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The Reemergence of the Venezuelan Armed Forces as a Political Actor

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On the evening of 11 April 2002, the third day of a general strike, the Venezuelan armed forces rebelled against their president, Hugo Chávez Frías. Reacting to the bloody outcome of clashes between pro- and anti-government demonstrators near the presidential palace, the commander of the Army, General Efraín Vásquez Velasco, announced in a nationally televised address that he would no longer obey presidential orders. General Vásquez accused Hugo Chávez of preparing widespread repression of anti-government strikers and demonstrators and he ordered military units under his command to disregard further government orders and remain confined to base. High-ranking generals and admirals soon followed Vásquez onto the airwaves, expressing their solidarity with his position and their refusal to support President Chávez. In the early hours of 12 April 2002, the senior military officer in the Venezuelan armed forces, General Lucas Rincón Romero, announced the resignation of President Chávez and the formation of a transitional government under the leadership of Pedro Carmona Estanga, president of the National Federation of Chambers of Commerce (FEDECAMARAS).1

Pedro Carmona's interim government committed a number of key political errors during its brief existence. First, it was drawn from a narrow right-wing slice of the political spectrum that excluded key elements of the opposition to Hugo Chávez, most notably organised labour. Images of the well-heeled participants in the televised self-proclamation of Pedro Carmona as president quickly confirmed the sectarian upper class nature of the new government, particularly to poor and working class Venezuelans where pro-Chávez sentiments are concentrated. Second, Carmona's decree dissolving the National Assembly and the Supreme Court made it clear to many military officers that the new government was completely unconstitutional and not prepared to meet even minimum democratic criteria. Third, Carmona erred in the military arena, appointing as Minister of Defence an admiral who had very little authority within the officer corps, rather than a senior Army general. He also selected a recently cashiered officer, Admiral Molina Tamayo, as head of presidential security. These
appointments, which also contravened military views on seniority and merit, angered a number of senior officers who had initially supported the Carmona government.²

Less than twenty four hours after becoming the head of a transitional government, Pedro Carmona was forced to flee the presidential palace to make way for pro-Chávez civilian and military forces. These swiftly engineered Hugo Chávez’s return to power, and many of the generals and admirals who had so recently refused to support his government reversed their positions, many scrambling to provide explanations for their behaviour during the rebellion. Amidst the celebrations of his supporters, Chávez advocated a new policy of national reconciliation, but also ordered the detention of high-profile military officers associated with the events of 11 April 2002.³

At first glance, what may seem most surprising about the recent turn of events in Venezuela is the rapid reversal of the coup against President Chávez, particularly given the continuous political turmoil that characterised his administration and his growing unpopularity during the previous year. However, the military rebellion against the democratically-elected government, the first since 1992 and only the third since 1963, is of much greater importance, since it signals the final deterioration of civilian control of the armed forces in Venezuela. Any future democratic government in Venezuela, whether led by president Chávez or his successor, will have to contend with the armed forces, which have fully emerged as political actors in Venezuela after nearly four decades of civilian rule.

Sources of the crisis in civil-military relations in Venezuela

Until the 1990s, Venezuela was often seen as a democratic exception in a region characterised by political unrest, military coups and revolution. Venezuela’s democratic success rested partly on the ability of its political leaders to institutionalise civilian control over the armed forces. Unlike many Western democracies, government control of the military in Venezuela did not depend on legislative oversight of roles and budgets or a civilian-led Ministry of Defence. Rather, since the 1960s, Venezuelan political leaders followed a strategy of ‘divide and conquer’ vis-à-vis the armed forces, which later became embedded in the very institutions of civil-military relations. These institutional arrangements were designed to inhibit cooperation or ‘jointness’ among the Army, Navy and Air Force. They also drove a wedge between senior officers, whose promotions were controlled by the Congress and the President, and junior officers whose careers depended strictly on merit. Moreover, even though political leaders
paid lip-service to the armed forces’ national security doctrine, which called for military participation in economic and social development, successive civilian governments carefully restricted the role of officers and soldiers in any activity that was not directly related to national defence. The result were armed forces that found it difficult to cooperate, especially in anything as risky and ambitious as a coup d’état and were tightly focused on professional and defence related issues.

