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Change We Can Believe In?

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Change We Can Believe In?

Abstract

We were warned to temper our high hopes for a bold new Obama era of human rights. After all, President Obama would have “a lot on his plate”: a serious economic crisis, high unemployment, over forty million people without health insurance, “two wars,” global volatility. But it’s very hard not to be dismayed by some of the continuities from the Bush to the Obama administration, as well as by some Janus-faced policy decisions with damning human rights implications. When it comes to US-Latin America relations, such decisions include: professing support for progressive immigration reform while expanding regressive anti-immigration measures; claiming a commitment to human rights and democratic engagement while facilitating increased military control over domestic affairs in the region; and voicing a desire for a multilateral approach to Latin American affairs while patently undermining such an approach.

Keywords

Human rights, Barack Obama, Policy, United Nations (UN)

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Change We Can Believe In?

by Katherine Hite

We were warned to temper our high hopes for a bold new Obama era of human rights. After all, President Obama would have “a lot on his plate”: a serious economic crisis, high unemployment, over forty million people without health insurance, “two wars,” global volatility. But it’s very hard not to be dismayed by some of the continuities from the Bush to the Obama administration, as well as by some Janus-faced policy decisions with damning human rights implications. When it comes to US-Latin America relations, such decisions include: professing support for progressive immigration reform while expanding regressive anti-immigration measures; claiming a commitment to human rights and democratic engagement while facilitating increased military control over domestic affairs in the region; and voicing a desire for a multilateral approach to Latin American affairs while patently undermining such an approach.

So many of us were euphoric about Obama’s victory. After several years of a presidency that not only broke international human rights law but seemed proud to do so, it certainly felt like we had nowhere to go but up. And indeed, within his first days in office, Obama announced the closing of the Guantánamo Bay detention center within a year; he ordered the CIA to close secret long-term detention facilities; and he re-criminalized the CIA’s use of extreme torture techniques. As Obama’s speech to the United Nations General Assembly reflects, the President’s discourse emphasizes global commonality, a new and respectful engagement, and both tacit and explicit recognition of US complicity with conflict and violence. In his speech, Obama announced that the US has joined the Human Rights Council. The fact that the US was not on the Council until now speaks volumes to the pathetic lows the US had reached.

Echoing this spirit of taking responsibility for the violence, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano, and President Obama himself all recognized during their visits to Mexico several months ago that US-originated gun-running, coupled with the ongoing high US demand for drugs, bring deadly consequences for Mexico. Yet the administration has continued the Bush administration approach of concentrating on drug supply and dedicating the vast majority of US-Mexico aid to the Mexican military, while a very small percentage targets judicial aid and other civilian protections efforts. The Merida Initiative to Combat Illicit Narcotics and Reduce Organized Crime exemplifies this approach. While the US congress threatened to withhold allocating a percentage of the Merida funding due to human rights concerns regarding the Mexican military, the Obama administration successfully allayed such concerns, claiming sufficient human rights progress was being made. This is in spite of the fact that while at least two thousand complaints of [human rights violations have been brought against the military](#) in the past three years, only one Mexican soldier has been convicted of human rights violations.

On the immigration and US-Mexico border front, there is similar cause for concern. As someone who is clearly quite familiar with racial profiling, Obama was expected to eliminate the controversial 287(g) program, which has allowed local law enforcement agencies the power to act as federal immigration agents. The most notorious abuser of this authority is Arizona sheriff [Joe Arpaio](#), who has targeted hundreds of Latinos and immigrants for arrest without suspicion of

crime. The subject of several ACLU lawsuits representing victims of racial profiling, Arpaio is now being investigated by the Justice Department and has theoretically been reigned in.

But Arpaio has become a right-wing populist folk hero and a leading GOP contender in the Arizona governor's race. Obama administration officials, particularly former Arizona governor-turned-Homeland Security Secretary Napolitano, have both expanded local police powers connected to profiling and publically refused to denounce Arpaio. This belies a claimed commitment to humane immigration reform. Such spin and double talk have made Obama all the more vulnerable to extreme anti-immigration leaders like Arpaio.

The Administration's stated commitment to human rights and a new multilateralism were severely undermined by the October 2009 military base agreement between the US and Colombia. This ten-year agreement allows increased access by the US military to seven of Colombia's military bases. The Obama administration chose to privilege a policy toward Colombia that emphasizes military aid and mercenary action over human rights and civilian governance. A commitment to a human rights agenda would have included protections for human rights defenders, judges, grassroots indigenous, Afro-Colombian rights movements, and others. [Colombia faces a human rights crisis](#) in which the country is second only to Sudan in terms of the numbers of internally displaced persons, and the situation for the rural poor is grave.

The US-Colombia base agreement angered much of the region, which took Obama at his word regarding favoring regional over bilateral security agreements. It has also signaled a carry-over from the Bush administration to cede greater [foreign policy decision-making to the Defense Department](#) at the expense of the State Department.

We can only hope that with the very recent appointment of Arturo Valenzuela as Assistant Secretary of State for the Western Hemisphere, this balance of power within the US executive will begin to shift. Yet in his first visible role regarding the region, Valenzuela has defended an Obama administration position that recognizes the outcome of the [November 30th elections in Honduras](#). This essentially legitimizes the military coup d'état of June 28th that unseated democratically-elected President Manuel Zelaya. What began as a US response condemning the coup and advocating a multi-lateral approach to resolving the situation became a lukewarm acceptance of the de facto regime, a position that has disappointed the vast majority of our allies in the region. In a country where historically the US has been the major power broker, it is virtually impossible to read the current US position toward Honduras as anything other than a sacrifice of democratic principles and the country's poor majority to favor the Honduran ruling class and their US political and corporate allies. Unfortunately, this resonates with collective memories of US-Latin America relations that are all too long and deep.

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