



OBAMA AND THE AMERICAS

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REUTERS / Cordon Press

Hugo Chávez gives Barack Obama a book as a present during the meeting in Puerto España

President Obama devoted the week of the Summit of the Americas to Latin America. His Administration announced the lifting of some measures which ease, without eliminating, the embargo set on Cuba. Both the President and the Secretary of State acknowledged the failure of the 50-year policy: there is no freedom in Cuba nor prosperity for the Cuban people. Obama visited Mexico, where he supported the efforts being made by the Government of president Calderón in the fight against the violence of drug-trafficking. And he ended the week participating in the Americas Summit in Trinidad and

Tobago where he, and not Hugo Chávez, became the real star of the meeting. Obama's kind attitude, coolness and gentleness have once again conquered everybody. Yet a global and consistent design of his foreign policy remains to be known. And again, as happened after his European tour, there could be doubts about the effectiveness of such intense diplomatic activity. As he said "the test for all of us is not only words, but also deeds". A very hard demand indeed in these times of international economic crisis and of serious challenges for freedom in Latin America.

The seed for the Summit of the Americas was sown in 1994 at the meeting held in Miami thanks to president Clinton's drive, with a clear political and economic model. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the democratising wave that pervaded the whole subcontinent in the '80s and '90s of the 20th century, authoritarian regimes ceased to exist in America, whether representing socialist (Nicaragua) or military dictatorships (Chile, Argentina). Liberal democracy was the general trend, with Cuba as the sole exception. The leaders meeting in Florida suggested the creation of a great area of political freedom and commercial integration to face the challenges of poverty and backwardness. There was not a real alternative for this great design, except for the sad, exotic and cornered case of Castro's dictatorship. That meeting sealed an agreement for development and prosperity, based on the preservation and the strengthening of "the community of democracies of the Americas".

The process, which started on a secure footing, continued. The 2nd Summit of the Americas held in Santiago de Chile in 1998, discussed the establishment of a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Respect for human rights and the eradication of poverty were a significant part of that meeting's agenda. In Québec, in April 2001, the American Presidents, with the determined momentum of the then recent



Bush Administration, discussed the drawing up of a Charter to reinforce the instruments available to the Organization of American States for the defence of democracy. In spite of Hugo Chávez's growing reluctance, the Inter-American Democratic Charter was approved in Lima by the Secretaries of Foreign Affairs precisely on September 11, 2001. When the terrorist fury demolished the Twin Towers and murdered thousands of people, the inter-American system reacted asserting the democratic principles of American nations.

The 4th Summit of the Americas, held in the Argentinean city of Mar del Plata (2005) was celebrated in a rather strained atmosphere and in a setting of growing division in the continent. The rhetoric of statements and speeches, focused on the creation of jobs and on

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the strengthening of democratic governance, was unable to hide the existence of deep differences regarding international strategic reality and the existence of two different political models for America. Populism had advanced in the region and had ceased to be a Venezuelan peculiarity.

Puerto España’s Summit of the Americas has been the first one having the presence of Obama. Before arriving to the island of Trinidad, Obama visited Mexico. There, United States’ support to the fight against drug-trafficking criminality started by president Calderón with great courage and resolution, was made public. But he did not support the reinstatement of the expired federal Assault Weapons Ban which prohibited the sale of certain weapons to civilians, especially in bordering States, demanded by Mexicans. The good news is that Obama seems to have forgotten the announcement he made during the elections of revising the environmental and labour provisions of the NAFTA, a decision which would encourage protectionist measures in the US.

Just about at the same time, Obama gestured to Cuba. The Government of the United States announced the lifting of restrictions on family travels and on the sending of remittances by Cuban-Americans to Cuba. Also included was United States authorisation for telecom



companies to operate in Cuba and the easing of restrictions on gifts and certain products that may now be exported. Obama has not demanded any compensation measure at all for easing the embargo on Cuba. There has been a significant exchange of declarations between the Obama Administration and Castrist authorities. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the President himself acknowledged the failure of a policy which has lasted fifty years: the people of Cuba are not free and economic prosperity is but a distant dream to them. Raúl Castro had no alternative but to react. “we’re ready...to discuss everything: human rights, freedom of the press, political prisoners, everything, everything, everything they want to discuss...but on equal terms”

he said. Obama's deeds confused him. From his elder brother he learnt that he needs the embargo to be able to cling to power. It seems now the instruction is "not an unpleasant word, not a good deed". Just in case, the elder Castro has rushed to write that Obama misinterpreted the words of his younger brother. As usual, an expectation worthy of a Hollywood star surrounded Obama's arrival at the meeting with his American colleagues. He did not disappoint them. A new tone and a new message from Washington were expected regarding his hemispheric policy.

