracies after such a short time after a coup?"

Unfortunately, we believe that the answer to Ma's rhetorical questions must be a resounding "No!" precisely because Lobo's inauguration does not signify the "return of Honduras to the ranks of democracies."

Anyone who kept his or her eyes and ears open should have been able to perceive that three hour inaugural in the National Stadium in Tegucigalpa had little to do with "democracy" but was rather a victory celebration for the military and other elite forces behind the coup.

More to the point, the Honduran military communicated clearly their intent to continue this tradition through a massive assembly of troops in the stadium field, 16 low-altitude overflights of jet fighters, two 21-cannon salutes and a march of general officers up to the presidium in the prelude to Lobo's first official action which was the signing of an amnesty for the military officers and their civilian accomplices who conducted the first coup in Latin America for 16

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years.

This demonstration confirmed the wisdom of the caution manifested even by moderate Latin American nations and the United States itself.

Washington evidently made a "pragmatic" calculation based on the fact that the military and civilian elites had the upper hand and acceded in the November elections and recognized Lobo's victory, even though the campaign was marred by continued repression, in hopes of promoting a genuine return to "democratic politics," reconciliation and a fresh start.

However, the backing of Washington and other moderate Latin American nations for the new civilian government has been conditional on Lobo's implementation of promises to promote reconciliation, arrange for Zelaya's safe exit and establish a truth commission that would probe the widespread human rights violations, including at least 10 killings of protestors, human rights activists and reporters during the seven months since the June 28 coup.

Hence, only 30 countries sent delegations, mostly foreign ministers or even lower officials, including a lowly U.S. assistant secretary of state, compared to the 74 delegations and 12 presidents who attended the inaugural of El Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes Cartagena of the left-wing Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) last June 1 in San Salvador, which was attended by Ma and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Lobo, who was elected with 56 percent of ballots in a general election that failed to secure even a 50 percent turnout, himself showed a degree of honesty when he told Ma that he had won the Nov. 29 presidential election because Hondurans "voted for peace."

Lobo has a reputation as a skilled negotiator, but faces monumental challenges in governing a bankrupt government under the polarizing pressures of military and ultra-right backers of the use of the "hard hand" of repression and the diversity of social, civic reform and human rights movements and left-wing political parties that coalesced into a national resistance against the coup and which are continuing the push for a more democratic constitution.

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More importantly, it is far from certain that the murders, arrests, interrogations, tortures and beatings of dissidents, human rights activists and reporters which have continued after the Nov. 29 election will cease with his inaugural, especially since the amnesty is likely to encourage military, police and gangs believe that they can continue to engage in such crimes with impunity.

Ma's endorsement of Wednesday's militaristic celebration did not manifest a "resolution to uphold democratic values" but represented a throw-back to the KMT's historical toleration authoritarian or military regimes in Central and South America.

At the very least, Ma should compensate for his unwise unconditional endorsement by adding the voice of the Taiwan government to the demands by Washington and Amnesty International that Lobo fulfill his promise to establish a truth commission on the widespread violations of human rights in the wake of the June 28 coup and ensure that perpetrators are identified and punished to prevent the resurgence of impunity.

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