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A New Dawn for Latin American Militaries: Across the region, militarization is on the rise, posing a major threat to democracy and justice. What can be done?

Brett J. Kyle and Andrew G. Reiter

On July 26, 2018, thousands of protesters, led by the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, marched in Argentina to oppose President Mauricio Macri's plans to empower the military to engage in domestic policing. In a country where a military regime killed thousands of civilians between 1976 and 1983, the prospect of the military on the streets again has opened old wounds and incited a heated debate. Macri defended the change, which was implemented by two executive decrees, as being necessary to enable Argentina to face the security challenges of the 21st century, including drug trafficking and terrorism.

The move is not a surprise. Diminished in size, underpaid, and without a clear role in society, the Argentine military has grown disgruntled in recent years. Macri campaigned on a promise to improve conditions for the armed forces, and has already implemented a 20 percent salary increase in an effort to close the gap in pay between the military, the police, and gendarmerie, while the military has welcomed the proposed expansion of its role. Traditionally the military is responsible for fighting wars and responding to external threats, the police for policing civilian populations, and the gendarmerie for border enforcement. These distinctions, however, are growing blurred.

The developments in Argentina are just part of the frightening trend of expanding military power across

Latin America. Persistent security challenges, such as gang violence and drug trafficking, are so extensive and so transnational in nature that police forces are having difficulty coping. Mounting public pressure for results in combating these problems has led elected civilian governments to turn to their militaries, despite the dangers of empowering the armed forces with internally-focused duties.

The shadow of the military dictatorships across Latin America in the 20th century should inform today's political leaders. Especially during the Cold War, militaries

routinely acted as the ultimate decision-makers in national politics who overthrew governments, suppressed political activity, and committed widespread human rights abuses. These regimes relied on violent repression to maintain power, including coordinating their use of state terror through Operation Condor, the multinational secret alliance among military dictatorships in South America.

Rushing to empower militaries today breaks down hard-won safeguards against repeating the abuses of the past. This has opened a Pandora's box, and quietly but steadily the military has grown larger and more sophisticated, broadened its mission, and gained significant political influence. Today, the military enjoys a position of power in the region not seen since the Cold War, with dangerous implications for human rights and democracy.

Growth and Domestic Policing

When new democratic governments came to power in the wake of the Cold War, military political influence was significantly curtailed. Responding to the recent atrocities committed by the military, the new governments radically reduced the militaries in size, slashed their budgets, and subjected them to increased civilian oversight. Facing few external threats and with internal security now handled by civilian police, most militaries became a shell of their former selves. In addition, civilian governments revoked many of the amnesties passed as part of democratic transitions, opening the possibility of trying and imprisoning members of the military for past human rights abuses.

In the last two decades, however, successes in reining in military power have been reversed. Latin America's militaries have steadily grown to levels not seen since the 1980s. The militaries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have grown by more than 20 percent since their post-Cold War lows. The Brazilian, Bolivian, Mexican, and Venezuelan militaries have at least doubled in size. Colombia's military has quadrupled, from 175,000 troops in 1990 to 336,000 today. The rest of the region's militaries have grown in size by an average of 35 percent. At the same time, they have acquired more sophisticated weaponry and become increasingly specialized, with most countries maintaining an array of special forces units trained by the United States.

A widespread increase in crime, gang violence, and drug trafficking has in part driven this growth. In an attempt to stem the flow of illegal arms and drugs, countries have heavily militarized their borders and regularly conduct joint military operations with neighboring countries. Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay work together to police the tri-border region [explored in more detail throughout this issue.] Peru and Bolivia closely cooperate to combat narco trafficking. In March, a newly-formed dissident faction of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebel group kidnapped and later killed

three Ecuadorian journalists, prompting the Ecuadorian government to send 10,000 troops to the border.

While labeled as border operations, these practices often begin well before one reaches the border, effectively providing militaries with policing powers over large swaths of their countries and bringing them into regular contact with civilians. In January, for example, Brazil activated the new 22nd Jungle Infantry Brigade to protect its northern border with Guyana, French Guiana, and Suriname. But the force also has jurisdiction over the entire states of Maranhão, Amapá, and large parts of Pará near the coast. In many other countries, including the United States, military border patrols also extend far into the interior.

