OBAMA AND LATIN AMERICA: CURSE OF THE 'LOCAL'

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By Juan Gabriel Tokatlián, Open Democracy, 18 February 2010*Juan Gabriel Tokatlian is at the Universidad de San Andrés in Argentina. He earned a doctorate in international relations from the Johns Hopkins University school of advanced international studies.*

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It is evident that external and internal politics are intertwined and that today most issues are "intermestic"; that is, simultaneously international and domestic in ways that link multiple official and non-governmental actors with different power-attributes and power-interests. Yet the "over-primacy" of domestic politics is a major mistake that affects essential global aims, commitments and responsibilities. President Obama's first year at the White House has been, in terms of US-Latin America relations, a vivid example of that excessive emphasis.
None of Obama's key policies towards the region has been able to overcome the overriding influence of domestic politics. The increasing (and reasonable) concern with Mexico's stability in light of the advance of drug-related organised crime was answered with the traditional formula: the coercive Plan Merida that satisfies only hardliners inside and outside the executive and legislative. The fifth Summit of the Americas held in April 2009 in Trinidad & Tobago was a fiasco in large part because Washington was less interested in an updated dialogue on trade: protectionist appeals in Congress and among business sectors made it impossible to renew any serious debate on the economics of the western hemisphere.

The military agreement of August 2009 between the United States and Colombia by which US troops can use seven bases was openly questioned by most South American countries (in particular, Brazil). But in any case it is essentially useless from the standpoint of improving the fight against

drugs: all the available factual evidence shows that the drug war in the Andes has made things worse, and that a direct US military presence in these Colombian bases will make no difference. However, the growing voice of the military in foreign policy - especially of the US Southern Command vis-à-vis Latin America - has superseded any other regional consideration or objective.

The lack of an effective normalisation of US-Cuba relations has still more to do with US politics than Havana's policies. The Cuban-American, anti-Castro constituency is less vocal and significant than the ideological, cold-war-fixated conceptions of key legislators and policy-makers; the latter's dominance blocks any innovative way of addressing the potentially extensive and positive agenda between Washington and Havana.

The ambiguity - to say the least - of the US position towards the military coup d'état in Honduras in June 2009 cannot be explained in terms of the promotion of democratic values in the region or the containment of a (non-existent) communist threat. Its main rationale was domestic: to facilitate the confirmation of the assistant secretary of state, Arturo Valenzuela, whose nomination had been blocked by the Republican senator, Jim DeMint. The fact that Washington was, by default, instrumental in the first successful military coup in the Americas in the 21st century will be remembered for a long time in Latin America.

In a similar vein, the decision in January 2010 temporarily to halt airlifts of Haitian earthquake victims because of alleged disputes among states regarding where the injured should be taken is an example of the disproportionate weight of domestic politics, both at the national and state level.

The result of this erroneous over-primacy of internal over external politics is that the United States - and not just the Barack Obama administration - is losing leverage, confidence and credibility throughout Latin America. The worst possible scenario is that the inter-American system as a whole exhausts its basic legitimacy. The election in March 2010 of the next secretary-general of the Organisation of American States will become a test-case of that legitimacy.

Juan Tokatlián's previous article in Keghart.com
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