
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

DEMOCRACY AND MILITARY CONTROL IN VENEZUELA: From Subordination to Insurrection*

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During the dramatic wave of democratization in the 1980s, Venezuela stood out as South America's wise elder. While neighboring militaries had shifted in and out of power, sometimes ruling for decades, Venezuela had maintained a stable democracy since 1959.¹ After a relatively brief period of adjustment, the country settled into a political system in which two dominant political parties alternated in power and the armed forces remained peacefully in the barracks. Yet twice in 1992, important sectors of the armed forces took up arms to displace what they and many other Venezuelans viewed as a decrepit and corrupt political system. The coups failed, but they left the political system shaken and the military's political subordination seriously in doubt. The coup attempts also raised doubts about Venezuelan strategies for military control that had been a model for the rest of Latin America.

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1. Colombia also established long-term democratic rule in the late 1950s, but the pervasive guerrilla and narcotics-related violence that has plagued the government preclude calling it "stable" during this period.

This research note will argue that declining military subordination in the early 1990s emanated from weaknesses in the very model of control that had initially proven so successful. This approach sought simultaneously to enhance military professionalism and to encourage military identification with civilians. This strategy combined selective aspects of the methods that Samuel Huntington earlier conceptualized as objective and subjective civilian control (Huntington 1957, 80–83). But by 1992, political competition had become increasingly limited and the economy was struggling to emerge from years of steep decline. In this context, two aspects of the Venezuelan model combined to encourage mid-level officers to discard the mantle of subordination that had long covered the armed forces. Specifically, the pattern of identifying with civilians led mid-ranking officers to identify with groups other than their superiors. Second, the high level of military autonomy inherent in Venezuela's model of professionalism encouraged mid-level officers to act independently of their military and civilian leaders in the context of political and economic crisis.

This research note will begin by discussing alternate strategies for achieving civilian control over the military, drawing on Huntington's classic formulation. Next it will examine the means through which Venezuelan policy makers originally established control over the armed forces, the significance of the recent coup attempts, and the reasons for the deterioration in civilian control indicated by them. I will conclude by exploring the implications of the Venezuelan crisis for alternate strategies of achieving military subordination.

CONTROLLING THE ARMED FORCES

Samuel Huntington's discussion of alternate means of civilian control has been a mainstay of analyses of civil-military relations since the 1950s. In *The Soldier and the State* (1957), Huntington suggested that militaries can rely on one of two major strategies to subordinate the armed forces: "subjective control" or "objective control." Subjective control relies on convergence between the armed forces and civilian groups, whereas objective control rests on differentiating the armed forces from the civilians. Yet each of these approaches contains a range of options that influence the conditions under which civilian control may actually be effective.

With subjective control, civilian groups attempt to maximize their control over the military, in part to enhance their power vis-à-vis other civilian groups (Huntington 1957, 80–81). Groups or social classes gain this kind of control largely by encouraging members of the armed forces to identify with their goals, political ideologies, or regime types. As Huntington explained, "subjective control achieves its ends by civilianizing the military, making them the mirror of the state" (Huntington 1957, 83). A military leadership with few differences from civilian leaders would in

theory have little motivation to rebel. Yet to maintain this convergence, ideas within the military must also be fairly uniform, the regime and its leaders should be relatively stable, and military and civilian interpretations of the ideologies or constitutional forms supported need to be consistent. As Alfred Stepan pointed out, "if the military has a working definition of democracy . . . that is different from the working definition held by democratically elected officials 'in charge' of the state," then civil-military conflict may ensue (Stepan 1988, 137).

Objective control is a more appropriate method for dealing with modern militaries, according to Huntington. As militaries become more professionalized in training, organization, and equipment, they develop institutional concerns separate from those of other political, social, or even bureaucratic actors, an outcome that could hinder subjective control. Objective control of a military relies on differentiating between military and civilian roles and on promoting military professionalism to keep the military out of politics. As Huntington explained, objective control "achieves its end by militarizing the military, making them the tool of the state" (Huntington 1957, 83).

The potential risks engendered by objective control stem less from the absence of prerequisites (as with subjective control) than from an imbalance between the components of this method. According to Huntington, "the essence of objective civilian control is the recognition of autonomous military professionalism" (Huntington 1957, 83). Consequently, objective control includes both expertise and military autonomy, the latter presumably a consequence of specialization. Professionalism and thus objective control clearly necessitate maximizing military expertise, and some degree of military autonomy is essential to allow the military to practice its expertise. Excessive civilian meddling with internal military affairs may not only trigger a military reaction but diminish the military's ability to utilize its own expertise effectively. Yet active and informed civilian leadership and oversight are essential for guiding the armed forces in serving the government, as well as ensuring that their actions conform with civilian aims. Many of the broader decisions about military affairs are intrinsically political in nature, such as questions about who should be considered potential enemies, the size and distribution of the military budget, and what kinds of roles the military should perform. For these issues, civilian control requires that military autonomy be bounded by active and informed civilian oversight.

Either objective or subjective strategies of control may include weaknesses that could hamper control. Yet the interaction between flaws in the application of both strategies may prove even more dangerous to stability. Excess autonomy, the most likely flaw of objective control, reduces the extent to which the military looks to civilian authorities for direction. This tendency does not pose a problem if both groups' goals and

ideals converge, as is sought by the subjective method of control. But if the goals and ideals do not parallel those of the civilian authorities—if they resemble more closely the ideals of civilian groups not in power or diverge altogether—then autonomy may increase that group's propensity to confront the government.

It was precisely this combination of diverging goals within the armed forces and excessive autonomy that brought Venezuelan democracy to the brink of collapse in 1992. Initially, combined objective and subjective measures of control contributed to stabilizing civil-military relations, as other analysts have recognized (Agüero 1990, 270). The Venezuelan model encouraged considerable professional expertise and autonomy, while also pursuing the convergence of values inherent to subjective control.