Targeting areas of drug cultivation also grants the military control over large rural areas. Following the recent peace agreement with the FARC, ending a half-century of civil war, Colombia's military is being retooled and redeployed to intensify its fight against drug traffickers, including the Gulf Clan cartel, which has grown significantly in strength. In January 2018, the government deployed the 9,000-troop Hercules task force, the largest military unit activated in two decades, to the department of Nariño, where the majority of the country's coca is grown.

Similarly, for Peru, persistent problems such as narcotrafficking and combating remnants of the Shining Path insurgency have renewed the military's internal security mission. The military's primary duty is external security, but it also has a domestic role, especially in the Valley of the Apurimac, Ene, and Montero Rivers (VRAEM) emergency zone, where the military, not the civilian Peruvian National Police (PNP) are responsible for security.

Military presence in urban environments in Latin America is also expanding. As regular police forces find themselves outgunned by well-organized gangs and drug syndicates, the military has displaced the police in internal security. The mandate of the military, however, is to fight enemies of the state through applying violence, not to protect and serve civilian populations, a mandate of policing. For example, military personnel played a lead role in Brazil's "pacification" policy in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro in 2008, and military presence expanded further when the country hosted the 2014

World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games. The establishment of a Ministry for Public Security in February 2018, led by an army general, has further institutionalized the military's mission in day-to-day policing. That same month, the government also authorized a federal intervention in Rio de Janeiro, and over 4,000 members of the military now operate in the city.

Jair Bolsonaro, the controversial new president, boasts rhetoric that extols the use of unrestrained force in the fight against street crime. In his first week of office alone, Bolsonaro appointed six active or former members of the military to his cabinet, giving

the institution more political influence than it has had since it governed the country in the 1980 s. In January, he deployed troops to Fortaleza and ten other cities across the state of Caerá in response to a rise in gang violence.

Meanwhile, in Mexico, then-President Felipe Calderón first deployed the military to fight drug gangs in 2006, and it now operates in 27 of Mexico's 32 states. The 2017 Law on Internal Security strengthened the military's role in policing, going so far as to “subordinate civilian law enforcement operations to military authority in some instances.” Under this law, the military was granted new powers, including the ability to conduct its own investigations. It also classified information on military operations, thereby restricting civilian oversight. In November 2018, the Supreme Court ruled this law to be unconstitutional on the grounds that it was too ambiguous in defining the appropriate use of force. Mexico's internal security questions will continue dominating the political debate as the new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), finds his footing in office. The Supreme Court ruling came just hours after he announced his own security plan, which looked very similar to that of the outgoing administration, with army and navy personnel deployed in policing duties across the country.

Using the military for domestic policing carries significant risks. As highly lethal and insular forces, militaries are more likely to use deadly force and operate with little oversight. Nowhere is this more visible than in the Northern Triangle of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, which have some of the highest crime and murder rates in the world. The region's largest gangs—the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18—are estimated to have as many as 85,000 members combined. In response, countries have militarized the problem. In 2016, El Salvador created a new military task force, equipped with helicopters and assault weapons, to fight criminal gangs. In 2018, an investigation revealed that senior members of the Salvadoran military were operating a secret death squad to execute suspected gang members, raising the ghosts of military abuses during the country's civil war.

Public Pressure and Civilian Empowerment

In contrast to much of the military behavior of the 20th century that Latin American countries have sought to put behind them, in this new era of remilitarization, it is often democratically-elected leaders themselves who are looking to the military for solutions to intractable national problems, often at the behest of the civilian population.

As countries democratized in the 1980 s, citizens had high expectations that quality of life would improve under democracy, but many elected governments performed poorly in the ensuing years. Neoliberal economic policies have led to increased inequality and poverty, while corruption is rampant and many citizens fear for their safety. The majority of respondents across the region feel that their country is “governed

for the benefit of the powerful” and disapprove of how the government of the day is running their countries, according to a 2017 survey by the polling organization Latinobarómetro. Asked to identify the most important problem facing their country, crime tops the list for almost every country, with unemployment and corruption typically close behind. In El Salvador, over half of respondents said they are concerned about being a victim of a violent crime all or almost all of the time. In Brazil, that figure is 68%.

