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Nothing Succeeds Like Failure? Honduras and the Defense of Democracy in Brazilian Foreign Policy

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Abstract

The world is becoming more multilateral, with established powers increasingly sharing decision-making with rising powers. At the same time, democratic institutions appear to be unstable in many parts of the world. What are the positions of the rising powers on the defense and promotion of democracy abroad? This article examines Brazil which, like India and South Africa, is a democracy. The conventional wisdom about Brazil is that its foreign policy prioritizes non-intervention, is pragmatic and open to negotiation to everyone, and prioritizes its own economic development as well as the political and economic integration of its own region, South America. Brazil's efforts to defend and promote democracy are also often depicted as minimal, and far less than those of established powers such as the USA and the EU. This article examines Brazilian policy towards Honduras after the coup d'état there in 2009 to challenge these interpretations. It argues that the Honduras case shows that Brazil does defend and promote democracy, especially when its material interests and geostrategic concerns are furthered by doing so.

Keywords

Foreign Policy, Rising Powers, Brazil, Democracy Promotion, Defense of Democracy, Coup D'état

Introduction

The twenty-first century world is witnessing a shifting balance of power. Formerly peripheral actors are becoming more important. As Antonio Patriota argues elsewhere in this issue, the world has become more multipolar (see also Amorim, 2015, 116). Established powers are having to share decision-making more broadly and the rising powers have a variety of distinctive perspectives on issues, resulting in fewer common initial positions amongst significant actors and more

ideological variation in global politics (Stuenkel, 2013, 339).¹

An important issue affecting this new, more multilateral world order is where the rising powers stand on the issue of democracy. Political institutions in established democracies look increasingly vulnerable, as illiberal speech and social movements have become mainstream (Buxton, 2017, 169). In newer democracies, regression is also possible, and has taken place in some countries. In this context, rising powers' willingness – or unwillingness – to defend democracy through global and regional multilateral institutions, as well as bilateral statecraft, is a crucial factor in the shaping of the new global order.

Brazil can be considered a rising power or at least a power that has recently risen in international standing, and it is also a new democracy that emerged from a long dictatorship in the late 1980s. Despite its democratic credentials, Brazil's diplomatic reputation is not one of vigorous democracy promotion. Brazil's foreign policy tradition, according to former Foreign Minister Celso Lafer, is that of a middle power that takes a moderate, Aristotelean middle ground in world affairs, mediating between rich and poor countries, and powerful and weak states.² According to Lafer, Brazil prefers non-intervention and pragmatism in its foreign affairs. It tends to negotiate with all parties rather than stand on abstract principles. Its core interests are its own economic development and the political and economic integration of its region, South America (Lafer, 2009). The defense of democracy is not one of the explicit principles of Brazil's foreign policy in the 1988 Constitution.³

If the traditional principles of Brazilian foreign policy do not appear to furnish a strong foundation for the defense of democracy, the specialized literature on democracy promotion confirms this view. For example, Repucci (2014) argues

¹ In this article the term “rising powers” applies to second-tier states that are non-nuclear powers. This list includes Brazil, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey. I take this from Milani, Pinheiro and Soares de Lima (2017), 585, 590. Although these authors avoid the term “rising powers” because they claim that it implies an upward and linear trajectory of ascent towards greater global influence, their focus on these second-tier states as significant actors in world politics seems appropriate.

² In international relations and foreign policy literature, the term middle powers typically refers to states that are not great powers but that have more influence than small or weak states, both regionally and globally. They tend to work through multilateral institutions and informal coalitions of states and avoid unilateral actions. The category overlaps with but is not the same as the “rising powers” category mentioned above, and often includes Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, South Korea, and Turkey. See Cooper (2011).

³ Article 4 of Brazil's 1988 Constitution lists the following principles of Brazil's foreign policy: national independence; the prevalence of human rights; the self-determination of peoples; non-intervention; equality between states; the defense of peace; the pacific solution of conflicts; the repudiation of terrorism and racism; cooperation between peoples for the progress of humanity; and the concession of political asylum. From *Presidência da República* (2017). This and other translations from Spanish and Portuguese have been made by the author.

that Brazil, India, Indonesia and South Africa “have proved unimpressive as ambassadors for democratic governance in their regions and beyond”. Abdenur and Souza Neto (2013, 104) note “the common assumption that democracy and human rights promotion are exclusive to the Western agenda”. Sean Burges asserts that “Brazil has not behaved consistently in support of democratic norm enforcement” and that Brazil’s policies in this area have been “tepid” (Burges quoted in Stuenkel 2013, 345). And in a study conducted between 2012 and 2014, the New York City-based think tank Freedom House argued that Brazil’s democracy promotion efforts were “minimal” and less vigorous than those of all but one of the ten other powers analyzed (the USA, the EU, France, Germany, Poland, Japan, India, Indonesia, Sweden, and South Africa).⁴ The Freedom House commentators claimed that “the democracies in Latin America, Africa, and Asia were less likely to exert pressure on rights violators in their regions and less inclined to condemn the abrogation of democratic standards by major powers than were the United States, the European Union, and individual European countries. The disparity is largely attributable to the emphasis placed by the former group on the principle of noninterference and respect for sovereignty” (Callingaert, Puddington and Repucci 2014, 1).

