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Turkish Civil-Military Relations: A Latin American Comparison

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ABSTRACT This article compares civil-military relations in Turkey and Latin America. It finds that in both cases, military interruptions of democratic rule have been justified on grounds of military guardianship over national values and interests and feelings of professional superiority over civilians. It also finds that while the Turkish military ruled for brief periods, relying instead on extracting legal constitutional guarantees to maintain influence, Latin American militaries ruled for lengthier periods with less constitutional rewriting. In recent years, militaries in both places seem more willing to accept civilian policies even if they disagree with them.

No nation or region is entirely unique. There are always patterns of behavior and thought in one place that find parallels in another place. It is discovering these patterns that make for interesting cross-national comparative work. At first blush, it would appear that searching for convergence between Latin America and Turkey would be challenging to say the least. They are worlds apart, separated by oceans, continents and cultures. One is the offspring of the Ottoman Empire; the other Spanish and Portuguese empires. One is Muslim, the other mostly Roman Catholic. One straddles Europe and Asia; the other resides in the West, inside the long shadow cast by the United States.

And yet, it is in their civil-military relations that present similarities amidst the differences. Both have democratic histories interrupted by military intervention. As this article argues, these militaries have intervened in defense of common propositions: that the armed forces are guardians of their nations; that only they can judge how, whether or when the nation’s core values and interests have been endangered. Militaries of Latin America and Turkey have a self-inflated sense of their own historical worth, reinforced by feelings of professional superiority over civilian leaders. These notions have made it easier to justify actions that, in defense of national security or national ideals, have interrupted or ended democratic rule even as the armed forces claim they are defending their democracies. In recent times

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however, military attitudes appear to be changing, and for the better. Latin American militaries would prefer leaving governance to civilians, and generally do not contest civilian decisions, even if they disagree with them. It appears as if the Turkish military is heading in the same direction.

**Historical Legacies**

If there are any sizeable differences between Latin America and Turkey, they are found in the past. These are places with contrasting experiences. Independence came to Latin America by the second decade of the 1800s. Turkey defeated the occupying forces in the 1920s. In the aftermath of independence, countries in the Southern Hemisphere were left in a state of anarchy, and it took decades for strong, centralized governments to form. By contrast, Kemal Atatürk was able to consolidate power soon after the victory of Turkish forces against the allied occupiers.

These contrasting legacies set civil-military relations off on different trajectories. Into the Latin American abyss stepped powerful political-military bosses called caudillos. Their power rested on having an economic base—usually land, loyal followers who depended on them for their own livelihoods and a means of coercion—in the form of a militia. These were rag-tag armed units, small in size, poorly trained and equipped with no particular loyalty to a nation-state or its government. But they served the caudillos’ objectives, and those with control of the guns secured property for the caudillos and their allies, they served as political brokers for the parties, and sometimes, they seized power for themselves. As the 19th century wore on, anarchy turned into some semblance of political order. But conflicts between regional power brokers raged on, and repeatedly it was the military that entered into these disputes as final arbiters. Thus, early on, the Latin American military became an autonomous political actor. Brian Loveman sums up the 19th century Latin American armies as follows:

> Armies became political arbiters, patriotic guardians of their nations’ institutions and sovereign interests. The armed forces mediated civilians’ conflicts, often at their request, and substituted themselves for civilian governments when such governments could not contain political conflict disorder and social polarization.¹

Turkey’s republican period appeared to be different. Atatürk moved decisively following the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne to consolidate his grip on power, eliminating potential military challengers by demobilizing and depoliticizing the military. He asked the generals to resign their commissions should they desire to serve in the parliament. He prohibited the Chief of the General Staff from serving in the cabinet. And he personally waged a relentless campaign against dissident officers. In 1930, he reformed the military penal code to make it a crime for any armed personnel to participate in politics. William Hale writes, “After 1926 and until the mid-1940s, any
idea that the armed forces might act as a threat to the regime, or to the political monopoly of the Republican People’s Party, was clearly excluded.”