Civilian politicians must respond to public demand if they are to stay in office, and failures in performance imperil democracy itself. In an environment of high crime rates, gang violence, and poor public security, citizens may be ready to defect from democracy entirely. Latinobarómetro consistently finds that sizable numbers of respondents feel ambivalent about democracy. In 2016, 23% believed regime type did not matter and a further 15% felt that “under certain circumstances, authoritarian government can be preferable to a democratic one.”

In countries facing the most intense problems with violent crime, dissatisfaction with democracy is even more severe. In Brazil and the Northern Triangle countries, nearly 60% say they “wouldn't mind a non-democratic government in power if it could resolve problems.” This data alone suggests how a figure like Bolsonaro was able to connect with sizable numbers of Brazilian voters in the 2018 presidential campaign through authoritarian-style appeals and promises to meet national challenges with violence.

The military, in contrast, enjoys much higher rates of confidence. Despite the dark histories of military rule, the military is often the most-trusted national institution in Latin American countries. For example, 55% of Brazilians express “a lot ” or “some” confidence in the military according to Latinobarómetro; in Mexico that number is nearly 60%. In Guatemala, the gap in public confidence is most striking. Support for the military (44%) is nearly double that of the civilian police (24%). Latinobarómetro reveals that citizens perceive civilian police and judiciaries to be corrupt and ineffective. The public is thus increasingly demanding that the government look to the military to solve major social problems.

No case better illustrates this pattern than Uruguay. The government reported a 66% increase in homicides in the first half of 2018 from the same period the previous year, with blame attributed to an increasingly active network of criminal groups. The government plans to expand the budget for security operations, and in May it authorized the military to engage in domestic policing operations on the border. So far, President Tabaré Vázquez has resisted efforts to expand the jurisdiction of the military any further. In May, he denied a request by the mayor of Lavalleja to deploy the military, proclaiming that “Uruguay is not in a situation of war.”

Yet public pressure is mounting. In a recent poll, three out of four Uruguayans support allowing the military to work with the police to combat crime. Nationalist senator Jorge Larrañaga's “Live Without Fear” campaign gathered over 375,000 signatures to

force a plebiscite on a series of anti-crime measures, including one that would create a new National Guard composed of military personnel that would work in conjunction with police in an internal security role.

Militarization: A Bipartisan Consensus

As security challenges mount, the drive to use the military transcends conventional left-right political divisions. In El Salvador, both the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and left-wing Faribundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) governments have turned to the armed forces in the fight against crime and gang violence. The 1992 peace accords, which ended El Salvador's civil war, mandated police reform and an end to the use of the military in domestic policing operations. Yet in 1995, the ARENA government empowered the armed forces with a renewed police support role, especially in patrolling rural areas, through a presidential executive order. By 2000, the military mission included Joint Task Groups with police in the counter-narcotics fight.

When the left-wing FMLN won a majority in Congress for the first time in 2003, these military practices continued. In September 2004, the government created the Anti-Gang Task Force, which deployed military personnel to high crime areas. This deployment grew from 333 military personnel in its first year to over 5,000 by 2009. The FMLN presidencies of Mauricio Funes (2009-2014) and Salvador Sánchez Cerén (2014-present) have continued these practices, renewing the executive decree each year that allows military personnel to take on domestic policing duties. The capital of San Salvador itself is now militarized, with the regular deployment of the military to conduct policing operations.

Tellingly, the most effective policy aimed at reducing violence in the country was not military activity but rather the temporary ceasefire between the two largest gangs in March 2012, facilitated covertly by members of the government. While the truce held over approximately the next 18 months, the murder rate dropped dramatically. After it unraveled, the Funes administration unsuccessfully doubled down on military-based strategies to reduce crime.

