

Historical Solutions for Contemporary Problems

Lessons for Civilian Control of the Venezuelan Military

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“Some events deserve notice because they are unremarkable. The democratic succession in Venezuela, for example,” wrote a contributor to the *New York Times* in December 1983 in a piece entitled “Democracy, as Usual, in Caracas.”¹ Jaime Lusinchi had just been announced the victor in the Venezuelan presidential election, the sixth elected leader since the country embarked on its democratic experiment in 1958 and “turned away from the rule of mobs [and] tyrants.”² Venezuela was then considered among the wealthiest, most stable democracies in Latin America. Times, of course, have changed. Today, Venezuelans suffer a nationwide economic collapse which has left millions in poverty and caused millions more to flee the country in what is becoming the “fastest-growing refugee migrant crisis in Latin American history.”³ Venezuela’s economic decline owes its roots to the early 2000s erosion of its democratic norms and the rise of populist-authoritarian leaders whose systematic mismanagement of vital national resources and misguided socialist policies bankrupted national coffers. What has enabled Venezuela’s undemocratic shift? The armed forces. Once commanding public respect and occupying a clearly circumscribed role in Venezuelan society, the armed forces have since come to encroach on civilian life in ways that transgress traditional civil-military boundaries, thereby protecting the mandate of the current regime.

Since the early nineteenth century Bolivarian struggles for independence, the armed forces have enjoyed a prominent role in Venezuelan state governance and public perception. Exalted as the liberators from Spanish oppression, military officers held a national mandate to govern under the banners of various liberal and conservative parties. By 1899, José Cipriano Castro’s *Revolución Liberal Restauradora* (Liberal Restoration Revolution) heralded the ascendancy of a new order of military strongmen, or *caudillos*, whose dictatorships stifled the dying embers of civilian democratic participation.⁴ Under the leadership of Juan Vicente Gómez (1908–1935), Eleazar López Contreras (1935–1941), Isaías Medina Angarita (1941–1945), and Marcos Pérez Jiménez (1952–1958), the military professionalized and modernized.⁵ Excluding its aversion to the security services erected by military leaders to stifle internal dissent—the most infamous of which included Gómez’s *La Sagrada* and Pérez Jiménez’s *Seguridad Nacional*—the public was largely supportive of the armed forces and viewed them as a stabilizing national

force.⁶ Under the *Junta Militar de Gobierno* (1958) and *Punto Fijo* administration of Venezuela's first democratically elected president, Rómulo Betancourt (1959–1964), a series of legal reforms were promulgated with the goal of ensuring the preservation of Venezuelan democratic principles and civilian control over the military. Until 1998, successor administrations had sought to fortify and expand upon those reforms.

As Venezuela approaches 200 years of independence, it finds itself under another military dictatorship, governing under a veneer of democratic accountability and with a greater purview over civil administration than ever before. Under the Hugo Chávez Frías and Nicolás Maduro Moros administrations, the role of the *Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana* (FANB; National Bolivarian Armed Forces of Venezuela) transformed from one of national defense to one of national development and state and corporate leadership. Beginning with the launch of *Plan Bolívar 2000*, the FANB has devoted resources and personnel to state infrastructure construction, food distribution, and health care implementation, among other social welfare *misiones*.⁷ Current and former FANB officers staff prominent political roles in the cabinet and ministries and are overwhelmingly represented at the local levels of governance, occupying 11 of 23 state governorships.⁸ Military officers are deeply embedded in the senior management of Venezuela's state-run enterprises, including its most profitable: national oil company *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PDVSA)*.⁹ The pervasiveness of the FANB in the Venezuelan public sector has facilitated their embezzlement of state funds and engagement in illicit narcotics trafficking through the *Cártel de Los Soles* criminal network.¹⁰ In short, President Maduro's administration, mired in accusations of illegitimacy following vote tampering and dubious election results, survives with the support of senior level officers.

Since 2017, the international community has led efforts to oust Maduro through comprehensive and multilaterally enforced sanctions programs, diplomatic recognition of a parallel government headed by Juan Guaidó, and aggressive US Department of Justice (DOJ) legal actions. This year, the US State Department (DoS) issued a detailed framework for peace, timed to coincide with US naval exercises in the Caribbean.¹¹ Despite international pressures, however, the Maduro regime has remained in power.

