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Obama and Latin America: a friendly imperialism?

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The following article seeks to dissipate false hopes in Obama meaning the end of US imperialist policies. This article can be seen as complementary to the one written by Wayne Price on Obama (www.anarkismo.net), but from a Latin American perspective.

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if Palestine, if the Middle East, are to wait for the answers to their deep problems to arrive from the White House, they will have to remain waiting for millenia to come, forever and ever...

With the official nomination of Obama as the Democrat candidate for the next US presidential elections, there are many who are rejoicing in the hope that this will bring an end to the imperialist and aggressive foreign policy of the US¹. A wise traditional saying states that it really does not matter what colour a cat is as long as it can catch mice. Turning their backs on popular wisdom, many on the Latin American left are full of expectations about Obama, who is almost certain to follow Bush as the White House leader.

What's the difference between a black Democrat and a white Republican?

“Oh, but he's a black candidate” we are told. As if the presence of one — 1! — black man in a racist institutional machinery was going to make any difference to immigrants and the residents of US ghettos. Obama has, by the way, already been forced to distance himself from his pastor Jeremiah Wright, who denounced institutional racism in the US and had to embrace fully the discredited rhetoric of the “land of opportunities”. Being a black man, with fresh roots in the African continent and thus an alien body in the traditional US spheres of power, Obama has on his shoulders a pressure none of his political rivals have in order to demonstrate that he is trustworthy for the Yankee plutocrats. So there he goes, adhering with greater fervour than anyone else to the values and project of the American Way. With the fanaticism of the religious convert, he proves his credo to his associates, in a way that those born into the faith do not need to.

There also those who believe that the colour of the skin, due to some curious intellectual and emotional effect of melanin, would make the potential US head of State more sensitive to

¹ A sample of optimism that is a single step away from delirium can be found at espanol.news.yahoo.com

the sufferings of the Third World and of its neo-colonies. But has Condoleezza Rice's presence in the government meant any change in the policy of the US towards the Middle East or Latin America? If anything, we could say without much hesitation than it's been for the worse. Did Colin Powell make a difference in Bush's government or stop the invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq or Plan Colombia?

"*Ah, but he is a Democrat*" we are now told. And do they forget that it was Kennedy, the Democrat, who pushed for the invasion of the Bay of Pigs (Cuba) and that it was he who, applying the theory of the Carrot and the Stick, carried the developmentalist bluff of the Alliance for Progress, while on the other hand he implemented the "National Security Doctrine" towards Latin America? Do they forget that it was Clinton who bombed Iraq (1998) and Somalia (1994)? Not to mention all of murderous blunders in the Balkans... Do they forget the criminal embargo that Clinton imposed on Iraq, which, according to UNICEF, cost the lives of at least 500,000 children? Do they forget it was Clinton who started with the rhetoric of the Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction?

Obama and the (Old) New World Order

Obama certainly is a critic of the Iraqi invasion, but he is not for an end to the occupation, only for the reduction of military personnel, which will remain necessary to guarantee the loyalty of the Iraqi regime, to train the Iraqi army and to "fight the threat of Al-Qaeda"². His main criticisms of the Iraqi war are of form, not of substance; they are not about the human cost on the Iraqi people, and certainly he is not to question the ravenous logic of the oil interests behind the occupation, but only criticizes its excessive costs on the US budget. It seems

² www.barackobama.com
www.ontheissues.org

Every worn-out project needs to refresh its image, to display some renewal on its facade in order to conceal its exhaustion. This wearing out of the "American Way" made it possible for something unthinkable to happen... a black candidate! The perfect chief for this crisis, a cosmetic change for the substance of the domination system to remain untouched: imperialism has never been an issue of melanin.

The imperial politics of the US are not up to each US president to decide: it is a well ingrained element in the Yankee State apparatus, in the social forces which shape the life of that nation, and the single force that can alter this order of things is the grassroots, bottom-up, struggle of the people. For let us remember something that we Latin Americans frequently forget: in the US there are also people. There is also a working class. Change depends on them. A US president, at most, can decide what version of imperialism he wants to apply, be it a Neanderthal version of imperialism, or a "forced consensus" version.

Let us hold no false illusions. Imperialism cannot be reformed, neither will it be defeated in the ballot box. It will be defeated in the streets, in the workplaces, in the schools and universities, through the struggle we lead in the countryside and in the urban centres, the struggle we take to every corner of this world. Difficult as this struggle may seem, is the only realistic option left.

Let me repeat: in the US, there are also people. But just as the Salazar dictatorship in Portugal needed that push from the African anti-colonial struggles (Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau) to fall, and needed that stimulus for the blossoming of the Carnation Revolution to happen, US imperialism and its global dictatorship will fall with that little push of our anti-colonial struggles in the Middle East and Latin America. But that struggle belongs to the people themselves, to the working class, and it will have no other unconditional allies but their own solidarity: if *Ayiti* (Haiti), if Colombia, if all of America,

Ecuador, which are drifting away from the Washington Consensus, constitute the new “Axis of Evil”.

