

The Military and Politics in the Andean Region

By Carlos Basombrío Iglesias

New Times, Old Problems

Latin America has come a long way since the military regimes of the past. This does not mean, however, that the armed forces have retreated to their barracks. Whereas in mature democracies political stability helps improve civilian-military relations and subordinate the latter to the former, the fragile, besieged democracies of the Andean region are still struggling with these issues.¹ Relations between civilian governments and the armed forces remain complex, plagued by friction, ambiguity, privilege, and co-optation. Indeed, the military in these countries continues to enjoy greater autonomy and more prerogatives, whether explicitly conferred or not, than in other democracies.

In many countries the armed forces are entrusted with activities that are not strictly military: combating the drug trade, maintaining public order, and fighting smuggling. This complicates their role and relation to civilian power and gives rise to turf battles with police forces. Further, the military in some of these countries either has or claims a role in development and poverty reduction efforts. Finally, given the deep-seated political problems and unending crises of governance in many Andean nations, the armed forces tend to be key players in the stability—and,

in extreme cases, the very survival—of democratic government.

Peru: From the Collapse of Authoritarianism to Thwarted Reform

The experience of Peru in the 1990s provides a good example of military involvement in politics in a post-coup era. As the decade began, democratic institutions and actors had fallen into disrepute, and most Peruvians equated democracy with corruption and inefficiency. By 1992, faced with political violence and economic ruin, Peruvian democracy was on the brink of collapse, paving the way for President Alberto Fujimori to assume dictatorial powers by dissolving the Peruvian Congress. His eight-year authoritarian regime enjoyed considerable support at home and abroad, mostly for its success in dealing with some of the most intractable issues facing the country, particularly the threat posed by the Shining Path insurgency and the rampant hyperinflation at the end of Alan García's presidency.

Although Fujimori's was not strictly a military project, the armed forces embraced it eagerly. Fujimori adopted several key elements of the so-called Green Plan, a proposal for a long-term military regime drafted in the final months of the García government by ranking members of the military. Still, *Fujimorismo* was a much larger authoritarian undertaking that did not depend on institutionalized military support alone. In fact, due to the regime's reliance on individual officers from the

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Andean

Working
Paper

¹ This argument is developed by, among others, Raúl Benítez Manaut in "Defense and Democracy in Latin America: Problems of Transition," in *Democracia, Seguridad y Defensa*, No. 9, Vol. II (January-February 2005); Democracy, Security and Defense Foundation, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador.

Foreword

In 2002, the Inter-American Dialogue launched a working paper series on Colombia. We sought to devote sustained and high-quality attention to what is among the hemisphere's most urgent challenges, looking especially at ways of helping the country move toward greater peace and security. The aim was to stimulate a wider public debate on the complex issues facing key decision makers, actors, and analysts with regard to the Colombian conflict. We offered diagnoses and interpretations of the current situation, as well as ideas for policy prescriptions that could usefully contribute to resolving the country's multiple and deep-seated problems.

The Dialogue has extended the focus of the series to the broader Andean region, encompassing Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, as well as a continuing concern with Colombia. The expanded scope reflects the natural evolution of a Dialogue initiative begun in June 2001—originally known as the Colombia Working Group, and now as the Andean Working Group. The initiative is made up of a select and diverse group of analysts and former policy officials from the Andean region, other Latin American countries, Europe, Canada, and the United States. The working group serves as a core of advisors, a “brain trust” for the Dialogue on the Andes, a central priority for the institution. The group's goal is not necessarily to reach agreement and produce consensus documents. Rather, it is to encourage as much imagination as possible, and generate ideas and proposals that help shape thought and action on Andean challenges in constructive ways.

This paper, written by Carlos Basombrío, researcher at the Institute of Peruvian Studies in Lima, political columnist for *Perú 21*, and former Peruvian vice minister of the interior, offers valuable comparative insights about the role of the military in politics in the countries of the Andean region. Basombrío notes that the weakness of democratic institutions in the region and the participation of the armed forces in tasks unrelated to their primary function leads to a high degree of political involvement by the military. He argues that unless political elites undertake serious military reform, democracy and civil-military relations will deteriorate, heightening instability in the Andean region. Basombrío's perspective does not necessarily reflect the views of the Working Group or the Inter-American Dialogue.

