

A Potential Obama Ally Becomes an Outspoken Foe on Immigration

By JULIA PRESTON

WASHINGTON — Representative Luis V. Gutierrez was all set to be a friend of the Obama administration, a point man for the White House among Latinos. A nine-term Democrat, he had cut his political teeth in the wards of Chicago, just as Barack Obama did, and the two knew each other from their parallel early careers in Illinois.

But instead of a favorite ally, Mr. Gutierrez has become a noisy, needling outsider — and not just in the halls of Congress. Saying he was fed up with the president not leading an overhaul of immigration laws, Mr. Gutierrez was arrested along with more than 30 other protesters on May 1 after a sit-in in front of the White House.

Mr. Gutierrez's frustration was only deepened by the president's announcement this week that he would send up to 1,200 more National Guard troops to the border with Mexico, a move Mr. Gutierrez called "sound-bite driven politics."

"There is 25 years of hard evidence that the president is wrong," said Mr. Gutierrez, who is chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's immigration task force. "Border security and immigration are not one-dimensional problems that can be solved by more boots on the border."

Demonstrators plan to take to the streets again in several cities this weekend — to protest Arizona's tough new immigration law, the president's planned troop increase at the border, and the failure of Congress to move an immigration overhaul bill including measures to give legal status to millions of illegal immigrants.

In recent months Mr. Gutierrez has emerged as a national leader of Latinos and immigrants favoring the overhaul, who up to now have largely been organized into local community groups with no iconic faces.

"What began as a legislative campaign is transforming into a social movement," said Frank Sharry, executive director of America's Voice, a group here that lobbies for an overhaul bill that includes legalization. "Luis is the closest thing we have to an Al Sharpton figure who has instant credibility with the community he speaks for."

Allies say Mr. Gutierrez's tenacity and his following among Latinos have helped keep the im-



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Representative Luis V. Gutierrez, facing camera, and other House members denounced an Arizona law at a news conference.

migration overhaul alive in Washington at a time when many administration officials wish it would go away, at least for now. But even some of Mr. Gutierrez's friends say that his sometimes intemperate broadsides and showy tactics have irritated the White House and won him no friends among Republicans, some of whom would have to sign on to any overhaul bill for it to pass.

Mr. Gutierrez, 56, said he believes he has a responsibility to point out that Mr. Obama has not fulfilled a campaign pledge to pass overhaul legislation, which is known to supporters as comprehensive immigration reform.

"I'm not demeaning him," said Mr. Gutierrez, "I'm talking to him about something he made a promise about. You shouldn't think you challenge somebody simply because you wish them ill. What if you challenge them so they can do better?"

In that spirit, Mr. Gutierrez points out that it is only because of Mr. Obama that he is still in Congress.

In late 2006, after the House

approved a bill he abhorred cracking down on illegal immigrants, and with his wife, Soraida, struggling with cancer, Mr. Gutierrez said he would not seek re-election in 2008.

He changed his mind the next year, when Mr. Obama declared his presidential run and his wife's illness went into remission. He was thrilled when Mr. Obama said he would take up immigration in his first year as president. Now midterm elections are looming, and in the Senate — where leaders in both houses agree the legislative effort has to begin — there is not a bill, only a Democratic blueprint. (Mr. Gutierrez presented a bill in the House in December.)

"Maybe next time you should put in a caveat," Mr. Gutierrez said in his Capitol Hill office recently, imagining a debate with Mr. Obama. "Vote for me, and I'm going to do immigration — unless A, B and C happen."

"That's not what you said!" he said "You're sophisticated. You went to Harvard. You knew the implications of what you were

saying."

As an unusually talkative lawmaker, Mr. Gutierrez does not do pith or detachment, Congressional aides and immigrant advocates said. Those who have participated in closed-door immigration negotiations with him recall Mr. Gutierrez weeping over stories of families sundered by deportation, leaping to his feet in rage at setbacks and being elated by small victories.

But for years, on immigration Mr. Gutierrez had been a more typical dealmaker. In 2007, he crafted a bipartisan bill with Representative Jeff Flake, Republican of Arizona, which included enforcement provisions and a guest worker program that brought him criticism from Latino and immigrant groups.

The proposal died that year along with an overhaul bill supported by President George W. Bush that failed in the Senate.

Then, one month after Mr. Obama's inauguration, Mr. Gutierrez embarked on a town-hall-meeting tour, called Familias Unidas (United Families), that took him

to 16 cities to raise support for an immigration overhaul. Citizens and legal immigrants were invited to recount hardships they faced because loved ones lacked legal status. Most meetings were held in churches.

Mr. Gutierrez played to packed pews across the country. By the end of the tour, he began to sound more like a preacher than a politician.

"He took immigration from a specialty policy issue to a Latino identity litmus test: are you for or against us as Latinos?," said Tamar Jacoby, a Republican who heads ImmigrationWorks USA, a business lobbying group.

It was an identity hard won. Born in Chicago to Puerto Rican parents, Mr. Gutierrez has maintained his ties to the island. His civil disobedience arrest this month was not his first; he was arrested in 2001 on the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, in a protest over bombing exercises by the United States Navy.

Latinos comprise 75 percent of his Chicago district. Most are of Mexican origin. His support

there has given him confidence to take on people in high places. He has a history of friction with Rahm Emanuel, another Chicagoan and Mr. Obama's chief of staff, which dates back to when Mr. Emanuel was a Democratic leader in the House.

"I think he sees comprehensive immigration reform as something the president does not need to prioritize," Mr. Gutierrez fumed.

Mr. Gutierrez said his turning point was the State of the Union address in January, when the president made only passing mention of immigration. At a rally before his May Day sit-in, Mr. Gutierrez ridiculed statements by Mr. Obama that Congress might have too much on its plate to handle immigration.

"Don't worry about us, Mr. President," he said. "We'll get up a little earlier if necessary."

Even as his stature as a Latino leader is growing, he faces trouble at home. In a series of articles, The Chicago Tribune has reported that Mr. Gutierrez received a loan from a Chicago real estate developer, Calvin Boender, who was convicted in March on bribery charges, in a case that did not involve Mr. Gutierrez. Citing court records, The Tribune reported that Mr. Gutierrez wrote a letter and met with city officials on Mr. Boender's behalf over zoning issues.

While acknowledging the loan, Mr. Gutierrez adamantly denied any wrongdoing. He produced financial records he said showed he had taken a bridge loan that was repaid after six weeks, part of a routine payment plan on a property he bought from Mr. Boender.

Other Hispanic lawmakers laud Mr. Gutierrez's commitment, though not always his strategies. "I know the discomfort it causes the White House and the party leadership," said Representative Raúl M. Grijalva of Arizona, another Democrat on the Hispanic caucus. "What he's doing is necessary."

But Representative Nydia M. Velázquez, Democrat of New York, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus leader, said the focus should be on behind-the-scenes efforts to win over Republican legislators. But Mr. Gutierrez remains focused on the president.

"This is the moment for him to act," Mr. Gutierrez said. "And if we stumble, if somehow we fail, let's fail together. Let's fail fighting!"