But if the Turkish military had been made an instrument in the hands of Atatürk, rather than an autonomous political force, it also acquired vital importance for the survival of the regime. Indeed, Article 35 of the Armed Forces Internal Service Law of 1935 obligates the armed forces to “protect and defend the Turkish homeland and the Republic, as determined by the Constitution.” Many Turkish officers over the decades have interpreted this mandate broadly, allowing them to determine what the threats to Turkey are and how best to counter them.

It is significant that both Latin American and Turkish militaries have taken liberties to interpret their roles in ways which promote or inflate their sense of historic significance. They often portray themselves as the saviors of their nations, referring back to their triumphs in the struggles that set the stage for self governance. Of course, the Young Turkish officers led the revolt of 1908 that launched the transition from the sultanate to the republic. Soldiers fought the war of independence that extricated Turkey from the grip of Greek occupation and annexation. Tanel Demirel states there is a “portrayal of the nation which was saved from extinction due primarily to its army . . .” The view is, without the army there would be no Turkish nation.

Likewise in Latin America, the armed forces see themselves as the progenitors of modern day states. They fought the wars of independence that freed the region from the yoke of Spanish colonialism. They predated but made possible the formation of republics and central governments and the writings of constitutions. The armed forces “became not only the primary symbols of the nation, but also self consciously the creators, agents and guardians of national values” (emphasis by author).

Guardianship

The concept of guardianship is prominent in both Turkey and Latin America. The military of Turkey have long positioned themselves as the guardians of national unity, territorial integrity, and Kemalist principles. Those cherished guiding norms for the nation include nationalism, republicanism, secularism, populism, reformism and statism. Any institution that believes it to be the ultimate custodian of a nation’s core values also assumes it is unassailable. If it guards the core values (and interests) who is to question its motives, its judgment? To the contrary, it becomes the judge, the final arbiter. It gets to determine whether a given group or a government has faithfully honored the core principles or not. As such, it also gets to resolve what would constitute a violation of those principles. This then plants the seeds for a more autonomous military perspective in the future. Not surprisingly, the Turkish military would go on to use the defense of Kemalism as a rationale for intervention. Hence, if the Turkish military began as Atatürk’s instrument of power, it evolved into a wielder of power for preserving Atatürk’s ideals.

Similarly, in Latin America, the military has often perceived itself as the guardian of national values and interests. This perception became pronounced during times of crisis, when countries were beset by economic decline and mounting violence; when
political and social actors failed to observe rules of democratic behavior. At that moment, the armed forces claimed that they stood above the political fray, not taking sides in political conflicts but rather remaining vigilant in defense of the public good. Their vigilance was expressed through the act of coup d’etat: overturning a government they believed had violated its pact with the governed; which had in the words of the Chilean junta of 1973, become an “illegitimate, immoral government, no longer representative of national sentiment…” These beliefs, however noble in expression, were also quite self-serving. They allowed militaries to enhance their own political power, and further their own corporate objectives, often at the expense of other actors. Coups became opportunities to not only seize political office but to make legal changes that augment the military’s autonomy and institutionalize benefits for itself well into the future.

In Turkey too, one came across similar developments. Thus, writes George S. Harris in this volume, the Turkish military used the 1960 coup as an opportunity to change the constitution in order to transform the National Security Council (NSC) so that it would “give the military a forum to express their views to the civilian authorities.” This invention would turn out to be one of the most formidable political weapons in the military’s arsenal, granting it a permanent seat at the table to wield influence over countless civilian democratic administrations. After each succeeding coup, the military would conveniently augment the NSC’s legal powers until finally in 1982 the constitution, written by the armed forces themselves, would stipulate that the NSC’s recommendations be given priority by the Council of Ministers (emphasis by author). The Turkish military has, at times, gone way beyond constitutional reforms of the NSC to propose sweeping changes to the structure of governance itself.

The Latin American military has also used intervention to augment its power. By contrast, the Latin American military regimes, with a few exceptions, have not tampered as much with constitutional provisions. The juntas generally preferred to sidestep the Magna Carta through de facto powers of decree. Those decrees had the force of law and were usually intended to bolster the state’s repressive apparatus, making national security the primary preoccupation of government. What would explain the difference here?

One possible explanation resides in the nature of military rule. In Turkey, military interventions were short-lived, one to three years in length. Once having reestablished order and stability, the armed forces seemed anxious to return to the barracks. But were they to do so, they also wanted in place new rules that would guarantee them lasting influence. Those so-called exit guarantees could institutionalize that influence through constitutional amendments that make them guardians without being rulers.