The 1992 crises demonstrated, however, that knowledgeable civilian leadership and oversight have been relatively lacking in Venezuela and are much less "shared" within the military than previously assumed. The coup attempts revealed that higher and lower echelons of the military had come to identify with significantly different groups and ideologies, thus diminishing control by civilian elites. Moreover, this stagnation had eroded the military's faith that the practice of politics matched the stated ideals, turning ideological identification from an ally of control into its enemy. Complicating the picture further were considerable differences between actors' conceptualizations of democracy. As will be discussed, the identification of mid-ranking insurgents with the powerless masses corresponded to a more equitable and inclusive form of democracy, which the rebels considered to have deteriorated.

"DEMOCRATIZING" VENEZUELA

According to Juan Linz, political stability in a democracy requires three related factors: legitimacy, meaning acceptance of the "existing political institutions" and a belief that those in power have the right to rule (Linz 1978, 16); efficacy, or "the capacity of a regime to find solutions to the basic problems facing any political system" (1978, 20); and effectiveness, "the capacity actually to implement the policies formulated, with the desired results" (1978, 22). When deterioration on these fronts combines with an available "disloyal alternative," democratic regimes collapse (Linz 1978, 27–38). Although Linz generally referred to disloyal parties and groups as emanating from civil society, military disloyalty is perhaps the most critical element for a coup: an important sector of the armed forces must be prepared to use force to take over the government. When legitimacy declines, sometimes because of the government's inability to achieve results, many citizens may be receptive to new political alternatives, perhaps even those that would radically transform the political system. If under these conditions a significant military faction wished to

overthrow the government and its concerns paralleled those of discontented civilians, the coup makers would have a good chance of garnering the support needed to succeed.

Cooperation and Contentment: Politics in the Age of Prosperity

The democratic regime established in 1959 in Venezuela initially managed to attain the legitimacy, efficacy, and effectiveness essential for its survival, along with sufficient military neutrality and even support. Much of this success resulted from the government's military policies. But the sustainability of the military model rested on two factors frequently credited for Venezuelan stability: political pacts and petroleum wealth (Karl 1986). Political pacts created a spirit of compromise that facilitated policy making and policy implementation and brought most major political actors comfortably into roles "loyal" to the incumbent administrations. Petroleum wealth endowed the regime with the resources to enhance effectiveness and simultaneously satisfy competing interest groups. Military policies could work as long as the pacts contained interparty competition, rather than freezing it. The petroleum pesos ensured that the pacts' distributive commitments could also be fulfilled.

After a three-year false start in the 1940s, leaders of the three major Venezuelan political parties—Acción Democrática (AD), the Christian Democrats (COPEI, the Comité Organizado por Elecciones Independientes), and the personalistic Unión Republicana Democrática (URD)—met to design a lasting democracy.² Competition and some uncertainty would be permitted, but not enough to threaten any major players. In the Pacta de Punto Fijo, party leaders agreed to curb mutual attacks, cooperate, and respect electoral outcomes, regardless of the winner. At the same time, the Programa Mínimo de Gobierno committed the parties to a moderately progressive social agenda. As Terry Karl explained, "the Minimum Program promised to pursue full employment, a major housing program for the poor, a new labor code, and widespread social legislation in health, education, and social security" (Karl 1986, 214). As long as the parties involved in the pacts could continue to represent most Venezuelans and could pursue policies in line with the commitments of the program, they could rely on a relatively high degree of legitimacy.³

Petroleum wealth greatly eased the task of meeting these commitments. During the 1960s and 1970s, the zenith of Venezuelan democracy, Venezuela was the biggest oil exporter in Latin America by far (Wilkie 1981, 475). Petroleum wealth meant that the government was able to sat-

2. The Communists were ultimately excluded from the pact.

3. Formally, the mandate of the Programa Mínimo extended for only five years. Yet the spirit of the document made its way into the constitution and into the expectations of the population (see Norden 1996b).

isfy the demands of numerous sectors of the population without having to make hard choices. Policy makers could simultaneously strive for economic growth and social welfare without having to pay the costs immediately. Even when social welfare policies fell somewhat short of aspirations, rapid growth kept optimism vibrantly alive. Except for a short-lived guerrilla movement in the 1960s and some initial military discontent, the Venezuelan regime appeared basically stable and highly prosperous. Between pacts and petroleum, most Venezuelans had little reason to look for an alternative to the existing political system.

Military Policies

The government's military policies sought to ensure that the armed forces would also have no motivation to displace the regime. Policies drew on a mixture of objective and subjective control, which worked well as long as political and economic conditions remained auspicious. Like the pacts, the model sought to overcome problems from the past, most of which had to do with questions of professionalization. In at least two of Venezuela's major coups (in 1945 and 1958), the discontent of the central military players—especially junior and mid-level officers—originated from conditions they perceived as interfering with military professionalism and autonomy.⁴ They were in part frustrated at having their professional paths blocked by less-trained senior colleagues, who had never benefited from the foreign education that many of their subordinates enjoyed (Burggraff 1972, 56, 151, 164). Military members of the coup coalition also reiterated previous complaints about corruption and politicization. They felt that the military needed to be kept separate from politics to protect professionalism. Finally, institutional autonomy was also an issue, as the air force and navy were chafing under army domination and all forces were seeking more autonomy to counter civilian meddling.