Mexico's experience similarly reveals a bipartisan consistency in the domestic use of the armed forces. While the Mexican presidency saw transfers of power between the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party (PAN) from 2000 until this year, the military has played a law enforcement role and has had internal deployments, especially in Chiapas and Guerrero states in the 1990s and more broadly with the full militarization of the drug war in the 2000s. Moreover, though Andrés Manuel López Obrador of the MORENA party was seen as an outsider with the

potential to bring a new approach to the anti-drug fight, he looks set to continue using the military in this manner.

Transfers of power in Honduras between the Liberal Party and the National Party also demonstrate the entrenchment of domestic military missions. Honduras made important strides in the late 1990s toward asserting civilian control over the armed forces while simultaneously professionalizing and demilitarizing the national police. In response to rising crime in the early 2000s, however, the military was deployed in a law enforcement role and by 2002 “nearly half of all military personnel were assigned continuously to joint patrols with police,” noted a 2003 U.S. State Department memo. When President Manuel Zelaya came into office in 2006, these practices continued.

By 2013, four years after Zelaya was ousted in a parliamentary coup, the government of Porfirio Lobo created the Military Police of the Public Order (PMOP), whose operations must be formally approved by civilian officials but whose ranks are filled by military personnel that answer to the military chain of command. PMOP personnel have been implicated in numerous abuses, including arbitrary detention and kidnapping.

Politicians like Evo Morales, the famed first Indigenous president of Bolivia, have also used the military to break up protests, and it now takes part in border enforcement alongside police. And while Ecuador has had a long succession of presidents of different political tendencies from the 1990s to present, each one has maintained the use of the armed forces for internal security. A 2014 constitutional amendment directly empowered the military to “intervene in domestic security,” which further institutionalized the military's internal role.

Mission Creep

While the general public supports deploying the military to combat other armed actors to a large degree, doing so has had the unintended consequence of making the military available as a tool for addressing non-security issues. The military is increasingly used to advance the political and economic interests of the state and transnational corporations, further undermining democracy itself. Across Latin America, the criminalization of protest, enforced by the military, speaks to this problem. In Guatemala, in October 2012, a joint police and military response to a protest against increases in electricity costs left six people dead and another 34 wounded when soldiers fired on the crowd in Totonicapán. In May 2018, military action stopped a nationwide truckers' strike in Brazil.

The problem is especially acute when protests pose an obstacle to mining and other extractive industries, where the military often provides security directly for corporations, as Maiah Jaskoski has written. In late 2016, the Ecuadorian government deployed the

military to evict Indigenous Shuar from their ancestral homes to allow a Chinese mining company to gain access. Protests and attacks against the military and police led the government to declare a state of emergency in the province, granting the military more authority to restore order. In Honduras, for over a year the community of Pajuiles successfully blocked the Hidrocep company from entering the area to construct a hydroelectric dam along the Mezapa River. In May 2018, however, the government deployed the elite Tigres and Cobras special forces to the region to break up the protests and allow machinery and company personnel to travel to the site and begin work.

Other countries have gone further. Rather than calling in the military when situations get out of control, they have tasked the military with regularly monitoring and protecting important infrastructure and assets. Bolivia uses its military to protect natural gas pipelines, and in neighboring Peru, the government declared the country's only oil pipeline a "strategic asset" and now tasks the military with protecting it from vandals.

In a recent interview with *Diálogo*, the head of the Peruvian Army, General César Augusto Astudillo Salcedo, sums up the trend well: "Not long ago, we only had one mission, one main task, which was a conflict scenario on a battlefield ... However, the threats have changed now, and we went from having one mission to having 11." These missions include such non-traditional tasks as combatting illegal logging and deforestation. Paraguay's military was deployed domestically in 2013 initially to combat the rising threat of the Paraguayan People's Army, a Marxist guerrilla in insurgency, but its mandate now includes preventing cattle theft.

During the Cold War, in many cases militaries took up the fight against communist "subversion" and embraced neoliberal economic development schemes that privileged capital interests over public needs, of ten with the encouragement and support of the United States. The use of the military today to displace people to make way for large infrastructure projects and to suppress protests in favor of furthering the interests of transnational corporations recalls the military-oligarch alliances of 20th century Central America and the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the Southern Cone. Twentieth-century militaries were key to upholding the highly concentrated landholding in Central America, with military-run state parties substituting for genuine political competition and militaries being used to enforce prohibitions on rural organizing. In the Southern Cone dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, militaries similarly were central to the "coup coalitions"—along with technocrats and capital interests—that overthrew civilian governments and instituted military dictatorships committed to neoliberal economic models, which especially sought to roll back workers' rights and to neutralize labor as a political force. Seeing militaries take an overt economic role in today's Latin America is a troubling echo of these past struggles.