By contrast, Latin American coups in the 1960s and 1970s resulted in dictatorships of longer duration. Militaries concluded that the shorter term, moderating coups of the past had not sufficiently resolved the social, economic, and political problems afflicting their nations, nor had they sufficiently protected the institutional needs of the armed forces themselves. Brazil’s military regime lasted 25 years; Peru’s twelve
years, and the Guatemalan generals were in power for decades. While most military dictatorships intended to eventually hand power back to civilians, they seldom scheduled their withdrawal. They had longer time horizons, and worried less about what would happen to them after they left office. To the contrary, many bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the era imposed draconian measures on society intended to permanently alter the political, economic, and social landscape in ways that would resolve the dilemmas that pulled them into power in the first place. That they did not succeed in doing so is beside the point; they saw little need to alter their constitutions since they confidently envisioned a future free of ideological conflict, Marxist doctrines, radical parties and left-wing trade unionists. The exertion of raw power, not legal reform, would make that vision possible, so they believed.

Why would Turkish officers refrain from long-term commitments to govern, preferring to influence events from the sidelines, whereas Latin American officers were prepared to govern for the long haul? Ümit Sakalloğlu argues that the Turkish military has never been praetorian; it has always had a firm belief in the legitimacy of democracy and its rulers and thus avoided actions which would fatally undermine the system. While this may be true, it cannot serve as a comparative explanation for the differences between Turkey and Latin America. Latin American militaries have also largely observed the principle that democracy is the legitimate, preferred model of governance. Most if not all ruling juntas promised an eventual return to democratic rule even if they failed to adhere to a timetable. In fact they rationalized their interventions by saying that, however regrettable, they were necessary to return the nation to a more stable democratic footing.

Professional Superiority, Democracy, and Intervention

The Turkish and Latin American militaries alike have had an ambiguous relationship with democracy. Both have often defended it by interrupting or overturning it. Tanel Demirel argues that the Turkish military values democracy but worries that left to its own devices a democracy might undermine secularism and the unity of the Turkish Republic. That seemed to be a motivating factor behind the 1960 coup, when the military feared the Democratic Party was out to eliminate the Republican People’s Party, not only threatening the symbiotic relationship the army had enjoyed with those who had ruled for decades, but threatening Kemalism itself. The Latin American military often worried that democratic governments were unwilling to sufficiently suppress threats to national security; that they were too tolerant of groups and movements that would exploit democratic freedoms and liberties for their own nefarious ends. This idea gave rise to many of the coups in the 1970s.

One can also find in both military mindsets condescending views about civilians which served as pretexts for intervention, or at the very least sowed distrust in civilian leadership. The Turkish military, argues Metin Heper, has tended to look down on politicians because of what it perceives as a lack of professionalism. By contrast, the military sees itself as a highly professional institution. The origins of military professionalism go back to the 19th century. Interestingly, both the Turkish and Latin
American military educational systems benefited from the same source: the German military theorist Colmar von der Goltz. In 1893, von der Goltz was invited to restructure the Ottoman Royal Military Academy. He significantly raised technical standards there and promoted the military as the vanguard force that would build and modernize the nation. In Latin America in the late 1800’s, von der Goltz’ book “Das Volk in Waffen” was widely read and praised. He helped disseminate the view that the military educational system was the best, and that the barracks should become the “school of the people.”\textsuperscript{10} The German influence was especially pronounced in Chile, whose military soon became the most adept fighting force in the region. The Chileans would spread their lessons to Ecuador, Colombia and El Salvador. At the turn of the century, one of von der Goltz’ protégés helped Argentina establish its Superior War College (Escuela Superior de Guerra). Under the influence of the Germans but also the French, military academies sprouted up everywhere to educate the next generation of officers.