The truth of the matter is that the reality of America now differs substantially from that of 1994 or even from that of 2001. Cuba is still a democratic disgrace. But that is not the only worrying reality. Populism has advanced unwaveringly since the beginning of the century, with the Bolivarian revolution of Venezuela at its core. In recent years, Chávez has efficiently exhibited his thirst for expansion and interference, fed by vast amounts of petrol resources managed with a total lack of control. Other nations have followed the path of Venezuela: Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, maybe Paraguay. The problem is not the arrival in power of the left, which has taken place with absolute normality in Chile or Brazil following the free decision of the electorate, expressed through democratic rules. The problem is that the populist leader begins as

soon as he is in power a process of democratic involution. The pattern is always the same: prior erosion of democratic institutions; once the elections are won, the process of constitutional revision begins, which distorts democratic institutions; the populist leader concentrates power in his figure and becomes the sole spokesperson of the population; the opposition and the areas of society which are "not sympathetic" begin to be harassed through all possible means; an aggressive rhetoric polarizes society; public resources are put at the service of an excluding political project...

There are several reasons that explain the advance of this worrying phenomenon. To the weakness of democratic institutions suffered by several countries, including political parties, severe corruption problems were added which undermined the foundations of the democratic system. But none of these reasons justify the retreat of freedoms that the countries in the hands of populists have experienced. In the global setting, 9/11 terrorist attacks and their strategic consequences deviated the attention of the United States from the region. Chávez saw the occasion to advance a project different from that of liberal democracy: 21st century socialism, on which he had been working on since the times of his military coup. The truth is that in recent years political freedom and economic integra-

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tion have diminished in the hemisphere.

In Venezuela, the “Bolivarian revolution” has ended with a clear deterioration of freedoms: freedom of press is systematically violated; political opposition is besieged; elections are celebrated without full guarantees; power harasses those factions of society that do not yield to their wishes. The model seems to be replicating in other countries of the region.

Ten years after Miami’s summit, the alternative to the “community of democracies in the Americas” that was envisaged at the time, was politically born. In 2004 Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez signed in La Habana the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). On April 29, 2006 Bolivia joined the agreement. Later came Dominica, San Vicente and the Grenadines, Honduras and Nicaragua. Ecuador and Paraguay which are not formally a part of ALBA, have participated in the ALBA summit called by Hugo Chávez in Cumaná, taking place before the Summit of the Americas of Puerto España. “We are preparing for this summit, getting our artillery ready” the Venezuelan leader graphically summarised.

That is the alternative to the project of liberal democracy, economic openness and commercial integration that was born in Miami in 1994. Obama is

aware that the major risk for the region is not Castro’s Cuba, but the Bolivarian revolution fostered by Hugo Chávez. He has had the political skill of avoiding direct confrontation and of giving an image of being open to dialogue and cooperation. But these deeds do not put an end to the danger that the Chavist project entails for the democracy and freedom of many countries of America. Neither has Obama shown the master lines of his foreign policy for the rest of America regarding the great challenges of the continent. In my opinion, these challenges are three: security; economy



and the fight against poverty; and democratic freedoms and the Rule of Law.

Security

Latin America is one of the most violent regions on Earth. Violence of all kinds causes unacceptable human damage and large economic losses in many countries throughout the region. In some cases, the insecurity is such that it puts the very stability of democratic institutions at risk.

In Mexico, drug mafias have generated an extremely fierce violence. President Calderon's Administration is confronting them with commendable determination and political courage. In Central America, organized bands or *maras* are one of the most worrying threats to stability. In Colombia, terrorism perpetrated by the FARC, ELN, or paramilitary groups placed democratic institutionalism in serious trouble. President Uribe's policy of democratic security has had remarkable success in just a few years. The support, refuge and financing that the FARC, a terrorist group according to the US and the EU, finds in some countries are absolutely unacceptable.

