Latin America: Military Strongmen Just Fading Away

By Andrew Reding

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For the first time since the Spanish conquest, the military is losing its privileged status across much of Latin America. From Brazil and the Southern Cone to Honduras, economic modernization, the end of the Cold War and the spread of a human-rights ethic are contributing to a sea change in attitudes. Military budgets are being slashed, public inquiries into past military abuses are being launched and once-untouchable generals are being hauled into court.

The changes are not, however, universal. In a half-dozen countries, the military remains well entrenched. In some cases, its budget and role are expanding. Significantly, though, this is happening in countries with sharp ethnic divides.

Leading the way in marginalizing the military are the economic powerhouses Brazil and Argentina. Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem have both called on their citizens to forget past military abuses. Capitalizing on the goodwill these promptings have created in military circles, the two leaders have slashed military appropriations without provoking an outcry.

As the armed forces are downsized to trim budget deficits and improve the countries’ standing with foreign investors, their influence diminishes further, making them more vulnerable to challenges by civil society, which itself is gaining strength as a result of economic reforms reducing the state’s role in the economy. In Brazil, Cardoso had to abandon his choice of a new federal police chief after a priest testified that the president’s nominee had supervised his torture in 1970. In Argentina, where Menem pardoned former military rulers for their roles in the “dirty war” of the 1970s, lawsuits by families of victims have led to new arrests and trials. Nine retired officers, including onetime junta leaders Gen. Jorge Rafael Videla and Adm. Emilio Massera, face charges of child stealing, a category not included in Menem’s 1990 amnesty.

In neighboring Chile, international human-rights law is fostering a comparable transformation in the military’s standing. The arrest last October of Gen. Augusto Pinochet in Britain, which shattered the myth of his invincibility, emboldened civil
institutions to reassert a degree of authority over the military not seen since the overthrow of leftist President Salvador Allende in 1973. Last month, Chile’s supreme court ruled that an army general and four other officers could be tried for the disappearance of 19 Allende sympathizers. As in Argentina, the court seized on a loophole in a 1978 amnesty: So long as the military fails to account for the disappeared, the court ruled, they remain “kidnapped,” a crime not covered by the amnesty. This puts the army in the embarrassing position of either having to admit it lied to the public for a quarter century or risk having its top brass go to jail.

Were that not humiliation enough, opinion polls show Ricardo Lagos as the odds-on favorite to be elected president this December, which would mark a return to a more moderate, free-market-friendly version of Allende’ Socialist Party. With numerous domestic lawsuits being filed against Pinochet, and with Lagos saying he favors placing the former dictator on trial in Chile, Pinochet may have little to cheer about even if he evades the courtroom in Spain. Lagos is also vowing to amend the constitution to remove six senate seats reserved for the military, including one held by Pinochet, which provides him immunity from prosecution.

Even Paraguay, long a military stronghold, has its first true civilian government. In March, Congress, backed by thousands of peasants and students, forced the resignation of a president who was little more than a stand-in for Gen. Lino Oviedo, who was imprisoned after leading an unsuccessful coup in 1996. Paraguay now has its first coalition government, ending 52 years of one-party rule and military government.

Panama and Haiti have abolished their armed forces outright, following the example set by Costa Rica in 1949. In both cases, U.S. intervention paved the way for their actions by overcoming each country’s military establishments.

In Brazil, the position of defense minister has been turned over to a civilian. In Honduras, the legislature voted unanimously to transfer command of the formerly autonomous armed forces to the president and a newly appointed civilian defense minister.

In countries where military authority and influence remain strong, there tend to be large indigenous populations. With the end of the Cold War, ethnicity has replaced ideology as a prime source of conflict. In Latin America, with its common Iberian and Catholic heritage, the major ethnic split is between indigenous peasant communities and the Iberianized ladino communities that have long controlled national governments. Political exclusion and economic marginalization have bred extreme inequalities, exacerbating ethnic tensions.

In Peru, Bolivia and Guatemala, where indigenous peoples are in the majority, ruling elites fear that democracy could lead their countries down the path taken by South Africa. In Mexico and Colombia, where most of the native populations have been assimilated in a mestizo culture, a chasm separates the city from the countryside. It’s as if there are two nations in one country: one white, prosperous, educated and urban; the other, brown, poor, illiterate and rural. Nowhere is this more evident than in Colombia, where rebels practically rule the countryside but have scant support in the cities. Another source of instability in Mexico and Colombia is that the two countries have become home bases for the hemisphere’s most powerful drug cartels.
In all these countries, fear of the indigenous underclass demanding greater political and economic participation has pushed elites into the arms of the military. It’s a gamble that will probably buy security in the short term—at a high price. In Peru, President Alberto Fujimori has stamped out guerrilla revolts but at the cost of democracy itself. Relying on the army, he dismissed congress and the supreme court and silenced a free press. He is now barring a former president from challenging him in his effort to secure a third term.

Colombia’s president, Andres Pastrana, is more of a risk-taker. He understands that urban-rural friction and large military budgets impede modernization and participation in the global economy. That’s one reason he brought the chairman of the New York Stock Exchange to his country in June to meet with a commander of the largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. In effect, he was saying to Colombia’s urban elites that if the NYSE can talk to the rebels, why can’t they? Yet, for peace to come to Colombia, the rebels will have to become less intransigent. The primary purpose of Washington’s huge increase in military aid to Bogota is to buttress the government’s bargaining position vis-à-vis the rebels. The drug war provides a convenient cover for this aid, primarily because the rebels rely on “drug taxes” to buy weapons.

Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo is taking a middle path. He knows that instability in southern Mexico spooks investors. But because the southern states are among the last bastions of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, he is reluctant to do anything that would weaken the party’s hold there, further jeopardizing its chances in next year’s presidential election. So the military budget continues to grow, as do reports of human rights abuses from the heavily militarized states of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero.

A second reason for Mexico’s increased reliance on the military is its war on drugs. Unable to reform a corrupt federal police, Zedillo has turned to the army to do the job, with the unfortunate side effect of exposing the army to greater corruption.

Still, the longer-term outlook is more promising. Democracy is taking hold at all levels—municipal, state and federal—of Mexican government as elections are cleaned up. One consequence is that institutions once sheltered from public scrutiny, such as the armed forces, are now held more accountable. For example, the truth about the 1968 massacre of students in Mexico City has finally emerged: The shots that triggered the army’s assault on the students came not from radical agitators, as the government has long maintained, but from plainclothes army snipers acting on the command of the general who headed the presidential guard. Already, politicians are citing the June revelations in calling for more civilian controls over the armed forces.

Civil society is well on its way to taming the military on Latin America’s southern flank. If reformers can prevail on the northern flank, the ghost of the colonial fuero—the military exemption from civil law—will at last fade into history, confirming the birth of a modern Latin America.

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