The case study presented in this article – Brazil’s response to the coup d’état in Honduras in 2009 and the subsequent constitutional crisis and political deadlock that lasted until 2011 – challenges these assumptions, both about the basic principles of Brazilian foreign policy and the likelihood of Brazilian engagement in the defense of democracy. As can be seen in the sections that follow, Brazil’s reactions to the suspension of democracy in Honduras violate several key assumptions about the way Brazilian foreign policy is supposed to work. They also show that Brazil can and does defend democracy under certain circumstances, even when that means challenging positions taken by the USA.

This article is divided into four sections. The first part is a brief outline of the events in Honduras. These events became a regional problem for the Organization of American States (OAS) and its members, and were also commented on by other multilateral organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union. The second section highlights Brazil’s role in the negotiations that followed. In the third section, the article argues that the Brazil’s policies upheld several important elements of the democracy agenda and were conducted as part of a carefully orchestrated multilateral process, even though these policies were not entirely successful from a Brazilian point of view. The fourth section places the Honduran crisis in the context of Brazil’s recent actions regarding democracy

⁴ Freedom House rated Brazil’s support for democracy “minimal”, faulting it for remaining silent about Cuban and Venezuelan human rights abuses. South Africa was the only other state whose support for democracy was judged to be “minimal” in the study. Freedom House’s rating of US performance as “moderate” could be questioned.

around the world, while the conclusion argues that the crisis allows us to question some key assumptions about Brazilian foreign policy in general and, more specifically, Brazil's willingness to defend democracy.

Honduras: What's a Constitution Between Enemies?

The removal of Manuel Zelaya from the presidency (and the country) of Honduras on 28 June 2009 was the result of a long-simmering conflict within the Honduran political establishment. The Supreme Court, most members of Congress, and the leadership of the armed forces became convinced that Zelaya had violated the constitution by insisting on a referendum to consider changing the constitution. Zelaya's critics also believed that the President's large increase in the minimum wage and adherence to ALBA were taking the country in the wrong direction.⁵

The Supreme Court requested the action to remove Zelaya, who was deported from the country at gunpoint by the armed forces. President of the Congress Roberto Micheletti, like Zelaya a member of the Liberal Party, became President of the interim government. International reactions to the removal of President Zelaya were swift and negative. On 4 July 2009, the Organization of American States (OAS) suspended Honduras by a unanimous vote. The United Nations, the US government, and the European Union also condemned what they called a coup d'état.

A Texas judge was once reported once to have said, "what's the constitution between friends?"⁶ The Honduras crisis illustrates the maxim, "what's the constitution between enemies?" There is evidence of the violation of the constitution by both President Zelaya and those who deposed him. It should be noted that the 1982 constitution is a rather odd one, reflecting the history of political conflict in Honduras. It has no impeachment clause and a strict prohibition on presidential proposals to change the constitution. In Article 42, section 5 it even states that anyone inciting, supporting, or promoting the continuity in power or re-election of the president will immediately lose her or his Honduran citizenship (Republica de Honduras, 1982).

President Zelaya visited Cuba in 2007 – the first official visit of a Honduran pres-

⁵ ALBA is the *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América*, or the Bolivian Alliance for the People of Our America, the free trade agreement that includes Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador, as well as the Caribbean islands of Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines

⁶ President Lyndon B. Johnson recalled the remark, supposedly made by an elderly judge in Texas who was willing to help Johnson in an election early in Johnson's political career. From "Don't Let Dead Cats Stand on Your Porch" in *Word for Word/A Tutorial* from Lyndon B. Johnson, *The New York Times*, Sunday 20 September 2009, Review Section, p. 5.

ident to the island in 46 years.⁷ In 2008, Zelaya made Honduras part of ALBA. In addition to these leftward political moves, Zelaya is alleged to have violated the constitution (including article 245, section 1, requiring the President to comply with the constitution). For example, it is said that he did not file a budget by the 15th of September 2008 as required by the constitution. On 11 November 2008, he issued a decree calling for a fourth ballot box at the November 2009 elections, so that voters could be asked whether they would consider convening a National Constituent Assembly to write a new constitution. Zelaya wanted a preliminary poll on 28 June 2009 to ask voters whether they wanted the fourth ballot box. In May 2009 Zelaya asked the military to distribute ballot boxes and other material for the poll. The Chief of the Armed Forces refused, after which Zelaya supposedly fired him (Zelaya denied this). These actions appear to have been unconstitutional (Republica de Honduras, 1982).

On the other hand, the forced exile of Zelaya to Costa Rica had little constitutional justification. Zelaya's arrest and trial could perhaps have been justified, but there is no provision in the Honduran constitution for exiling the president. In fact, article 102 of the constitution states explicitly that "No Honduran can be expatriated or turned over to the authority of a foreign state". Supporters of Zelaya's removal defended the act in terms of a political emergency or "state of necessity". They argued that trying Zelaya in Honduras would have led to violence, and that for pragmatic reasons it was better to remove him from the country. This may be a plausible, pragmatic political argument, but constitutionally, it is an ex-post facto rationalization of an act of force. Chapter III, article 187 allows for the suspension of the Honduran constitution in a time of "grave perturbation of the peace", but this suspension can only be decreed by the President, with the approval of the cabinet (*Consejo de Ministros*), and ratified by Congress within thirty days (Republica de Honduras, 1982). None of these procedures were (or could have been) followed in the case of 28 June 2009.