As military missions themselves expand, armed forces are being granted sweeping legal powers to operate with impunity. The Brazilian military, for example, has pushed for more freedom to oversee its own operations as the government increasingly relies on it to police urban areas. In late 2017, the Ministry of Defense publicly made the case that allowing civilian courts to handle cases involving the military would hinder policing operations. Its Congress subsequently passed Law No. 13.491, which gives military courts jurisdiction over any of their personnel accused of human rights violations. Colombia passed a similar bill in 2015, shifting jurisdiction for most crimes committed by members of the military to military courts.

Allowing the armed forces to sit in judgment of its own cases can lead the military to shield its personnel from accountability for alleged crimes. Military courts can mete out more lenient punishment to its members, subverting justice and nurturing a culture of impunity. With such systems in place, military personnel in the field act with less restraint, knowing that they are unlikely to face accountability for abuses of power. Fundamentally, military judgment of military actions is a conflict of interest that contradicts the idea that no one can be their own judge, an essential principle of the rule of law.

Even where civilian judicial oversight still exists, militaries are granted significant leeway in how they carry out their operations. In El Salvador, for example, a 2015 directive authorized members of the military and police to shoot gang members if threatened, without any legal consequences. Across the region, militaries now have broad missions related to domestic security and operate with little oversight, leading to increased human rights violations against civilians.

The Past and Future of Militarism in Latin America

While this growth in military power would be worrisome in any context, it is particularly dangerous for Latin America given its troubled history of civil-military relations. The military has traditionally been a major political player in the region, and by bestowing renewed prestige and independence upon it, governments today are playing with fire.

The period since the end of the Cold War, which has fully subordinated military officials to elected civilian officials, represents a hard-fought exception in Latin American history. In the 19th and 20th centuries, militaries across the region followed an ethos of loyalty to near-mythical *patria* (“fatherland”), seeing themselves as national guardians who were above political leaders and would step in to reset political systems when they deemed it necessary. For example, Ecuador's José Velasco Ibarra was elected to the presidency no fewer than five times from the 1930s through the 1960s, but only successfully served one complete term due to military interventions. Argentina's military

similarly clashed with populist leader Juan Perón, ultimately removing him from office in 1955 and outlawing the Peronist party for the next 18 years.

Moreover, the countries that faced widespread internal conflicts also experienced the most volatile civil-military relations, because militaries came to blame the civilian leadership for allowing domestic insurgencies to develop and fester. Far from unifying against a common foe, internal threats divided civilian and military leaders. The intensity of today's security challenges similarly endangers civil-military relations when militaries use their enhanced visibility to publicly denounce civilian politicians. Brazilian Army General Antonio Hamilton Mourão sparked controversy in September 2017 when he suggested that military intervention in government might be necessary if corruption is not brought under control. And in August 2018, in a high-profile speech on *Dia do Soldado* (Soldier's Day), General Eduardo Villa Bôas condemned civilian politicians for their ineffective leadership and complained that the military seemed to be the only institution committed to solving the country's public security crisis. The fact that these grievances are being aired publicly, as pointed criticisms of civilian government performance, demonstrates the pressure democratically-elected leaders face to take action and to deliver results, even if that pushes them to further empower the armed forces.

Conflicts between civilian and military leadership in the contemporary era underscore the challenges faced by young democracies with politically active militaries. No country illustrates this danger more than Honduras. In 2009, after a prolonged crisis over a proposed referendum for constitutional reform, the military removed President Zelaya from office and sent him into exile in Costa Rica. The coup d'état demonstrated the Honduran military's ability to decide the composition of government, placing it above the democratic processes that put Zelaya or his congressional rivals in office. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the coup, the interim government empowered the military to detain citizens, which resulted in numerous cases of excessive force and arbitrary detention. In subsequent years, state violence against citizens has increased, including the murder of at least 18 activists, while impunity for these actions has reigned. Each election cycle since the 2009 coup has seen significant protests, and the military has been employed to counter them. Following the December 2017 election, widely believed to be fraudulent, the Honduran military enforced a curfew and security forces killed at least 16 people in the following months.

