

Obama's Test: Democracy or Chaos in Latin America

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Latin America stands at the threshold of a new era: one that promises a return to political uncertainty, violence and chaos or one of political stability and economic prosperity. Honduras is a crucial indicator.

The possible outcomes of the Honduran crisis are likely to define the coming era for Latin America and the US future role in that hemisphere, and, in fact, beyond it. Indeed, the story is much more elaborate than a daring president holed up in a foreign embassy in his own country.

In her second visit to Asia as US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton declared on July 21 in Bangkok, "The US is back." The declaration was disconcerting to many Asian countries, despite Clinton's indistinct qualifications afterwards. Asian countries, exploring regional unity and economic cooperation are well aware of the subtle meaning of the term. However, it's unlikely that politically stable and economically prospering Asia countries would allow for unwarranted outside interferences, especially with the growing Chinese regional influence and the election of Yukio Hatoyama the prime minister of Japan.

But how would Latin America feel about the US interference? The outcome of the Honduran coup should sufficiently answer this question.

Since the introduction of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, the politics and economic structures of Latin American countries subsisted as a component of US foreign policies, regardless of who presided in the White House. The region's economies seemed, at times, a laboratory for economic theories hatched at various US academic institutions. Many Latin American countries existed, and a meager existence at that, between US interventions, self-seeking local oligarchy and wilderness and chaos wrought by military dictatorships. In many instances, these three components were intrinsically linked.

But US influence in that region, as in the rest of the world, began to fade. The neoconservative wars in the Middle East and South Asia were but desperate, now failed attempts at salvaging some of the dwindling influence.

The former Bush Administration left Latin America to its own devices as US military adventures elsewhere took a toll on the country, militarily, economically and politically, at home and abroad. But as Clinton promised a return to Asia, the Obama administration attempted a return to Latin America as well, a region that is significantly different from yesteryear, as a new form of popular socialism was taking hold (in Venezuela, Bolivia, and elsewhere) without wholly disturbing the economic patterns that long governed these countries. While many didn't welcome President Hugo Chavez's outspokenness, few in Latin America, except for a few remaining US allies, considered him a threat. To the contrary, the

new age has promised greater cooperation among all economic sectors between Latin American countries than any other period in the past. A new Latin America was making its debut, more equitable than before, politically stable, and economically promising, if not, in some cases, prosperous.

Indeed, the US returned to a different reality, a return that, at first was welcomed, even by Chavez himself. Obama spoke a language that soothed much fears and fostered a sense of promise.

“At times we sought to dictate our terms. But I pledge to you that we seek an equal partnership. There is no senior partner and junior partner in our relations; there is simply engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values,” declared Obama on April 19, at the Summit of the Americas , to the pleasure and relief of his audience.

Did that mean no more coups, military interventions, economic sanctions, political intimidation and all forms of coercion that defined much of the two hemispheres’ relationship of many years? Certainly, Latin American leaders, or most of them, hoped so.

But then, the democratically elected President of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya was overthrown on June 28. It was a classic Latin American junta move. The popular leader was escorted in his pajamas and deported to another country. The coup leader, Roberto Micheletti lead a series of draconian measures, starting with the installation of a new government of allies and cronies - with the blessing of the local oligarchy - and ending with the declaration of emergency decree limiting civil liberties. After several attempts and many dramatic episodes, Zelaya returned to his country and was holed up in the Brazilian embassy, in Tegucigalpa , surrounded by a military that merely represent the very poor country’s very rich rulers: the oligarchs and the generals.

In some way, the coup in Honduras helped highlight the new order in the continent, as displayed in the unity of many Latin American countries, the steadfastness of its regional organizations, and the growing influence of the democratically elected governments. But it also highlighted the precarious position of the US administration: condemning the coup on one hand (as did President Obama, and clearly so) and condemning Zelaya’s courageous action (as did Hillary Clinton, and clearly so.) Clinton described Zelaya’s action as “reckless.” She was not alone, of course as the U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States, Lewis Amselem said Zelaya’s return was “irresponsible and foolish.” Zelaya should stop “acting as though he were starring in an old movie,” he counseled. Worse, US Republicans, who see the coup leaders as trusty allies reminiscent of their allies of the past, are flocking to the Honduran capital in dangerous attempts at validating the coup leaders as legitimate statesmen.

Between Obama’s anti-coup stance, and his own Department of State’s anti-Zelaya rhetoric (and Republican giddiness over the prospects of their country’s ‘return’ to Latin America), the US position lacks clarity, a dangerous notion at a time when Latin America expected a clear US divorce from the past, and “engagement based on mutual respect and common interests and shared values.” President Obama may be sincere, but he must ensure that he acts upon his promises, not for Latin America ’s sake, but for his own country’s future relationship with that part of the world. As for Latin America itself, the repercussions of the Brazilian embassy’s siege, and the future of democracy in Honduras will either set a terrible

precedent in an age of hope, or serve as further proof that the ghosts of the past will no longer haunt Latin America , no matter how much the reviled generals toil.

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