With professional upgrading came improved self-image, and officers increasingly believed they could manage the affairs of state better than the politicians themselves. In fact, the more professionalized they became the more they tended to cast aspersions at civilians who by contrast seemed less capable. Like their European counterparts—indeed because of them—Latin American military establishments acquired deep distrust if not contempt for civilian authorities. They viewed governments of that era as incompetent, selfish and corrupt and themselves as more capable, selfless and ethical. Similarly in Turkey, the armed forces have often held an unflattering view of civilian politicians that derives from a feeling of superiority. According to Sakallıoğlu, the military believes the civilian world is marked by “praetorianism, instability, inefficacy, careerism, populism, lack of prudence, corruption, and irresponsibility.”\textsuperscript{11}

If these are the views of military officers, then it is not difficult to understand how a belief in professional superiority can descend down a slippery slope to political intervention. As guardians of national interest, charged with safeguarding the democratic system, the armed forces cannot stand idly by as civilians mismanage the affairs of state. If the armed forces can do a better job, then they feel obliged to intervene for the good of the nation. Their subordination to civilian control must be sacrificed so that they can come in to save the democratic system from those politicians who could do it harm.

Of course this logic has a perverse effect. Repeated military interventions weaken public confidence in the viability of democratic institutions and leaders. Each succeeding coup makes the next one easier to execute and accept. A self-fulfilling prophecy is then created: citizens expect governments to fail and rather than rally to defend them, they withhold their support, thus ensuring that they do fail.\textsuperscript{12} Meanwhile, coups cause politicians to adjust their behavior in self-defeating ways. They increasingly view generals as credible power brokers. Rather than subject them to civilian control, they realign their policy preferences so as not to rock the boat. That in turn fosters a military perception that civilians are weak, which can only tempt them to take further advantage, and that undermines adherence to the democratic rule of law.
As stated, the Turkish military took advantage of civilian governments differently than did the Latin American military. According to Zeki Sarıgil, the Turkish military is of a popular praetorian character, meaning it would rather manipulate events from behind the scenes than assume full power. But when it does seize power, its regimes are “characterized by a lower degree of penetration, political control and of repression” than predatory praetorian regimes that ruled in Latin America. It would seem as if the Turkish military’s preference order is to remain on the sidelines rather than arbitrate, to arbitrate rather than veto, and to veto rather than intervene. This may be so, and it certainly has spared Turkey the terrible bloodshed that accompanied Latin American interventions and dictatorships. By the same token, the danger in the Turkish solution is that by exerting guardianship from the sidelines, the military molded a more compliant civilian sector, one that operated within military boundaries. This in itself is destructive to democratic rule because it limits the autonomy of democratically elected leaders, their ability to chart their own course. It created an institutionalized military presence that while not nearly as intrusive as the Latin American variety, still exerted a steady and powerfully detrimental effect on Turkish politics.

The Military and Public Opinion

Sarıgil also argues that the popular praetorian military is one that is more integrated within society, enjoying a higher level of public confidence. As a result, military interventions in the past were often met with public approval. Unexpectedly, one finds similar patterns in Latin America where military coups were, for the most part, societal in nature. They were launched only after some significant portion of the public had turned its back on the democratic regime while signaling its complacency with, if not outright support for, a praetorian intervention. In fact, large pluralities either supported or did not oppose military coups in Brazil in 1964, Peru in 1968, Chile in 1973, Argentina in 1976, and in many other countries. Militaries would, as Alfred Stepan pointed out, move deliberately, cautiously and strategically. They would wait for problems to fester and the public’s disgust for those in office—and for the political system itself—to reach new, alarming heights. Only once the armed forces sensed sufficient societal disdain for the democratic regime would they intervene. What nearly every military wanted to avoid was the prospect of societal civil war and institutional division. Moving into power prematurely, before a sufficient number of citizens on the outside and soldiers on the inside were supportive, would only trigger a backlash from societal groups united with dissident officers, inflicting grave harm on the military institution. Thus, the Latin American military, like the Turkish military, has always been aware of public opinion, wanting, even seeking societal support before intervening.