Since the situation throughout the Andean region is highly dynamic, with events unfolding with unusual velocity, it is nearly inevitable that some of what appears in these papers will seem out of date, overtaken by new developments. Still, the central points and arguments remain relevant, and we hope that a steady production of thoughtful interpretations of what is affecting the region will lead to better insights on the problems and more realistic and effective policy recipes.

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Vice President for Policy

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armed forces for a political project that was fundamentally corrupt and undemocratic in its exercise of power, the services became more fractious, politicized, corrupt, and unprofessional than ever.²

Fujimori's regime eventually fell apart amid the biggest corruption scandal in Peruvian history. The entire military high command of the time was prosecuted for serious crimes. This episode completely discredited the armed forces and led to a vigorous debate about their role in events of the preceding decades. Peruvian society began to question the methods and costs of defeating the Shining Path. The result was the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the reopening of human rights trials against the military.

The military's overt involvement with Fujimori and his subsequent downfall left the armed forces in a quandary not unlike that faced by their Argentine counterparts following the Falklands debacle: as never before in Peruvian history, the military was institutionally weakened and politically on the defensive. It has, therefore, largely stayed out of politics since then, despite a deepening political crisis and increasingly discredited democratic institutions. Not only has the military ceased to be a political actor, its ability to mediate conflict has also diminished.

As the Toledo administration draws to a close, this trend is starting to change. Reforms intended to modernize the military and subject it to effective civilian control have been abandoned. The Defense Ministry has lost much of its ability to influence

policy in favor of the armed forces. And, from the Minister on down, the Ministry is once again the preserve of active and retired military men.

The Peruvian military has generally opposed getting involved in non-military missions. Although the Toledo administration has often asked the military to take on public order assignments, it has openly resisted and seldom agreed. This is due, in part, to an awareness that the armed forces were never intended to assume such functions—in itself a commendable development—but also to the absence of guarantees that its performance would not subsequently be subjected to political and legal scrutiny. The armed forces have gone so far as to withhold support for police forces fighting the last remnants of the Shining Path, making it impossible to eradicate a militarily insignificant threat.³

Another point of friction in civil-military relations in Peru is the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Most members of the military feel that the Commission report is unfair to them and that the country does not recognize their role in its struggle against terrorism. Their discontent has mounted in the wake of new trials against hundreds of men in uniform. Unlike its Argentine and, most recently, Chilean counterparts, Peru's military has yet to acknowledge its past abuses; the high command continues to resist efforts to put its men on trial. A Constitutional Court ruling that declared the military justice system unconstitutional and ordered Congress to legislate the transfer of its jurisdiction to civilians further strained civil-military relations, even though quiet lobbying by the armed

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² This issue is widely documented by Fernando Rospigliosi in “Montesinos y las Fuerzas Armadas: Cómo controló durante una década las instituciones militares,” Institute for Peruvian Studies. Lima, 2001.

³ This was personally confirmed by the author during his tenure at the Interior Ministry of Peru. The experience is described in detail in Gino Costa and Carlos Basombrío, *Liderazgo civil en el Ministerio del Interior: Una experiencia de reforma policial y gestión de la seguridad en el Perú*. Institute for Peruvian Studies. Lima, 2004.

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forces ultimately succeeded in countering the Court’s decision.

Another bone of contention is the defense budget. With public opinion highly sensitive to neighboring Chile’s arms buildup, the Peruvian military successfully pushed for additional funds. A new, open-ended Defense Fund now channels a percentage of revenues from the exploitation of natural resources directly to the armed forces, further undermining the Defense Ministry’s policymaking and agenda-setting role.

Five years after the end of the Fujimori regime, with democratic institutions and politicians utterly discredited, the Peruvian military has regained a measure of respect in society. Relations between politicians and the military remain characterized by a mix of fear and patronage. Although these factors have allowed it to regain, in part, its past autonomy and privileges, the military is far from being the political actor it once was. According to some members of the military, this is because younger officers assuming command positions take a dim view of events of the past decade and place a greater premium on professionalism. However, the possibility that their efforts at professionalizing the military could be frustrated or the country’s evolving political situation could well turn things around in the mid-term.