Obama describes Venezuela as an authoritarian regime, with a wallet-led diplomacy and full of Anti-American jargon that reproduces the “false promises” of those “failed ideologies of the past”⁷. But what is it that Obama has to offer instead? Unconditional support for authoritarian regimes such as that of Uribe⁸, dollar-led diplomacy – plus more economic intervention, microcredit offers, and some other filthy handouts to increase our dependency – and hollow promises from failed ideologies such as the Washington Consensus. All of his platitudes are, indeed, stained with the old-fashioned National Security Doctrine. And in an attempt to recycle failed intervention programmes, he even literally calls for a New Alliance for the Americas⁹, suspiciously similar to the discredited fiasco called Alliance for Progress that Kennedy promoted in the ‘60s.

Obama go home!

It is only natural for Obama to increase the virulence of the imperialist politics towards Latin America; after all, he knows that he will be in command of a sinking ship, of an empire stuck in a swamp of political, economic and military troubles. The depth of the US crisis is not, this time, a result of the hallucinating desires of a bunch of utopian leftists – tycoons such as Soros or economists such as Stiglitz are turning into the main prophets of the new crisis. And every single empire in crisis has to resort to higher levels of violence, in a similar fashion to a drowning man who tries to remain afloat by blindly slapping the water’s surface. In the same way, Obama is already threatening Venezuela and Iran.

⁷ espanol.news.yahoo.com

⁸ Ver www.anarkismo.net and also www.anarkismo.net

⁹ espanol.news.yahoo.com

that, when it comes to Iraq, differences between Democrats and Republicans are more of a quantitative than of a qualitative nature. It seems that we can have a Yankee praetorian guard perpetually in the Middle East...

On the Palestinian question, Obama has been more than clear: in March, he criticized that “*view that sees the conflicts in the Middle East as rooted primarily in the actions of stalwart allies like Israel, instead of emanating from the perverse and hateful ideologies of radical Islam*”³ Can anyone point out to me what the difference is between this view of the Middle East and that of the Pentagon’s hawks? Just like Bush, he fails to “see” the link that the Palestinian conflict has with “minor details” such as the Palestinian occupation, Israeli State terrorism (a State founded on forced displacement and violent land expropriation of Palestinians, it has to be said), the institutional racism in Israel, similar in many aspects to the South African apartheid and worse in some respects, or the strangling of Gaza. If he sees these factors, he quite convincingly plays the fool...

But what about his positions towards Latin America? He has made clear what his programme towards Latin America will be, starting with a criticism of Bush’s politics towards the region. “*We’ve been diverted from Latin America. We contribute our entire foreign aid to Latin America is \$2.7 billion, approximately what we spend in Iraq in a week. It is no surprise, then, that you’ve seen people like Hugo Chavez and countries like China move into the void, because we’ve been neglectful of that*”⁴

³ electronicintifada.net

⁴ www.ontheissues.org

A New Alliance for Progress? Do we need it? Do we want it?

What is Obama offering to us Latin Americans? Something maybe worse than Bush has already given us: more intervention, more domination, more interference in our own affairs, more death. The lesser-evil politics turn into a cruel paradox with the imperial grandeur that Obama adopts when talking of his “backyard”. Now that the US is being displaced from Latin American markets by China and the EU⁵, who are making a triumphal entrance with their own Free Trade Agreements, as well as by the new emerging regional power of Brazil (not to mention the shivers that the regional unity projects led by Venezuela cause in Washington, as they also represent a further threat to its hegemony), Obama states openly that he is about to turn our land into a battlefield for the US to recover its lost ground. Competition for our markets is out there, and no matter which global power is to win, we know who will be the certain loser: our people.

And not to leave the slightest shadow of doubt about his imperial pretensions over our America, on May 23rd at a meeting with the Cuban American Foundation, the FNCA (in Miami, where else?), he set out his complete programme towards Latin America⁶:

1. Direct diplomacy with Cuba, but maintaining the embargo;
2. He stated his intentions to isolate Venezuela and its allies in the region, with the argument that they are FARC-EP supporters;

⁵ www.anarkismo.net

⁶ espanol.news.yahoo.com
espanol.news.yahoo.com
espanol.news.yahoo.com

3. The FARC-EP gets exactly the same role as Al-Qaeda in the Middle East: the perfect excuse to justify any intervention in the region. In fact, he goes as far as to declare that he will not tolerate members of that organisation looking for sanctuary beyond Colombian borders nor any local regimes giving them any support, in a clear follow-up to the media harassment of Ecuador and Venezuela;
4. Absolute support for Plan Colombia and for the fascist regime of Uribe in Colombia – he, however, remains opposed to the Free Trade Agreement with that country, so as not to contradict his own supporters in the US who remain staunchly opposed to any more trade liberalisation with that country. Let’s see if he remains opposed after the elections;
5. To increase the budget for the Merida Plan, which under the excuse of the “War on Drugs” (local variant of the War on Terror), is nothing but the latest mechanism of social control over Latin America. He went further to declare that he was going to expand its current area of operations in Mexico and Central America southwards ... maybe he will expand it to the Andean axis which runs from Venezuela down to Bolivia?

So, there’s not much of a novelty in this. Unless it is the deepening of an aggressive intervention policy, which is a US tradition in our region, and the continuity of a dated paternalism, though in more of a blatant form.

His view of Latin America is not very different to that of Bush in relation to the Middle East, save for the fact that the villains of the story are adapted to local circumstances: the FARC-EP replaces Al-Qaeda, War on Drugs replaces War on Terror, Chávez replaces Saddam Hussein and Venezuela replaces Iran. The independent regional projects of Venezuela, Bolivia and