Both sides in the conflict were surprised by the intransigence of the other. Supporters of the Micheletti government stressed Zelaya's unconstitutional actions, and emphasized the role of the Supreme Court in requesting Zelaya's removal. They were hurt by the outside world's perception that a "coup" had taken place. Because a military regime had not been created after Zelaya's ouster, they denied that there had been a coup, and claimed that their actions were constitutional. They believed they were defending an important principle: a President should not be above the law.

Many supporters of the Micheletti government saw the conflict in Cold War, Manichean terms. For them it was part of a regional and even global struggle

⁷ BBC News, Timeline: Honduras, 2 November 2011, accessed at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1225471.stm on 23 May 2012.

between *chavismo*, the pan-Latin American movement begun by the President of Venezuela Hugo Chávez (1999-2013) and its ideological bedfellows Communism and socialism. Since Zelaya was propagating *chavismo*, they reasoned, they had to stop him to save capitalism, the alliance with the United States, and Honduran democracy. Frederico Alvarez Fernandez, a Honduran businessman who visited the United States in defense of the Micheletti government in September 2009, complained, “The world is defending a principle... [but] Hondurans are defending their liberty”.⁸

Some commentators argue that Honduras’ constitution contributed to the crisis of 2009, in that Chapter X, article 272 (Republica de Honduras, 1982) requires the armed forces to “maintain peace, public order, and constitutional rule (*el império de la Constitución*)”, effectively making them the arbiters of the political game (see, for example, Zaverucha, 2009). This argument would carry more weight if members of the armed forces’ high command or other political actors favorable to the removal of President Zelaya had actually invoked article 272 during the crisis. However, nobody appears to have done so. Many Latin American constitutions formally grant the armed forces responsibility for the maintenance of the legal order, but this in and of itself seems insufficient to explain the removal of an elected president.

Furthermore, various other provisions of the Honduran constitution make it clear that the armed forces are under the command of the President (such as article 272 itself, which says the armed forces must be “professional, apolitical, obedient, and non-deliberative”, and articles 277 and 278). It is true that the Chief of the Honduran Armed Forces is elected by the National Congress from a list proposed by the Superior Council of the Armed Forces and can only be removed by the National Congress (article 279), not the President (Republica de Honduras, 1982). But in all other respects the relationship between the Honduran President and the Chief of the Armed Forces is thoroughly conventional: the former is the latter’s commander in chief. Therefore, arguments about the role of constitutional language in laying the foundation for the 2009 crisis should be considered skeptically.

Supporters of the Micheletti government devised a clever tactic to deflect criticism of Zelaya’s removal and lay the groundwork for the acceptance of a new successor government. They argued that the Supreme Electoral Court (*Tribunal Supremo Electoral*), whose members were elected before Zelaya left power, would preside over the elections scheduled for 29 November 2009. This, they argued, would give the elections legitimacy. Once the elections had taken place, the new

⁸ On 18 September 2009, three members of the Unión Civica Democrática (UCD) of Tegucigalpa, spoke about the crisis in Honduras at the University of New Orleans in an event hosted by the local World Affairs Council. Mr. Alvarez Fernandez made this remark in his presentation during this event.

government would have a mandate that the interim, de facto government of Roberto Micheletti lacked. This tactic ultimately succeeded, despite many problems with the elections. This is because the United States, which had first condemned the coup and cut off economic aid to Honduras, eventually declared that it would recognize the government the elections produced. This gave the Micheletti government an incentive to remain intransigent, and the focus of the international negotiations that dragged on from July to October of 2009 gradually shifted from whether Zelaya would be allowed to complete his presidential term to whether the new government would be recognized. The victory in November of Porfirio Lobo, a National Party Congressman who had lost to Zelaya in the 2005 presidential election, paved the way for Honduras' normalization of relations with a number of OAS member states, after Lobo was inaugurated in January 2010.

The Honduras situation dragged on for another sixteen months thereafter. Opponents of the Micheletti government and the subsequent Lobo administration, not all of them necessarily supporters of Manuel Zelaya, believed they were upholding an important principle. This is that a President should not be removed from office unconstitutionally and without due process. Zelaya physically embodied this principle when he snuck back into Honduras and took refuge in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa in late September 2009. He eventually left the Embassy, and Honduras, on 20 January 2010. In April 2010, in accordance with point 6 of the Tegucigalpa-San José accord, an international Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to investigate events that occurred in Honduras between January 2006 and January 2010, including the forced removal of Zelaya. This commission eventually concluded that Zelaya's removal had been unconstitutional. On 22 May of 2011 an agreement signed in Cartagena by President Lobo and Manuel Zelaya, as well as Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos and the then-Venezuelan Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro (now president), paved the way for Zelaya's return to Honduras and Honduras' re-admission to the OAS. A vote on the latter measure took place on 31 May 2011, with all member states except Ecuador voting in favor. (For more on Honduras before and after the coup, see Forti Neto and Lehmann, 2017.)

This summary of Honduras' constitutional crisis is not intended to be exhaustive. It is instead an overview that provides background to the discussion that follows. What can be seen from the summary is that the Honduran crisis was complicated, involving accusations of the violation of the constitution on both sides. Both sets of accusations contain some degree of plausibility. OAS member states had to make difficult choices at various moments during a conflict that dragged on for almost two years. How best to defend democracy in the case of Honduras was highly contested.