At the end of 2005 Ollanta Humala, a former Army colonel running for president, surged in the polls and is now one of three leading candidates in the race. The impact on the military of his rapid rise also needs to be considered carefully, since the Army is the linchpin of Humala’s ultra-nationalistic ideology and his success could render relative, or even reverse, the positive trends noted earlier.

Ecuador: The Umpires Join the Fray

Ecuador is in the midst of a period of significant political instability, as its six presidents in eight years make amply evident. Contributing factors include an acute institutional crisis, a discredited political elite and party system, severe regional friction (mainly between Quito and Guayaquil), and the indigenous movement. The chronic instability has buttressed the role of the Ecuadorian military as the arbiters of national politics because, unlike the country’s democratic institutions, the military is generally well regarded by the population.

Ecuador’s political system is, to some extent, unrepresentative of the country’s regional, ethnic, and cultural diversity. Instead, political support and legitimacy rely on patronage, wealth, and political bosses, making consensus ephemeral and loyalties fragile. This helps explain why none of the recent governments has been strong; they have not had the support of business, labor, or political parties. The opposition has not been particularly strong, either. In fact, civil society—business, indigenous groups and certain unions—seems stronger than political institutions. Eschewing the procedures and processes of democracy, these actors have either taken politics to the streets or started applying pressure within the corridors of power.⁴

Ecuador’s political actors—in government and civil society—have been unable and unwilling to set new rules for civilian-military relations. Ecuadorian democracy seems to survive due to an unwritten pact according to which the military devolved power to civilians. In return, the civilian leadership guaranteed the armed forces a

⁴ Adrián Bonilla, “Las Fuerzas Armadas ecuatorianas y su contexto político,” in *Fragile Democracies: Civil-Military Relations in the Iberoamerican World*, edited by José A. Olmeda. Tirant lo Blanch and Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado. Valencia, 2005.

high degree of autonomy and the explicit acknowledgement that they were the final guarantors of constitutional order.⁵ Thus, civilian control of the military has been impossible, as the “guarantor of last resort” cannot be subordinate to leadership that it might be called upon to arbitrate.⁶

Civil-military relations are further complicated by the armed forces’ role in education, medical care, forestry, customs oversight, and most importantly, law enforcement. The military is also permitted by law to sit on the boards of public corporations and associations concerned with telecommunications, electricity, and urban planning.

The military’s role in recent events in Ecuador needs to be understood in the context of the considerable autonomy it has preserved for itself. Many observers regard the 1997 ouster of Abdalá Bucaram as a coup orchestrated by the armed forces. Their role in Jamil Mahuad’s January 2000 overthrow in the midst of a major crisis marked by massive indigenous protests and clashes between the Guayaquil and Quito elites was even greater. Mahuad was toppled after the military requested his resignation and left the presidential palace unguarded, forcing the president to flee. A group of officers led by Colonel Lucio Gutiérrez formed an alliance with the indigenous movement—which demanded the resignation of incumbents in all three branches of government—and briefly formed a government.

From the military’s perspective, the new circumstances were extremely risky due to the threat of increased violence and the distinct possibility of soldiers shooting each other as well as the indigenous peasants. Fortunately, the crisis was defused when power was transferred to the vice president. What was new about the January 2000 coup was not the military intervention per se, but its alliance with indigenous and grass-roots organizations.⁷

As the armed forces intervened increasingly in politics, their institutional standing began to suffer. Members of the armed forces were tried, disciplined, or forced into retirement. Others sought a political career based on their military status. Although the military has continually chastised the party system as the reason for bad governance, individual members have not shied away from using it for their own political objectives.⁸ Lucio Gutiérrez may be the most overt expression of military involvement in politics, but he is not alone; the mayor of Quito, General Paco Moncayo, previously served as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Gutiérrez was elected in a runoff vote in November 2002 with the support of the indigenous movement. He had neither a majority of the popular vote nor a majority in Congress, and elicited as much expectation as apprehension. His two years in office were marred by upheavals and the further deterioration of Ecuador’s political situation.

