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Political Ideology and Globalization: A Look at Panama

INTRODUCTION

Too often, it is argued that the phenomenon of globalization distinguishes our era from any other. The concept of globalization has been commonly understood to be characterized by technology advancements, financial and economic interdependence and growth. Although this is true to a large extent, this undermines the influence of political ideology in shaping the way international relations are formed and therefore, their effect on globalization. In this short paper, I pose the following question with regards to the case of Panama: in terms of international relations, is political ideology a factor of globalization? Yes. I recently visited Panama, a small Latin American country, which I describe as the epitome of a globalized nation. Tommy Hilfiger advertisements, tall skyscrapers, diverse individuals, and no authentic cuisine have all caught my attention. However, I also met with politicians in Panama and came to find a wavering resemblance between its foreign policy and that of the United States, especially towards the Middle East—particularly towards the occupied Palestine. This particular tie with the U.S has been a result of the current ruling political ideology in Panama—conservatism. Under other governments or rulers that have been supporters of other political ideologies, such as the “Maximum leader,” Omar Torrijos, the relations with the U.S were not as solid as they are now. On the other hand, Panama’s relations have not been as politically separated from other regions of the world as is the case now.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the subsequent section, I will provide a brief background on the topic. In the third section, I will explain Panama's conservative

policies and its influence on Panama's relations with the other side of the world—the Middle East, and argue how these policies separate Panama from a strategic region, and thus, effects its position within a globalized world. In the fourth section, I present possible counter arguments, and then counter those counter arguments. Finally, in the fifth section, I provide my concluding remarks.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Panama - An epitome of Economic Globalization

Panama ranks as the second most competitive economy in Latin America, after Chile (Schwab, 2013). In addition to its location between two continents, and its 77.1 km ship canal, which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean, companies can easily establish operations in Panama's Colon Free Trade Zone. This Zone allows for the tax free importation and exportation of goods, thus attracting many multinational companies to have their Latin American Headquarters based in Panama and encouraging Foreign Direct Investment into the country. These geo-economic factors have, in fact, enhanced Panama's location as an epitome of globalization. However, taking these factors without considering the effect of the ruling political ideology in Panama may be misleading. This is where I look at next.

U.S. - Panama Relations and Policies towards the Middle East

The influence of Panama's changing political ideology in regards to its international relations can be best exemplified through its relations with the United States. Throughout history, Panama has had close relations with the U.S, stemming back to the extensive linkages that developed when the Panama Canal was under U.S control. However, since Panama's independence, these relations have witnessed dramatic changes with the different political ideologies that ruled the country. These ideologies have varied between conservatism, liberalism

and progressivism, each with different sets of foreign policies, and therefore marking varying relations with the U.S. The current relationship is characterized by the ruling conservative party in Panama, which has received unwavering support from the U.S to promote Panama's economic, political and social development; and a free trade agreement that has entered into force at the end of October 2012. These economic ties have been, however, a result of Panama's current foreign policy, which does not contradict or oppose that of the U.S, especially in regards to the Middle East.

On November, 2012, the General Assembly accorded Palestine with a non-member observer state status in the United Nations, based on a majority vote—138 in favor, 9 against, and 41 abstaining (UN, 2012). Among these 9 negative votes were the U.S and Panama. This negative vote portrays Panama's political support to Israel and its opposition to the Palestinian aspirations to self-determination. Further, this clearly indicates that Panama's conservative government is blindly following the guidelines of the American Policy, without taking the rest of the international community into account. Indeed “...we follow the United States’ position...” bluntly confessed Ministro Roberto Henriquez when I asked him about Panama’s vote against Palestine (2014).

And in terms of international relations, certain policies may lead to distorted political images, which will in turn, effect a country's position in the international arena. Therefore, measuring Panama's economic advancements, in terms of globalization, through the multinational companies operating inside its free zone territory will be misleading if we did not take its political approach towards other parts of the world into account. Below, I argue this point in more detail.

ARGUMENT

Globalization is associated with economic openness and, in this sense, is in line with conservative free market ideology that embraces less government intervention (Breckenridge and Moghaddam, 2012). However, globalization is also associated with non-retributive policies that seek outer attraction and, in this sense, is in line with a more liberal foreign policy. Using Joseph Nye's term of "soft power," attracting and co-opting rather than coercing is important in international relations (Nye, 2004). This attraction involves positive image among public opinions. For a small country like Panama, such attraction is important in order to maintain and secure its economic stability. With its right, conservative government that only follows the guidelines of the U.S when it comes to foreign policy, Panama will be losing the ability to attract a strategic region—the Middle East.

