

Interview: Manuel Solís Palma



The world must uphold the Carter-Torrijos treaties

Panamanian President Manuel Solís Palma granted EIR reporter D.E. Pettingell the following exclusive interview on Sept. 26, the day before he addressed the General Assembly of the United Nations.

EIR: Of all the countries of Ibero-America, why did the United States pick Panama as what Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega calls an “experimental laboratory”?

Solís Palma: There’s a very clear explanation for that. Panama is a strategic location, and in the new military-strategic situation it has acquired a transcendental importance for the United States, because the military bases in Panama, naturally, have acquired great significance for the United States with the phasing out of long-range weapons.

Naturally the Panamanian Defense Forces, which under [Gen. Omar] Torrijos carried out a highly nationalistic policy that reached a first stage of culmination with the signing of the Carter-Torrijos agreements, have started to become a stumbling block for the United States’ policy for a future understanding of the use of those bases, from a point of view which in my view is totally wrong. They feel that this was compounded by Panama’s absolutely free position regarding Nicaragua, as well as the role Panama has played, through Contadora, in the quest for peace in Central America and all countries, through coordination rather than intervention.

All these things have added up to a fundamental political contradiction among the United States, the Defense Forces presently commanded by Gen. Manuel Antonio Noriega, and the entire military structure. Thus, we see pretexts such as “democracy” and the need for civilian supremacy over the military, although we know that at the present time, in this world, armies still have a fundamental and prevailing role in the process of administering a country. It’s no longer a matter of whether the Defense Forces or armies should be above civilians, or civilians above them. It’s a matter of simple unity—a consolidation of the two forces, in order to carry forward a country’s progress and development.

But to believe that Panama can go back to the times when we civilians dominated the military and could have them at our beck and call, is unreal. Neither can the proposition be maintained that the Army should totally dominate civilians. It’s a matter of joint responsibilities. But they don’t want this theory applied in Panama, although I’m sure that the civilian government of the United States doesn’t act without consult-

ing with the Pentagon whenever a job of any importance must be done.

EIR: We frequently hear, and even the newspapers say that the U.S. government is planning a so-called “October surprise” a month before elections here. Even Ambassador Gabriel Lewis Galindo, of the Civic Crusade, has said that the reduction of U.S. personnel in Panama is part of preparations for some kind of military intervention to depose General Noriega. Could you say something about this?

Solís Palma: I feel that such an action would be inconceivable indeed, because it is an attack on the sovereignty of a people, and at the same time a threat not only against Panama but against all the peoples of the continent.

If today—when we believe the world has some small hope, through the agreements between the United States and Russia, of moving away from the possibility of a world holocaust—if, again, one country’s hegemony and power can be used today to subject another, whether for interest or fancy, taking advantage of nationals who have embraced such a policy, tomorrow it can be used against any other country. I think that, as the saying goes, when you see your neighbor’s beard shaved, start lathering your own.

EIR: *The Washington Post* recently reported that Panamanian funds frozen in U.S. banks are being used to finance covert CIA operations in Panama, and that the Panamanian opposition has access to those funds. Can you confirm this? Does Panama plan to take this case to the The Hague?

Solís Palma: We are studying the situation, and are seeking information to corroborate it. What we can say for sure is that the Banco Nacional, which had \$54 million frozen, has tried to obtain information about the whereabouts of those funds, and has been unable to obtain any to date. Thus we tend to think that the funds of the Panamanian people are being used in an unprecedented, irresponsible and inexplicable way, for actions of such a kind. If this is so, I simply think that very few things can remain in the world which will still surprise us.

EIR: There are various bills before the U.S. Congress which go as far as demanding the abrogation of the Canal treaties—the one presented by Rep. Phil Crane, for instance. How do the government and people of Panama plan to enforce those

treaties in 1999?