Although he enjoyed unconditional support from the armed forces, the political and social tensions he faced led him into a

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⁵ The 1998 constitution currently in force says so explicitly in Article 183, noting that “the Armed Forces will have as their fundamental mission preserving national sovereignty, defending the integrity and independence of the State and guaranteeing its juridical order” (emphasis added).

⁶ Fernando Bustamante has made this argument in various writings. See, for example, “La crisis de la institucionalidad de la Defensa en el Ecuador,” in *Democratic Control of Defense in the Andean Region: Perspectives for Civil-Military Integration*. Series: Democracy, No. 9. Andean Commission of Jurists, Lima, 2004.

⁷ Bustamante, *op. cit.*

⁸ Fredy Rivera Vélez, “Partidos, Fuerzas Armadas y crisis institucional en tiempos de incertidumbre,” in *Democratic Control of Defense in the Andean Region: Perspectives for Civil-Military Integration*. Series: Democracy, No. 9. Andean Commission of Jurists, Lima, 2004.

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web of questionable maneuvers and alliances that made him politically vulnerable, despite economic stability due to high oil prices. Numerous instances of corruption and nepotism, a less-than-transparent foreign policy and the arbitrary and cynical manipulation of the law under Gutiérrez angered many Ecuadorians.⁹

As anger against Gutiérrez intensified in mid-April 2005, street protests became uncontrollable. On April 15th, the president decreed a state of emergency in Quito and disbanded the Supreme Court. These actions further inflamed the discontentment and strengthened the perception that Gutiérrez was imposing a dictatorship. By the time he backed down it was already too late, and he was forced to flee after the police refused to disperse protesters by force. Once again, power passed to the vice president.

Unfortunately, none of the underlying issues that led to the downfall of Gutiérrez and his predecessors seems to have been addressed. Rising oil prices provide welcome relief, but tensions persist, and decisions such as whether or not to convene a constituent assembly do not augur well for eliminating conflict. Meanwhile, the armed forces remain a key actor—perhaps the most decisive of all—in determining the course of political developments in Ecuador.

Military autonomy seems to grow with each crisis in Ecuador. The provisions regarding presidential powers in the new Armed Forces Act proposed by the Ministry of Defense speak volumes. Article 184 in the 1999 Constitution states, curiously, that the “military and police forces owe allegiance to the State. The President of the Republic

shall be their Commander-in-Chief and *may delegate* his authority in case of national emergency, in accordance with the law” (emphasis added).

The proposed legislation does away with the conditional, leaving no room for doubt. Article 4 states: “Pursuant to the Constitution, in case of war or the imminent threat thereof the President of the Republic shall exercise political command of the war effort *and shall delegate* strategic command as well as territorial jurisdiction to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, as per military plans.” And not just in case of war. Article 5 reads: “In case of *conflict or grave internal commotion*, the President of the Republic, through the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *shall delegate* the conduct of military operations to Defense Zone Commanders, *who shall have full command and jurisdiction of the same*, in conformity with military plans” (emphasis added).

Venezuela: Politics in the Military, the Military in Politics

The situation in Venezuela is just as challenging and complex as in Ecuador. The December 1998 election of Hugo Chávez has thoroughly changed political life in Venezuela and unavoidably affected civil-military relations and the military’s role in society. Politics now plays a strong role within the military, and vice versa.

The 1961 Constitution—the result of a political accord that ensured stability for four decades—was designed to ensure that the armed forces were subject to civilian oversight and control and that the military remained an apolitical institution. From 1961 through 1998, Venezuela’s civilian-military relations were governed by rules and constitutional norms as well as by military, security, and national defense legislation providing for the supremacy of civilian authority.

⁹ Lorena Navarro, “Caída y fuga de Lucio Gutiérrez Borbúa: ¿Otro episodio de politización militar?” in *Democracia, Seguridad y Defensa*, No. 10, Vol. II (March-April 2005); Democracy, Security and Defense Foundation, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador.

In fact, however, the Venezuelan military was more political and autonomous than the law prescribed and enjoyed great latitude in handling security and defense affairs. At the same time, the politicization and control of military promotions and assignments by the ruling elite, especially the president, led to growing dissatisfaction within the ranks of the armed forces with the political system, leaders, and parties.

