

## **The latest global 'celeb': Pope Francis**

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**I** am always puzzled as to why UK/US journalists fail to cover global religions in terms of their actual or potential political impact, when religion is a huge political force. All clerics, Christian, Jewish, Muslim and so on, can and do influence their publics, many are politically active and some at the very top of their societies: e.g. bishops and the Chief Rabbi in Parliament; the Vatican's one time refusal to recognise the state of Israel; the Ayatollahs of Iran; or allegations that Pope Francis may have had a nodding acquaintance with Argentina's Junta. Whatever the truth of the last of these, it will have done Pope Francis' reputation no harm in authoritarian nations such as China where he has Chinese Christians and bishops to protect.

In particular, I am astonished by what appears to be an absence of coverage on the impact a South American pope could have on US politics. The Republicans are unlikely to welcome him: like the pope they are anti-gay and anti-abortion. However, they are also anti-immigrant: Pope Francis empathises with immigrants. Republicans they deny climate change when the Vatican does not, its priests having seen it decimate parts of Africa. In addition, Pope Francis is a respecter of all faiths, a huge challenge to US neo-cons and Israel which depends on favouritism; and in a wonderful turn of tables, gives South America the ability to meddle in US politics because of Pope Francis' ability to mobilise Hispanics. Surely a candidate for political assassination if ever there was one?

Of course, if you listen to the Vatican's spin machine, you would think that Pope Francis will do no more than concentrate on matters spiritual, pastoral, reputational, corrupt and administrative. This is true. But it is also a wonderful piece of Vatican Omission PR. It ignores the fact that the pope-as-figurehead has political significance in international relations terms and the Vatican has centuries

experience of this; that Francis is a Jesuit, when the Jesuit Order is an organised global educator and therefore a highly politically active force world-wide. For example, it is very active in Africa, especially, as I say above, on climate change; is the only faith challenger to Islam in Africa; and by virtue of its influence as educators, a significant economic challenger to China which is heavily involved and invested in Africa.

In addition, a South American pope strengthens South American prestige in global and economic politics – it's a brand thing. Overnight South America has gained a unifying global figurehead – Hugo Chavez was a figurehead who divided nations, Pope Francis does not – who is a 'celeb' as big as President Obama or, if you prefer, Tom Cruise, creating a viable economic and political challenger to India and the Far East who have no unifying global figureheads or celebrities: i.e. no recognisable brand. As importantly, backed by the rise of South America, it gives global Christianity an economic and political power base that challenges murder emanating from minute pockets of some Muslim communities – while accelerating and embracing dialogue with Islam in general whose only figureheads in the West happen to be terrorists or suspected terrorists.....