A return to democratic normalcy and the reduction of the role of the armed forces in state governance will require a reapplication of old tactics, adapted to modern times. Brookings Institute Senior Fellow Harold Trinkunas, in *Crafting Civilian Control of the Military in Venezuela* (2005), outlines the changing civil-military dynamic in Venezuela following the Pérez Jiménez regime. Civilian leaders, Trinkunas argues, consolidated the newborn democracy and protected it from military encroachment through the sidelining of senior military figures, alternat-

ing divide-and-conquer and appeasement reforms, and the civilian identification of a military mission.¹² Despite the slow erosion of these civilian safeguards, exacerbated under Presidents Chávez and Maduro, aspects of them remain as relevant today as they were in 1958. A twenty-first century adaptation of these historic methods for civilian control of the military might succeed, where internal struggle and external pressure have thus far failed, in returning Venezuela to a civilian-led, democratic state. Indeed, the formation and subsequent breakdown of effective mechanisms for civilian control of the Venezuelan military from 1958 to the present, viewed through the lens of Trinkunas's framework for democratic consolidation, lend historical precedent to the implementation of similar policies in these analogous, contemporary circumstances. Using Trinkunas's circa-1958 historical analyses as modern day guideposts, this paper examines the formation and erosion of key methods for civilian control of the military and offers potential reforms intended to reintroduce them.

Civil/Military Control: Sidelining Military Players

Formation of Control Dynamic

Following the overthrow of Pérez Jiménez on 23 January 1958 by elements of the political opposition (*Junta Patriótica*) and armed forces, a fragile interim Junta Militar de Gobierno was formed and faced immediate challenges from popular military figures. The governing Junta, although composed of military service chiefs under the leadership of Admiral Wolfgang Lazarrábal, was erected as a temporary steward of executive power until scheduled national democratic elections could be held a year later. The services, however, soon fragmented, with some sectors rejecting reform.¹³ Admiral Lazarrábal and his navy officer cohort sought to prevent a counter-coup by officers inclined to reintroduce permanent military leadership and subvert a democratic transition. Lazarrábal's most potent challengers represented opposing ideological camps within the army and air force—opposed both to Lazarrábal and to each other.¹⁴ Vice Chief of the General Staff Army LTC Hugo Trejo led the progressive populist wing of the officer corps and espoused visions of nationalist renewal and suspicions of civilian politics. Defense Minister Air Force Colonel Jesús María Castro León, leader of the technocratic authoritarian faction, represented a more conservative element within the armed forces, one sympathetic to the policies of the Pérez Jiménez regime.¹⁵ Each leader boasted a sizable following and posed a considerable threat to Admiral Lazarrábal's democratic agenda.

Lt. Colonel Trejo and General Castro León imperiled, but ultimately failed to undermine, Lazarrábal's democratic agenda, owing to deft applications of diplo-

matic and military pressure by the ruling Junta. Unlike Castro León, Trejo, despite his popularity, had not been able to consolidate his command over his forces and place followers in prominent positions, thereby leaving himself exposed to isolation by his opponents.¹⁶ Through his acceptance of promotion to Vice Chief of the General Staff, Trejo allowed himself to be removed from the direct command of his troops. By the time he accepted an ambassadorship to Costa Rica in April, Trejo no longer represented a serious challenge to the Lazarrábal government. Castro León, a staunch opponent of the rise of political parties and an administration he perceived as impotent and illegitimate, proved more pragmatic and dangerous to the Junta than Trejo. In July, Castro León issued an ultimatum to Lazarrábal demanding administrative reforms.¹⁷ Unwilling to set a dangerous precedent of executive subordination to a military officer, Lazarrábal consolidated resistance to Castro León within the armed forces from his seaside residence. When Castro León eventually rebelled, military garrisons in Caracas and Maracay, units critical for a government takeover, refused to participate, threatened by Lazarrábal to remain loyal. Castro León's subsequent resignation and self-exile would mark the last coup attempt by a high-ranking military officer in Venezuela for 30 years.¹⁸

Contemporary Circumstances

Over 60 years later, senior military figures with similar influence contend for power and present risks of continued military governance in a post-Maduro regime: Defense Minister General Vladimir Padrino López and Commander of the Strategic Operations Command (CEOFANB) Admiral Remigio Ceballos Ichaso. Both officers trace their positions to personal relationships with President Chávez, and each faces allegations of narcotics trafficking and embezzlement.