Objective control / The central military goals of professionalism and autonomy fit naturally with the premises of objective control and thus were easily backed by the civilian government. Military branches were given both the mandate and the resources to upgrade their level of professionalism, unhampered by civilian interference. The Programa Mínimo de Gobierno of the Pacta de Punto Fijo promised the "technical perfection and modernization of the different branches composing the armed forces," as well as "progressive improvement of living conditions for officers, [cadets], and soldiers" (Da Silva 1990, 89–90). Venezuela's soaring economy

4. The 1948 coup was also led by mid-level officers. But many of them had already risen to the top ranks of the military and acted more from enduring hostility to the AD than from professional frustration (Doyle 1967, 40–41).

allowed the government to provide the armed forces with such benefits as increased salaries and improved equipment, without augmenting the military's overall proportion of the budget.

In response to some of the other career frustrations, the government sought to speed up movement through the ranks, particularly at the top of the military hierarchy. Members of the armed forces were limited to thirty years of active service, which moved younger officers up through the ranks more quickly. The government also began to rotate the military command at a faster rate, allowing many more officers to occupy top posts at some point in their careers. The army's historic dominance of the armed forces was countered by replacing the *Estado Mayor* (General Staff) with a considerably weaker *Jefes de Estado Mayor Conjunto* (Joint Chiefs of Staff), which gave the separate branches greater independence. Although these reforms eventually interfered with professionalism, they initially alleviated tensions.

Subjective control / In conjunction with military professionalization, Venezuelan political leaders also pursued subjective control of the armed forces, which was essential given the country's extensive military autonomy. According to Felipe Agüero, subjective control is found in "a broadly shared developmentalist ethos and in an extended practice of party penetration, influence, and patronage among the military" (Agüero 1990, 270). Some of these practices have been efforts from the top, such as President Rómulo Betancourt's active outreach toward the armed forces and the personal contacts between political party leaders and military elites mentioned by Agüero. Others have targeted military ideals and role definitions, using discourse, military education, or socially sensitive tasks to encourage military acceptance of democracy and identification with the civilian population.

Betancourt, who was suspected of a harshly anti-military attitude for many years, deliberately sought to turn the armed forces from enemies into professional allies during his 1959 administration, pursuing direct contacts with the military and actively exercising his role as their constitutional leader (Bigler 1977, 122). After Betancourt, political leaders continued to wield influence in the armed forces through the parties. Even though members of the Congress apparently avoided altering or vetoing the promotion lists submitted to them,⁵ the parties reportedly influenced those lists at earlier stages. This informal political intervention created personal obligations to the dominant parties for many officers. In one sense, this arrangement helped maintain ties between civilian authorities and military officers (especially in higher ranks), thus discouraging them

5. According to a member of the Defense Committee, Deputy José Rodríguez Iturbe, the general policy is "neither confrontation nor obstruction." Interview with Dr. José Rodríguez Iturbe, 22 June 1994, Caracas.

from acting contrary to civilian wishes. But at the same time, political interference in promotions and assignments conflicts directly with merit-based professionalism and will subsequently prove to be controversial.

In the realm of ideology, the regime began with the advantage that the military had rebelled against a dictatorship in support of democracy. To retain that commitment, the Constitution of 1961 declared that one main function of the armed forces is to assure “the stability of the democratic institutions.”⁶ Subsequent efforts included “‘socializing’ actions that diffused democratic values, tightly linked to [assuring] permanent military backing, particularly in emergency situations” (Da Silva 1990, 85). The military’s direct involvement in protecting the democratic system during the guerrilla attacks of the early 1960s appears to have facilitated this process by deepening the military’s commitment to the established political system (Agüero 1993, 192).

The Venezuelan Armed Forces have generally accepted an apolitical role—and, at times, have even demanded it—as long as the political leaders could satisfy their professional needs. The political neutrality of the armed forces is mandated by a constitutional clause that defines the armed forces as “apolitical, obedient, and non-deliberative.”⁷ This clause has been invoked to prohibit active-duty military officers from holding elected office and from voting.

Overall, “democratizing the military” apparently succeeded in Venezuela. As one senior officer explained three decades later, “The military officer today is conscious of his institutional dimension and by his rank is committed to defense, security, and national integration; . . . he is custodian of the permanency of the rest of the institutions, and hence the cornerstone of the maintenance of those factors that make democratic existence possible . . .” (Rangel Rojas 1993, 178). Support for democracy and relative political neutrality followed smoothly from the military’s concerns in the mid-1950s, and the government’s subsequent policies appeared to have reinforced those tendencies.

Problems with Military Control

Yet as mentioned, excess autonomy and political meddling held definite risks for subordination. The Venezuelan military is subject to minimal institutional civilian oversight. Neither of the two branches of the government formally responsible for overseeing the military, the executive and the legislative, can do so practically. For the executive, the problem stems from the lack of any civilian intermediary between the president and the armed forces. The defense minister is an active-duty military

6. *Constitución de la República de Venezuela*, 1961.

7. *Ibid.*, Artículo 132.

officer at the top of the military hierarchy. This officer becomes the official head of the armed forces, assuming the political functions of the ministry but continuing to act as a representative of the military. The president, charged with a multiplicity of duties, has only limited ability to direct the armed forces actively.

The Venezuelan Congress exercises equally limited oversight of the armed forces. The few decisions made in the Congress about the armed forces, such as those regarding the broad outlines of the budget, tend to be based primarily on information and advice provided by the armed forces. The Congress has even accepted bills proposed by the military.⁸ This practice can be explained in part by the lack of staff. When asked about the Defense Committee's sources of information, committee president Ibrahín Sánchez identified as the primary providers of advice and information four military officers assigned to the Congress, one from each branch of the armed forces (the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, and the National Guard).⁹ Although these individuals are certainly knowledgeable about military affairs, they are unlikely to be neutral. Furthermore, deputies and senators rarely have the ability to provide alternate perspectives. Members of Congress tend to be assigned to committees on the basis of political criteria rather than expertise. Few members of the defense committees—especially those from the two dominant parties—begin with extensive knowledge of the subject or have sufficient time on one committee to develop any. The extensive range of what is considered *secreto militar* further restricts policy makers' ability to evaluate military issues in an informed manner (see Da Silva 1990, 90). Members of the Congress, even those on the Defense Committee, are not exempt from prohibitions on civilian access to a wide range of military information.