By the 1980s, the crisis of Venezuela’s state-led development model sparked political and social consequences that began to affect the armed forces. Junior officers were increasingly disgusted by the corruption that they believed pervaded military and political elites and began to conceive of political alternatives that better reflected their concern for the underprivileged. As products of a military educational system that emphasised leadership, self-sacrifice and nationalism over political and economic reality, the most successful of the conspiratorial groups, Movimiento Bolivariano 200, rejected the possibility of change within Venezuela’s democratic framework and began to organise a coup d’état. Lulled into complacency by the prolonged political quiescence of the armed forces, civilian and military elites ignored the growing evidence of military conspiracy under the leadership of a highly regarded Army officer, Hugo Chávez Frías.

In part, the neoliberal economic policies of the second government of Carlos Andrés Pérez provided a pretext for the 1992 coups. Shortly after his inauguration in 1989, widespread rioting and looting shook many Venezuelan cities. Military units were called in to restore order, resulting in hundreds of civilian casualties and many of the junior officers who led these troops were appalled by the bloodletting. The highly negative impact of the Pérez administration’s economic policies on military salaries and benefits were keenly felt by many officers, further sowing unrest within the armed forces. In this fertile ground, Lt. Colonel Hugo Chávez was able to organise a coup against the government in February 1992. Consisting entirely of Army units, the coup failed in the face of resistance by the other branches of the armed forces. Similarly, an Air Force coup in November 1992, led by officers sympathetic to Chávez’s message, failed due to a lack of support within the Army. The institutions of civilian control of the armed forces remained strong enough in the 1990s to make a successful coup d’état very difficult, but even an unsuccessful military rebellion tipped Venezuela’s democracy into crisis.

Although President Carlos Andrés Pérez survived the events of 1992, the coups sparked increasing political and social protest against his administration and his policies, and he was eventually impeached by the Congress for misuse of government funds. The 1992 coups also set off a wave of conspiracy and unrest within the armed forces as some officers took
sides for and against Hugo Chávez, even though the great majority maintained a professional detachment from politics. President Rafael Caldera, elected in 1993, restored a measure of unity within the armed forces by purging both Chávez’s supporters and his right-wing opponents from the officer corps. However, the ghosts of these divisions remained in the officer corps and would regain their vigour in the future.6

Hugo Chávez and the collapse of civilian control of the armed forces in Venezuela.

Having failed to achieve power by military means, Hugo Chávez succeeded brilliantly in the political realm. Despite beginning his campaign with single-digit poll ratings at the beginning of 1998, he swept the December presidential vote with one of the highest approval ratings in Venezuela’s democratic history. One of the planks of his left of centre political platform was reform of civil-military relations to correct what he perceived as the perverse aspects of this system under his predecessors. When his reform programme was implemented, rather than modernising civilian control of the military, President Chávez’s reforms dismantled it, substituting personalised control of the armed forces for the previous institutional arrangements.

The Chávez military reforms initially focused on three aspects: loosening the constitutional and legal constraints on political activities by the armed forces; expanding their role in social and economic development activities; and removing legislative influence over military promotions. As part of the reform of Venezuela’s constitution, the Constituent Assembly deleted language barring military deliberation on political issues and granted active-duty members of the armed forces the right to vote, which had been withheld under the 1961 constitution. The role of the armed forces in development activities also greatly expanded under the President’s Plan Bolívar 2000, which channeled large amounts of social welfare funding away from civilian agencies and towards the military garrisons in each Venezuelan state. As a result, the armed forces became involved in infrastructure construction, repairing schools and hospitals, and even the sale of consumer goods at cut-rate prices in popular markets in an attempt to hold down inflation. President Chávez also relied on hundreds of military officers seconded to positions in the public administration to enforce his authority over the state bureaucracy, which he perceived as having been colonised by his political opponents during the previous four decades of civilian rule. Finally, Chávez took control of military promotions, alleging that the legislature’s role in this process during the previous four decades had politicised it.

