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Obama's visit to the land of Romero leaves behind questions

Dean Brackley | Mar. 24, 2011

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U.S. President Barack Obama walks past a portrait of Archbishop Oscar Romero as he tours the Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador March 22. (CNS photo/Kevin Lamarque, Reuters)

VIEWPOINT

SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador -- President Obama and his family spent a packed overnight March 22-23 here and took the place by storm. Reactions in this polarized society couldn't help but be mixed, but many were positive.

Obama surprised and pleased most people by his historic visit to the tomb of Archbishop Romero, the 31st anniversary of whose martyrdom we celebrate today.

Obama arrived under two clouds.

His administration had been decisively instrumental in allowing an illegal coup to stand in Honduras a year-and-a-half ago and for the elections organized by the coup-masters to go unchallenged. And, of course, he arrived as U.S. cruise missiles were raining down on one more Arab country. While Salvadorans know tyranny of the Gaddafi stripe, they are also very sensitive to war.

Many probably sensed that Obama, like Salvadoran President Mauricio Funes, has mounted a horse he cannot fully control. He said as much when asked about helping "legalize" undocumented Salvadoran immigrants in the United States: The U.S. Congress is tying his hands. (Few drew attention to the 50-odd immigrants that the U.S. has been deporting by air to El Salvador each day for the last three years.)

The most dramatic moment of Obama?s stay was his visit to Romero?s tomb in the cathedal crypt. He listened to the current archbishop, José Luis Escobar, in silence, then closed his eyes, ostensibly in prayer. Before leaving the cathedral, the protestant president lit a candle at the rack near Romero?s tomb.

The press, dominated by the right, spilled barrels of ink about Romero, about his life and ministry. (The main media had air-brushed Romero from Salvadoran history until 1999 when the Anglican Church mounted his statue, along with seven other martyrs, on the façade of Westminster Abbey.)

Now there was the scramble to insist that the memory of this great spiritual leader be "de-politicized." One columnist felt the need to point out how he had denounced the Jesuits in 1973 (four years before becoming archbishop) for spreading "red" literature. Nowhere, among all the bloviation, was it breathed who had actually killed Romero: the founder of the main right-wing party which governed from 1989 to 2009.

Obama?s visit says something about Romero, increasingly a man for all seasons and for all peoples. Jesus said,

"If I am lifted up, I will draw all to myself." In Romero we see what that means.

His courageous defense of the poor, in the name of the gospel and unto death, is drawing everyone to him. The beauty of his life, his preaching and his self-gift, seduces. This is the way forward for all of us, especially, of course, for the Church.

Obama?s visit also says something about the president. Surely, it burnishes his image, but give him credit. Even as he exercises U.S. power, with its militarism and imperial sway, he detours to acknowledge a champion of the poor and a martyr for the truth.

I imagine the president saying to himself, "Even if I?m not quite there, I want to acknowledge this greatness." Last year, recalling Romero, the U.N. General Assembly declared the anniversary of his death, March 24, the International Day of the Right to the Truth, especially for victims of human rights abuses.

The Obama Administration recognizes that it can collaborate with the Funes Administration, unlike more corrupt counterparts in neighboring countries, in the fight against narco-trafficking and the street crime and endemic poverty killing thousands and fueling massive emigration.

There is a convergence of interests between the U.S. government, on one hand, and, on the other, the FMLN, the party of the former guerrillas who brought Funes to power in an alliance with business groups fed up with the corruption of right-wing parties with personnel on the take with the cartels.

On this visit Obama announced funding of $200 million for combating crime in the region. Guns and crime control open government spigots. But in June there will be more credit ready to flow for local development.

This will go mostly to the usual subjects for the usual kinds of projects, that is, to the construction companies (of course, through the banks) for expanding the airport, for a port, for highway and other infrastructure development.

Apparently a smaller component will go to re-activating agriculture and to medium and small enterprises. It?s not how you and I would do it, but that is how politics works, both here and there.

This credit will steeply increase the already inflated Salvadoran national debt, making us still more dependent on the U.S. Whatever the intention, this Obama-hug will hold us close.

If a future FMLN government wishes to turn south and ally more closely with the social-democratic left in South America, if it wishes to trade broadly with China, it will have to think twice. Re-negotiating these big debts will come with thick strings attached.

Rumors are even floating that the government of Afghanistan may invite El Salvador to send troops there. San Romero, pray for us.

I confess: I was hoping, unrealistically, that before Romero?s tomb Obama would silently ask pardon for all that U.S. governments have done this past century to sustain privileged oligarchies and their militaries in Central America.

Shortly before his death, Archbishop Romero wrote to President Jimmy Carter begging him in no uncertain terms not to send military aid to the Salvadoran government that was murdering hundreds of civilians each month.

I am left wondering, What kind of letter would Romero write to President Obama today?

[Jesuit Fr. Dean Brackley has been at the University of Central America in San Salvador since 1990, when he volunteered with others to help replace members of the faculty killed during the Salvadoran civil war.]

For more coverage of Obama's trip to Romero's grave, see:

- Obama at Romero's grave: 'Missed opportunity' [1]
- Obama's visit to the land of Romero leaves behind questions [2]
- What would Oscar Romero say to Barack Obama? [3]

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