Solís Palma: The signing of the treaties was possible because General Torrijos, in a moment of great historical scope, sought the world's support for them. I think we would have to follow the same course. It's a matter which we must put to the world community, because Panama alone wouldn't have the strength to stop any action of a contrary nature. The entire world, which was co-responsible for the signing of these Treaties, has the obligation today of backing Panama in this difficult and perilous moment.

EIR: High-ranking officials of the Peruvian government recently said that the International Monetary Fund is trying to retaliate against President Alan García of Peru, because he broke the rules of the game with his debt policies, and hopes to teach other debtors a lesson. What potential is there for the people and governments of Ibero-America to jointly defend Panama and Peru, which suffer similar aggressions?

Solís Palma: I couldn't say how much potential there is, but that is one of the things I plan to bring up [at the General Assembly]: that our countries must go beyond verbal statements and rhetorical support, toward true, concrete support for countries such as Panama and Peru, which are being attacked economically for the most part.

Rhetorical support has been very positive for us. To some extent it has thwarted actions by the U.S. government, but on the other hand, there has been no concrete aid to help us avoid the economic calamity which now besets us and consequently, of course, creates anxiety and unrest among the poor.

EIR: The *New York Times* said recently that Panama has only two options: either become another Cuba—"cubanize" is the term they use—or adopt the Hong Kong financial model. Do you consider these the only two options for Panama?

Solís Palma: Models similar to other countries' are always being established. Every country has its own nature. I think Panama could come closer to Hong Kong's position, but there's a mistake in the "Hong Kong model" itself, which is to think that Hong Kong is merely a trading country. Hong Kong is a producer country. We cannot make Panama a great center of production and commerce overnight.

Neither is "cubanization" the alternative for Panama. Panama has neither the historical, social, or cultural conditions for the imposition of a socialist regime. But Panama can develop its own model and, even within the capitalist regime, if we can get the underdeveloped countries to join in supporting Panama, in this case, or any other underdeveloped country, we could be strong enough to carry out the recovery of the country. And at that point we would have totally changed the prospects of the country and of every country which in any circumstance might be subjected by greater powers to surrendering or changing the course of its own destiny.



Demonstrators greet President Solís Palma at New York's JFK airport on Sept. 25.

EIR: The United States insists that Panama's main problem is a lack of "democracy." The United States has been criticized in Ibero-America for thinking that it has patent rights on democracy. How do you feel about that?

Solís Palma: Panama's "lack of democracy" falls in the context of two or three facts. First, that we've closed a few radio stations; that in some cases we don't permit demonstrations. Yet [our accusers] don't wish, nor is it convenient for them, to put themselves right in the midst of the situation. If Panama—the Panamanian press, Panamanian radio—were waging an internal campaign, within Panama, for Panamanians, we'd have no objections to make. But when we are the target of open, brazen, and effective economic warfare, and our press—some of our press, our television, our radio—take sides with those who've declared war on us, we cannot entertain contemplations of a democratic nature, because what's jeopardized is something much more important, for any country: its existence as a nation, its very condition as a sovereign and independent country.

I would like to know if the United States, with all its democracy, if it were attacked tomorrow by some country, and the press, or part of its press, took sides with that country, would they tolerate that press to internally undermine the national defenses against the aggressor? No one would tolerate that. Because the existence of a nation is above its own apparent liberties. What is a country to do when it faces a difficult situation, and efforts are made to overthrow a democratic regime? Liberties are curtailed, precisely to prevent the existing democracy from being overthrown. But it cannot

allow itself to be overthrown, much less when these gentlemen answer to some international game, rather than an internal struggle.

On the other hand, what is the concept of democracy? Do we want to bring in the same patterns, the same standards? I myself just saw here a few people who were protesting, and they were fenced out so that they couldn't come through. But here they respect the barrier. In Panama we must employ other means to prevent demonstrators from taking aggressive action against national sovereignty. So this isn't the stuff of democracy; we can't be establishing rigid and equal standards for all countries. Every one has its own culture, its own traditions and forms of government. And every one practices them after its own fashion. Democracy involves fundamental aspects, which are far more serious, far more substantive, than the formal democracy which they sometimes wish to impose. Let Panamanians deal freely among themselves, and you'll see that we not only allow liberty of expression—we allow even libertinism when we are left to ourselves.

