

## REGIONAL INSIGHTS

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## RADICAL POPULISM VS ARMED FORCES

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**Abstract:** Populism as a political force has a long history in the Hemisphere, one that has been analyzed in depth. Its impact on the armed forces, however, has not been studied. The author argues that the radical leftist variety of populism sweeping the region seeks to subvert the fundamental missions of the military, injecting it into the governance of each state while using it to directly support the populist leader in power. The impact is long-lasting, as the military is taken out of its normal role as a defender of the state.

## INTRODUCTION

From the end of the 1990s to the present, leftist social movements and parties have expanded their influence throughout Latin America, threatening strong democracies and endangering those with fragile institutions.<sup>1</sup> In a democratic system, the armed forces are an apolitical institution of full-time professionals. In any other system, they are engaged as a political, social, and economic protagonist, intervening in government affairs as required by the national leadership. Populist regimes seek to modify the constitutional underpinning of the armed forces, convening constitutional assemblies to alter the military's basic nature, legal system and structure.<sup>2</sup> Such alteration has repercussions at the regional level, for example, through association with indigenous separatist movements, exacerbating social resentment among the region's marginalized classes, and a realignment of regional power blocks. Radical left-wing populists claim to challenge and overturn representative democracies, market economies, and the technological advances of globalization, identified as the status quo, the enemies of the people.

## DEFINING THE PROBLEM

Populism in the region has relied heavily on the idea of dependence on foreign capital, typified by the experience at the end of the 19th century, including liberal-inspired constitutions that establish the separation of powers, elections and the practice of pecuniary values of authority structures such as the *cacique*, boss, *gamonal*, colonel, or *caudillo* (strongman). Populism seeks an alliance between a charismatic leader and the lower masses of society, using a moralistic discourse to divide the people from the oligarchy. Patronage ensures a state's resources support the leader, concentrating attention and power on him as more important than citizen rights or respect for the procedures or standards of a representative system of government. As a political force, populism acts within the framework of a representative democracy, while makes developing policies to confront it directly or effectively a difficult proposition. As a political phenomenon, it has received little attention or analysis from the security and defense community, in part because of its dynamism, instability, and ephemeral nature.<sup>3</sup>

Populist tactics are used by politicians worldwide as each seeks to attain power; populism as a strategy after attaining power has a long history in Latin America. This study will focus on how its current manifestations affect the state's security forces in the region.

As a political phenomenon, populism is not perceived by many as a threat to security or to the structure and foundation of the armed forces, despite the evidence provided by the various regimes that have come to power since the end of the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> However, radical populism undermines the moral legitimacy and physical capacity to confront the threats to regional security and defense by focusing on terminating the system of representative democracy and supplanting it with a participatory democracy. The differences between these two systems are illustrated by the role assigned to the military in relation to the government and society.

## ARMED FORCES IN A DEMOCRACY

The military institution has historically been the guarantor of the political and constitutional order of its nation, the defenders *par excellence* of the common good and the permanent interests of the state. This model establishes flexible limits on the scope of the military's participation in political and legal activity, positing that territory, political integrity, and the citizenry must be protected from potential external enemies. Each state determines whether or not to use military force to defend against domestic organizations that might subvert the internal order.

defense and security to the state and to the region is subverted to the populist leader's will, reducing its ability to carry out its traditional roles and missions. The result is a militarization of the government and politization of the armed forces, in an effort to centralize all decision-making authority under one person. If the fundamental legal basis of the armed forces is allowed to be thus altered, democracy as a political system is in imminent danger, with unpredictable consequences for the political future of the region.

Populist regimes are difficult to eradicate once entrenched in power. Argentina's experiment began in the 1940s and is still not complete. Economic and social chaos forced changes in Brazil in the 1960s and Peru in the 1990s. The current situation in Venezuela is more difficult, however, because of the country's oil-based wealth, which allows its leader more impunity in perpetuating his tenure.

In none of these cases has the resolution come from outside the country. Populist leaders alter the existing domestic system, using a perceived foreign threat to solicit internal support. The resolution must be internal, either through radical action (Brazil in the 1960s), or by gradually subverting the centralized authority (Argentina and Peru). This suggests a long-term solution for Venezuela as the most viable alternative, though it also implies a lengthy period of pain for Venezuelans.