With respect to promotions, few within the military seem to accept the congressional role as benign or trivial. According to Rear Admiral Hernán Gruber, leader of the November 1992 attempted coup, "many poorly qualified officers move up because a politician takes them by the hand."¹⁰ He reported that some years earlier, "I occupied the first place in the order of merit by my qualifications, and I was not promoted. I was not promoted because the one who was in last place was a friend of President Lusinchi's lover. So when they took the list to the president for him to sign, he said, 'Not this one [Gruber]. Move him to the end and move the last one here.'"¹¹ The dominant political parties have reportedly exercised even

8. Ibrahín Sánchez referred to a specific bill proposed by the navy, which the Congress debated during the summer of 1994. Interview with Dr. Ibrahín Sánchez, Diputado Nacional and president of the Defense Committee, 22 June 1994, Caracas.

9. Ibid.

10. Interview with Adm. Hernán Gruber Odreman (Navy), leader of the November 1992 coup attempt (the senior officer involved), 27 June 1994, Caracas.

11. Ibid.

more influence over assignments. According to Gil Yepes, "There have been cases in which the president names a minister, service chief, or similar official who has less seniority or ability than others. This phenomenon generally is tied to party sympathies" (Gil Yepes 1986, 170). In the mid-1990s, the advances of President Rafael Caldera's son-in-law, General Rojas, were viewed by the military with suspicion. Such political maneuvering stimulated resentment on the part of officers like Gruber, who believed that their careers had been harmed in the process, and also fostered the distrust of more junior officers.

Subjective control also fell short in that not all members of the armed forces perceived democracy in the same way. The military's extensive participation in "civic-action missions" contributed to many officers' conception of what democracy means or should mean. Through these missions, members of the armed forces were regularly brought into contact with less advantaged citizens throughout the country, whether building schools or vaccinating children (Ortiz 1973). This experience led some in the military, especially those in the lower ranks, to associate democracy with the rights of the masses and the provision of basic needs. According to Aníbal Romero, this perspective is common among many Venezuelans who view democracy as "a type of government capable of distributing prosperity more efficiently" (Romero 1997, 8). These political ideals diverged enough from the practices of political elites that subjective control became increasingly problematic in the lower ranks of the armed forces.

Nevertheless, the Venezuelan mixture of objective and subjective control achieved at least apparent subordination for several decades. In terms of objective control, the armed forces were granted the professionalization and autonomy they craved, although without the institutionalized oversight that would have completed Huntington's formulation. As long as officers shared the general goals of civilian authorities and identified their own career success with that of political leaders, institutionalized oversight was scarcely needed. Petroleum wealth and a general civilian trust of the armed forces further contributed to the cooperative relationship between the Venezuelan Armed Forces and the Congress. Given the country's enormous wealth for most of the democratic period, the Congress did not have to make the usual difficult financial choices and trade-offs.

But the Venezuelan model included a couple of major flaws. First, the personalistic and political ties between military officers and party leaders undermined merit-based professionalism. Mechanisms to speed up career advancement and divide the forces also weakened the military's professional capacity, although it hindered the ability to interfere politically. Second, subjective control required maintaining military identification with elites, while military tasks and education gradually drew many in the military closer to the masses. Therefore, if the elites lost their ability

to satisfy the masses, they would lose their ability to satisfy many in the military, as well.

THE COUP ATTEMPTS OF 1992

By the early 1990s, Venezuelan leaders had ceased to satisfy the citizens. According to Linz's theory, prime conditions existed for the breakdown of democracy: declining legitimacy and efficacy as well as a clear alternative to the incumbent government (in this instance, the military). The coup attempts of 1992 underscored just how precarious the situation was. These attempts represented ambitious movements that managed to garner significant sympathy within the armed forces and influence the course of Venezuelan politics. Thus although the coups failed, their apparent resonance within the military and in national society imbued them with significance.

In both attempts, the insurgents planned to eliminate the existing government and establish civil-military juntas. These were not mere rebellions in which insurgents use force to pursue institutional demands without seeking the overthrow of the government (Norden 1996a). The coup attempts also appeared to have gone beyond either the roles of "moderator" or "guardian." In these roles, insurgents threaten or displace a government perceived as unacceptable but essentially seek to "preserve the status quo" and allow a quick transition back to civilian rule (Nordlinger 1977, 22–23). Instead, the Venezuelan coup leaders intended to maintain control long enough to carry out substantial changes in the political system that would prepare Venezuela for a "better democracy." As coup leader Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez Frias explained to me, "We planned a transition government of at least a year. . . . [We would] call a Constituent Assembly, make decisions at a national level [and] basic decisions at an international level. . . ." ¹² The coup leaders' plans resembled in some respects a more moderate version of those implemented by their Southern Cone neighbors in the 1960s and 1970s (Agüero 1993). Like coup leaders in those countries, the Venezuelan insurgents claimed to be advocates of democracy but believed that democracy needed to be interrupted to make it work. In each of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes identified by Guillermo O'Donnell (1973), especially Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and Uruguay, protestations of democratic beliefs failed to impede harsh repression and prolonged military governance (lasting from seven to seventeen years).