Although some aspects of these reforms proved popular with the officer
corps, the overall impact on civilian control of the armed forces was negative. The extension of suffrage to the armed forces was appreciated by the officer corps and helped to solidify initial support for Chávez in the military. Similarly, some officers, particularly in the Army, genuinely appreciated the new opportunities to contribute to Venezuela's development through participation in the Plan Bolívar 2000 and public administration. On the other hand, expanded social welfare roles for the armed forces also created new opportunities for corruption by some in the military. To the chagrin of more honest officers, charges of corruption involving the armed forces became daily fare for the media. In addition, military officers in the public administration had important roles in shaping public policy and, as a result, they became de facto political actors. Finally, President Chávez used his control of promotions to reshape the officer corps, favouring officers who supported his political agenda with plum commands and assignments. Numerous generals and admirals, many of whom had opposed the 1992 coup attempts, were shunted into administrative duties, retired or were placed on leave. Naturally, this generated discontent and opposition among military officers excluded from the president's favour and increased the politicisation of military promotions. Taken in their totality, the Chávez reform of the armed forces undermined a number of the traditional elements of civilian control in Venezuela. In the absence of institutionalised control of the armed forces, President Chávez could only rely on personalised mechanisms to maintain the loyalty of the officer corps. As the events of 11–14 April demonstrated, this is a weak reed on which to rest the stability of a democratic government.

Implications for Venezuelan civil-military relations

In the aftermath of the 11–14 April events, the Venezuelan armed forces are split into three factions: anti- and pro-Chávez minorities and an institutionalist majority. The anti-Chávez faction, concentrated among senior officers, has been hard hit by its defeat during the rebellion. Its association with the Carmona government is likely to have discredited them among their subordinates, and the Chávez administration has begun prosecutions. Military prosecutors have detained 58 officers, 24 of whom are generals or admirals. In the Army, these detentions have largely occurred in the logistics and aviation branches. However, in what may be a sign of uncertainty, the Chávez administration has been handling these officers with kid gloves, allowing many of them to remain under house arrest rather than in military prisons. Pro-Chávez forces have emerged from the rebellion with a mixed record. Senior officers closely identified with the President's programme, such as General Rosendo, the commander of the armed forces' unified command (CUFAN), sided with the rebels on 11 April. As a result, almost the entire military high command was replaced in the days following
President Chávez's return to power. However, junior officers in general, and some senior officers in particular, notably General Baduell of the 42nd Paratrooper Brigade, have demonstrated that they are committed supporters of President Chávez and the constitutional regime. Five relatively junior generals, led by General Baduell, have temporarily constituted themselves as a parallel military high command to support President Chávez in the event of any new military upheaval. Finally, the institutionalist majority in the Venezuelan armed forces emerges in a somewhat stronger position politically, although one which is also more threatening for the Chávez administration in the long run. By deposing the president in the first place, it has shown that it is willing to place limits on the actions of the President, preventing him from using force to achieve his political objectives. However, its support for democratic principles and the constitution also shows that the Venezuelan armed forces are not willing to support an outright dictatorship, which is likely to enhance their image.9

The credibility of the civilian opposition to President Chávez has been undermined by its anti-democratic actions during the 11–14 April period and this will have a negative impact on its future relations with the military. The hijacking of the transitional government by the most conservative elements in Venezuelan civil society, their mistakes in handling civil-military relations, and the subsequent failure of the coup, can only create doubts within the officer corps about the wisdom of working with the opposition. More importantly, the unconstitutional decrees of the Carmona government confirmed for many officers the truth of President Chávez’s claims about the opposition, namely, that it is led by a right-wing conspiracy between a corrupt oligarchy and the owners of the media. This charge will especially resonate among junior and mid-ranking officers most likely to favour President Chávez and, more significantly, most likely to lead combat units. As a result, important elements of the armed forces will distance themselves from those civilians who oppose the president.

The Chávez administration remains weakened by the military rebellion, and the armed forces are well placed to emerge as an important political actor in Venezuelan politics. In the past three years, President Chávez has repeatedly asserted the solidarity of the armed forces with his revolutionary project as one of the strengths of his regime, asserting that the guns of the military were on the side of the people (and by extension his programmes). This claim of a seamless connection between military support and government authority is no longer credible. Moreover, as critics of his military policy predicted, his efforts to manipulate the officer promotion process to favour his revolutionary project accentuated splits in the armed forces. While he did have sufficient supporters in key positions as a result of this policy, President Chávez’s personal control of the armed forces was not enough to prevent a nearly successful military rebellion. The small number of rebellious officers who have actually been detained and the somewhat
larger number of generals who have been placed on administrative leave, confirm that the administration is not secure in its relations with the armed forces. In the future, President Chávez will constantly have to gauge the support of the officer corps for his government. More importantly, Venezuelan society will increasingly look to the military for answers to the ongoing political crisis. Whether the institutionalist majority in the officer corps likes it or not, the armed forces have become an independent political actor in Venezuela. Given these circumstances, there is no longer civilian control of the armed forces, and democracy in Venezuela is no longer secure.

Notes
