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What Obama Should Know About Macri's Argentina

By GASTÓN CHILLIER and ERNESTO SEMÁN MARCH 23, 2016

During his trip to Argentina this week, President Obama is unlikely to visit Milagro Sala. A prominent social activist in the northwestern province of Jujuy, Ms. Sala was arrested in January at the behest of Gov. Gerardo Morales, a political ally of the country's new president, Mauricio Macri.

There has been international outrage over her detention; Pope Francis, the United Nations and Amnesty International have expressed concern. Not the White House: When announcing Mr. Obama's visit, it thanked Mr. Macri for "his contributions to the defense of human rights in the region."

Mr. Obama's historic trip to Cuba has all the pageantry of a farewell to the Cold War in Latin America. His visit to Havana will serve as a symbolic climax in the normalization of American relations with Cuba's Communist government. But his excursion to Argentina has a very different resonance.

Shortly before Mr. Obama's arrival in Buenos Aires, his administration announced the declassification of United States government documents relating to Argentina's 1976-83 military dictatorship. Yet the visit is not about the current state of human rights, but about free trade and hemispheric security.

An acknowledgment of the malign role the United States played in the early years of the dictatorship is welcome, if overdue. But to ignore the red flags on human rights raised by the recent actions of Argentina's new ruling party is a worrying reminder of that legacy. For Mr. Macri, Mr. Obama's visit is already an endorsement.

The arrest of Ms. Sala illustrates the Argentine government's new hard-line approach. Her organization played an important role in providing for socially excluded groups offering them housing, jobs and education. Ms. Sala was detained for leading a protest of cooperative workers, the unemployed and indigenous people in one of the country's poorest provinces. Later, she was accused of embezzling public funds. That judicial investigation must run its course, but due process demands that she should not be imprisoned in the meantime.

This arbitrary detention comes amid a rash of measures taken by the Macri administration that have weakened the rule of law on the pretext of security, economic freedom and the war on drugs. In January, within weeks of taking office, Mr. Macri declared an emergency that allowed military forces to shoot down unidentified planes suspected of drug trafficking.

In effect, the president had decreed a de facto death penalty without trial. This policy has been criticized

as an example of the “narcotización” of public safety. It is counter to the core principles of Argentina’s post-dictatorship reforms that prohibit military intervention in domestic security.

Soon after Mr. Macri’s inauguration, the highest court in the capital, Buenos Aires, ruled that police officers could demand identification from citizens there without probable cause, a ruling that gives a green light to harassment based on prejudice. In an equally troubling move, the federal government recently unveiled a new protocol for policing protests that gives the authorities more power to put down and criminalize demonstrations; this in a country where people value the right of free assembly and often take to the streets to fight for their rights.

Argentina’s economic and political meltdown in 2001 conclusively demonstrated that the free market approach of the 1990s had not made life better for ordinary people. Yet, Mr. Macri and his team are reviving failed policies of the past. With commodity prices in decline, they want to attract foreign investment by cutting their way to competitiveness: reducing public spending and shrinking government.

At the same time, the administration has lifted controls on currency exchange, boosting inflation. Some analysts predict that it will exceed the official target for 2016 of 20 to 25 percent.

Despite campaign vows to strengthen democratic institutions, President Macri is governing in the other direction. In December, he tried to appoint two new Supreme Court justices by fiat, bypassing Senate approval. Facing an outcry, the president backpedaled and sent the nominations to the Senate.

In another highhanded move, Mr. Macri used executive orders to alter a cornerstone of media law that, while poorly enforced by the previous administration, had amplified freedom of expression by bolstering anti-monopoly regulations. Such a presidential intervention would be appalling in any circumstances, but in the context of Argentina’s political polarization and other repressive measures is cause for alarm.

The risk of militarizing public order, the weakening of institutional restraints on executive power, the criminalization of protest and a fixation on promoting free-market orthodoxies — none of this has good echoes in Latin America. The United States supported many of the region’s dictators in the 1970s and ’80s so that they would serve as local guarantors of free trade and security against Communism.

Only after the inauguration in 1977 of President Jimmy Carter did the United States try to curb the continent’s repressive forces. Important as this was, it could not compensate for the decades when the United States, while claiming to defend democracy, had aided Latin America’s dictators.

Mr. Obama surely wants to put that past behind him. But during his administration, the United States has encouraged the destabilization of democracy in Honduras and Haiti, presumably in hopes that more favorable commercial partners or allies in the war on drugs would take over.

The United States’ decision to declassify more documents relating to Argentina’s dictatorship is an important step that could enable further judicial investigations of crimes against humanity. But Mr. Obama should not now endorse state violence and ideological bigotry as acceptable side effects of the United States’ larger goals of promoting free markets and security cooperation.

A presidential visit to Argentina that neglects to notice how Mr. Macri’s government is undermining

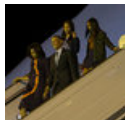
human rights and democratic institutions — and instead pours empty praise on his policies — will rightly be read as a return to the bad old days.

Gastón Chillier is the executive director of the Center for Legal and Social Studies in Buenos Aires. Ernesto Semán is a history professor at the University of Richmond's Jepson School of Leadership Studies.

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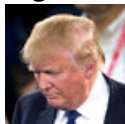
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