## ISSUES TO CONSIDER

U.S. leaders admittedly require more sensitivity in understanding the heavy impact of any U.S. action, given the disparity in power and resources. Latin American leaders, likewise, need to recognize the validity of the U.S. global outlook, despite the fact that this delegates the region to a much lower level of attention. Perhaps the most significant fact is the recognition by both sides that their interests are best served by the need among their citizenry to buy and sell among each other regardless of national borders, a function of the private sector, not the government. The best approach is one seeking to reduce partisan and nationalistic rhetoric, seeking a genuine move toward national and regional representative democracy, thereby re-taking and enhancing the image and credibility of the United States as a champion of democracy in the Hemisphere and globally as well.

One of the principal means of strengthening representative democracy is to avoid the conditions that contribute to the attractiveness of populism; one of the best means to this end is education. Incorporating studies on the role of the armed forces in a representative democratic system into the curriculum of training and postgraduate school is highly recommended, with emphasis on the values and principles of western culture. Promoting the exchange of teaching personnel among the regional strategic study centers, universities and war colleges would demonstrate the universal applicability of such principles.

Promoting full awareness in political leaders, civilian and military, of the impact and consequences of the impact of such regimes on the military institution is a credible, preventive measure. Government leaders must fully understand the true motivations for the proposed changes, since the future stability of their representative democratic system is at stake.

Regional leaders can and should serve as a significant counterweight to such a threat to regional peace and security, seeking diplomatic pressure to reduce the threat of escalation over perceived problems. In a case such as Venezuela, with resources that can and are being used indiscriminately to purchase sophisticated weapons, dialogue should be promoted.

Over the short term, U.S. efforts should concentrate on less ideological issues such as energy security, countering the reach of terrorism, the environment and the propagation of infectious diseases. Bilateral relationships should be maintained where possible, above all with regard to security and defense issues.

Over the long term, the U.S. diplomatic and development aid should be emphasized for issues where populists exploit their advantages, such as social inequality, poverty and exclusion. In other words, address the underlying problems of inequality and poverty, thereby neutralizing the sources that feed the attractiveness of populism.

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Those principles, described by Huntington,<sup>5</sup> require an exclusive dedication and nonpartisanship, with a clear division between civilians and military in defense matters, which allows for a solid and professionally-prepared institution. Individuals in both are expected to act within a specified professional framework in support of the highest interests of the nation, and military personnel do not participate in any political partisanship.

Huntington's analysis posits a clear and specific requirement that civilian power directs the military through *objective control*. This is based on the professionalism of the officer corps, which delegates the military's action to an arena independent of politics. Populism seeks to impose *subjective control*, which aims to civilianize the officer corps, assigning it a political role and controlling it directly through a civilian elite leadership, a fact that allows the officer corps to assume a role as leaders of civil society.

The process of enhancing representative democracy, initiated at the end of the 1970s, led civilian authorities to reform the constitutional and legal principles defining the role of protector of the military as well in protecting democracy, its values, and its territory. This led to changes emphasizing the role and responsibilities of civilian authorities in the defense sector, as well as accentuating the control and supervision of the defense institution through the executive and legislature. This last institution is deliberative in nature in any representative democracy, and must function as a separate and independent power, thereby enhancing the political control over the defense function by balancing the executive's interests with a different set of priorities. The subordination of the military institution to civilian power does not simply place the president at the top of the chain of command as the commander-in-chief.

Populist reformers seek to silence the parliament's responsibility in favor of direct political control over the state's defense functions. They use the rhetoric of deepening democracy, of reforming corrupt governments in order to impose participatory democracy. This transformation contemplates the development of a well-defined political orientation for the armed forces, seeking to use the military directly in the political, ideological and socioeconomic governance of the societies in which they operate. In other words, radical leftist populism seeks a total militarization of society, the creation of a police state.