Brazil's Role in the Crisis

Brazil's role in the early phase of the crisis was unexceptional. It condemned the coup along with most other OAS member states. Its visibility rose in late September 2009, when Zelaya obtained shelter in the Brazilian Embassy in Tegucigalpa. A war of words between President Luiz Inácio "Lula" da Silva of Brazil (2003–2010) and interim Honduran President Micheletti ensued. Zelaya stayed in the Embassy for almost four months. One year after the coup, the US, Canada, the EU, Peru, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Panama, and Guatemala recognized the Lobo government. Mexico and Chile followed suit in August of 2010. But Brazil did not; it was one of the last group of countries to recognize the government, after Honduras was reinstated into the OAS in late May 2011.

This behavior contradicts core assumptions about Brazilian foreign policy. For example, Burges and Daudelin (2007, 128) state that Brazil's "indifference to many of the crises taking place in Central America and the Caribbean also makes good sense: where little influence can be waged and where little can be gained, why expend scarce diplomatic and financial resources?"⁹ Yet as we have seen, in Honduras, Brazil took a principled and disruptive stand in a country in which it had few economic interests. It continued to defend democratic principles even after many states pragmatically recognized the new Honduran government. And it challenged the US in a region, Central America, that it usually acknowledges as belonging in the US sphere of influence, and outside its own region of South America.

Reactions to this surprising Brazilian protagonism in Honduras were largely negative. The political scientist Riordan Roett, for example, writes, "...the critical question is why Brazil chose to ally itself with the radical nationalist governments in the region and did not seek to serve as a mediator" (Roett 2011, 146). Another political scientist, Professor Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, of the Institute of International Relations at the University of São Paulo, characterizes Brazilian support for Zelaya as imprudent, hyperactive, impractical, and "a really bad decision."¹⁰ International relations specialist Marcus Freitas argues that Brazil in Honduras blocked the operation of domestic institutions and frustrated other regional actors (Freitas cited in Burges 2017, 61). Michael Reid of *The Economist* criticized Brazil in March of 2012 as one of a "hard core of governments, including...Argentina and left-wing allies of Venezuela's Hugo Chávez, [who] will have

⁹ While Burges and Daudelin clearly did not anticipate the stance taken by Brazil in Honduras in 2009–11, much of the rest of their analysis in the chapter cited makes sense. Their argument that Brazilian foreign policy is essentially realist, characterized by an "opportunistic normativism" (*ibid.*, p. 29) that is also adopted by most other states, seems persuasive and fits within the interpretive framework used in this article.

¹⁰ Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, "Brazil: A Global Player? Foreign Policy in Changing Times", presentation at the Brazil Institute, King's College London, 17 January 2012.

nothing to do with Honduras”.¹¹ And scholar Kevin Casas-Zamora (2011, 125) claimed that the outcome of the Honduras crisis was “a defeat of sorts for Brazil, which after being thrown in the eye of the hurricane by Zelaya’s decision to seek shelter at the Brazilian embassy, missed a chance to use its regional influence to craft an adequate political settlement. It is now clear that Central America – too close geographically and historically to the United States – is, at most, a marginal concern in Brazil’s strategic outlook”.

Criticisms of Brazil’s approach to Honduras could be found in the diplomatic community and civil society as well as in academia and the media. Mexico’s former Foreign Minister Jorge Castañeda claimed that Brazil acted more like a “dwarf” than a diplomatic giant in Honduras, “taking on minor battles for a country that is not decisive” (quoted in Heine, 2009). Former Brazilian Ambassador to the UK and the US Rubens Barbosa saw Brazil’s actions in Honduras as a reflection of the “ideologization” of Brazilian foreign policy under the Lula administration. In his view, Marco Aurélio Garcia, President Lula’s foreign policy advisor, politicized foreign policy to appease militants in the PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or Workers’ Party), the dominant party in Brazil’s ruling coalition at that time. According to Barbosa, these militants were dissatisfied with the Lula administration’s orthodox approach to economic policy, and wanted their leftist aspirations realized in the foreign policy arena. Barbosa was joined in this opinion by other former diplomats, including Rubens Ricupero and Luiz Felipe Lampreia, as well as serving diplomat Paulo Roberto de Almeida. Finally, Cuban anti-Castro activist Armando Valladares warned darkly about the “Chavist abyss” into which Honduras would fall unless the removal of Zelaya was approved by the international community (Valladares, 2009).

These examples suggest that a considerable body of opinion, perhaps a consensus view, is that Brazilian policy towards Honduras was a failure. It was unpragmatic and unconstructive, failing to contribute to a resolution of the crisis; it opposed the United States in Central America, a region where it had little influence, over a country that did not matter; it was driven by ideological and partisan impulses, rather than a concern for the defense of democracy; it placed Brazil in the company of radical governments such as those led by Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and Evo Morales in Bolivia; and it was ineffective, failing to place Zelaya back in the presidency, failing to isolate the Lobo administration, and succeeding only in highlighting Brazil’s lack of influence in Central America, and lack of readiness for regional and global leadership. The next section will argue that these criticisms are too sweeping, and based on a one-sided and misleading interpretation of Brazil’s role in the Honduras affair.

¹¹ “Why a Pariah May Return”, *The Economist*, 12 March 2012, p. 58.

Nothing Succeeds Like Failure? The Brazilian Position

From 1995-2005, 17 elected governments in Latin America did not finish their mandates. From 2006 to 2012, only one did not – that of President Zelaya in Honduras.¹² Therefore, the resolution of the Honduras crisis was fundamental to the defense of democracy in the region, and criticisms of any state's position in the crisis must be made carefully.