Gen. Vladimir Padrino Lopez



Defense: General Padrino rose within the ranks following his public support for Chávez during the 2002 Coup and 2002/2003 general strike. The backing of the commander of Infantry Battalion 311, among the army's most prestigious units, proved a critical buttress to Chávez during the greatest threat to his administration, and Padrino was accordingly rewarded with lucrative promotions.¹⁹ Following Chávez's death, Maduro appointed him as his Minister of Defense. Padrino's privileged position has enabled him to appropriate

state security services in order to facilitate cocaine shipments into and out of Venezuela.²⁰ An investigative study by the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)*, a prominent investigative journalistic platform, uncovered a network of US-based companies and high-value properties registered under the names of Padrino's family members, likely used to launder the Defense Minister's illicit proceeds.²¹

Adm. Remigio Ceballos, Commander, Strategic Operational Command (CEOFANB)



Admiral Ceballos also owes *his* position, as head of the FANB's powerful interservice and deployments coordinator (*Comando Estratégico Operacional de la Fuerza Armada Nacional Bolivariana de Venezuela – CEOFANB*), to his relationship with Chávez, for whom he served as an aide-de-camp.²² Ceballos has twice come under investigation by the general inspector of the navy for “administrative irregularities,” which amounted to the embezzlement of state funds. The accusations are supported by the testimonies of over 20 naval officers.²³ Since 2016, Ceballos has also served as the head of security for President Maduro's

Gran Misión Abastecimiento Soberano (Great Sovereign Supply Mission), a military organization charged with overseeing national food distribution under the state-subsidized *Los Comités Locales de Abastecimiento y Producción (CLAP)* program.²⁴ The US has sanctioned CLAP officials for overvaluing contracts and embezzling proceeds and has accused the Maduro regime of using the CLAP program as a political weapon to purchase votes.²⁵

Path Forward

Criminal accusations leveled against Padrino and Ceballos threaten to undermine their support within the armed services. While US sanctions and criminal indictments are often branded by the Maduro administration as part of an American propaganda campaign for regime change, charges of corruption exacerbate internal military cleavages between junior and senior officers. A current of resentment exists between university-educated, idealistic junior officers whose earnings and state benefits have plummeted during Venezuela's economic collapse and the senior officers who owe their positions to party loyalty and decades-old connections to

Chávez and who have accrued wealth through corrupt dealings.²⁶ By ensuring the loyalty of senior officers through “promotions, pay raises, and occasional purges,” Maduro has fortified the class/rank divide within the FANB and bloated the military high command, now comprising over 2,000 generals/admirals and 10 times the number of flag officers there were when Chávez came to power in 1998.²⁷

The FANB in general, and Padrino and Ceballos in particular, could expect lackluster support from the general public in the event of a transition of power to a military leader. As the FANB has become increasingly politicized since 1999, the demographics of support for the armed forces have come to align with the leftist, populist-leaning *Chavismo* voter base, occupied predominantly by the low socioeconomic classes.²⁸ Given the correlation between partisan affiliations and military support, deteriorating national confidence in the Maduro government has had similarly deleterious consequences for the domestic legitimacy of the armed forces. While 71 percent of Venezuelan respondents who identified with Maduro’s political party in a 2018 Pew research poll indicated support for his administration, just 20 percent of overall respondents felt the same, a result indicating that the proportion of government/armed forces supporters is dwindling.²⁹ According to the last Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) poll, 53 percent of Venezuelan respondents have extremely low confidence in the FANB, principally due to allegations of corruption. That same poll indicated that nearly 98 percent of the population considered public corruption to be a national issue.³⁰ Low public confidence in the military as an institution, combined with strong anticorruption sentiments, impose considerable barriers for figures like Padrino and Ceballos who may hope to lead a new government.