Yet the Venezuelan coup attempts differed from these experiments in at least two important ways: in the ranks of their leadership and in the

12. Interview with Lt. Col. Hugo Chávez Frias (Army), leader of the February 1992 coup attempt, 14 July 1994, Caracas.

ideological nature of the movements. In Venezuela, both factors reflected a specific problem with the model of civil-military relations—the diminishing capacity of political elites to reign in lower-ranking officers through subjective control.

The Venezuelan coup attempts, especially the first one, originated in the middle and lower ranks of the armed forces, where support for the coup appeared to be broad.¹³ According to Felipe Agüero, this composition prevented the success of the movement, which failed “as a result of the rebels’ inability to marshal the participation of the high command. . .” (Agüero 1995a, 138). The *rebeldes bolivarianos* (those leading the coup on 4 February) perceived senior officers as too corrupt and entangled with the political elites to be worth recruiting. But I would argue that their collaboration was far less essential than Agüero claimed. Leadership by the high command facilitates coups because it is much easier to issue commands than to coordinate horizontally. This pattern characterized the Southern Cone coups of the 1960s and 1970s. But the ones who are critical are the middle-ranking officers (from captains to lieutenant colonels) because they exercise direct control over the fighting men. Junior and middle-rank officers have often been the central actors in successful military coups, especially in Venezuela. Thus while the absence of the high command cannot explain the failure of the coups, it reveals the critical generational split within the Venezuelan Armed Forces underlying the deterioration of control.

The ideological bent of the Venezuelan coups, especially that of 4 February, stood out as much as the leadership composition. The coup leaders shared several concerns with their Southern Cone predecessors, such as military professionalism, public disorder, and political ineffectiveness. Yet this coup reflected progressive sentiments more similar to the government of General Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru than to the conservative and even reactionary tendencies of the military regimes in the Southern Cone. Whereas the top-down coups of the Southern Cone for the most part sought to protect “the Nation” and the economic elites from threatened mobilization, the Venezuelan coups largely sought to reclaim the rights of the apparently neglected poor.

The first coup attempt on 4 February 1992 represented directly the junior officers’ disaffection with their military superiors and their relatively progressive political sympathies. The coup attempt failed largely because of problems in planning and organization but proved popular

13. Following the coup attempt of 4 February, Venezuela’s military command conducted an extensive study of the concerns and attitudes of their forces. Entitled “Diagnóstico FAN-01-92,” the study included interviews of five thousand officers, noncommissioned officers, and soldiers as well as other materials. The study itself has been kept under lock and key (protected by the ubiquitous military confidentiality in Venezuela), but the results that have leaked out suggest considerable dissent within the armed forces and significantly more condemnation of political leaders than of the Bolivarianos (see Gruber Odreman 1993, 116–19).

enough to launch the movement's leaders and their ideas into a position of considerable influence. The coup was led by two lieutenant colonels, Hugo Chávez Frías and Francisco Arias Cárdenas. They named their movement the *Movimiento Bolivariano Revolucionario 200*, evoking as its inspiration, the popular image of liberator Simón Bolívar and the bicentennial of independence. Members of the MBR-200 were frustrated by declining economic conditions and increasing social turmoil (particularly after the bloody riots of 1989). They were also angered by the corruption of President Carlos Andrés Pérez and, in their view, the entire political system. The insurgents therefore decided to oust Pérez and initiate a new and more democratic era. Profound distrust of their senior officers, who they viewed as equally corrupt, led them to guard their secrecy. Excess caution in advance and a failure to take over the media during the event itself hindered the rebels' ability to communicate their goals to potential supporters. Thus the government succeeded in controlling the MBR-200 coup attempt by using the loyalist National Guard. But they could not control its aftermath.

The coup awakened the public imagination, demonstrating the extent to which the Pérez administration and its leadership had strayed from public expectations of democracy. As Agüero explained, "the massive demonstrations in the days immediately afterward were not in support of the government; they reflected open sympathy for the rebels" (Agüero 1995b, 215). The leaders of the coup, particularly the charismatic Chávez, were lauded as heroes, long-awaited knights who had come to rescue Venezuelans from a stagnating system. Polls taken immediately after the attempt demonstrated that nearly half of the population believed that a military coup (but not necessarily a military regime) might make things better (Philip 1992). Michael Coppedge found that around the time of the February coup, "polls showed that 65 to 75 percent of the respondents continued to favor a democratic, constitutional solution to the crisis. Still, when a quarter to a third of the population actively favors a military solution, and many more would acquiesce in one, it is a sign that a democracy is vulnerable to regime breakdown" (Coppedge 1992, 43). Even a few members of the political elite justified the actions of the rebels (Romero 1994, 37). Reflecting the reaction of many Venezuelans, Rafael Caldera (one of the founders of democratic Venezuela) rejected the coup attempt as "deplorable" but blamed the government's harsh economic policies and corruption (Caldera 1992).¹⁴ Venezuelans voiced their support for democracy and their distaste for authoritarianism but also grumbled about their exasperation with existing politics.

14. After Caldera was reelected to the presidency at the end of 1993, he pardoned all the rebels. He even found a place for Arias Cárdenas within the government as the head of PAMI, a program for mother and infant nutrition and care. Arias Cárdenas was subsequently elected governor of Zulia for the Causa Radical party.

By November, the insurgency had spread wider and higher within the military. The February coalition of primarily junior army officers had been replaced by a coalition that included officers from the army and the highest ranks of the navy and air force. Chávez and Arias Cárdenas were still in prison, but some of their followers allied with the new movement, now led by Navy Admirals Hernán Gruber Odremán and Luis Cabrera Aguirre and by Air Force General Francisco Visconti Osorio.

