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Tiny El Salvador Plays Big Role in President Barack Obama's First Latin America Trip

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US President Barack Obama concluded his first official tour of Latin America last week with a brief visit to El Salvador. Dismissed by some as offering more style than substance, the quick stopover served, nevertheless, to underscore El Salvador’s increasingly important role as a key US ally in the region.

In the troubled Central America nation for less than 24 hours, President Obama met privately with his Salvadoran counterpart President Mauricio Funes; visited the tomb of Archbishop Óscar Romero, a human rights icon assassinated during the country’s 1980-1992 civil war; and even squeezed in a pupusa (traditional Salvadoran tamale-style dish) before being whisked away—slightly ahead of schedule—to Washington, DC.

Obama's one concrete policy announcement came during a March 22 conference, when he promised US$200 million to help fight drug trafficking and other transnational crime affecting the region. The funds are part of the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARS).

Obama’s visit raised expectations he might also present something solid on the immigration front. Salvadorans are especially eager to know what will happen to their estimated 220,000 compatriots living in the US under Temporary Protected Status (TPS). The conditional visas, first issued as part of the Immigration Act of 1990 to Salvadorans who had fled the violence during the civil war (NotiCen, Dec. 14, 1990), have been extended several times through the years but are set to expire early next year.

Promising to do his best, Obama admitted, nevertheless, that the TPS situation specifically and immigration reform in general face major political hurdles in the conservative-controlled US Congress. "My hope is that [Republican opponents] begin to recognize over the next year that we can’t solve this problem without taking a broad, comprehensive approach," he said.

Following Obama’s departure, President Funes went on television offering an enthusiastic recap of the US presidential visit, which he described as "very good news." For many observers, however, the stopover—preceded as it was by weeks of media coverage, analysis, and, above all, high hopes—came as a disappointment. Roberto Cañas, a Salvadoran political analyst, said the trip was nothing more than "a lot of photos, Hollywood-style paraphernalia." He told the Spanish news agency EFE, "It was all noise and little substance."

Looking southward, finally
What, then, was the point of the visit? And why, of all places, would President Obama visit tiny El Salvador, especially just days after authorizing a bombing campaign in Libya?

For starters, the US president was clearly eager to reach out to Latin America as a whole, to finally follow through on a promise he made in April 2009—just three months after taking office—when
he told leaders gathered at the Summit of the Americas in Trinidad and Tobago (NotiCen, April 16, 2009) that he was ready to join them in an "equal partnership." He added, "I am here to launch a new chapter of engagement that will be sustained throughout my administration."

Given the concurrent crises in Libya and Japan, the timing of the trip could not have been worse. Against pressure to cancel the tour, Obama stuck to his Latin America agenda regardless, evidence of just how determined his administration is to focus some attention south.

Michael Shifter of Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington, DC, policy institute, said the significance of that decision was not lost on Obama’s Latin American counterparts. "In my opinion, that was the most important message from this whole trip. The fact that he didn’t change his plans, that he stuck to his agenda...that was the most important message," Shifter told the Mexican news wire Notimex. "[The trip] was more symbolic than substantive, but symbols can be powerful."

Before arriving in El Salvador, Obama visited Brazil and Chile—both logical choices, observers agree. Brazil, the region’s "sleeping giant," has by all accounts woken up. Together with China, Russia, and India, it forms part of the BRIC quartet of emerging economic powers. Chile is another success story. A regional dynamo with a solid democratic government, the thin coastal country boasts Latin America’s highest per capita GDP (US$14,000).

It also makes sense that, for a third destination, the Obama administration would want to choose somewhere within the Central American isthmus—"America’s back yard," as it’s sometimes called. That still doesn’t explain, however, why President Obama would choose El Salvador over the other six countries in Central America. Why not Panama, home to the all-important canal, or Costa Rica, a traditional US ally?

**Obama’s ‘go-to guy’**

For one thing, El Salvador has a leader Obama gets along with. Both relatively young, Funes (51) and Obama (49) assumed their respective presidencies within months of each other. The two leaders, who met in Washington, DC, one year ago, also have some ideological affinities: left of center, each campaigned as a progressive but, once in office, chose to govern as a moderate.