Lietenant Colonel Hugo Chávez Frías's unsuccessful February 1992 coup attempt, launched with civilian support, subjected the prevailing framework of civil-military relations to a critical test. His bid occurred against the backdrop of a party system in the throes of a major crisis arising from Venezuela's ongoing economic troubles and the corrupt handling of oil revenues.

When Chávez finally came to power seven years later, the role of the armed forces changed considerably.¹⁰ In the 1999 Constitution, in force today, the plural "Armed Forces" was dropped. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Guard retain their divisional commanders, but are now a single force under a unified command, "the National Armed Force." The 1961 Constitution established that "the Armed Forces are a disciplined, apolitical institution". The current constitution, in contrast, merely imposes an ambiguous ban on "political memberships," treating an entire formal institution as if it were an individual policy-making unit or a private citizen.

¹⁰ The analyses of constitutional changes presented here are based on work by Miguel Manrique, "Relaciones civiles militares en la Constitución Bolivariana de 1999," in *Research and Education in Defense and Security Studies*, REDES, May 22-25, 2001. Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies, Washington, DC; and, "La participación política de las Fuerzas Armadas venezolanas en el sistema político (1998-2001)" in *Armed Forces in the Andean Region: Impartial or Political Actors?* Series: Democracy, No. 2. Andean Commission of Jurists, Lima, 2002.

The 1999 Constitution also grants the armed forces special privileges. Bringing to trial a member of the military now requires a preliminary Supreme Court finding, thus extending to the military a provision traditionally reserved for only the most senior government officials. And it goes further; this preliminary finding requirement also applies to civilians performing similar functions at a comparable level of public responsibility.

The purpose of the armed forces also changed. According to the 1961 Constitution, part of their role was to contribute to "the stability of democratic institutions and respect for the Constitution and the law, whose observance shall always take precedence over every other obligation" (Article 132). The new Constitution, however, establishes that the role of the military includes "cooperating in the maintenance of public order and taking active part in national development." The Venezuelan military has been entrusted with leading *Plan Bolívar* and *Plan Proyecto País*, poverty relief programs that are responsible for school repairs, housing construction, healthcare for the poor, at-cost markets, and public works projects.

The armed forces are thus actively involved in political life and, until the April 2002 coup against Chávez, were as polarized as the rest of society. (Following his return to power after less than seventy-two hours, Chávez consolidated his control over the military by purging it of all opposition.) According to the Venezuelan daily *El Nacional* (9 January 2005), sixty of the senior government officials elected or appointed in 2005 are members of the military. Since 2001, active duty officers frequently express support for President Chávez rather than to a particular system of government and freely voice their views on events, especially security issues. At the same time, the opposition, too, actively sought the military's help

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and allegiance, as evidenced by Chávez's overthrow and swift return to power in 2002. The officers who led the coup have been discharged and are regularly quoted in the media about both domestic and foreign affairs.¹¹ Whereas the Institutional Military Front rallies retired military officers opposed to the Chávez government, the Bolivarian Military Front brings together those who support it.¹²

The leading factor in military politicization is Chávez's *Bolivarian Revolution*, which fosters an alliance between Venezuela's population and its armed forces, the backbone of the revolution. This is highly reminiscent of the role of the Peruvian armed forces during the regime of General Juan Velasco Alvarado. Chávez makes frequent allusions to the loyalty of the armed forces and to their commitment to the so-called revolutionary process, assuring all that the Revolution can count on their might should it face a threat.¹³

A troubling development is the creation, by executive decree, of the Military Reserve and National Mobilization Command. This reserve force is charged with “assisting in the maintenance and defense of national security while integrating civil society into the national peacekeeping tasks for which it is jointly responsible. This does not imply recruitment or conscription.” Reservists are volunteers—about 60 percent of whom

are unemployed—who enlist at the municipal level and are assigned to various government-run social programs. The government envisions that it will, eventually, count on the support of 1.5 million reservists.