We can see that although the Panama Canal has connected two oceans, the current ruling political ideology has separated Panama from another part of the world—the Middle East. In fact, with Panama's negative vote against the upgrade of Palestinian representation at the UN, Panama has isolated itself from the Middle East, and caused its image to decline among the Arab world. And this Arab world has been dominated by revolutions and emerging Islamic movements that have been characterized by its anti-west ideology. Although these revolutions have created many internal national problems, which deflected the question of Palestine from the priorities of the Arabs, the emerging Islamic movements have increasingly used the question of Palestine to serve their anti-west approach. Although Panama is a small country in global politics, its U.S-led policies towards the Middle East may, in fact, make it a new target. Thus, its economic glory may be in threat.

On the other hand, there is a Muslim and Arab community in Panama. Although this community has integrated within Panama and has not reflected its origin in a conflicting way, Panama introduced itself to the Arab world as an opponent. Any political changes, as a result, may influence them, in terms of their position in upcoming elections. If Panama relies solely on its relations with the U.S, any changes in the ruling political ideology in Panama's elections may affect its relations with the U.S. If liberalism ruled in Panama, its international relations will perhaps move further from the U.S and closer towards considering neighboring countries in Latin America and attracting the Middle East. However, these changes will also have implications on Panama's market, its investment flow, competition and living standards, which will impact the countries that are engaged in business with Panama. Political ideology is, therefore, a factor of globalization.

On another level, Panama's U.S-led approach pushed it further than the other neighboring Latin Countries, instead of integrating more with them. Meanwhile, Nicaragua has announced its new canal project in March 2014, which will also connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. Although this project has not yet been realized, it is set to start taking shape in mid-2015; and it has already been promoted as "a new canal and transportation hub – for the benefit of the region, its citizens and the global economy" (HKND Group, 2014). With more liberal ideologies in favor of integration, this new canal can form a base of regionalism in Latin America, which can strengthen its position globally. Regionalism in terms of economic blocs is a form of globalization, yet these blocs can only be formed if liberal ideologies are in the decision-making seats. Perhaps if Panama's ruling political ideology was open to its neighboring Latin countries, such a bloc would have been formed already.

COUNTER-ARGUMENT

Some continue to argue in terms of “the end of ideology” and that ordinary citizen’s political attitudes lack the kind of stability, consistency and constraint that ideology requires (Jost, 2006). Moreover, ideological constructs such as liberalism and conservatism lack motivational potency and behavioral significance (Jost, 2006). This suggests that international institutions manage the world economy, decreasing the level of autonomy and leverage of nation-states.

Under globalization, politics can take place above the state through political integration schemes—for instance, the European Union or through intergovernmental organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization. Political activity can also transcend national borders through think tanks, global movements and NGOs. Civil society is no longer driven by particular ideology. Instead, it acts globally by forming alliances with organizations in other countries, using global communications systems, and lobbying international organizations and other actors directly, instead of working through their national governments.

However, Keohane and Nye have also constructed a new model of international relations known as “complex interdependence” based on a number of well-defined assumptions (1989). Complex interdependence is presented as an ideal model to compare and contrast the complexity found in the equally ideal realist image of world politics. As such, they define it as a set of “multiple channels that connect societies including inter-state, trans-governmental and transnational relations” with an agenda “consisting of multiple issues that are not arranged in a clear and consistent hierarchy” and with economic interests on the same footing as military ones (Keohane and Nye, 1989).

This implies that states are not the sole players in world politics, nor are they necessarily unitary actors as they are composed of competing bureaucracies; and however policies may be influenced and driven by non-state economic factors, economic interests are shaped through political ideologies. Changes in the ruling ideologies will change the way economies are integrated. Therefore, political ideology is indeed a factor of globalization. We see that this has indeed been portrayed through the case of Panama.

On another note, we see that the ideas put forward have all reflected some kind of ideology in a way or another. The arguments proposed by Keohane and Nye, do in fact represent realism, while the arguments in favor of an increasing role of non-state actors at the expense of nation states' autonomy represents neo-liberalism. Both are schools of thought or ideologies, and the mere existence of debates between the two schools of thought proves the end of "the end of ideologies" term.

CONCLUSION

Globalization is a complex topic and it has indeed marked the era we live in. Although most of the discussions on globalization include technological advances and economic measures, this paper sheds a light on political ideology as a factor of globalization. Particularly in Panama as a case study, one can see how political ideology influences its relations with the U.S, and in turn, effect its relations with other parts of the world, especially the neighboring countries in Latin America and the Middle East. These relations may result in more or less regional integration, as well as more or less positive image and attraction. There have been competing arguments, however, that the role of nation-states has been declined by the rise of non-state factors, and that ideology may have ended. Yet, we see that this is an ongoing debate of

ideologies and through this particular report on Panama, we see that we are in a complex interdependent world, where political ideology is indeed a factor of globalization.

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