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Luis Ángel Saavedra

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Ecuador's Diplomatic Ambivalence with the U.S.

by Luis Ángel Saavedra

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On April 5, the Ecuadoran government, through Foreign Minister Ricardo Patiño, declared US Ambassador Heather Hodges persona non grata and asked her to leave the country as quickly as possible (NotiSur, May 6, 2011).

This decision followed the WikiLeaks release of cable ID 216141, sent from the US Embassy in Quito to superiors in the US State Department. In the cable, Hodges questions the 2008 naming of Gen. Jaime Hurtado as general commander of the Policía Nacional because of his alleged involvement in various acts of corruption. "Jaime Aquilino Hurtado Vaca has used his office as Commander of the National Police and personal influence to extort cash and property, misappropriate public funds, facilitate human trafficking, and obstruct the investigation and prosecution of corrupt colleagues," the ambassador said in the cable.

Hodges did not stop with the accusation but went on to give the opinions of some of her colleagues. "[S]ome Embassy officials believe that President Correa must have been aware of them when he made the appointment. These observers believe that Correa may have wanted an ENP Chief whom he could easily manipulate," reads the cable.

The ambassador also details some of Hurtado's activities and says, "US investors are reluctant to risk their resources in Ecuador knowing that they could be targeted by corrupt law enforcement officials."

A wave of anti-US sentiment

In February 2003, former President Lucio Gutiérrez (2003-2005), who had just been elected, visited US President George W. Bush in Washington (NotiSur, March 7, 2003) and offered to be "the best friend and ally of the US."

Apropos of Gutiérrez's offer, his administration aligned itself completely with US Latin American policy, expressed through Plan Colombia and the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative (EAI)—which sought a process of military control—and, regarding trade, supported Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations, which would open Latin American markets to free trade with the US.

The Gutiérrez administration even formally denied the sinking of Ecuadoran fishing boats by the US Navy, which was carrying out sea- and air-control operations from the Eloy Alfaro Air Base in the Ecuadoran port of Manta, despite the US Embassy in Quito's justification, on its Web page, of its actions (NotiSur, Aug. 27, 2004) and (June 12, 2009).

The Gutiérrez administration's submission to US interests was one of the principal factors that mobilized urban social sectors to the point of provoking Gutiérrez's removal from office and his replacement by Vice President Alfredo Palacio (NotiSur, April 22, 2005). Palacio (2005-2007) initially formed an anti-US Cabinet, in which Foreign Minister Antonio Parra Gil, Economy Minister Rafael Correa, and especially vice minister of economy Pablo Dávalos, who refused to meet with World Bank officials, stood out (NotiSur, April 29, 2005).
The earliest information about anti-US sentiments that appears in the WikiLeaks cables specifically refers to Correa, who was looking for closer financial ties with Venezuela, Iran, China, and Libya.

During his presidential campaign, Correa exploited the anti-US sentiment of numerous Ecuadoran social sectors that had fought for nearly ten years against the FTAA and for the withdrawal of US troops stationed at Manta. One of his major campaign promises was that he would not extend the US stay at Manta when the agreement expired in 2009 (NotiSur, Oct. 20, 2006).

**An ambivalent policy**

As president, Correa has used the Ecuadoran social organizations' anti-US sentiments each time he has needed to boost support for one of his frequent electoral campaigns; nevertheless, he has not fulfilled all the aspirations of these movements, as in the case of the fishers who were left without work when their boats were sunk, or in issues raised following Colombia's bombing of the border area of Angostura in March 2008, which killed Colombian guerrilla leader Raúl Reyes (NotiSur, March 7, 2008).

Regarding the Manta fishers, the Coalición No Base Ecuador has insisted on the need to conduct a technical audit to learn the real functions of the US soldiers in Ecuador and a political audit to establish the responsibilities of Ecuadoran officials who allowed the installation of a US military base in Ecuadoran territory. The Correa administration has not accepted either request nor has it wanted to support the fishers' demands for compensation for their sunken boats.

"Correa takes up the discourse only when it serves to win votes, but he has no interest in deepening a nationalist policy because he would have to confront the US government, and that is not convenient for this administration," said Gualdemar Jiménez, leader of No Bases.

After the US troops left, Correa continued negotiating with the US regarding logistical support, from the base at Manta, for US military operations, violating even the new provisions of the 2008 Constitution.

The Angostura bombing was another opportunity to strengthen presidential popularity and denounce US infiltration in Ecuadoran security agencies, which provoked the expulsion of the first secretary of the US Embassy, Max Sullivan, accused of being an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and controlling the Unidad de Investigaciones Especiales (UIES) of the Policía de Ecuador (NotiSur, Dec. 3, 2010). He was also accused of having appropriated UIES computers with information related to, among other things, the attack and cover-up of the Angostura bombing by the Fuerzas Armadas de Colombia (FAC).

The Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Comercio e Integración, through then vice minister José Valencia, calmed down US diplomats, assuring them that Correa's impulsive character would not harm Ecuador's good relations with the US.

The Ecuadoran government continued collaborating with the US, within the framework of the war on terrorism, including last March 19 when the Ecuadoran police captured 67 Muslims, accusing them of human trafficking, drug trafficking, and terrorism. Immediately, and without any hearings, six were deported to the US to be prosecuted in that country.

The Defensoría del Pueblo and various agencies that work for migrant rights have questioned the operation and the hurried deportation. The government has not explained the process or the reason.
for the continued detention without trial of 29 persons, although the rest of the group has been
released because there was no proof of links to any crime.

"It is not possible that a government act arbitrarily and detain 69 persons to comply with an
international request against six of them. It is like sifting flour to see what is left at the end," said
Patricio Benalcázar, director of protection at the Defensoría del Pueblo.

To defend presidential honor
The incident with former ambassador Hodges and the WikiLeaks cables could not have come
at a better time since it strengthened the president's campaign to win the latest referendum by
channeling a new wave of anti-US sentiment toward support for his proposal, and all under the
premise that presidential honor cannot be sullied.

"The honor of the president is worth more than any trade agreement," said Foreign Minister
Ricardo Patiño, to silence the protest by exporters who would be harmed by the US failure to renew
preferential tariffs in reprisal for the expulsion of the former ambassador.

Patiño also emphasized that the problem was only with Hodges and would not interfere with
diplomatic relations with the US; therefore the tariff agreement should remain in effect. This
affirmation did not, however, stop the US government from expelling Ecuador's Ambassador to
the US Luis Gallegos and freezing negotiations on the preferential-tariff terms (Andean Trade
Promotion and Drug Enforcement Act, ATPDEA), which the US unilaterally grants to countries it
considers effective in the war on drug trafficking.

After the referendum, it is hoped that relations between the two countries will be normalized and
that this incident will be remembered as one more of those that have served to bolster a government
electoral campaign but that have not really helped to either define or determine the extent of the
nationalist sentiment that characterizes many of the Ecuadoran social movements that helped
Correa win the presidency.

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