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An unholy alliance

Across Latin America, the military's gaining power and moving into politics – with support of Christian fundamentalist groups

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The government and the military got caught up in a struggle for power – in a country that's generally considered one of the Latin America's shining examples of democracy. Yes, in Uruguay, Guido Manini, head of the country's armed forces, recently criticised 'the bias of the judiciary' in investigating the breaches of human rights under the military dictatorship.

In a recent report, he was quoted as accusing the courts of having neglected due process and passed sentences on forces personnel without sufficient proof. Manini had already publicly claimed that 'nobody cares what happened 40 years ago' and also repeatedly disrupted searches for the remains of victims 'disappeared' by the dictatorship by giving false information to their relatives. But the latest accusation turned out to be the straw which broke the camel's back.

President Tabaré Vasquez responded immediately to the report, ordering Manini into his office and dismissing him on the spot. This was the first time anything of the sort had happened in Uruguay – and proved to be something of a double-edged sword, positioning Manini as an opposition candidate for this autumn's presidential elections. The country's media soon jumped on board, writing the dismissed general up as 'Uruguay's Bolsonaro' in reference to neighbouring Brazil's right-wing extremist head of state with a military background.

A Latin American trend

The heightened tension between the government and the military originated from, on the one hand, Manini's flagrant efforts to influence the nation's politics. On the other hand, he has become a conduit for suspicion in Uruguay's military with regards to the planned reform of the

country's armed forces by the left-wing governing party *Frente Amplio* (FA). The FA wants to update training, increase the number of women in service, and reduce the amount of top brass. On top of that, the reform includes provisions for service personnel to refuse orders which run contrary to the country's constitution or represent a violation of human rights.

Manini now finds himself the darling of the *Movimiento Social Artiguisto*, a new, staunchly conservative political grouping from the country's evangelical and catholic fundamentalist scene. His wife is a local politician for the *Partido Nacional* (alias *Blancos*), and Manini himself doesn't seem to be running short of fans in the country's traditional right-of-centre party. Indeed, the party's own presidential candidate, Luis Lacalle, tweeted that Manini had been a 'loyal serviceman and a commendable commanding officer'.

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While this may, at first, look like little more than a brief flare-up in a small country, it's actually quite symptomatic for developments across Latin America. After losing resources, influence, and prestige following the collapse of the juntas of the 70s and 80s, the continent's armed forces are back on the march. From Mexico and Guatemala in the north down to Brazil, they are profiling themselves not only as allies in maintaining law and order – e.g. in fighting drug cartels. But they're also getting back into politics, most frequently with the support of neoconservative, often populist parties and fundamentalist evangelical groupings.

The military expands power in Brazil and Mexico

In Brazil, for instance, Jair Bolsonaro and his Vice-President are both from the military and allied with evangelical parties. Seven of his 22 cabinet ministers also have military backgrounds. They control key ministries such as mining and energy, defence, transport, infrastructure, and research – and the armed forces are stretching out their hands towards genuine executive power.

In the first three months of the Bolsonaro administration, the military has not only made sure to exempt itself from the planned pensions

reform (i.e. they will retain their lower pension age without losing anything from their last pay package). But they also reined in the president in foreign policy, vetoing military engagement in Venezuela and the planned relocation of the country's embassy in Israel to Jerusalem.

In Mexico, a country in which the military submitted itself to civilian command after the end of the revolution one hundred years ago, President Andres Manual López Obrador has signed over more power to the armed forces than ever before. While considered a left-wing politician due to his populist social welfare agenda, López Obrador is actually a member of an evangelical church and holds quite conservative views. The National Guard he has created to improve domestic security is heavily militarised, and his attempt to place it under military command – and, as such, outside of civilian control – was only narrowly stopped by Congress.

This National Guard is, however, only the latest manifestation of a tendency towards more power for Mexico's military which begun under conservative President Felipe Calderón in 2006. Since his administration, the military has been *de facto* operating in internal security (if not *de jure*). With a range of special powers, it can block investigations into human rights abuses committed by armed forces: massacres involving military personnel now end up being dealt with at military tribunals or, not infrequently, in low sentences for rank-and-file soldiers at court.

According to the Washington Office on Latin America, only 3.2 per cent of all human rights breaches involving military personnel are brought to trials ending in convictions. This is, in essence, a guarantee that crimes will not be prosecuted. Yet the Mexican military stands accused of torture, summary execution, 'disappearances', and rape. Under López-Obrador, they are expanding their influence on the economy, too, having been charged with building a new airport for the capital for reasons which have yet to be fully explained. They are also now the security contractors for the state oil concern, Pemex.

Undoing the progress of decades

In Guatemala, the situation is even more dramatic: the armed forces and ex-military personnel have joined to form the *Frente de Convergencia Nacional* (FCN) and now guarantee President Jimmy Morales' survival. The evangelical former comedian and his family clan stand accused of corruption and illegal election financing, with the country's judiciary being backed by the UN's International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG). When state prosecutors applied for his presidential

immunity to be lifted, Morales had soldiers march outside the CICIG and, surrounded by generals, announced the end of the CICIG mandate. He topped it off by declaring head investigator Iván Velásquez a *persona non grata*.

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In the country's congress, the FCN then forged an alliance with conservative parties to stop the president's immunity being lifted. This way, Morales managed to pull off something which his predecessor Otto Pérez didn't: blocking a judiciary acting far too independently. Ex-general Pérez is currently serving a prison sentence for having set up a mafia-style network within the Guatemalan customs body to embezzle import taxes and share out the proceeds among those in the know. This kind of organised crime is a legacy of the civil war and is still draining the small state's resources to this day.

These developments are only possible because of the continent-wide crisis in democracy and voters' loss of faith in the political establishment. According to the latest surveys carried out by Latinobarometro, only 48 per cent of the region's populations now believe in democracy – the lowest number since it returned. In lists of trustworthy institutions, political parties and parliaments regularly pull up the rear, while the military and the church top the polls.

Calls for a 'strong man at the helm', which are almost unavoidable in this context, are an open invitation to a conservative elite wedded to post-colonial structures and looking to strengthen its privileges. For the military, it's about maintaining its business advantages, about tightening control of groupings in civil society, and about rewriting the history of its role in dictatorships. The continent's armed forces also want to limit human rights and avoid 'pesky' international control mechanisms.

For values-based conservative evangelicals and catholics, this is an opportunity to roll back the women's and gay rights agendas – something against which, astonishingly enough, there's relatively little resistance. A bit of skilful political marketing seems sufficient to get even the flimsiest of campaigns over the line: by claiming it contained 'gender ideology', Columbia's hard-right former president Álvaro Uribe was, in alliance with evangelical church groups and catholic fundamentalists, able to sabotage the peace deal with FARC. He helped the No campaign to win the national referendum.

The most frightening aspect of this neoconservative-militaristic backlash, supported by President Donald Trump's administration in the US, is its clear goal: to abolish as much progress as possible in terms of gender equality, transparency, constitutionality, and participative civil society in the shortest possible timeframe. This is progress which has been measured in decades. The maybe even more terrifying part: the inability of the progressive parties and movements in the region, weakened by corruption scandals and internal rivalries, to get over the shock of what's happening and come up with an effective strategy against this bulldozing from the right.



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