There are six main reasons to be skeptical about the criticisms of Brazil's policies described above. First, the constitutional principles and political realities at stake in Honduras were complex and hard to reconcile – reasonable people and governments could and did take different positions. Second, US policy was ambivalent and changed significantly over time, weakening the argument that Brazil should have been more deferential towards the US. Tracking US policy exactly would have forced Brazil to adopt an entirely inconsistent and subordinate series of positions. Third, Brazil never behaved unilaterally, and always worked within groups, including Mercosur, that were much larger than the ALBA grouping singled out by some critics of Brazilian foreign policy. Fourth, Brazil tried to contribute to the constructive resolution of the conflict, and many developments that occurred in 2011, such as the report of the Honduran Truth and Reconciliation Commission, upheld the Brazilian interpretation of events as those were expressed in 2009. Fifth, the criticisms of Brazil's actions in Honduras are often contradictory; some of the same critics who complain about Brazil's reluctance to speak out about human rights abuses in countries such as Iran, for example, also complain about Brazil's stance in Honduras.

Finally, the allegation that Brazilian foreign policy was hijacked by the PT for partisan and ideological reasons deserves some skepticism. The Brazilian aim of diminishing Venezuelan regional leadership, a long-standing goal of the country's statecraft, should be separated from the issue of the PT's sympathies. The temptation to play a prominent role in Honduras would have been great for any Brazilian president, regardless of her or his party base or ideology. Furthermore, the argument that Brazilian's Foreign Ministry (often called *Itamaraty*, after the palace in Rio de Janeiro that was once its headquarters) was a model of non-partisanship and apolitical technocracy before the PT government came to power in 2003 does not withstand scrutiny. The Lula administration's positions in the Honduran crisis may have been different from those that would have been adopted by a center-right government, but they are consistent with long-standing Brazilian foreign policy goals rather than radical policy innovation.

Brazil's position in the Honduras crisis, that an elected president cannot be re-

¹² Statement made by José Miguel Insulza, then Secretary General of the OAS, Center for Inter-American Policy and Research, Tulane University, New Orleans, 7 January 2010.

moved without due process, was fully backed by the then-Secretary General of the OAS, José Insulza from Chile. It could also be interpreted as conforming to article 4, clause II of the Brazilian constitution, which states that the country's foreign policy will be guided by the principle of the prevalence of human rights (Presidência da República, 2017). Within this perspective, the right to constitutional government can be seen as a fundamental human right. Survey research suggests that the Lula administration position in Honduras, far from being exclusively backed by the PT, might have enjoyed support, at least in elite circles, in Brazil. A poll of some 2,400 professionals with an interest in foreign policy revealed that 57 percent agreed that an important goal of Brazil's foreign policy should be to support democracy elsewhere. 48 percent agreed that when the army overthrows the government of a Latin American country, Brazil should condemn the action and break off diplomatic relations with that government, which is what it did in Honduras.¹³

The Brazilian position on Honduras was also fully consonant with the original US position about Zelaya's removal. The immediate US reaction to the coup in Honduras was quite strong. It suspended economic aid to Honduras and pressured the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to suspend their aid to the country as well. It expelled interim President Micheletti's daughter from the Honduran Embassy in Washington DC and denied visas to the members of the de facto government. It is also known that US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Lorens sent a cable to Washington on 24 July 2009 that read:

The Embassy perspective is that there is no doubt that the military, Supreme Court and National Congress conspired on June 28 in what constituted an illegal and unconstitutional coup against the Executive Branch, while accepting that there may be a prima facie case that Zelaya may have committed illegalities and may even have violated the constitution. There is equally no doubt from our perspective that Roberto Micheletti's assumption of power was illegitimate... Zelaya's arrest and forced removal from the country violated multiple constitutional guarantees, including the prohibition on expatriation, presumption of innocence and right to due process.¹⁴

The fact that this did not remain the US position has little to do with a reappraisal within the US government of the constitutional issues at stake. It has much more to do with divisions in the Obama administration and a concerted lobbying effort by the Honduran-American community, the fourth largest Hispanic American

¹³ Maria Hermínia Tavares de Almeida, "Domestic Support for Foreign Policy in Brazil", presentation at the Brazil Institute, King's College London, 31 January 2012.

¹⁴ Confidential cable from then-US Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Lorens to Washington DC, found on Wikileaks under the heading: TFH01: Open and Shut: The Case of the Honduran Coup at: https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09TEGUCIGALPA645_a.html on 12 April 2017.

population in the United States,¹⁵ and Republicans in Congress, led by Senator Jim DeMint. The Congressional Republicans used strong-arm tactics to bend the Obama administration's policy towards Honduras, holding up key Presidential appointments at the State Department and using them as bargaining chips. These were Arturo Valenzuela's appointment to the post of Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs and Thomas Shannon's appointment as US Ambassador to Brazil. (Valenzuela and Shannon were eventually confirmed by the Senate and took up their positions in November and December 2009 respectively.)

Republican obstructionists succeeded in changing the Obama administration's position. The result was contradictory: the US condemned the coup but recognized the Lobo government that was elected under questionable circumstances a few months later. One member of Congress hailed this as a political masterstroke that preserved US influence in Honduras. Nevertheless, if the policy was politically useful, it was a constitutional muddle. (For criticisms of the policy, see Frank, 2011).