Today, as in Turkey, the Latin American public generally has a high opinion of the armed forces, at least in comparison to other institutions. When asked, “how much do you trust the following institutions?,” the Catholic Church scores the highest, followed by the military; the congress and political parties almost always score the
lowest on the trust scale. Support for the military is less a sign of familiarity with their performance and more a function of respect. The military is rarely asked to engage in defense-related missions, and so citizens are generally unaware about specific military activities. Still, support quite probably derives from some vague public notion that the military is competent or at least professional. Public trust also derives from the fact that the armed forces have not intervened politically in recent years, confining themselves to the barracks, unless ordered out on missions by the constitutional authorities. These survey results would not have looked the same 20 years ago, when citizens’ memories of military coups, tyranny, violence and repression were still fresh. Similarly in Turkey, public esteem for the armed forces, which is usually quite high, seemed to decline after the February 28, 1997 “post-modern” coup that pressured the Erbakan government to step down, and diminished even further after the 2007 release of the General Staff web-based statement that threatened action unless the Islamic challenge was not confronted.

In the 21st century, publics in Turkey and Latin America are intolerant of military intervention to topple democratically elected governments. But how much change has really occurred in both places? Are these fundamentally different military organizations than they were a decade ago? Two decades ago? And has civilian control been achieved?

Contemporary Civil-Military Relations

As far as the Latin American armed forces are concerned, lessons have been learned. In countless South American countries in the 1970s and Central American countries of the 1980s, unspeakable practices were committed by military, paramilitary and police forces in the name of safeguarding national security and fighting communism. While citizens paid the ultimate price for this brutality, eventually militaries paid a price as well, measured in a loss of power, unity, stature, and material well-being. In countries like Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Peru, older military officers associated with the “Dirty Wars” have been put on trial, accused and often convicted of illegal seizures and detentions, mistreatment including routine torture of political prisoners, and death and disappearance of thousands.

Now, a new generation of officers has climbed the ranks and enjoys positions of authority earned under democratic rule. These soldiers would rather disassociate themselves from the repugnant practices of the past. They are loyal to their institution, respectful of its history, rituals and traditions, but they distinguish between practices which bring honor to their organization and those that bring disgrace. They are also pragmatists. They know they are being watched; that they live in a modern, decentralized world filled with video and cell phone users who can transmit images of victimized citizens across the globe with the click of a button. Human rights abuses are more easily exposed and communicated, while norms against such abuses are more widely shared than ever before. In short, the costs to the military of re-intervention and political repression have risen markedly in the last two decades.
Meanwhile, the benefits to the military of remaining confined to the barracks have risen. The political world is inhospitable, and the lifespan of politicians is short. The military’s calculation is that it would be better off remaining quartered, secure resources for its organization, and watch civilians take the heat. If the armed forces can sustain themselves financially and institutionally, avoid the pratfalls of power, all the while maintaining a comparatively better standing with the public, that would be a win-win situation for them. Besides, when politicians fumble, their ratings go down, and the military’s ratings go up. But what if civilians do make a mess of things? Does not the military still feel obliged to intervene in order to save the nation? The short answer is it does not. Now officers in this region generally believe that civilians have the right to be wrong. Very occasionally there are exceptions to that rule, as we witnessed in the Honduran coup of June, 2009. But on the whole, the military in Latin America no longer sees itself as the guardian who must rescue the nation from the ineptitude of politicians.

While the changes in military attitudes are encouraging, it also takes developments on the civilian side of the ledger to assure subordination. Politicians have certainly been very motivated to curtail the military’s political and economic power. With the transition to democratic rule, elected officials had to respond to the priorities of voters: creating jobs, reducing hunger and poverty, enrolling more children in school, providing health care and delivering basic services to communities. Defense was not on the voters’ priority list. With only scarce resources at their disposal, governments had to make tough choices and did. The armed forces were downsized: military bases scrapped, units eliminated or shrunk; defense budgets and personnel payrolls trimmed, weapons procurement and modernization programs put on hold. The military was no longer treated as a privileged interest group; now, it had to compete for resources just like any other organization. The balance of power shifted from the armed forces to democratic forces.