The militarization of politics under Chávez is particularly worrying given his penchant for intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries in the region. He has publicly supported Ollanta Humala's candidacy in Peru, and talks of “military integration” among the armed forces of South America. To this end, he is reportedly establishing ties with junior officers in the Andean countries.

The *Bolivarian Revolution*, like *Fujimorismo*, is not solely, or even primarily, a military project. Rather, it involves the integration of the military into a civilian political system with authoritarian features. Venezuela is undergoing a *sui generis* militarization of politics, in which the armed forces become a government instrument controlled increasingly by the president, raising the possibility of military confrontation.¹⁴ Democratic coexistence may well deteriorate, at the same time as the political role of the armed forces is emphasized and their influence in determining security policy increases.

Bolivia: Military, Police Face an Extreme Situation

On 10 October 1982, General Guido Vildoso Calderón turned power over to Hernán Siles Suazo, winner of the 1980 election, bringing to an end the series of dictatorships in Bolivia that commenced in 1964 with the regime of René Barrientos. After playing a key role in national life for so long, the military stayed out of politics

¹¹ Ana María San Juan, “La Agenda de Seguridad de Venezuela y mecanismos para su discusión plural,” ILDIS, Proyecto Cooperación en la seguridad andina. (Discussion paper) Caracas, 2005.

¹² Francine Jácome, “Cambios conceptuales e institucionales en seguridad: Venezuela frente al contexto andino y hemisférico (2000-2005)” (DRAFT).

¹³ Nelson Daniels, “Nuevos escenarios para un efectivo control democrático de las Fuerzas Armadas en la region andina. El caso venezolano,” in *Series: Democracy*, No. 9. Andean Commission of Jurists, Lima, 2004.

¹⁴ San Juan, *op. cit.*

during the subsequent two decades of democratic rule. However, particularly given the experience of other countries in the region, it should come as no surprise that, since 1982, Bolivia's political elite have not prioritized efforts to establish civilian control over the military and to assume responsibility for defense policymaking.

Bolivia's difficulties in redefining civil-military relations are part and parcel of the structural weakness of its political system, built on a long tradition of patronage, wealth, and privilege. Rather than creating conditions for civilian control through the primacy of public authority, there is in place a "pragmatic coexistence pact," subscribed to by all governments in varying degrees, depending on political talent and skill. The logic of this agreement is to establish mechanisms of reciprocity for the mutual benefit of the civilian leadership and the military, in order to ensure political stability.¹⁵

The Bolivian military is heavily involved in law enforcement. In this regard, their participation in the Zero Coca policy in the Chapare region was a landmark. Starting in 1998, over 2,000 personnel participated in coca eradication efforts. As the government struggled to meet eradication goals, practically every unit around the country had to provide personnel. The military have also been involved in public security, fighting smugglers, and above all, putting down growing civil unrest.

Unlike elsewhere in the Andean region, in Bolivia the national police, too, enjoys great autonomy from civilian authority, and are also engaged in an ongoing feud with the armed forces. The civilian leadership has generally turned a blind eye to their illicit,

arbitrary, or political actions. The national police also have a long history of breaking the rules, most recently in February 2003, when striking policemen demanding tax-free salaries clashed with the army, leaving more than thirty dead. The strike, initiated in response to an unfulfilled government pledge, ended in sedition as the policemen turned their guns on the presidential palace.

This set off the unrest that led to the fall of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Losada on 17 October 2003, following several weeks of violence between protestors and the armed forces that left about 60 dead and over 4,000 injured. Since then, the crisis has deepened. After failing to reconcile the forces in conflict, Carlos Mesa (Sánchez de Losada's vice president, who assumed office following his departure) was forced to resign in mid-2005. Supreme Court president Eduardo Rodríguez Veltzé took over as interim president and led Bolivia toward the December 2005 elections that Evo Morales, leader of the country's coca farmers, won decisively. Despite the euphoria over his victory, the problems that have rendered Bolivia practically ungovernable in recent years have not been resolved, and could well lead to renewed instability.

The social and economic motivations of Bolivia's coca-growing *campesinos*, indigenous leaders, and the disenfranchised underclasses of El Alto and La Paz are closely intertwined with ethnic issues, and their discourse is tinged with strongly nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments. The issue of ownership and exploitation of natural gas resources, in particular, has been central to the tensions that have wracked the country. These problems are complicated by growing discord between La Paz and the more affluent oil-producing eastern regions of Santa Cruz and Tarija.