The resolution of the Honduras crisis was well described by OAS Secretary General José Insulza. He said that initially, the OAS tried to resolve the problem multilaterally. But once the US decided to recognize the Lobo government, the old pattern of US unilateralism was reasserted. The problem was resolved according to US interests, and eventually all the other states fell into line.¹⁶ Sufficient compromises were extracted to make both parties in the Honduran dispute feel upset about the outcome. Opponents of Zelaya felt the Lobo administration had compromised too much; opponents of the coup felt aggrieved that Zelaya never served out his term, and those who removed the president by force got away with it.

Brazil and the Defense of Democracy

Brazil's positions in the Honduras crisis is but a single case. It does not represent the whole of Brazilian foreign policy. The Honduran coup of 2009 and its aftermath was complex and idiosyncratic. The Brazilian position was the result of at least two unusual circumstances. As mentioned previously, Brazil could afford to reject the de facto status quo after the coup, because it had few economic interests at stake in Honduras. In a neighboring country with which it had more extensive trade and financial relations, Brazil might have been more cautious. Furthermore,

¹⁵ Hondurans are the fourth largest Hispanic American immigrant group in the United States, behind Mexicans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans. From 2000 to 2010, the number of Hondurans in the US rose from 217,569 to 633,401, an increase of 191 per cent. From the US Census Bureau, quoted in Beaulieu (2012), 157-158.

¹⁶ Summary of remarks made by José Miguel Insulza, then Secretary General of the OAS, Center for Inter-American Policy and Research, Tulane University, New Orleans, 7 January 2010.

the coup took place during the most dynamic phase of one of the most active periods in Brazilian foreign policy in the last few decades. Foreign Minister Celso Amorim (2003–2010) and his team promoted an “active and assertive” (*ativa e altiva*) foreign policy and during the second term of President Lula (2006–2010) it reached its apogee. Less than a year after the Honduran coup Brazil engaged in one of its most controversial negotiations, achieving an agreement in May 2010 in Tehran on Iran’s nuclear programme. Together with Turkey and Iran it issued the Tehran Declaration, and although the agreement was subsequently rejected by the US and the UN Security Council, it represented a significant incursion of rising powers into a diplomatic realm of international security issues previously thought to belong exclusively to the established powers (Amorim, 2015, 13–104).¹⁷

There is certainly evidence that Brazil’s reputation for timidity when it comes to democracy promotion is deserved. For example, in 1992 Brazil was silent about a political crisis in Ecuador (Stuenkel, 2013, 343). In 2000 Brazil turned a blind eye to President Fujimori’s fraudulent re-election in Peru and opposed the USA and Canada in the OAS General Assembly when they tried to criticize Fujimori (Burgess, 2017, 60; Stuenkel, 2013, 344). In 2004 Brazil said nothing when a Franco-American operation removed elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from Haiti. Under Presidents Lula and Dilma Rousseff (2011–2016), Brazil was largely silent about human rights abuses in Cuba, as well as questionable practices in the re-election of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 2012. Perhaps most egregiously, given Brazil’s historical record of concern about non-intervention and international law, Brazil was mute when Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

However, Brazil’s record of supporting democracy in its own region, South America, is impressive. Since its own redemocratization in the 1980s, Brazil has taken gradual steps to build democratic safeguards through a variety of regional institutions, including the OAS, the Rio Group, Mercosur, and the South American Community of Nations, Unasul. Under Brazil’s first civilian president after 21 years of military rule, José Sarney (1985–90), Brazil approved of the insertion of a reference to democracy in a new preamble to the OAS Charter. Under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995–2002), Brazil used its influence in Paraguay in 1996 to prevent a military coup. It did so again in 1999 and 2000 (Stuenkel, 2013, 343–344). Vieira and Alden (2011, 516, 526) call these regional initiatives “normative leadership” and claim that they “represent fundamental foreign policy strategies aimed at achieving acceptance of...[Brazil’s] regional leadership role”.

These tendencies have become more pronounced in recent years. President Lula

¹⁷ In this regard Brazil’s position on the Honduran coup confirms Margheritis’ contention that “domestic politics explanations are stronger than structural or systemic ones” when it comes to the defense of democracy; see Margheritis 2010, 42.

mediated a constitutional crisis in Bolivia in 2003 and a similar crisis in Ecuador in 2005 (Stuenkel, 2013, 344). When President Hugo Chávez was removed in a coup in 2002 and the US appeared to approve of and have been involved in instigating the action, Brazil under President Cardoso organized a Rio Group meeting and helped to issue a call for a return to constitutionality in Venezuela (Burges, 2017, 179). Chávez subsequently returned to power.

Democracy protection has become a key element of Brazil's attempt to use its hegemony in South America as a springboard for global influence (Amorim, 2015, 130). Stuenkel, citing Santosi, argues that "Brazil has played an exemplary and fundamental role in strengthening democratic norms and clauses across the region" (Stuenkel, 2013, 344). In his own words, promoting democracy "is increasingly aligned with Brazil's national interests as a regional hegemon" and "democracy promotion has become a key tool with which to contain threats against the legitimacy of the established order and to defend Brazil's growing economic presence in South America" (Stuenkel, 2013, 350). Admittedly, Brazil is more likely to exert itself during constitutional crises such as the Honduras coup and is less likely to take a firm stand when procedural issues cast doubt on the legitimacy of a democracy, as in Venezuela (Stuenkel, 2013, 345).