Civil/Military Control: Dividing and Appeasing the Military

Formation of Control Dynamic

Institutional mechanisms for civilian control over the armed forces rely on divide-and-conquer stratagems first adopted under the Junta Militar de Gobierno and designed to fragment the armed forces through a system of “cross-cutting cleavages within the officer corps.”³¹ Decree 288 (27 June 1958) marked the first in a series of executive actions taken by the Junta to limit the power and influence of the nation’s highest ranking military officers: the minister of defense and chairman of the general staff. Under Decree 288, the defense minister lost administrative authority over the armed forces, with power devolving to each service’s commanding officer.³² Thus, apolitical service chiefs became the firewall between orders issued by the defense minister and the lower level officers for whom they

were intended, creating institutional barriers between the senior-most political appointee/military officer and the potential forces they may attempt to commandeer. At the same time, the centralized *estado mayor* (general staff) military command structure was replaced with a *jefes de estado mayor conjunto* (joint chiefs of staff).³³ The Prussian general staff model, which had been in place up until that point, had elevated a senior military officer to the post of commander of all armed forces. With direct oversight of troops in the field, the chairman exercised a degree of power that presented a potent challenge to civilian leadership.³⁴ The joint chiefs framework, by contrast, made the chairman and service chiefs the senior-most presidential advisors on military matters but removed them from the direct chain of military command.³⁵ Within the Venezuelan joint chiefs, the generals and colonels assigned “had no ability to control what type of armed forces Venezuela should have to meet their plans, how those forces should be based, or what types of operations they should be trained to accomplish under wartime conditions.”³⁶

In an effort to clear the military ranks of senior, conservative-minded officers and limit the personal ambitions and collectivization of the junior ranks, the Junta set service limits and renovated the military education system. Decree 533 (17 January 1958) retroactively established a 30-year service limit for all military officers, thereby allowing the government both to remove Pérez Jiménez loyalists (without the need for forcible discharge) and, as importantly, due to time-in-grade requirements, to erect a system of rapid rotations through commanding roles, in this way preventing officers from cultivating loyal cadres.³⁷ The Junta also closed the *Escuela Básica*, a military academy established by Pérez Jiménez to build cross-cutting, interservice bonds between junior officers (the same type of academy where Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez would form the ranks of his revolutionary movement). Because rebelling officers “cannot depend on the traditional military hierarchy to ensure the obedience of their co-conspirators,” they often rely on the trust, common interests, and personal bonds formed with other officers within such academies.³⁸ Without these early interservice bonds, junior officers who sought to foment service-wide dissent were forced to rely on formal military communications channels, channels susceptible to civilian interception and disruption.

The divide-and-conquer reforms of the Junta period were legally codified under the 1961 constitution and expanded upon by the Betancourt administration. Article 132 defined the armed forces as an “apolitical, obedient, and non-deliberative institution,” charged with the maintenance of national defense, the protection of democratic institutions, and the enforcement of the constitution.³⁹ Protection of Venezuela’s incipient democracy was enshrined as the principal obligation of the services and remains today a pillar of the FANB’s identity and values.⁴⁰ Article 190 guaranteed the president the right to act as commander in chief of the armed

forces without the authorization of the council of ministers, thus allowing the president to issue orders directly to commanders and further diminishing the role of the defense minister.⁴¹ While remaining a key voice on military matters within the cabinet, the minister of defense had lost direct legal authority over the armed forces. The constitution also accorded congress the authority to approve military promotions of officers for the ranks of colonel and naval captain. Further, congressionally appropriated budgets created incentives for inter-service competition over limited funds.⁴² Congress's new powers, while creating incentives for military adherence to civilian policies, would prove a double edged sword: effectively forming a politicized class of senior officers who sought to curry favor among politicians to advance their service's interests or their own personal ambitions.