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¹⁵ These arguments are developed in numerous articles by Juan Ramón Quintana, now minister of the presidency under Evo Morales. See, for instance, "Bolivia: militares y políticas. Fuego cruzado en democracia," in *Conflicting Memories: Aspects of Violence – Contemporary Policy*. La Paz, 2004.

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The future of Bolivia remains far from certain. Questions persist about the response of the military and the police should the crisis worsen, particularly if regional tensions continue to move the country toward territorial fragmentation. There are already indications that sectors within and outside the armed forces do not rule out military intervention. On 28 October 2005, General Carlos Delfin Meza, acting Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces, told the Santa Cruz daily *El Deber* that “the critical time the country is going through demands solutions that rise to the challenge of preventing territorial fragmentation; otherwise, the armed forces will enforce the Constitution.” According to the same newspaper, the military has asked that the Constitution and the law be used against Santa Cruz separatists gathering signatures in support of secessionist demands, and police commander David Aramayo acknowledged having been asked to lead a revolt in June, when Mesa resigned.

Colombia: The Weight of War

Colombia has experienced civil strife since its founding as an independent republic. The current conflict alone is over four decades old and ending it, by negotiation or by force, is, without a doubt, the government’s top priority. Still, Colombia boasts a long democratic tradition, with relatively solid institutions and separation of powers. While acute internal conflict is rarely compatible with functioning democratic institutions, in Colombia they coexist (although not without considerable tension). Civilians have controlled the Ministry of Defense since 1991. Compared to the rest of the Andean region, the issues are different—more intractable, perhaps, but certainly different.

An important factor in understanding the role of the armed forces in Colombia is its weak central government, outweighed by local powers and unable even to con-

trol the entirety of its national territory, let alone defeat insurgent groups. The weakness of the Colombian government and its minimal presence in large areas of the country compelled the military to take on key responsibilities related to internal security. It did so hampered by a chronic lack of funding, by the factional infighting so characteristic of politics in the country, and by perennial questions about the legitimacy of its endeavors.¹⁶

Government weakness also largely explains the rise of the drug trade and the role of paramilitary forces. In Colombia, counterinsurgency was not the exclusive domain of the state; in fact, drug barons often took the lead. This gave rise to a kind of centrifugal force: regional alliances between drug lords, cattle ranchers, and military officers became a major factor in the destabilization, evident in every government since the 1980s, of the Colombian state and its security apparatus.¹⁷

As a result, the Colombian military has neither had, nor sought, an explicitly political role, not even as the arbiter of national politics, as has occurred in other countries in the region. At the same time, it has enjoyed relative autonomy in the formulation and implementation of security policy,¹⁸ and enjoys special privilege when it comes to prosecution. Members involved in human rights crimes often enjoy high degrees of impunity.

¹⁶ Román D. Ortiz, “Las relaciones civiles-militares en Colombia: control democrático de las Fuerzas Armadas en el contexto de un conflicto interno,” in *Fragile Democracies: Civil-Military Relations in the Iberoamerican World*, edited by José A. Olmeda. Tirant lo Blanch and Instituto Universitario General Gutiérrez Mellado. Valencia, 2005.

¹⁷ Francisco Gutiérrez, “El escenario colombiano,” in *Series: Democracy*, No. 9. Andean Commission of Jurists, Lima, 2004.

¹⁸ Francisco Leal Buitrago, *El oficio de la Guerra: La seguridad nacional en Colombia*. Editores-IEPRI. Bogotá, 1994.

Colombian governments and society have alternatively favored military force and negotiation as the best way to end the internal conflict, though neither has succeeded in doing so. Save for the M-19 peace accord in 1989, negotiations in the past two decades have invariably failed. Whenever talks have broken down, public opinion and government policy shift overwhelmingly towards the use of force.