One stereotype about rising powers is that they defend democracy but do not promote democracy. They will react to a coup d'état as in Honduras, but they will not do the difficult daily work that the US and the EU do of strengthening political parties and institutions of electoral oversight, providing technical assistance, constitutional advice, and capacity building. This is democracy promotion, what Thomas Carothers defines as "aid specifically designed to foster opening in a non-democratic country or to further a democratic transition in a country that has experienced a democratic opening" (Carothers quoted in Abdenur and Souza Neto, 2013, 105).

The extraordinary relationship between Brazil and Guinea-Bissau belies this generalization. The case of Guinea-Bissau shows that Brazil can promote democracy, and do so outside its own region, in Africa. Guinea-Bissau, like Honduras, is a relatively low-risk country for Brazil, in that its trade with the country is negligible.¹⁸ Like Honduras, Guinea-Bissau is unstable, and hardly a candidate for a democratic success story. Unlike Honduras, Guinea-Bissau is seen as strategic in Brazilian foreign policy circles, an Atlantic partner in Africa that is also a trans-shipment route for drugs emanating from South America. Nevertheless, Brazilian

¹⁸ Abdenur and Souza Neto (2013, 109) show that trade between Brazil and Guinea-Bissau grew considerably between 2002 and 2009, but in the latter year was only \$11.69 million. This is a very small amount compared to Brazil's \$24.6 billion trade surplus in 2009. See "Brazilian Exports in 2009 Suffer Worst Performance in Six Decades" in MercoPress, 5 January 2010, at en.mercopress.com accessed on 13 April 2017.

engagement with its Portuguese-speaking West African partner has been sustained, multidimensional, creative, and prolific.

According to Abdenur and Souza Neto, Brazil's democracy promotion efforts in Guinea-Bissau flow through three different types of mechanism. The first is multilateral, through the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (*Comunidade de Países da Língua Portuguesa*, or CPLP) and the United Nations, specifically the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN Security Council, and UNIOGBIS (the UN Integrated Cabinet for the Consolidation of Peace in Guinea-Bissau). The second mechanism is trilateral cooperation between Brazil, Guinea-Bissau and other partners, most notably the USA. Finally, there are bilateral programmes coordinated by the Brazilian Cooperation Agency. These three mechanisms combine to make institution-building a major part of Brazil's foreign policy towards Guinea-Bissau, giving the lie to stereotypes that rising powers only react spontaneously, and purely opportunistically, to democratic breakdowns abroad.

Some examples of Brazilian assistance to Guinea-Bissau consist of the following. In 2004, Brazil furnished aid to authorities conducting legislative elections there. In 2005, a Regional Electoral Court mission from the state of Minas Gerais provided technical assistance to those responsible for the presidential elections held that June, and donated twenty-five computers to help register voters. From 2006 to 2009, Brazil's Federal Police helped to establish a training center for the police in Guinea-Bissau. In 2011, Brazil provided help to Guinea-Bissau in the establishment and maintenance of a national system to register births. And up until 2010, 1,200 citizens of Guinea-Bissau took professional capacitation classes offered by SENAI, Brazil's National Industrial Training Service (*Serviço Nacional de Aprendizagem Industrial*), while Brazil also engaged in a project to strengthen Guinea-Bissau's National Popular Assembly (Abdenur and Souza Neto, 2013, 109-113).

When a coup d'état took place in Guinea-Bissau in 2012, Brazil released a firm rebuke of the military action. Its Foreign Ministry tried to persuade the country's military leaders to release civilian politicians who had been detained and to organize a return to constitutional normality. After the United Nations appointed the former president and prime minister of East Timor and Nobel Peace Prize winner José Ramos-Horta as Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Guinea-Bissau in 2013, Ramos-Horta "characterized the role of Brazil in Guinea-Bissau as essential, stating that Brazil has 'enormous credibility', as well as consolidated cooperation ties with Africa" (Abdenur and Souza Neto, 2013, 111-112).

Even in the case of its special engagement with Guinea-Bissau, Brazil has been

less assertive – some might say less arrogant – than established powers in promoting democracy. This is due partly to Brazil’s long-standing tradition of respecting the principle of non-intervention. But it is also due to Brazil’s own domestic shortcomings, including high levels of economic inequality, corruption, and human rights violations, including police violence in poor communities (Sahoo et al, 2015, 2). Established powers that expect Brazil to shout loudly about democracy are likely to be disappointed. Former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim argues that “there needs to be a dialogue rather than an intervention” and “democracy cannot be imposed. It is born from dialogue” (Amorim quoted in Stuenkel, 2013, 344).

Brazilian foreign policy has also been dialed down since the heady days when Celso Amorim was Foreign Minister. Under President Dilma Rousseff, the budget of the Foreign Ministry was slashed. President Rousseff’s controversial 2016 impeachment, which some Brazilians and international observers regarded as illegitimate, made it more difficult for Brazil to pose as a potential model for other new democracies. The turmoil caused by Brazil’s anti-corruption investigations have contributed additional political instability to the equation.

In summary, Brazil’s policies in South America and its special relationship with Guinea-Bissau show that Brazilian defense of democracy is not just short term and reactive, and that long-term democracy promotion is not the exclusive purview of the EU and USA. The Honduras case is also important because it shows that generalizations about Brazil’s foreign policy orientations and defense of democracy need to be questioned. Perhaps the policies of other democratic rising powers – for example, India and South Africa – should be re-examined as well. In Stuenkel’s words, “contrary to what is often believed, Brazil has defended democracy abroad in many...instances, and over the past two decades its views on intervention have become decidedly more flexible” (Stuenkel, 2013, 343).