The second coup failed for various reasons: further problems in coordination, an active post-February program by the army command to regain control, and persisting tensions between junior and senior officers. The loyalist military command had kept close tabs on the army, monitoring them carefully and working hard to co-opt troops from the rebel ranks.¹⁵ These efforts allowed them to anticipate the second coup attempt and cut off the remaining ground troops (especially those in the navy infantry) before they could participate. The coup of 27 November thus ended up as primarily an Air Force coup—very violent and having little chance of succeeding.

Conflict within the coalition emanating from the ongoing generational cleavage also contributed to the downfall of the November insurgents. When taking into consideration the mistakes of the earlier effort, the senior officers involved in the November coup pre-filmed a video to play on national television, in which they appeared dressed in uniform, informing the public of their intentions in a low-key manner and encouraging everyone to remain calm. According to General Visconti, "What was programmed was a video in which I, standing firm next to the symbols of the country, delivered a message to Venezuelans about the causes and possible consequences of our movement."¹⁶ That video never appeared, however. Instead, the insurgents who took over the television station played another video in which Chávez (accompanied by three others) proclaimed: "The independent men and women committed to the future of the country have now come out to fight in the streets and byways of Venezuela to recover with our own hands the stained honor of the Fatherland. . . ."¹⁷ According to Arias Cárdenas, the video shown had been prepared considerably earlier for another planned insurrection and was substituted without his knowledge.¹⁸ But the damage was done. The mo-

15. According to my interviews with Gen. Iván Darío Jiménez Sánchez (Air Force), Minister of Defense during the November 1992 coup attempt (in which the Air Force was central), 15 July 1994, Caracas; and with Gen. Pedro Remigio Rangel Rojas (Army), commander of the army during both coup attempts, 29 June 1994, Caracas.

16. *El Nacional*, 3 Dec. 1992, p. A2. Also, my interview with Gen. Francisco Visconti (Air Force), co-leader of the November 1992 coup attempt, senior air force officer in the coup, 12 July 1994, Caracas.

17. *El Nacional*, 28 Nov. 1992, p. D6.

18. Interview with Lt. Col. Francisco Arias Cárdenas (Army), co-leader in the February 1992 coup attempt with Chávez Frías, 14 July 1994, Caracas.

bilizing message alarmed many Venezuelans, triggering images of unrestrained violence in an already chaotic society. Combined with the destruction wrought by the air force bombs, the coup appeared more frightening than inspiring.

The November coup revealed an invigorated loyalist faction but did not end the intra-military and civil-military crises. The division between junior and senior officers remained, even within the rebel coalition. Furthermore, despite the violence of the November 1992 coup attempt, at least 22 percent of Venezuelans polled continued to consider this an acceptable option (Templeton 1995, 10). Thus the coup attempts revealed the extent to which the government's legitimacy had waned in Venezuela as well as the weakness of subjective control in the lower ranks of the military.

CRISIS IN VENEZUELAN POLITICS

What happened to Venezuelan democracy? The answer has much to do with its origins. The political system and military policies had been designed with the tensions of the past in mind and the prosperity of the future assumed. But petroleum wealth turned to dependency, and inter-party cooperation gradually smothered competition (Karl 1986). At the same time, "democratizing military training" actually encouraged lower and middle ranks of the armed forces to identify more with the masses than with party elites. Public frustration stimulated active opposition from within these sectors of the military. Meanwhile, excessive degrees of autonomy encouraged officers to seek their own solutions to political crisis rather than accept the authority of elected leaders. In sum, policies that had been very effective in resolving the problems of a transitional government actually became disabling for a more enduring political system.

Stagnating Pacts and Petroleum Dependency

In the 1990s, the combined political and economic crisis activated the Venezuelan military's potential for insubordination. The political pacts designed to ease the transition gave a privileged position to the central parties. Of the three parties originally involved in the Pacta de Punto Fijo, the URD soon proved unable to survive without Jóvito Villalba, leaving only the AD and COPEI to compete from the 1960s onward. Despite elections based on proportional representation, new political parties found it difficult to break into the existing political system due to cooperation between these two parties and their penetration of Venezuelan society. As Coppedge has pointed out, "AD and COPEI (and the minor parties as well) have always sought to enhance their competitive positions by controlling other organizations. Sometimes control was established by co-opting the organizations' existing leadership; sometimes partisans infil-

trated the organizations and won control from the inside. . . . Once in control, these partisans were then expected to mobilize their organizations to support the party in elections, rallies, demonstrations, and policy debates" (Coppedge 1992, 37). The success of the AD and COPEI shut out smaller political parties, thus limiting the competitiveness of the political system. By the early 1990s, many were referring scornfully to Venezuelan democracy as *partidocracia*—government of the parties rather than of the people. The government was commonly viewed as corrupt, elitist, and unresponsive to the needs of the population.

Petroleum wealth likewise ceased to benefit Venezuelan democracy—good fortune simply ran out. After becoming dependent on petroleum income, Venezuelan profits began to decline around 1981. From 1981 to 1985, petroleum sales declined from 20 billion dollars (U.S.) to 14 billion. The following year, they plummeted to 8.7 billion (Hellinger 1991, 123). This decline stunned a population accustomed to high levels of distribution and an ever-expanding pie. According to Aníbal Romero, 82 percent of Venezuelans agreed that the country's substantial wealth "should be shared between all without any distinction or privilege," yet only around a quarter of those surveyed felt that they had gained from oil profits" (Romero 1994, 25). With many Venezuelas already perceiving the distribution of the country's riches as highly unjust, further movement away from economic equity was bound to be unpopular.

Yet shortly after taking office in January 1989, President Carlos Andrés Pérez instituted a stringent neoliberal economic program designed to adjust the economy to Venezuela's declining oil revenues and burdensome debt. For the military, this plan meant declining real wages and fewer resources for professional modernization. But the most explosive measure was an increase in the cost of public transportation (traditionally subsidized by low gas prices). Caracas erupted. On 27 February 1989, Venezuela was torn by riots and looting. Lacking the means to control the chaos, the government called in the armed forces. Eventually, the riots subsided, but not without trauma to the population and the armed forces. Junior officers who had shared the burden of the struggling economy were now forced into the streets to defend policies that many opposed and an elite with whom few identified.