**IMPACT ON THE ARMED FORCES**

The armed forces have a specific organizational structure characterized by three fundamental elements on which are based its ability to function: organization, legal system, and military capacity. To illustrate this analysis, Garcia developed a descriptive triangle which shows the relations between the nature of the armed forces, the rule of law, and the military capabilities undergoing a process of reform

**The medium- and long-term impact, projected conservatively, includes a fragmentation of the military institution, internal political destabilization, both leading to the total collapse of the state apparatus.**

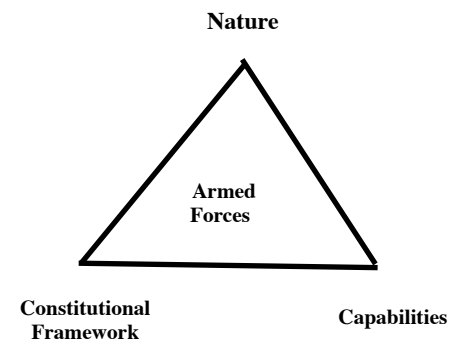
[see illustration]. He emphasizes the implications of these factors for the security and defense of the nation, specifically the current efforts to cooperate (or not) at the regional level.<sup>6</sup> The joint Russia-Venezuela naval exercise during November 2008 is an example of how a populist

leader can alter the regional security dynamics, by introducing an extra-regional force to increasingly polarize the dialogue.

Populist leaders, in their role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, take advantage of their professional

background, idiosyncrasies in the military institution, the social context and the political environment, ignoring the rules and regulations of the military institution. They create direct lines of contact at various hierarchical levels within the core of military professionals, eroding institutional bases to introduce a new ideology into its political behavior. One result of this tactic is a dramatic alteration of the relationship between the leader and the chain of command, which erodes the legal system and the operational capacities of the armed forces.

**DEFENSE TRANSFORMATION**



Source: Jaime Garcia, "Los tres pilares de una transformación militar," *Military Review* (November-December, 2007): 21.

Few arguments have been presented to justify reform to increase the security and defense environment other than to concentrate its decision-making process in one individual at the top. This is where the key to the populist's strategy can be found; he maintains legality through rules, to the detriment of *de facto* legitimacy, together with serious consequences for the institution and democracy. The first of such reforms always address the state's constitution, and are designed to establish a legal base that will enable them to make future changes to facilitate his proselytizing political work make it possible to modify the laws underpinning the armed forces' legitimacy. Such reforms in reality reflect the personal needs of the leader, concentrating authority in his hands. This pattern has been used in Venezuela, with a new

<sup>1</sup>See The Fund for Peace, "The Failed States Index 2007," *Foreign Policy* (July/August 2007).  
<sup>2</sup>Constituent power is the prior and total sovereign power that can modify and transform the constitutional order.  
<sup>3</sup>Steve C. Ropp, *The Strategic Implications of the Rise of Populism in Europe and South America*, U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute (June, 2005), <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/ssi>.  
<sup>4</sup>Cesar Rodríguez, Patrik S. Barret, and Daniel Chávez, *The New Left and Latin America. Its Origin and Future Course* (Colombia, Bogota: Editorial Norma, 2005).  
<sup>5</sup>Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: Theory and Policy of Civilian-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957).  
<sup>6</sup>Jaime Garcia, "New Threats and Defense Transformation: The Case of Latin America," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement*, 12 (#3, Autumn 2004): 144-155.

Constitution imposed in 1999; in Bolivia, with an undefined plan for democratizing defense based in part on assistance from Venezuela; in Ecuador, with the writing of the new constitution; in Nicaragua, though the armed forces are not yet directly answerable to the presidency and thus can resist such "reforms" with more success.

The modifications to military laws generally disguise the militarization of governance with a façade of complete civilian control by the president. In reality, the military is given control over several decision-making and political management roles within the state, seeking to monitor and control society. This in effect authorizes the military to guide and direct society, making decisions at the highest level of the state, and acting as the savior of the homeland, with all the repercussions thus implied.