Historically, Colombia's armed forces have felt uncomfortable about negotiation. Peace talks held since 1982 under a wide range of circumstances have met with skepticism, distrust, and outright resistance by the military, especially when they have implied major concessions, such as those granted by President Belisario Betancourt in the 1980s or, more recently, by Andrés Pastrana, President Álvaro Uribe's predecessor. Pastrana tried to overcome the military's resistance through policies aimed at strengthening and professionalizing the armed forces.

The military's attitude to the peace process led by Pastrana revealed the extent of its subordination to civilian authority. Although the three-year process was not free from friction between civilian and military authorities, the armed forces did agree to the creation of a 42,000-square kilometer demilitarized zone as a confidence-building measure. Even when it became clear that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) were using the zone—and the reprieve afforded by the negotiations—to bolster their offensive capabilities, and to launch strikes, the military refrained from retaliatory sorties. Pastrana's peace bid eventually failed, despite massive concessions to the rebels, setting the stage for Uribe and his Democratic Security Policy.

Uribe assumed office with a clear electoral mandate to impose law and order by military means. He has at his disposal a significantly stronger military, one that has recovered from the defeats suffered at the hands of insurgent forces in previous years. Civil-military relations are thus especially dependent on how, and to what extent, President Uribe's security objectives are met. He has been particularly demanding—at times bitingly critical—of the military high command when he feels that not enough progress is being made. He has clashed with and upbraided military officers, most recently in December 2005, when he disavowed an Army account that troops had rescued fourteen hostages who were in fact released by the FARC.

Uribe's critics counter that the price of effective control of military performance is a lack of attention to human rights violations. They argue that even though Uribe has fired officers on the spot over lack of results and has gone as far as instructing generals as to specific military actions, he gives them free rein where human rights are concerned, either removing or weakening oversight mechanisms designed to protect Colombia's civilian population.

Uribe's relative success in addressing Colombia's security concerns largely explains his popularity and the viability of his 2006 reelection bid. Still, much remains to be done before the country's armed conflict and drug-related violence, which all but define civil-military relations, can be brought to an end.

A Pending Agenda

Bringing the armed forces of the Andean countries under the control of democratic, civilian authority in the context of stable institutions and rules is a task that remains, at best, unfinished. Most politicians in the region have lacked the courage

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or been unwilling to undertake the institutional and policy reforms necessary to make progress on this front. They have chosen to pretend that the armed forces are subordinate in order to make use of them, in return for significant budgetary and jurisdictional autonomy and the wherewithal to define defense and security policy free from any meaningful oversight by elected authorities.

One obstacle to much-needed reforms is the recurrent tendency to involve the armed forces in tasks other than those directly related to defense. Requiring the military to fight the drug trade (above all in Bolivia, but also in Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela), maintain citizen security (in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Venezuela) and public order (Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Peru), distorts their role. The same is true of military participation in development, relief, and poverty alleviation efforts (most notably in Ecuador and Venezuela). Additional duties generate demands for additional prerogatives and privilege, further diminishing the ability of civilian authorities to assert their supremacy over the military and undermining the goal of a truly professional military and police force. This is particularly so in situations such as Venezuela's, where military participation in non-military activities is an essential part of a system with clearly authoritarian traits, where the regime is defined by its alliance with the armed forces.

Perhaps the most crucial issue confronting the Andean region is the discrediting of the political elite and democratic institutions, revealed in a restive population and agitated demonstrations capable of deciding the course of politics in a matter of days—if not hours. In this charged atmosphere, the role of the armed forces as arbiters of or actors in national politics has indisputably grown. The clearest example is Ecuador, whose armed forces have played a decisive role in deciding the course of political events. In Bolivia, too, the military's role in politics is growing, and will probably continue to, unless a solution to the country's crisis of governance is quickly found.

Military reform, then, remains part of the Andean region's pending agenda. Even in Peru, where the fall of Fujimori in 2000 created propitious conditions to tackle the issue, progress has been limited, due mainly to the government's lack of resolve and its swift slide into crisis and disrepute. Unfortunately, the weaker the political elite and democratic institutions are, the greater their real or perceived reliance on the armed forces is, and, therefore, the fewer the possibilities of meaningful reform. Not undertaking these reforms, however, can only increase the vulnerability of Andean democracies, thereby propagating yet another hard-to-break vicious cycle.

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