That said, it was not and is not enough to exert short term leverage over the military to gain some advantage. Governments need a longer term, structured relation that induces stable, supportive encounters between political officials and military personnel. For this, they need a set of strong, well staffed, civilian-led organizations to devise, advise, and manage defense policies, as well as to exert oversight on military operations. Latin America is still in the process of building institutional strength, and developing expertise. Defense ministries are not yet sufficiently empowered or equipped with well trained civilian staffs; congressional defense commissions do not have enough oversight; and defense is still not a subject that captures much attention among politicians or the public. It is especially important that defense ministries reside in the operational chain of command between the president and the military, and that they are granted full authority to devise and implement the defense strategies for the nation. Only about half of the nations of this region subscribe to this organizational model. For those reasons, institutionalized democratic civilian control has still not been fully achieved in the region, though progress has been made.18

How does this compare with Turkey? Change seems more incremental in Turkey than in Latin America. There has not been a dramatic transition from a harshly
repressive, authoritarian rule to democratic rule, the kind that would prompt a swift, wholesale rethinking of positions, principles and priorities. As numerous authors have argued, Turkish military interventions were brief, and did not result in the kind of bloodbaths witnessed in Latin America. The armed forces usually left power without having committed wide scale abuses, with their reputations intact, and with the ability to set their own timetables and terms of withdrawals. As a result, the military did not engage in “soul searching,” and civilians were not motivated to exact revenge by stripping the military of its prerogatives.

Nonetheless, there seems to have been a gradual shift in military thinking, according to Metin Heper. Especially since 2002 but probably beginning in the late 1990s, the military has been more reluctant to outwardly criticize democratic governments, and seems more willing to accept civilian preferences even if it disagrees with them. The present author has always maintained that the strongest test of civilian control is one where the military falls in line behind a political leader’s decision, despite its objections to it. In that respect, it is perhaps the Ergenekon case that will serve as the ultimate measure to date of civilian supremacy. Can the military accept the investigation, the judicial process and the prospect of seeing its own officers convicted for crimes in a civilian court? It is too soon to tell, but so far the results seem encouraging, with cooperative members of the military having the upper hand over obstructionists, according to Ersel Aydınlı. For the first time, coup plotting in Turkey has serious consequences for those who might contemplate it. Not unlike the human rights trials in Latin America, Ergenekon may have a deterrent effect on future conspirators.

As far as institution building is concerned, Turkey seems to have a way to go. The chain of command weakens the position and role of the Defense Ministry. The Chief of the General Staff is appointed by the President and is directly responsible to the Prime Minister, not to the Defense Minister. The Defense Ministry is positioned alongside of, not above, the General Staff. It collaborates with rather than directs, military commanders. This downgrades the Ministry’s power while affording top military commanders privileged, direct access to the Prime Minister. Metin Heper describes how General İlker Başbuğ, Chief of the General Staff (2008–2010) would meet weekly with the Prime Minister, often on his own initiative. Nowhere does the Defense Minister figure in these encounters. This is unfortunate because as Thomas Bruneau and Richard Goetze Jr. point out, the Ministry of Defense is arguably “the most indispensable mechanism for establishing [civilian control].” It is the Defense Ministry that transmits presidential orders to soldiers; that structures the power relationship between civilian leaders and the military; and that places organizational distance between powerful military commanders and the highest political office holders in the nation.

Turkey, in contrast to Latin America, resides at the gates of an economically vibrant European Union. It has a great incentive to transform its civil-military relations to conform more closely to a liberal democratic model in order to gain accession. The Copenhagen criteria for admission demands that nations have stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and a market economy. Obviously, the military is one of those institutions that will have
to commit itself to an unwavering defense of liberal democracy if Turkey is to become an EU member.

To do so, they will have to be open to a reinterpretation of Kemalism, one that rejects military political intervention in defense of modernity. Now, becoming modern will have to mean adaptability to changing conditions and trust in the judgments of politicians and the will of the people, as expressed through legislation. It will mean no longer being guardians but rather fully subscribing to the rule of law and to the policies of elected leaders, despite whatever misgivings the military may have about them. And if that comes to pass, perhaps the Turkish military will have finally conceded that civilians have the right to be wrong.

Notes
8. Regardless of how successful military regimes may be at restoring order and economic growth to the nation, they cannot substitute effectively for the legitimate democratic alternative. If in fact, the military regime had discovered the correct remedies for the ills plaguing the nation, the citizenry might be grateful but at the same time impatient for a political change aimed at restoring much cherished rights and liberties. The paradox is that the more decisive the military regimes’ economic successes were, the more persuasive the argument was that with its mission accomplished, it was now time to return to the barracks.


22. See Heper, “Civil-Military Relations in Turkey.”