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### Obama losing favor in Latin America

#### Honduran, Colombian issues strain relations

By Paul Richter

Tribune Newspapers

January 3, 2010

WASHINGTON

-- Just nine months ago, President Barack Obama was calling Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva "my man" and suggesting that the South American nation could become a leading U.S. partner in the region.

Since then, Brazil has criticized the U.S. approach to the coup in Honduras and warned the United States over plans to expand its military presence in Colombia. U.S. officials have complained about Silva's increasing efforts to form economic and political ties with a leading American adversary, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The U.S.-Brazilian differences underscore how the Obama administration's relationship with Latin America has evolved into one of tensions and suspicions. Although polls indicate Obama remains highly popular with ordinary Latin Americans, his administration's relationship with their governments has been tested.

Latin American leaders who had hoped to move up on the U.S. priority list have discovered that the new president has most of his attention focused elsewhere.

"The administration created expectations (that) were enormous, but sooner or later reality was going to catch up," said Juan Carlos Hidalgo of the Cato Institute in Washington. "That's what happened."

It was always likely that the Obama administration would come into conflict with Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and the allied left-leaning governments of Cuba, Bolivia and Ecuador. After some early praise, Chavez has become critical of Obama, declaring recently, in a message carried by state media, "the Obama illusion is over."

Many governments have been unhappy with U.S. efforts to negotiate the return of a legitimate government in Honduras in the aftermath of the June coup that toppled President Manuel Zelaya.

Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela and others have refused, despite Washington's urging, to bless the Nov. 30 elections won by wealthy rancher Porfirio Lobo, who has the support of the coup leaders. The governments



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contend that blessing this outcome could prevent the return to power of Zelaya and could encourage coups in other countries.

A senior administration official, who asked to remain anonymous because of the sensitivity of the subject, said "there is more consensus on the future of Honduras than it appears."

Controversy erupted, too, when it was leaked that the U.S. had reached an agreement with Colombia that would give U.S. military personnel greater access to Colombian bases for anti-drug and counterinsurgency work. Although the 10-year deal, signed Oct. 31, won't increase the number of U.S. personnel in Colombia, it raised fears even among U.S. allies Chile and Brazil that U.S. military presence might spill over Colombia's borders.

In addition, the administration eased its opposition to Cuba's entry into the Organization of American States, and it made a gesture toward normalizing relations by reducing restrictions on Cuban-Americans' travel to the island.

However, "the general reaction was that it was too little," said Hidalgo. "They want a total lifting."

Another area of tension is the fight against illegal drugs. Although U.S.-Mexican cooperation is broad, other Central American and Caribbean countries complain that they receive less help than they need, said Daniel Erikson of the Inter-American Dialogue, a think tank that specializes in Latin American issues.

Peter DeShazo, a former State Department official now at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that while Obama has changed the tone of U.S.-Latin relations, many of the core U.S. goals will be unchanged -- increasing security cooperation, trying to reform governments, fighting poverty and developing economies.

"There will be greater continuity than a lot of people expected," he said. "Those who expected a sea change were misleading themselves."

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