Funes, in other words, is much more of a natural ally than someone like Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, a one-time Marxist revolutionary, or Panamanian President Ricardo Martinelli, a conservative business mogul. As former Costa Rican vice president and current Brookings Institution fellow Kevin Casas-Zamora wrote in a recent essay, Funes is now Obama’s Central American "go-to person."

Funes’ moderate approach has earned him consistently strong approval ratings, among the highest in Latin America (NotiCen, Jan. 6, 2011). Those high marks have contributed in turn to the Salvadoran government’s overall stability, another quality that may have made El Salvador an attractive choice for Obama’s inaugural visit to the region.

"El Salvador was the only country in the region that assures President Obama a quiet visit," Costa Rican analyst Luis Guillermo Solís told last week. "Guatemala and Nicaragua are in the midst of very complicated election processes. Honduras poses a challenging issue in that its government is still not recognized by many countries in the Hemisphere. Panama is ‘not Central America’...and Costa Rica is not supportive and cooperative enough with US security concerns. In short, El Salvador was the best—and perhaps only—option for Obama."
Troubles aplenty

For political reasons, El Salvador may have been able to offer Obama a "quiet visit," as Solís suggested. But it is hardly a quiet country. Politically stable, El Salvador struggles economically and is plagued by violent crime, boasting—together with Honduras and Guatemala—one of the world’s highest noncombat-zone homicide rates in the world (NotiCen, Oct. 29, 2009).

Interestingly enough, these myriad troubles—a list that also includes an overdependence on emigrant remittances—may also have factored into the Obama administration’s decision to touch down in San Salvador.

Twenty-five years ago the US government’s primary concern vis-à-vis Central America was the perceived spread of Soviet-backed communist influence. Since then, gangs and international drug traffickers have replaced radical leftists as the region’s biggest security threat. Immigration is another concern, as is trade, which the US government has tried to expand with the region through the controversial Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), in effect since 2006.

These interests and concerns—drug trafficking, free trade, and immigration—apply to Central America as a whole, though nowhere do they intersect in quite as obvious a way as in El Salvador. As Obama said during his visit last week, "There are few better examples of both the opportunities and challenges facing the Americas today than here in El Salvador."

Two decades after El Salvador ended its civil war, bullets are still flying. A cauldron of gang activity, El Salvador is also thought to serve as a corridor for drug and small-arms trafficking between South and North America. The result has been more than 11,000 murders in just the last three years, a staggering number for a country the size (in both area and population) of Massachusetts.

A victim of the region’s rampant crime, El Salvador could also be part of the solution—at least from the perspective of the US government. US authorities recently opened an International Law Enforcement Agency (ILEA) in San Salvador, its first and only in Central America. The US government operates five of the controversial crime-fighting academies worldwide. Since 2000, the US Navy has also used El Salvador as a base for regionwide anti-drug-trafficking operations.

The ties that bind

Immigration is another area that binds the two countries together. By some estimates as many as 2.5 million Salvadorans reside in the US. Together they send home up to US$4 billion annually, more than 15% of El Salvador’s GDP. Remittances are El Salvador’s single-most-important source of revenue.

Many Salvadorans live in the US legally. Some depend on the tentative TPS. Countless others make the long trip north without papers, putting themselves at odds with the US Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency, which in recent years has deported an annual average of 20,000 Salvadorans (NotiCen, Feb. 11, 2010). The deportations are not only costly—for both countries—but have human rights implications as well.

Presidents Obama and Funes both acknowledge that a long-term solution to the immigration issue will depend on improved economic conditions in El Salvador. CAFTA-DR was supposed to help. So far, it has not. Trade between the two countries rose only slightly in the past four years—from US$4
billion in 2006 to US$4.6 billion in 2010—not enough to prevent El Salvador from slipping into a deep recession from which it has yet to fully recover. The Salvadoran economy contracted 3.5% in 2009, rebounding last year, but not by much (NotiCen, Feb. 10, 2011).

"Helping El Salvador diversify and upgrade its exports is crucial if CAFTA-DR is to live up to the high expectations of its ratification," wrote the Brookings Institute’s Casas-Zamora. "While intense attention for Central America is probably a very tall order given the complexity of Washington’s current domestic and international agenda, steady attention should not be too much to ask....There are more than 3 million Central Americans already living in the United States. There are plenty more where they came from."

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