

THE NEW YORKER

DEPT. OF TRANSIENTS

ANOTHER OBAMA?

by Lauren Collins

JULY 20, 2009

People who like the Ecuadoran President, Rafael Correa, describe him this way: environmentalist, speaker of five languages, Ph.D. (in economics) from the University of Illinois, solidifier of a once unstable country, writer of a new constitution, corruption fighter, canceller of debt, a “young, handsome, and shrewd” reformer who—as Fenton Communications, the Washington, D.C., P.R. firm that the government of Ecuador has hired to help Correa polish his profile in America, pointed out recently—has been called “the Obama of Latin America.” People who don’t like him have their own ideas: Chávez crony, wild card, antagonist of America, whom the *Wall Street Journal* has likened to Fidel Castro, and under whose rule, the paper said, “liberty has been evaporating faster than you can say *bolivariano*.”

Amid the encomiums and the slurs, it was interesting, the other day, to hear Correa speak for himself. Tanned, and wearing an embroidered shirt, he greeted a reporter at the Ecuadoran Consulate with a kiss on each cheek and a grin. The first question was about Iran—President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad flew to Quito, in 2007, to attend Correa’s inauguration. Correa’s smile gave way to a smolder. He said, in Spanish, “The opposition is unhappy about the election results. But our *chargé d’affaires* tells us that the difference obtained in votes by President Ahmadinejad is actually quite big. Polls indicated that he was going to be the winner.”

Correa, who calls himself a “humanist and Christian of the left,” was in town for less than twenty-four hours, to speak at the United Nations about the financial crisis. After landing at 7 A.M. in a chartered plane, he had delivered a fiery speech to the General Assembly, declaring himself a representative of “a Cinderella-like humiliated continent.” Correa quoted the Spanish erotic poet Juan Ramón Jiménez (“They wanted to kill him, / the equals, / because he was different”), defended the Palestinians, excoriated what he termed “the Washington consensus” (“a paradoxical and cynical agreement signed behind the backs of peoples and governments and limited to the conclaves of the dominating and colonialist powers”), and called, ultimately, for a sort of coalition of “the different”—the poor, the oppressed, the ignored—that would assert “the preëminence of human beings over capital.” After the speech, he invoked the *Journal* article, which had also alleged that his government maintained ties to Colombia’s FARC rebels. “We will sue this newspaper, because we are sick of their lies,” he said.

At four o’clock, Correa held a press conference at the Ecuadoran Consulate. There were *banderas* hanging from the ceiling, and, near the door, a woman offered Dixie cups of Güitig, an Ecuadoran mineral water. In selling his agenda—which consists of five things: a new constitution (accomplished), boosting the economy, social development, *la lucha contra la corrupción*, and Latin-American integration—Correa seemed to rely on a combination of personal magnetism (his grins and scowls could have been a good-cop, bad-cop routine) and an academic’s knack for statistics (such as: “Before, you would win on the first round of elections with only twenty-three per cent, twenty-five per cent of the vote, but we won with fifty-two per cent”). The Ecuadoran constitution, which was ratified in 2008, is probably the only one in the world to accord natural rights to the environment (from its Rights for Nature: “Nature, or Pachamama . . . has the right to persist, maintain, and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions, and its processes in evolution”).

At seven o’clock, Correa was due at Our Lady of Sorrows church in Corona, Queens. He was late, but no one seemed to care. The scene resembled a block party, with an ice-cream truck at the curb, and supporters in bright T-shirts

featuring the slogan “*Inmigrantes con Correa!*,” along with Correa’s likeness, in the style of Shepard Fairey’s Obama. The Presidents had exchanged handshakes at the Summit of the Americas, in April, and Obama called Correa to congratulate him on his reelection in June. But, at the consulate, Correa had said that he doesn’t pay much attention to domestic American politics. Asked about the Mark Sanford scandal, he turned to an aide and said, “Which one of the many scandals is that?”

Correa had been in New York twice before. His favorite place in the city is Times Square. “There’s a lot of technology, it’s the center of capitalism,” he said. “I don’t mean that I *like* it. It’s very interesting for me.” Correa had not had much time to see the sights. “Obviously, it’s an impressive city,” he continued. “Fifth Avenue, the Empire State Building, Broadway.” Last time, he had seen “Phantom of the Opera”—“It was wonderful,” he said. ♦

To get more of *The New Yorker's* signature mix of politics, culture and the arts: **Subscribe now**