A similar story of military political decision-making played out in Ecuador. The irregular end to the presidencies of Abdalá Bucaram in 1997, Jamil Mahuad in 2000, and Lucio Gutiérrez in 2005 all shared the common refrain that "the military withdrew its support" for their tenure in office. For each president, in the face of street protests and congressional opposition, the military rendered its judgment and sealed their fate. Gutiérrez, who himself rose to prominence as a rebellious army officer in the 2000

Indigenous uprising that unseated Mahuad, saw that his presidency was at an end when the head of the armed forces held a press conference withdrawing their support for him.

The role of militaries as king-makers in Latin America should concern everyone, as it directly contradicts the principles of popular sovereignty, the rule of law, and the hard-fought gains of democratic consolidation in the region. If militaries ultimately hold the destiny of governments in their hands, then electoral participation and competition mean very little.

In Venezuela, the situation is at its most extreme. The military controls the fate of the country. Both President Maduro and his opposition are aware of the importance of whose side the military is on. In January 2019, Juan Guaidó, the head of the National Assembly, declared the Maduro presidency constitutionally invalid and assumed the role of leader of an interim government. Guaidó has called on the military to support his claim to leadership and has reportedly held private talks with military officials to bring them over to his side.

With economic conditions at an all-time low, military discontent is at an all-time high. A foiled coup attempt in March 2018 was the most sophisticated so far, led by seven generals who combined controlled over 60 percent of the country's military. The United States has openly called for the military to oust President Nicolás Maduro and take control. Maduro has responded by arresting and imprisoning hundreds of members of the military on rebellion and other charges.

Rather than attempt to deter the military, however, Maduro has focused most of his efforts on attempting to buy its loyalty. Active or retired members of the military run 10 government ministries, including the Ministry of Agricultural Production and Lands and the Ministry of Electric Energy. The military controls a vast array of state and private enterprises and nearly all of Venezuela's food distribution programs. In December 2017, his administration put the military in charge of the state-owned oil company. In a large, public ceremony in June 2018, Maduro promoted 16,900 soldiers for their "loyalty" to the state.

Finally, the evolving crisis in Nicaragua likewise illustrates the expectation that the armed forces will be the one to set the political course of the country. In the wake of protests beginning in April 2018, the military has largely stayed out of the fray, holding on to its apolitical image crafted since 1990. President Daniel Ortega has instead relied on police and organized pro-government paramilitary groups to attack protesters and suppress dissent. Political actors in the country, however, clearly see the military as having a decision-making role, because in justifying its anti-interventionist stance, the army has weighed in on the events, voicing a preference for dialogue between the Ortega government and protesters. Most recently, the opposition has called on the military to break its silence and to curtail the paramilitaries. The military's potential

intervention is an important part of each side's strategic calculations and suggests a powerful political role for the institution.

Here to Stay

The military is back and here to stay. The institution benefits from a natural association with patriotism, and many view it today as a last bastion of defense against criminals who threaten the state. With corruption rampant and economies floundering, there is widespread nostalgia for the days when the military was perceived to have maintained order. Public support for the military will remain high so long as these societal problems persist.

But as politicians and business leaders come to rely on the military to remain in office and safely extract resources, they allow it to become a political actor again, with frightening implications. Militaries will increasingly influence elections and crack down on dissent to maintain their privileges. The region's history has demonstrated the difficulty of taking power and influence away from the military once it has gained it. It has most often taken a catastrophic event—defeat in an external war, economic crisis, or revelations of large-scale human rights violations—to reassert civilian control.

The only hope of avoiding such a scenario is for civilian politicians to effectively address violence, crime, and inequality through a democratic, public process, without succumbing to corruption or militarized policies. Sustained efforts that lead to real results could make the military less necessary and weaken public support for its involvement in politics—a task easier said than done.

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