Betancourt capitalized on the military resentment of their new, more constrained societal roles, using the subsequent 11 coup attempts under his administration to root out disloyalty and discourage future actions. For the first time in Venezuelan history, stiff prison sentences of 16 to 30 years were imposed on rebellious officers and hundreds of soldiers were detained (later shown leniency).⁴³ Long prison sentences proved a powerful deterrent for officers and soldiers lacking strong ideological incentives for new governance. The government response to the coups themselves grew more violent, as pro-government elements of the armed forces displayed a greater willingness to fire upon the insurrectionists. The bloodshed reached its apex during the June 1962 Puerto Cabello insurrection, when a naval destroyer fired on crowds, killing 72 and wounding 300–400.⁴⁴ Moreover, following these coups, Betancourt eagerly promoted his image as commander in chief, frequenting military ceremonies and graduations and hosting officer dialogues at his *casa militar* (military residence).⁴⁵ As the costs of failed rebellion grew more pronounced, officers lacking strong ideological foundations for revolt were incentivized to work within the civilian-led system.

Alongside civilian divide-and-conquer tactics were equally significant displays of civilian appeasement of the military. Selective amnesty toward, and reinstatement of, military officials who supported Pérez Jiménez—so-called *reincorporados*—satisfied the senior-most players in the former regime, that is, those with the most to gain from a return to their old, privileged lifestyles.⁴⁶ Betancourt's wide-scale executive pardoning (though not total: many Pérez Jiménez loyalists were prosecuted) helped to defuse a potentially volatile situation, sponsor meritocratic promotions in the ranks (independent of political affiliation), and encourage the nation to move forward from its dictatorial years on the unified, democratic path ahead. Beyond amnesty, the Betancourt administration expanded the *Instituto de Previsión Social de las Fuerzas Armadas*, the state-run organization responsible for providing social security benefits, low interest mortgage rates, and other social

benefits to the officer corps. Retirement benefits were also increased under the Retired or Available Officers Program (*Oficiales en Retiro y Disponibilidad - OFIDIRE*).⁴⁷ Mid- to high-ranking officers entered the Venezuelan upper class and, by 1964, earned higher pay than nearly any other officer corps in the Western Hemisphere (with the sole exception of that of the United States).

Erosion of Control Dynamic

Among the first signs of the erosion of these democratic reforms was the gradual evolution of the military education system to emphasize political idealism and joint training, molding generations of junior officers with grand ambitions and a distrust of their leadership. In the early 1970s, the army adopted a new educational approach for cadets enrolled in military academies: *Plan Andrés Bello*. The revised curriculum sought to transform military academies into university-level institutions by pairing conventional military coursework with leadership training and a strong sense of nationalism.⁴⁸ By glorifying the exploits of Simón Bolívar, exaggerating the class consciousness of his policies, and focusing on the “proper” role of the military in civil society and national development, the *Academia Militar* produced ideologically driven graduates with a strong sense of leadership.⁴⁹ Within the *Instituto de Altos Estudios de la Defensa Nacional (IAEDN)*, cross-service training of military officers, the type disbanded by the Junta Militar de Gobierno, was reintroduced. The new class of officers (among them, Chávez) grew to resent both the military high command, who they felt were corrupt, and the civilian leadership of the Carlos Andrés Pérez administration, whose mismanagement of the nation’s oil resources and economic liberalization policies were disadvantaging the masses in favor of the politically connected elite.⁵⁰ Owing to their common educational backgrounds and inter-service connectivity, a group of junior officers led by then Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez—*Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200 (MBR 200)*—coalesced and rapidly expanded to encompass nearly 10 percent of the army officer corps by 1991.⁵¹ The MBR 200 would lead two failed coup attempts in February and November of 1992. Chávez’s campaign for the presidency in 1998 was defined by a return to Bolivarian ideals, a so-called 21st century socialism, which animated his and his successor’s presidential agendas.

