

Forbes

With Edward Snowden, The Ecuadorian Pot Calls The American Kettle Black

By: Doug Bandow - July 8, 2013

For a time this major port, and largest city in the small South American country of Ecuador, was thought the likely destination of Edward Snowden. However, Ecuador, whose London embassy hosts asylum-seeker Julian Assange of WikiLeaks fame, appears to have cooled on the now infamous American leaker.

Long seen as a Chavez-style left-wing firebrand, President Rafael Correa originally praised Snowden for his exposure of National Security Agency spying and Ecuadorian diplomats provided Snowden with travel papers from Hong Kong. However, President Correa quickly back-tracked.

When questioned later, he emphasized that “we also believe in human rights and due process,” but he indicated that an asylum request would be considered only after Snowden reached Ecuadorian territory or an embassy, and after consultation with Washington. Moreover, Correa complained that the issuance of travel documents had not been authorized. He added: “I am very respectful of other countries and their laws and I believe that someone who breaks the law must assume his responsibilities.”

Why did Correa flip-flop? He cited a “friendly and very cordial” phone call from Vice President Joseph Biden—not something normally viewed as of great value by foreign nations—in which the latter “communicated a very courteous request from the United States that we reject the request.” Correa may have been more worried about Ecuadorian access to the U.S. market, the destination of more than half of his people’s exports.

Only days before his government unilaterally repudiated Ecuadorian commercial preferences under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act. Quito explained its action was necessary to avoid giving the U.S. leverage over Ecuador, after Sen. Robert Menendez (D-NJ) threatened to block congressional renewal of the pact if the Correa government granted Snowden asylum. However, the law had appeared moribund even before the controversy. Ecuadorian exports also are eligible for lower tariffs under the Generalized System of Preferences. This issue is very much alive, and the Obama administration’s decision is expected soon.

Now Snowden seems unlikely to end up in Ecuador. That will allow bilateral relations to get back to normal. Of course, the new normal may be tense. Quito is not likely to soon forget congressional threats to retaliate. Two years ago Ecuador expelled the U.S. ambassador after WikiLeaks detailed her criticism of police corruption.

In turn, American officials will remember that Correa was a strong ally of Venezuela's late President Hugo Chavez. Indeed, when Correa celebrated his reelection in February, he said: "I take this opportunity to dedicate this victory to a great Latin American leader who changed Venezuela, Commander Hugo Chavez."

Still, relations with Ecuador don't much matter to America. Quito has been critical of Washington of late, but that is common in the region. Some observers believe Correa may take over Chavez's anti-American mantle, but the latter was more bark than bite and never did the U.S. much harm. Correa is a poor imitation of the Venezuelan showman and his international appeal has yet to be seriously tested.

The Correa government has reduced cooperation with the U.S. "drug war," but that is a counterproductive strategy which has done more harm than good, especially to citizens of other nations, such as Ecuador. Many Latin American nations—including U.S. neighbor Mexico—have tired of wrecking their societies to satisfy Washington's failed policy of prohibition.

President Correa is primarily a problem for his own people, a dangerous populist who, in the words of the Hudson Institute's Jaime Daremblum, "relies on class warfare, thuggery, and demonization." Serving his third term, Correa used his political ascendancy to rewrite the constitution, increase his authority, and take control of the judiciary.

The group Freedom House cited his use of "questionable maneuvers to remove opposition legislators and members of the Constitutional Court." Correa deployed the law and judiciary against members of the opposition. For instance, he brought an anti-defamation suit against a member of the National Assembly, labor union leader, and political activist. The verdict, delivered in April, imposed fines and prison terms.

Moreover, according to Human Rights Watch "prosecutors have repeatedly applied a 'terrorism and sabotage' provision of the criminal code against participants engaged in public protests against environmental and other issues." Public security forces have been accused of making arbitrary arrests and using excessive force. The government has threatened to rescind the legal authorization for human rights NGOs it believes to have acted improperly.

Correa also uses his control of the government and the courts to discourage media criticism. Observed my Cato Institute colleagues Juan Carlos Hidalgo and Gabriela Calderon de Burgos: "In truth, Ecuador is one of the least friendly countries in Latin America in terms of freedom of the press." Just last month the National Assembly approved a new "gag law" which, warned the Inter American Press Association, "sets administrative and financial sanctions and establishes a requirement that journalists have a university degree, among other rules." The measure runs 119 articles with 23 temporary regulations and creates a Communication Regulation and Development Council, Office of Superintendent of Information and Communication, and Citizen Participation, and Social Control Council to enforce its provisions.

The government closed a score of independent radio and television stations last year, which earned criticism from Reporters Without Borders. Private broadcasters are required to carry Correa's remarks. The Ecuadoran president also has used lawsuits to punish his critics. For example, after being accused of misbehavior in a controversial military rescue operation that left

several people dead, he filed a defamation suit which imposed a \$40 million judgment and jail terms on the journalist and newspaper's owners. Observed Freedom House: "International human rights and press freedom organizations, the Organization of American States (OAS), and the United Nations denounced the court decision as a clear effort to intimidate the press."

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Such reports on Correa’s activities were dismissed as “gross exaggerations” by Mark Weisbrot of the Center for Economic and Policy Research. Yet venerable champions of human rights such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also have pointed to the serious threat to freedom of expression. Earlier this year the latter warned: “President Rafael Correa has undercut freedom of the press in Ecuador by subjecting journalists and media figures to public denunciation and retaliatory litigation.”

His attacks on the press dramatically contradict his high profile support for foreign leakers. However, wrote Hidalgo and de Burgos: “another, less reported story is Correa’s war against leakers in his own government. Since he came to power in 2007 there have been four well-documented case where the Ecuadorean government either prosecuted or arrested people who leaked information to the media, revealing instances of corruption in Correa’s government.” Moreover, the Ecuadorean president has barred his own officials from giving interviews to the private media.

Although the system remains formally democratic, Freedom House only rates Ecuador as “partly free.” Alberto Acosta, who co-founded the Alianza Pais party with Correa before switching to the opposition, opined of Correa: “He controls everything. He is a sort of Sun King of the 21st Century.”

While in Ecuador I talked with people who are more classically liberal, favoring limited government, competitive markets, and free expression. Although they oppose the crony right as much as the populist left, there was a shared feeling of intimidation. Years ago, when a free market university let Correa go after he chose politics over the classroom, he sent government regulators to the school. Many who write about the president today say they temper their criticism, lest they face a ruinous lawsuit. And liberty activists fear creeping dictatorship: possessing the vote but not the other aspects of a vibrant democracy.

Ecuadorian President Correa has turned sanctimony into an art form. He is not the first politician to back away from a stand on principle to protect his nation’s practical interests. But his domestic practices demonstrate that he isn’t even a man of principle. He obviously believes press freedom and government transparency are for other nations, not his own. Never mind his carefully cultivated international image: Rafael Correa’s overriding concern is power, not liberty.