Evolution of Military Politics

Junior and mid-level officers' disgruntlement over the February deployment built on growing concerns about declining military professionalism and increasing social inequities. Throughout much of the armed forces, policies designed to accelerate promotions were now considered disruptive. Measures originally taken to appease highly trained junior officers had ceased to aid professionalism after the earlier generation of less-

trained officers had long since retired. Limiting military service to thirty years (or thirty-three for those beginning service in the mid-1980s) has been criticized by some as counter-professional and debilitating, turning promotion into “an obsession” (Müller Rojas 1992, 228). Members of the armed forces have also argued that the shortened period in service impedes leadership and planning within the military, as does the rapid rotation of command (Daniels 1992, 49). By the time officers can become skilled and respected in a position, they have either moved on or out. Likewise, the relatively weak *Jefes de Estado Mayor Conjunto* (which replaced the stronger *Estado Mayor*) has been criticized for providing insufficient coordination between these forces. Policies like these collectively weaken the military’s ability to act in a unified manner—politically but also professionally. This approach suits a strategy of pure subjective control but is completely incompatible with an “objective” form of control.

Yet military policies unquestioned by the armed forces have undermined control even more. These policies have to do with primary measures taken to achieve subjective and objective civilian control—the ones that fostered identification with civilians and institutional autonomy. When the practice of democracy came to conflict with the military’s expectations of democracy and junior officers’ identification shifted away from the political elites and toward the masses, subjective control could no longer compensate for the gap left by excess autonomy and insufficient institutional control.

Strategies to achieve subjective control succeeded in establishing a firm belief in democracy as well as strong identification with civilians. But Venezuela’s increasingly closed pact regime came to be viewed as less than democratic. According to Lieutenant Colonel Chávez Frías, “The constitution that they created in 1961 is an illegitimate constitution, in origin and in process. When it was set up, the dominant political parties made it. Here there is no right to referendum, repeal of a president or a minister—not for anyone.”¹⁹

Coup leaders, going beyond their criticism of the procedures of Venezuelan democracy, adopted a more substantive definition of democracy, emphasizing distribution and economic justice. Chávez Frías argued that the poor “cannot buy meat; they cook banana peels . . . to substitute for meat, to give to their children because they have none. The basic cost of a week’s food in Venezuela is approaching 60,000 bolívares. The majority of those who work earn less than 20,000 bolívares. How do they eat, when this isn’t even enough to eat? As a result, there’s no democracy here.”²⁰ In sum, it would appear that for Chávez Frías and others in the armed forces and in Venezuelan society, full democracy would include at least the gen-

19. Interview with Chávez Frías, July 1994.

20. *Ibid.*

eralized provision of basic economic needs. During the decade that culminated in the 1989 riots and led to the coup attempts, the Venezuelan government's capacity to fulfill these needs diminished substantially. As Jennifer McCoy and William Smith reported, between 1980 and 1990, "the number of Venezuela's urban poor (income of less than \$60 per month) grew from 18% to 33% of the population" (McCoy and Smith 1995, 160). For Chávez Frías, the declining living standards indicated a flawed democracy. With scarcity unthinkable, only corruption could be to blame.

Military identification with civilians inevitably clashed with political control. Compared with an example like the Argentine military, the Venezuelan military has had considerable contact with civilians through civic-action functions as well as education. The inclusion of women in the Venezuelan Armed Forces, even in small numbers, has also made the organization somewhat more parallel with civilian organizations. Finally, many if not most in the armed forces appear to identify with Venezuela's poorer classes rather than with the elites.²¹

Yet it seems that junior and mid-level officers differentiate civilians with whom they identify from political elites, partly as a consequence of training. As with prior insurgent junior officers, the coup leaders of February 1992 had received somewhat different training from their superiors. In 1970 the armed forces implemented new educational programs, which were called the Plan Andrés Bello in the army. José Machillanda Pinto explained, "the Great Reform that the Military Academy initiated in 1970 sought a level of education for the young cadet that would prepare him to operate in a free, plural, and decent egalitarian society, in which the legitimate government would be the reflection of virtues and development, and the armed component, autonomous and subordinate to the Civil Authority, would be capable of participating, declaring opinions, integrating itself, and cooperating with the growth and aggrandizement of the nation" (Machillanda Pinto 1993, 91). The Academia Militar altered its educational plans so that cadets, who were now required to enter officer training with a high school diploma in hand, would graduate with the equivalent of a university degree. Young officers and cadets began to interact more with civilians in the universities through sports and various exchanges.²² Many opted to study in the civilian universities as well.

The leaders of the February 1992 coup attempt came from the first generation to have benefited from these new educational plans. Lieutenant Colonel Chávez Frías received a university degree (*licenciatura*) from the Universidad Central de Venezuela, and Lieutenant Colonel Arias Cárdenas carried out postgraduate studies at the Universidad de los

21. This opinion emerged as a common theme throughout my interviews with Venezuelan military officers, from the lieutenant colonels all the way to the most senior generals.

22. Interview with Chávez Frías, July 1994.

Andes. Both studied political science.²³ The new generation tended to view themselves as more broadly educated and open-minded than those who came out of an earlier tradition, "an old, authoritarian, Prussian, rigid conception."²⁴ Thus the educational changes alienated younger officers from their superior officers as well as from civilian authorities. Junior officers perceived senior officers and political leaders alike as closed elites that were bound to each other but not to the people. Junior officers could be loyal to the idea of democracy, identify with and relate to civilians, but in no way support a government they perceived as neither democratic nor representative.