After ten years of Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela violence has increased dramatically. Between 1998 and 2005 homicides have increased by

128%; deaths in confrontation by 253%, and kidnaps by 426%¹. In 2004, according to the CICPC, there were 9,719 homicides. In Peru, the rekindling of Sendero Luminoso and its possible connections with drug lords is a recent and serious phenomenon. Insecurity and violence are top concerns for the citizens of Argentina and the big cities of Brazil.

But that is not all. On an international level, Chavez has established a strategy of collaboration and connections with extra-regional powers and with regimes that are not very recommendable. Venezuela has performed joint manoeuvres with Russia in the Caribbean. Its alliance with Iran is evident. Statements in support of terrorist groups such as Hezbollah or Hamas are more than disturbing. And the recent remark of Venezuela's leader about the FARC ("I am not an ally of the FARC, I am not a friend of the FARC – but you know that I am not their enemy.") denotes his ambiguous attitude, to put it lightly, towards terrorist groups whose goal is to tear down Colombian democracy.

Economy and the Fight against Poverty

Latin America has not yet incorporated itself fully as a region in the global economy and in the group of economi-

¹ Source: Cuerpo de Investigaciones Científicas Penales y Criminalísticas (CICPC), PROVEA; MSDS.

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cally developed countries. The populist wave in Latin America has been able to grow due to oil's high prices and to the enormous incomes it generated, administered with “revolutionary” criteria and with no control whatsoever by the Venezuelan leader. But populist economic policies lead to the same failure of real socialism that we suffered in Europe in the 20th century, or that everyday reality shows in Cuba.

Fortunately there are countries that have chosen a different path: the path of legal security, openness to the world, budget discipline, investment promotion. Results are visible, especially in poverty reduction. There is a Pacific vertex, from Mexico, through El Salvador, Panama, Colombia and Peru and ending in Chile, which has chosen free economy with considerable results. Brazil also belongs to this group. But the international crisis will have its effect in the whole region and we must prevent institutional stability from being

the first victim and countries that have made a significant effort towards openness and modernization from being penalized.

It is now more necessary than ever to avoid the error of protectionism.

Democratic Freedoms and the Rule of Law

Democracy is still the predominant case in Latin America. Nevertheless, democratic institutions need to be reinforced in almost all countries of the region. Cuba is still today a shameful and outdated exception. But unlike what happened in 1994, when the first Summit of the Americas took place in Miami, today there is a regional political project that aspires to substitute the democratic regimes based on democracy, freedom and respect for human rights. Turning a blind eye to this reality would have terrible consequences for Latin America and for the whole continent.

History shows that every time Latin America has been deprived of the political and diplomatic attention that it deserves by the great democratic nations of the world, freedom and prosperity have decreased in the region. Today, more than ever, cooperation has to be recovered among all nations which support the principles of freedom in order to be able to consolidate democracy at a hemispheric scale.



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Obama faces this difficult, complex and changing reality. His first decisions have raised great expectations. But it is necessary to specify objectives and to develop them in the shape of a foreign policy. He will not be able to please everybody. It will be necessary to choose between falling into the trap of protectionism or promoting free trade. Security and stability in American countries, threatened by terrorist groups or by organized crime, demand a strengthening of cooperation and the adoption of more effective measures. Transition to democracy in Cuba as an end cannot be waived even though there may be different opinions on the ways to accelerate it. It is just unacceptable that democracy, freedom, and the Rule of Law disappear from other Latin American Nations.

Obama's charm makes it hard for the enemies of freedom in America to criticize him. But let us not be deceived. There are people who want to destroy precisely that which has enabled Barack Obama to become a world reference and the President of the United States: democracy, the Rule of Law, freedom of press, the independence of justice, the overcoming of historical traumas with reconciliation, looking to the future. We are not living easy times. Problems are still there. Obama faces great responsibility. Those of us who wish Latin America to become a reference for democracy, freedom and economic progress hope that Obama applies the correct policies and that he is persistent and firm in their implementation.