In the wake of Chávez’s accession to power, the 1999 constitution rolled back many of the reforms of the previous generation and cemented a new role for the armed forces in Venezuela. This amendment of the previous constitution reflected President Chávez’s revolutionary vision of an expanded military presence in civil society. The armed forces’ mandate had shifted from national defense to the maintenance of internal security and the promotion of civic development.⁵² Military officers were awarded the right to vote and to perform administrative policing

duties. Congress lost its right to approve senior military promotions, a right which was transferred to the president and expanded to encompass all ranks. Critically, the unified military command structure that empowered a chairman with direct control over all armed forces—dismantled by the Junta under Decree 288—was reinstated.⁵³ The 1999 reforms increased the level of politicization in the armed forces while dismantling some of the key civilian control mechanisms installed during the Junta/Betancourt years. The legal change paved the way for a significant expansion of military presence in traditionally civilian roles in governance and business, where they now figure prominently.

The Path Forward

Modern civilian strategies of divide-and-conquer of the military rest on the reimplosion of “cross cutting cleavages” either through the disbandment or curricular adaptation of military academies. While high standards of military education promote the kind of professionalism required of a modern military, a high degree of military autonomy and a lack of effective civilian oversight allow for universities to serve as hotbeds of military dissent. In *The Soldier and the State*, political scientist Samuel Huntington argues that one method for civilian subversion of the military involves the promotion of military professionalism and autonomy, what Huntington terms “objective control.”⁵⁴ By “militarizing the military,” Huntington’s approach creates incentives for officers to remain on base and out of politics. Objective control promotes military autonomy from civilian interference in internal affairs but requires executive and legislative oversight in military matters which intersect with the political domain (such as the annual defense budget and military expenditures).⁵⁵ Educational reforms such as *Plan Andrés Bello* represent just one facet of a larger military modernization initiative under the *Programa Mínimo de Gobierno*, through which advanced equipment has been appropriated, officer salaries raised, and meritocratic promotions enforced.⁵⁶ However, where military professionalism has improved, civilian oversight has weakened. Congress, due to a lack of institutional defense expertise on military committees, makes budgeting determinations on the counsel of service representatives with vested interests. Without effective oversight, the lecture halls of military campuses will continue to foster leadership skills, interservice unity, and political idealism. This potent combination produces graduates who invariably find faults with civilian governance and possess the means to organize and seize power in an effort to promote their image of democracy.

Modern civilian strategies of appeasement of the military are also possible through the promotion of amnesty for mid- to high-ranking officers throughout much of the military, an approach which would serve to bifurcate President Mad-

uro from his military support base. Officers of all ranks share collective concerns over regime change, including the potential loss of their privileged status within society (social benefits, salaries, etc.) and the specter of criminal indictments for highly publicized, perpetrated acts of violence. These constraints weigh above all on the highest-ranking officials, many of whom face international sanctions and US indictments for human rights abuses, drug trafficking, and corruption. For that reason, President Donald J. Trump and Guaidó have both proposed actions aimed at alleviating these concerns. The US has taken the unusual step of “delisting” sanctioned military actors who defect to the Guaidó regime—the most prominent of whom is the former head of the *Servicio Bolivariano de Inteligencia Nacional (SEBIN)*, General Manuel Ricardo Christopher Figuera—and guaranteed a place for the military high command in the proposed transitional government.⁵⁷ Guaidó has also offered amnesty to low ranking, defecting military personnel and (controversially amongst the opposition) limited offers of amnesty to higher ranking officials.⁵⁸ Much like the forces that supported the regime of Marcos Pérez Jiménez, the majority of Maduro’s military could expect similar leniency from the public and from the successor administration, while the ranks of the security services most associated with state repression, notably *SEBIN* and the *Dirección General de Contrainteligencia Militar (DGCIM)*, face less post-regime security.