Institutional autonomy, a central component of objective control, had also developed in such a way as to minimize political oversight of the armed forces. The extent of the military's autonomy came to light during the February 1989 riots. President Pérez issued the command for the military to take action, but that appears to have been the extent of civilian direction. Military guidelines determined when the Guardia Nacional would be joined by the traditional armed forces.²⁵ The president merely told the military to restore order. Decisions about how to implement the order were left to the Minister of Defense. For the duration of the crisis, this minister clearly held the country's fate in his hands (Capriles Ayala 1992, 125–26).

During the crisis of 1989, the military's actions apparently converged with the wishes of the government (those of the president at least). Yet the structure of Venezuelan political-military relations provides no guarantee of that convergence. If subjective control were effective and complete, the existence of shared values and commitment to democratic processes could make the armed forces particularly sensitive to the wishes of the government and could incline military officers to seek the same kinds of outcomes as political leaders. But as discussed, the military's identification with non-elite civilians has caused a rift between many in the armed forces and the government. In 1992 the military's identification with a frustrated civilian population converged with the tradition of independent decision making to encourage rebellion among junior and mid-level officers.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the initial decades of success, contemporary Venezuela presents a disappointing picture for newer democracies seeking long-term

23. Interviews with Chávez Frías and Arias Cárdenas, July 1994.

24. Interview with Chávez Frías, July 1994.

25. Interview with Gen. Italo del Valle Alliegro (Army), 30 June 1994, Caracas. He served as Minister of Defense during the 1989 riots and directed military actions in these events.

consolidation of their regimes. The designers of Venezuela's democratic system managed to overcome serious political antagonisms and alleviated the concerns of major social actors (like the business sector and the Catholic Church). They dealt effectively with the specific issues that had provoked military displeasure previously, as well as confronting larger challenges such as identification with civilians and military professionalism. Nevertheless, by 1992 significant elements of the armed forces were prepared to oust the elected government. This collapse of subordination raises the question of what failed in the Venezuelan model of combined subjective and objective control.

Despite the difficulties demonstrated by the Venezuelan case, it is feasible and probably even desirable to combine Huntington's subjective and objective control. Yet for either or both approaches to work, care must be taken to include all the key ingredients. Joining selective elements of each can create an explosive mixture.

Effective subjective control requires two conditions above all: ideological convergence between the civilians in power and the armed forces, and consistency of ideas and identifications within the military. In a rapidly evolving society, neither of these conditions is necessarily easy to achieve or maintain. Civilian-military convergence requires either relative political homogeneity within the society (the advantage of the United States) or narrow opportunities for opposition groups to gain power (perhaps the situation of Mexico). In the early years after the transition to democracy in Venezuela, electoral results demonstrated that the governing political parties represented the majority of voters, and the inter-party pacts meant that no serious contender would stray too far from the accepted set of policies. The discussions of the late 1950s also took into account the interests of the military, bringing them in as partners in the new Venezuela and thus binding them to the governing political elite. As Venezuelan society evolved, however, it became increasingly difficult for the stagnant party system to represent the spectrum of ideas and interests of the population and correspondingly problematic to retain military allegiance.²⁶

Part of the problem has been the lack of consensus among the branches of the armed forces. The Venezuelan Armed Forces appear to respond to a broader spectrum of ideas within society than does the AD-COPEI duo. Exposing junior officers to training that differed from that of their superiors created a breach between the ranks. As usually occurs in these cases, the top ranks lost the respect of their subordinates. Junior officers were also immersed in domestic tasks such as civic-action projects and riot control (in 1989). Such undertakings, like counter-narcotics as-

26. In the late 1980s, political elites began studying alternatives for political and electoral reform through a presidential commission known as COPRE (Comisión Presidencial para la Reforma del Estado), but the changes came too late to avoid the crises of 1992.

signments, tend to encourage disassociation from political elites and an inclination to try to resolve a broad range of society's problems. In sum, the Venezuelan model of subjective control attained the allegiance of high-ranking officers to political elites but encouraged the lower ranks to look elsewhere. For subjective control to work, attention must be given to military training (making sure that senior officers are always the most knowledgeable) and military roles, while taking care on the political side to maintain stability and flexibility. Ideological homogeneity within society would be ideal.

Objective civilian control also has its limitations when lacking the essential ingredients. As indicated, professional autonomy in Venezuela came to mean complete independence and a lack of institutionalized civilian oversight. Yet certain decisions about defense are unavoidably political: decisions about how to spend taxpayers' money and about national priorities, allies, and enemies. Decisions about defense also have implications for employment, industry, the environment, and the overall economy. If civilian politicians do not or cannot make such decisions, then those political decisions will be left by default to the military. At this point, the military is forced to go beyond its realm of professional expertise, and objective civilian control cannot function. Only if relative professional autonomy is combined with active civilian leadership can such professionalism support subordination.

Since the crises of 1992, Venezuela's political and military leaders have been working rapidly to try to create a new stable environment. The political system has become more open, with new political parties gaining important positions and the dominant parties even joining opposing coalitions. Within the armed forces, military leaders have sought to bring former rebels back into the fold. At least some have found these political reforms sufficient to answer their concerns. But other issues remain unresolved. Economic reform progresses slowly, with policy makers tightly constrained by the possibility of public upheaval. As of 1997, the defense minister remains an active-duty military officer, and the Congress has only begun to work more aggressively on military issues. The deprofessionalizing rapid rotation of military leadership continues, and the military appears to be even more involved in domestic tasks. On many fronts, Venezuela may be moving forward, but its leaders have not yet established a secure model for long-term civilian control of the armed forces.

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