The professional military educational system is adapted to a socialist curriculum, especially for the core of young officers and in the training schools for recruits, changing the dynamics of command and the source of authority. An example is the Venezuelan government's imposition of the slogan "*Socialism, Fatherland or Death*" on the armed forces.<sup>7</sup> In Bolivia, the *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS) party plans to create a legal system that would institutionalize a greater role for the defense sector in the civil-military relationship.<sup>8</sup>

**... radical leftist populism seeks a total militarization of society, the creation of a police state.**

**Representative democracy:** a form of government through which the people delegate sovereignty to authorities periodically elected in free elections. Elected authorities have the duty to act in accordance with the citizens' interests. In this system of government, the military institution bases its actions on the following principles: nonpartisanship, non-deliberation, and exclusive dedication to its professional functions related to the defense and security of the state, under the control and supervision of the civilian government.

**Participatory democracy:** a form of government in which the people immediately and directly exercise the public functions attributed to them; the leader uses popular referendums as a decision-making tool for enacting law, instead of electing representatives to form a parliament for that purpose.

Source: M. García-Pelayo, *Derecho Constitucional Comparado* (Madrid, Spain: Alianza Universidad, 1984).

Venezuela's new organic law of the armed forces was issued by government executive decree on the 31st of July 2008. The new law concentrates all military authority in the hands of the president in several ways. The president now has a military rank, that of Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, imposed on the military chain of command; his role as national leader can now be imposed through military orders over which there is no civilian oversight or question of legitimacy by the officer corps. New military zones have been developed, but are now under the command of the president, emphasizing his new rank, with very subjective rules of engagement. These are complemented by

a National Bolivarian Militia, a new component of the armed forces, but under the direct command of the President. Ostensibly this was done to complement the armed forces for the integral defense of the nation, though it also serves to balance the military's political influence by linking the militia's mission with the Community Councils, specifically by collecting and processing intelligence on the citizenry through those Councils. The law gives the military overall responsibility for the functions of intelligence and counterintelligence, with no limits or oversight to

restrict its activities. One final component was the legalization of the practice of appointing military officials to run non-military government agencies. All these

reforms were done by executive decree, thus evading the need to submit to legislative or judicial review.

This use of military officers to govern is disguised with good intentions, subverting their careers and expertise, and put them in political decision-making positions, by, for instance, leading education or indoctrination campaigns aimed at political proselytizing that could foster armed movements outside of the law, seeking to achieve each movement's cultural and ethnic claims through violence. Examples include working with political movements such as the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, (EZLN) in Mexico, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities (CONAIE) in Ecuador, the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (Rural Landless Workers Movement) in Brazil.

The populist's process introduces an ideological debate over loyalty to the leader or the institution, leading to serious effects on discipline, directly affecting the operational capability of the institution at its most basic level, the interpersonal relations of its human resources. It discredits and reduces the military leadership's stature among subordinates and society in general because their seconding out of the ranks and into the partisan political and ideological environment leads to an officer's total subordination to a political ideology. Further, it takes the officer out of his expertise and traditional role, reducing his value to the institution as a leader. Such seconding demonstrates a lack of respect for the values, principles, customs and traditions of the military institution in general, and for the individual officers thus involved.

There is a negative impact on the image presented to society, which over time produces an overall loss to the country, because it results in a loss of credibility as a fundamental institution of the state. Under such conditions, the armed forces are perceived as a political instrument of the regime currently in power, to be used by the leader to carry out his particular proselytizing plan, one usually oriented toward a political ideology and, more importantly, for the individual political appetite of the populist leader.

**CONCLUSIONS**

The structural reforms promoted by populist politicians aim to replacing the system of representative democracy with a participatory democracy, directly affecting the institutional mission of the armed forces. The armed forces' fundamental role in the struggle to provide

<sup>7</sup> Corral, Pablo V. "The Left versus Chávez," Internet (24 de abril de 2007) at: <http://venezuelareal.zoomblog.com/archivo/2007/05/14/la-izquierda-esta-contra-Chavez.ht> <<http://venezuelareal.zoomblog.com/archivo/2007/05/14/la-izquierda-esta-contra-Chavez.ht>> ... 5/17/2007.

<sup>8</sup> Sonia Alda Mejías, "The Alliance of the people in the Armed Forces in the social transformation project of Evo Morales," Real Instituto Elcano, ARI No 3/2007 (17/01/2007), at: <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/rielcano/>.