Civil/Military Control: Identifying a Military Mission

Formation of Control Dynamic

Over the course of the successive presidential administrations of Betancourt, Raúl Leoni, and Rafael Caldera (1959–1974), civilian governments refocused the mission of the armed forces from domestic politics to the management of internal national security threats, fortifying the nascent dynamic of civilian control over the military. By 1960, left-wing insurgency groups, inspired by the revolutionary politics of the Communist Cuban government, had coalesced behind the *Partido Comunista de Venezuela (PCV)* and *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR)*, rioting and employing urban guerilla tactics in Caracas in attempts to overthrow the oligarchic, civilian administration.⁵⁹ Isolated terror cells, *Unidades Tácticas de Combate (UTC)*, carried out high-profile airplane hijackings and bombings of military installations. The armed forces, unprepared to launch counterinsurgency (COIN) operations and preoccupied with the business of domestic political security (notably, the organization of the 1963 national elections: *Operación República II*), were slowly retrained and redeployed to undertake their new mission.⁶⁰ President Betancourt and congress approved funding measures and sponsored officer

COIN training in US military academies. As the insurgency spread from urban centers to rural areas, Betancourt erected forward operating bases and decentralized the military command structure into local unified commands capable of leading effective combined arms operations.⁶¹ Over the course of the Leoni and Caldera administrations, the military's CI abilities were fiercely promoted and expanded upon. The refocus of the military mission fortified the civil-military control dynamic: removing much of the armed forces from urban areas where they could be used to launch a coup, promoting professionalism within the ranks, and providing a COIN strategic prerogative for an armed forces previously imbedded in internal, domestic political affairs.⁶² Despite an expanded military role in the prosecution of the government's COIN campaign, however, civilian leadership defined the mission, scope, and termination of hostilities.

Erosion of Control Dynamic

Since then, the armed forces' mission to defend against internal (or external) threats has eroded, devolving into a military competition for power with paramilitary groups and the loss of prestige and ability among the services. Driven by fears of a coup attempt against his administration, President Chávez encouraged the formation of armed, progovernment paramilitary groups, safeguards of his regime. Venezuela's 1.6 million-member "Bolivarian Militia" facilitates anti-opposition protests, government intelligence operations, and civilian repression.⁶³ The Bolivarian Militia operates in tandem not only with government security services but also with *Colectivos*, locally empowered, militant communal councils which often serve "as the de facto authorities in many neighborhoods."⁶⁴ Chávez's "civic-military union" has blurred the lines of ownership of the legitimate use of state violence and, in turn, has challenged the military's purpose in Venezuelan society. With members of the Bolivarian Militia and *Colectivos* playing increasingly larger roles in the repression of urban riots, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolutionarias de Colombia* - FARC / National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* - ELN) combatants controlling the porous Colombian-Venezuelan border and expanding their operations in rural Venezuelan gold mining operations, and violent prison mafias (*Pranes*) operating with impunity among their fiefdoms, the role of the armed forces in managing internal security affairs has become increasingly nebulous.⁶⁵ Even in the realm of external security operations, the traditional purview of any state's armed forces, the services have suffered embarrassing displays of impotence. In March 2020, a Venezuelan navy coastal patrol vessel sank following its attempt to ram a civilian cruise liner in international waters, an action which displayed not only poor military performance but also a lack of tactical judgment.⁶⁶ Without a clear military

mission or well-maintained, service-wide professional standards, the armed forces have devolved from a once-focused and capable force to a well-armed band of Maduro loyalists with criminal ties, increasingly less distinguishable from the competing paramilitary organizations which surround it.

Path Forward

A renewed focus on military professionalism and a well-defined, internal threat-driven mission will prove critical toward extricating the military from civil administrative functions. Historically, the Venezuelan armed forces have abhorred executive directives calling on them to repress civil discontent. Chávez and Maduro handled this problem by increasing their reliance on select military outfits (such as the Bolivarian National Guard) and paramilitary elements for riot dispersal.⁶⁷ In the present Venezuelan security environment, where the greatest threats to governance are internal, the FANB has been relegated to traditionally nonmilitary duties: coordination of national development initiatives and staffing of political positions in governance. Clear indicators of mismanagement in these areas are nowhere more noticeable than in the oil sector, where military-operated *Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A.* runs at a fraction of the efficiency and profitability it did prior to Chávez's reorganization of the industry in 2003. From crude outputs of over 3 million barrels per day (bbl/d) throughout 1997, *PDVSA* now produces just over 600,000 bbl/d with unrealistic end-of-year targets of 1 million bbl/d.⁶⁸ Military officers hold management and directorial positions in many of the state's nearly 700 state-owned, expropriated enterprises, where corporate inexperience has reduced productivity.⁶⁹ The lower-to-mid-ranking personnel in the FANB, since the Venezuelan economic collapse in 2013, neither benefit from the corruption associated with public industry (as the senior-most officials do) nor view their efforts as benefiting the people.