EIR: Recently Panama hosted the Meeting Towards a Second Amphictyonic Congress. How important was that meeting for Ibero-American integration? Do you feel, Mr. President, that conditions are ripe for such integration, or shall it remain a dream, a utopia?

Solís Palma: That conference was really, extremely important. Yet, it was but one step toward the work still ahead, which won't be easy, or simple. We have differences in Latin America which would have to be overcome, and above all, there isn't a Latin American country which doesn't have some greater or lesser degree of penetration by the long hand of the United States, as Bush has said, which is always touching every country, so that we don't, in fact, unite, for they know what the effect of Latin American unity would be for the hegemony of the United States.

But that doesn't mean that we won't try to continually strive ahead toward that dream, that ideal, which sooner or later we must transform into a reality.

EIR: Are you optimistic about being able to attend the Group of Eight presidential summit in Uruguay next month?

Solís Palma: I don't know if I'll be able to go, if some problems will have been solved by then. At this time, I am far more optimistic about Panama's re-entry to the Group of Eight, because there have already been very important statements, like the one by Peruvian Prime Minister Armando Villanueva, and also the ambassador of Uruguay. Up to this point, Uruguay had not had a positive attitude toward Panama. They have admitted that they acted precipitously and that the matter calls for reconsideration.

Perhaps Panama's return will not at first immediately open the doors to my own presence in Uruguay, but the mere fact of returning would allow us again to assume our leading role in that group. That's what's important.

EIR: The International Monetary Fund is meeting presently in West Berlin, and the possibility of certain changes has come up. Do you think it possible to attain a solution to the foreign debt problem within the IMF framework, or would it be necessary to create new institutions, a new economic order?

Solís Palma: If the International Monetary Fund were to act according to the current reality, in which all countries have difficulties dealing with their foreign debt—and it is an undeniable fact that the foreign debt constitutes a drain on the economies of all our countries—then it would have no alternative but to change its policy, modify it. Otherwise, it will have to disappear, because new international financial mechanisms will have to come into being, which are more in tune with the experience our peoples have had, and which will make up a whole new orientation and reality.

EIR: What importance does John Paul II's latest encyclical, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, hold for Ibero-America in its fight for integration?

Solís Palma: The Holy Father's position, as always, has a great unifying force which makes understanding among our peoples, our masses, more feasible; it is a very important foundation for political layers to act upon, on the basis of such a holy blessing, which is extremely important to all our peoples. The Holy Father's statements are a kind of tranquilizer and an aid to communities with a high level of Catholicism and faith.

EIR: The American people have been subjected to a very intense misinformation campaign about Panama. Newspapers distort reality nearly every day; the subject of General Noriega even had a prominent place in the Bush-Dukakis debate. Supposedly the only thing those two gentlemen agree on is the need to depose Noriega. What message would you like to convey to the American people?

Solís Palma: Your questions seem to anticipate the speech I'm giving tomorrow, because that is one of the themes I'll present.

I maintain that the American people have been fooled, and that such misinformation is one of the most dangerous weapons that highly developed countries use against weak ones. We must do something to face this new weapon of aggression which has come into play. The American people, of course, have fallen for such misinformation, which is totally deliberate and scientifically tuned to attaining the subjugation of small, poor nations and now particularly Panama.

We have no alternative but to denounce it, since we haven't the resources to counter-penetrate them, because we are not at such a technological level yet, nor do we have the means to do it. That takes a lot of economic resources; command of so many communication media, so many technical aspects that are not within our reach, precisely because we are underdeveloped.