

Lingering Illusions About the U.S. Democracy's Competitive Two-Party System

By Arnold August, April 2012

In response to Washington's opposition to Cuba's participation in the April 2012 Summit of the Americas in Cartagena, Colombia, a special meeting of ALBA was held in February 2012. It supported the "full participation" of Cuba in this summit.¹ However, the Obama administration maintained its position of exclusion.

Ecuador's President Correa decided to boycott the summit to protest Cuba's exclusion. In order to avoid further similar participation cancellations, Colombia's President Santos, as the summit's host, reached a compromise solution due to diplomatic efforts. It consisted of declaring that Cuba's attendance at future summits would be discussed at the summit. The debate would centre on ensuring that the 2012 summit would be the last one without Cuba in attendance. However, the next summit will be held in 2015. There was a lingering dose of illusions regarding the U.S. two-party system and its capacity to bring about real change. It was reported that, given that the next summit is in three years, if re-elected, Obama "will not need to court the Cuban-American votes of Florida any more, the thinking goes."² The summit took place in April 2012 without Cuba's participation. All of the countries, including the ALBA members, attended except for the explicit boycott by President Correa of Ecuador and the implicit rejection by President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua through his absence. The summit ended without a final common declaration, even though such documents are the custom at these meetings. One obstacle to reaching a consensus was the difference over Cuba's participation: the U.S. and the Canadian Conservative government under Harper stood together against all of the other countries.³ The following were very positive: first, that there was an incapacity to reach a common agreement; and second, that Cuba be invited to attend the next one in 2015 won out, thanks to the insistence by all members, aside from the U.S. and Canada.

However, it would be an exaggeration to consider this a major victory for Latin America and the Caribbean. Obama used the summit period as a platform to *increase* disinformation against Cuba. For example, he characterized Cuba on Spanish-language, Colombian-based television, as a "profoundly anti-democratic, authoritarian state," adding that Venezuela under Chávez is "undermining ... democratic institutions."⁴ In the opening plenary session of the summit, Obama alluded to Cuba having "a right to democracy." He provided the example of Honduras to demonstrate

how the U.S. defends democracy. He said that, in this country (Honduras), “[The U.S.] laid the foundation for the return of the rule of law.”⁵ In another statement at the summit, Obama felt confident enough to ridicule what he called countries being caught in a “time warp,” for example, those that use terms such as “Yanquis.”⁶ In a joint press conference held with Colombian President Santos, the host praised Obama as being responsible for the success of the summit. In response to a reporter’s question regarding the continued exclusion of Cuba, Obama said that Cuba “has not yet moved to democracy, has not yet observed basic human rights.”⁷ After the summit, the Obama administration even escalated its opposition not only to Cuba, but also to other ALBA members. A State Department official evaluated the Colombian summit as a success. The representative also pledged that the U.S. would continue to support “democracy programming, including in challenging environments like Nicaragua, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Cuba.”⁸ Soon after, the same official, in a summary of the summit, reiterated the U.S. policy toward Cuba in assisting the island to achieve a “democratically chosen government.”⁹

Before and during the summit, the countries of the South pledged that there would be no other summit unless Cuba is included. However, the next summit is to take place only in 2015. How many more coups d’état of one form or another, how many more instances of subversion and installation of military bases can the U.S. carry out in the region between 2012 and 2015? For example, in June 2012 in Paraguay, two months after the Cartagena summit, another (parliamentarian) coup took place against President Lugo by pro-American elements. What was the reaction of the Obama administration? Darla Jordan, a spokeswoman for the State Department, said in an e-mailed statement, “We urge all Paraguayans to act peacefully, with calm and responsibility, in the spirit of Paraguay’s democratic principles.”¹⁰ This is similar to Obama’s reaction to the 2009 Honduras coup, as detailed in Chapter 2 of my book. Aside from some isolated statements against the coup, Washington focused on putting both sides on the same footing while the right-wing forces held political and military power. Washington did so until elections were organized in Honduras to provide “legitimacy” to the coup perpetrators. This strategy necessarily included making sure that the ousted Zelaya did not return to Honduras as the legitimate president. The Paraguay coup, like the coup in Honduras, was a setback for development and sovereignty.¹¹

Thus the actual holding of the April 2012 summit served in part as a justification for the ongoing, arrogant U.S. presence in the region, including against Cuba. Can one thus conclude that Correa was right in boycotting the summit, a gesture that other countries,

especially ALBA members, should have followed? I believe that he held the most principled position. On the other hand, if a wider boycott had provoked division in the ranks of the ALBA and CELAC countries, this would not have aided the cause of integration, nor of Cuba's rightful place in the region.

Thus the situation is a complicated one for ALBA and CELAC. They both represent major advances in terms of self-defining democracy and upholding sovereignty. Both of these objectives are carried out in the face of the old colonial notions of ingrained superiority as represented by the U.S. and the Canadian Conservative government under Harper. However, there is always a danger of the U.S. succeeding in fostering division and attracting certain countries to U.S. democracy promotion programs. The goal in so doing is to increase the pressures against Cuba. Latin America and the Caribbean are no longer the backyard of the U.S. The situation has changed dramatically. However, the U.S. is still at their gates. Only once the OAS has been dismantled, while ALBA and CELAC move forward, will the right of each country, such as Cuba, to peacefully carry out its democratization process advance in a relatively peaceful environment.

¹ *Granma*. 2012. "Special Declaration From the ALBA-TCP Political Council: On Cuba's Participation in the 6th Summit of the Americas and in Rejection of the Blockade." (February 26) Year 47, No. 9.

² Wallace, Arturo. 2012. "Summit Set to Highlight Changing US-Latin America Ties." BBC News (April 13). At <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17681367>>.

³ BBC. 2012. "Summit of the Americas Ends Without Final Declaration." BBC News (April 15). At <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-latin-america-17723555>>.

⁴ Lothian, Dan. 2012. "Blasts, Secret Service Incident Overshadow Start of Colombia Summit." CNN Politics (April 14). At <http://articles.cnn.com/2012-04-14/politics/politics_summit-of-the-americas_1_secret-service-edwin-donovan-colombia-summit/2?_s=PM:POLITICS>.

⁵ Obama, Barack. 2012a. "Remarks of President Barack Obama — As Prepared for Delivery — Summit of the Americas Opening Plenary." White House (April 14). At <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/14/remarks-president-barack-obama-prepared-delivery-summit-americas-opening>>.

⁶ Obama. 2012b. "Remarks by President Obama at CEO Summit of the Americas." White House (April 14). At <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/14/remarks-president-obama-ceo-summit-americas>>.

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- ⁷ Obama. 2012c. “Remarks by President Obama and President Santos of Colombia in Joint Press Conference.” White House (April 15). At <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/04/15/remarks-president-obama-and-president-santos-colombia-joint-press-confer>>.
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- ⁹ Jacobson. 2012b. “U.S. Policy Toward the Americas: The Summit and Beyond.” U.S. Department of State (May 11). At <<http://www.state.gov/p/wha/rls/rm/2012/189962.htm>>.
- ¹⁰ Quigley, John. 2012. “Paraguay Swears in Franco After President Lugo Impeached.” Business Week (June 23). At <<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2012-06-22/president-lugo-facing-impeachment-vote-over-deadly-land-seizure>>.
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