Conclusion

The world has become more multipolar. The post-Cold War consensus amongst some established powers in favor of exporting the institutions of liberal democracy has been shaken because these aspirations have “generated tensions and fragilities that were simplistically glossed over and marginalized in intellectual debate” (Buxton, 2017, 169). Furthermore, there has been a “lack of critical engagement with the failures, flaws, and, at points, egregious hypocrisies of the ‘West’, of law breaking and institutional violation, and of illiberal internationalism” in the defense of questionable elections and in the application of “political double standards” (Buxton, 2017, 170).

In this context, unilateral and one-dimensional assessments of democracy such as those offered by Freedom House can be usefully complemented by the per-

spectives on democracy of rising powers such as Brazil, India, and South Africa. While these powers generally avoid the sweeping liberal ideology used by US and European democracy promoters, and indeed avoid the language of democracy promotion altogether, they can add value to the debate about democracy in the world. They are often seen as less condescending and arrogant than the established powers, they have experience in maintaining democracy under difficult conditions, and their record of domestic success makes them attractive to other countries struggling to create or maintain democracy (Stuenkel, 2013, 350-351).

This article argues that assumptions about Brazil's approach to democracy in its foreign policy, as well as the positions on democracy of other rising powers, need to be rethought. Brazil's foreign policy changed as the country became more globally influential, and traditional ideas about Brazil's foreign policy principles should be re-examined. These are that it prefers non-intervention and pragmatism, concentrates mainly on South American economic and political integration and does not invoke principles that do not advance its own economic interests. The literature on democracy promotion, for its part, suggests that Brazil makes minimal international efforts for democracy, preferring to cling to traditional notions of sovereignty and maintain a discrete silence in the face of anti-democratic actions abroad, both to protect its economic interests and its international support in multilateral fora. We should therefore expect Brazilian democracy promotion efforts to consistently lag behind those of the European Union and the United States.

Brazilian responses to the Honduran constitutional crisis and political deadlock of 2009-2011 show that these assumptions should be questioned. In this case, Brazil took a principled stance in defense of democracy, worked with other states within the OAS to defend this position, and went farther than the United States was willing to go to isolate the government that came to power in Honduras after the removal of President Zelaya. While Brazil's efforts were in some respects unsuccessful – it was unable to expand its influence in Central America, and it was forced, eventually, to seek a pragmatic compromise in the face of the unilateral decision of the USA to recognize the Lupo government after the 2009 elections – they were also constructive in upholding the OAS Democracy Charter, and positive in reaffirming the principle that governments that come to power through undemocratic means should not be encouraged or rewarded by regional representative institutions.

Brazil's position in the Honduras crisis was reasonable, principled, and shared by many other state and non-state actors. Brazil played a role in the compromise solution that was eventually achieved, a compromise that included the dropping of all charges against Zelaya and his return to Honduras, as well as an amnesty for those who took part in the 2009 coup. The fact that Brazil did not align in

lock-step with the United States is a point in its favor, given that the US position changed over time and was a muddle in constitutional terms. Brazilian policy could be faulted for its passivity. Brazil probably did not do enough to try to resolve the impasse over Honduras, thus hurting its ally El Salvador, which was badly affected by the prolonged nature of the crisis. Despite its ostensible independence, Brazil ultimately deferred to the United States and did not aggressively challenge the United States' preeminent role in the region. Having to house Manuel Zelaya in its Embassy was difficult, and tied Brazil's hands somewhat, but once the former President arrived there, it is difficult to see what else Brazil's Foreign Ministry could have done. It was obliged to allow him to stay, and to help secure his safe passage out of the country. The important thing is that the Brazil made a stand for multilateralism and the defense of democracy in the Americas.

Brazil's foreign policy goals have often been identified as multilateralism and negotiated solutions to international problems; a recognition of Brazil's global interests and role; the pursuit of its own economic development; and independence with regard to the United States. The Honduran crisis shows two more characteristics of Brazilian foreign policy. One is that it is likely to invoke high principles where doing so is least costly. Brazil's lack of economic ties with Honduras made it easier, not harder, to defend constitutionalism and democracy during the crisis and to insist on a reversal of the 2009 coup. In this respect Brazil behaves like other states. In addition, Brazil often takes actions independently of the United States, but it does not usually choose to openly confront its neighbor to the north, even when led by a government of the center-left.

As Antonio Patriota argues in this issue, and as another former Foreign Minister Celso Amorim has argued, Brazil is an incrementalist and reformist power that wants improved multilateral institutions that are rule-based, consistent, and inclusive (see also Spektor, 2016, 35).¹⁹ It is a moderate, and not revolutionary actor in the shifting global balance of power. It is an advocate for a new type of multipolarity. If Brazil's policy in Honduras was a failure in the sense that its immediate goal – the restoration to power of President Zelaya – was not realized, it was successful in that it showed a wholehearted commitment to the defense of democracy. The irony of Brazil's position was that the United States, which often claims to be a consistent and vigorous champion of democracy, chided Brazil for not being constructive and pragmatic enough to help in restoring stability to Honduras by recognizing a government that had come to power after a coup d'état. Sometimes nothing succeeds like failure.

¹⁹ Lecture by Celso Amorim, "Constructing Multipolarity: the Brazilian Perspective", given at the Brazil Institute, King's College London, 2 November 2015.

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Bio

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