Military unease with the domestic role they have come to occupy has been paired with a rising skepticism over the largely unchecked growth and increasingly left-leaning radicalism of paramilitary groups, a potent danger to the military's traditional control over the levers of state-sanctioned violence. Occasionally, these groups have opposed Maduro's policies, exerted their autonomy from the formal government, and vowed to wage insurgent warfare in the event of a change in administration.⁷⁰ The growing failure of paramilitary groups to faithfully execute Maduro's agenda and the military's desire to reemerge as the sole guarantor of national security intersect to create shared interests in a renovated military role in society. Any traditionalist reorientation of military forces in the realm of internal security will reap societal benefits: a reduction in the violent repression of the opposition, the enhanced performance of state-owned enterprises, and the civil-

ianization of key government posts. Moreover, weakened paramilitaries will be less capable of mounting an effective insurgency in the event the Maduro administration is displaced.

Conclusion

Effective, modern applications of Trinkunas's methodology for civilian control of the military—leadership sidelining, divide/conquer and appeasement strategies, and mission identification—will prove essential in reducing the role of the military in Venezuelan society and increasing the likelihood of a democratic transition following President Maduro's exit from power. Facing condemnation both within their ranks and in the public for their highly publicized corruption, Venezuela's most prominent senior military figures are unlikely to wield the military or civilian support necessary to lead. As a key byproduct of a reformed military education system that de-emphasizes the formation of interservice bonds and Bolivarian idealism among junior officers, the rising class of military leaders will be disinclined to view civilian democratic problems as warranting military solutions. For those senior officers attached through economic and political ties to the Maduro administration, upheld domestic and foreign assurances of amnesty for all but the most heinous human rights offenders are likely to increase the pace of defections, thereby weakening Maduro's grasp on power. A refocus of the FANB's mission from national development and civilian administration, where it has demonstrated incompetency and for which it was never designed, to internal security, where it can target the criminal paramilitary forces that thrive in urban centers and rural areas, will increase national productivity, demilitarize state and local government, and reintroduce limits on the use of state-sanctioned violence.

Of course, a reduction in the role of the military in civil society is a necessary precursor for, but not an immediate catalyst of, a full democratic transition in Venezuela, a task that instead must fall to a united political opposition. Betancourt and his presidential successors succeeded in overthrowing a military-controlled government where others before had failed due in part to the political unity of the time, derived from the *Pacto de Puntofijo*. Codified in October of 1958, leaders of Venezuela's most prominent political parties—Democratic Action (*Acción Democrática* - AD), Christian Democratic Party (*Partido Socialcristiano* - COPEI), and the Democratic Republican Union (*Unión Republicana Democrática* - URD)—agreed to limit political infighting, respect electoral outcomes, and further a moderately progressive social agenda.⁷¹ Although the united opposition coalition was short-lived, it guaranteed a bipartisan civilian commitment to democratic principles over the expediency of military solutions during the most fragile period of Venezuelan democracy. Today's opposition to Maduro

and his *Partido Socialista Unido de Venezuela (PSUV)* enjoys none of the same broad support. *Mesa de la Unidad Democrática (MUD)*, a coalition formed in opposition to *PSUV* in 2008, effectively dissolved in 2018 when *AD*, the group's most powerful member, departed following internal rivalries and disagreements.⁷² Failures to forcefully respond to Maduro's denuding of the democratically elected congress (*Asamblea Nacional*), formation of a rubber-stamp replacement (*Asamblea Nacional Constituyente*), and appointment of pro-government judges to the Supreme Court (*Tribunal Supremo de Justicia*) and "protectors" in states with opposition governors are just some of the ways in which chronic disunity has weakened the ability of opposition politicians to legislate.⁷³ Despite broad international recognition of interim President Guaidó, without internal political unity his administration is fated to remain impotent. □

Notes

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