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Latin America Still Not a Priority for U.S. Under New President Obama

by LADB Staff

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US President Barack Obama's arrival in the White House has raised expectations in Latin American governments and a modicum of hope among people in countries where there has always been a deep anti-US sentiment, intensified during eight years of the administration of former US President George W. Bush. South American countries, whose presidents with the exception of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe had already "voted" for the Democratic candidate before the election, are now expecting different treatment.

Although the first signs make clear that the region does not have a preferential spot on the US agenda, and some rifts have already occurred, Latin American leaders are expecting a positive change in trade and diplomatic relations with the US. In various surveys, people in the region express satisfaction with the image of the new president.

In this more open climate, Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has sent his regional colleagues and the US a clear message, taking up the South American giant's historic leadership position in this arena as well. Nevertheless, alarm bells are going off in various countries because the global crisis, whose epicenter is in the superpower, is causing a reduction in remittances that emigrants to the US send their families.

Lula connects with Obama

Lula was the first to express his hope. In the days before Obama's inauguration, he repeated, in various settings, that he considered Obama's election not merely the arrival of just another president but an encouraging sign for Latin America. "The election of a black person as president of the United States is an extraordinary event, and I think Obama should convert this act of the US people into a far-reaching Latin America policy that respects our idiosyncrasies and, above all, our sovereignty," said the Brazilian president.

Presidents Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Evo Morales of Bolivia, long at odds with the US, expressed slightly different opinions. Although careful not to contradict Lula, both were defensive and expressed reservations about the future of regional and bilateral relations. Replying to their comments, Lula said on his radio broadcast, "I think at some time you [Chavez] and Obama are going to have to meet and have a lengthy dialogue; I think Evo also needs to meet with him."

Reaffirming his role as continental leader, Lula asked the White House to modify "substantially its misguided policies in its relations with Latin America." Responding to Obama's statements that he is considering lifting restrictions imposed by President Bush on travel and sending money to Cuba, the Brazilian president said that was insufficient. "It is important to send a signal to Cuba, to lift the embargo that has no valid explanation," said Lula. "It is important that this embargo be lifted so that Cuba can have a normal life."

Lula also said Obama should take the initiative to reach an agreement within the framework of the World Trade Organization (WTO) to liberalize international trade and eliminate agricultural subsidies. That, he said, "would be an enormous help for poor countries, above all for those that have an agriculture-based economy, even more so given that, with the global crisis, protectionist tendencies are spreading through the First World." Lula, the first president in the region to receive a call from Obama, expressed his optimism to the new US president, but also made clear the limits on the optimism. "We are going to continue with the good bilateral relationship that we have, but Obama can strive to improve it, because while the US is the most important country in the world, Brazil is the most important country in Latin America," he said.

Lula said that although, during the conversation, Obama's only reference to Cuba was his support of closing the prison at Guantanamo, the US president satisfied his expectations regarding the WTO negotiations.

In what might be seen as a show of balance, Obama's second call was to Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, a day after talking with Lula. Uribe has been a stalwart ally of the White House, but, from the beginning of the US electoral campaign, Uribe made clear his preference for the Republican candidate. Colombia is the third-largest recipient of US aid, after Israel and Egypt (various sources say that, since Uribe took office, Colombia has received more than US\$6 billion to combat drug trafficking and to promote security policies and human rights).

In March 2008, then Sen. Obama backed Uribe when Colombian troops crossed into Ecuadoran territory to destroy a camp of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), a controversial episode in which 19 people died, among them a FARC leader (see NotiSur, 2008-06-06).

During the electoral campaign, Frank Sanchez, an Obama advisor on Latin America, said aid to Colombia would continue as it had during the Bush administration. A Colombian government communique said that, in the Jan. 27 telephone conversation, Obama assured Uribe that he would continue supporting "Colombia's efforts to improve its security and prosperity."

All has not been rosy

The new Obama administration's "romance" with the region has had two difficult moments. The first was when diplomats quoted by EFE complained that the US "is blocking" the Latin America and European Union (EU) positions, such as harm reduction, in negotiations in Vienna, Austria, to set world policies on narcotic drugs. EFE's sources said the US position "is based on a tough, zero-tolerance concept, begun in the Bush era and characteristic of the war on drugs, and not on a policy of health, with hygiene programs and preventive medical supervision to stop the scourge of various illnesses, contradicting the strategy Obama defended during his campaign."

The second occurred on Feb. 7, when the Ecuadoran government of President Rafael Correa expelled Armando Astorga, Homeland Security attache at the US Embassy in La Paz. Correa's action was in response to a letter Astorga sent directly to a police chief notifying him that the Obama government was canceling an agreement on migration controls, suspending US\$340,000 to be used to fight smuggling and freezing another US\$160,000 for efforts against human trafficking.

Four days later, Correa said Astorga and US intelligence officers had left, taking computers, communications equipment, vehicles, and information that belonged to the Policia Nacional. Declining remittances beginning to be felt It was precisely in Ecuador where the first signs of a drop in remittances were felt. Reporters for Quito daily El Comercio wrote on Feb. 5 that Ecuadoran residents in the US were caught in the unemployment that hit after the economic crisis began, and the first immigrants were returning to the country.

Radio France Internationale on Feb. 10 reported a similar situation in Europe and said the first to feel the effects were, besides Ecuadorans, workers from the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and other Latin American countries. From the steps taken so far, it is clear that the region will continue occupying a secondary place for US diplomacy.

Before communicating with Lula and Uribe, Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had already spoken with the leaders of Israel, Great Britain, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, France, Russia, and Germany. "US concerns are centered on Asia, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, regardless of the fact that it can negotiate with Brazil in fundamental areas, such as biofuels," said Marcelo Coutinho, coordinator of the Observatorio Politico Sul-Americano (OPSA).

Democrat and Republican lawmakers on the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, such as Eliot Engel (D-NY) and Connie Mack (R-FL), told the White House that now is the time to get engaged with Latin America, but they did not receive a reply.

On Feb. 6, during a Senate hearing on the nomination of Leon Panetta to head the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the region barely merited a mention. Panetta said priorities include Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. "But, we also have to look closely at Russia and China, and at Africa," added Panetta, who only mentioned Latin America as a region "to watch" when some senators pointed out his omission. "But since the withdrawal of New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson from his nomination as secretary of commerce there is no enthusiastic advocate for greater attention to Latin American in his Cabinet," wrote Andres Oppenheimer in his weekly column in the Argentine daily La Nacion.

In March, Obama will receive Lula at the White House and the two will also see each other at the G-20 summit in early April in London. But the only time that Obama will be with the rest of the regional leaders will be on April 17-19, in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, during the Fifth Summit of the Americas.

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