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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7fr03453>

Journal

Journal of Democracy, 31(4)

ISSN

1045-5736

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Publication Date

2020

DOI

10.1353/jod.2020.0062

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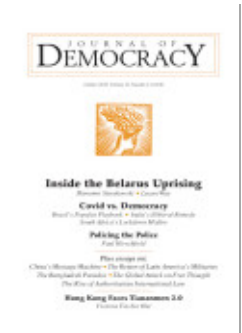
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Journal of Democracy, Volume 31, Number 4, October 2020, pp. 151-165
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2020.0062>



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THE RETURN OF THE LATIN AMERICAN MILITARY?

David Pion-Berlin and Igor Acácio

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Are Latin American militaries back? In country after country, troops now appear front and center, carrying out missions both armed and unarmed: They patrol city streets and chase drug traffickers while also building or fixing infrastructure, teaching literacy, handing out food, water, and clothing to the poor, and responding to natural and medical disasters. That last mission is especially salient at present. In nearly every Latin American country, the military has been asked to provide emergency help in fighting the covid-19 pandemic and has everywhere stepped forward. Military establishments have been producing and distributing medical equipment, setting up mobile hospitals, and enforcing curfews and health regulations. The range of roles is impressive, as are the thousands of operations conducted annually.

The high-profile return of Latin American armed forces does not necessarily represent a return to the days of the Cold War, when militaries intervened repeatedly in the name of national security, development, and crisis alleviation. Back then, the region was in the grip of dictatorships, suffering at the hands of anticommunist military autocrats with no regard for individual liberties, political rights, or the rule of law. Military juntas replaced congressional districts with security zones, and the leaders of unions, parties, and local governments with military officers. In more than one country, generals ruthlessly imposed their will, arresting, torturing, and “disappearing” tens of thousands of citizens

across Latin America in bloodthirsty campaigns designed to wipe out perceived enemies of the state.

The end of the Cold War and the return of democracy in the late 1980s did not instantly end military involvement in politics. Generals left office but clung to “reserved powers” and occasionally rattled sabers to intimidate newly installed democratic leaders. After a period of democratic vulnerability to military pressures, however, such pressures waned. Elected civilian governments asserted their authority and shrank the domains of reserved powers. Interactions between militaries and the world of politics became far more low-key, receding from the minds of citizens and the front pages of newspapers.

While today’s wider military presence might stir troubling echoes of days gone by, the current wave of military activism in Latin America is, in fact, not a return to the past.

Yet even as new or restored democracies overcame the problems of political transitions, new security challenges emerged. To meet them, Latin American militaries have taken on a widening array of missions. Today, the region’s armed forces seem to be more active than before on many fronts. This concerns some scholars. They point to troops acting as law enforcers in Central America and Mexico; propping up incumbents in Brazil and Venezuela; and nudging another incumbent out of power in Bolivia.¹ Scholars have asked whether a new form of militarism is taking shape, and have worried that greater military assertiveness could hamper civilian control and weaken democratic institutions.²

One prominent scholar goes so far as to say that Latin America is at risk of becoming a region of “militarized democracies.”³ If that is true, it must be taken as a dire sign for Latin American democracies that are already beset by economic decline and a loss of public confidence in key public institutions. Brazil may be a particularly acute case: President Jair Bolsonaro, a former army captain, has a vice-president, a retired general, who once mused publicly about a return to military rule. Bolsonaro has seven current or former military officers in his cabinet.

While today’s wider military presence might stir troubling echoes of days gone by, the current wave of military activism is, in fact, *not* a return to the past. There is a range of military behaviors, most of which occur at the behest of democratically elected executives. The motive is no longer national-security ideology or the soldiers’ quest for political power. Civilian control and democracy’s survival are by and large not under threat. This is not to say that these actions are wise or cannot have deleterious consequences; the point is simply that we are not talking about autonomous military decisions. Mexican troops pur-

suing drug cartels, Brazilian soldiers venturing into *favelas* to suppress gangs, or the repression aimed at protesters in Chile: Each of these has been a case of a national military following rather than defying orders from a civilian democratic government. In other words, more often than not, the current wave of military activity has been happening *because* of civilian control rather than in spite of it.

Civilian control of the military is a cherished principle of democracy and a necessary condition for consolidated democratic rule. We expect armies to be subordinate to political authorities, and usually this is the case. Armies are being deployed by legitimate, democratically elected presidents who are themselves acting in response to voter demands. Publics want to see the military help in the fight to quell crime and make neighborhoods safer. When floods, earthquakes, or pandemics strike, the military's rapid, large-scale organizational and logistical capacities are called on to succor ravaged communities. The orders to intervene are usually legal, often flowing from constitutional articles allowing presidents to declare temporary states of siege or emergency.

At the same time, there have been occasions in Latin America when the armed forces have stepped out of line. They may have rejected presidential orders, reinterpreted rules of engagement in their own favor, bargained for better terms of deployment, or otherwise put presidents under undue pressure. The results of such behavior need not always be bad. A military that, for instance, ignores lawful orders to suppress street demonstrations is waving off civilian control in favor of its own "judgment call." And yet, this disobedience might forestall human-rights abuses and even save lives. There is a tradeoff here that cannot be weighed purely in the abstract.

Civilian Control or Human Rights?

Domestic deployments of the military bring to light a conundrum of security governance in Latin America: Civilian control may clash with the need to protect citizens' human rights. Latin American states often find themselves caught between these cardinal principles of democracy.

Missions such as subduing mass protests or chasing down criminals in densely populated areas are tasks of civil policing on which militaries typically do not focus. When a president orders an army that is poorly trained and equipped for the job to quell protests or fight crime, innocent civilians are likely to be harmed. Ignoring such orders would therefore seem to be the moral course.

Yet how can it be legitimate for the soldiers of a democratic state to disobey lawful orders from that state's democratically elected chief executive? If soldiers do so, they are shirking their obligations, undermining the commander-in-chief whom the voters have chosen, and (on a personal level) risking punishment. Democratic governments are often

FIGURE—THE MILITARY, CIVILIAN CONTROL, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

		<i>Military Compliance with Government Orders</i>	
		<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>
<i>Military Aversion to Violating Human Rights</i>	<i>High</i>	<p>Box 1: Best</p> <p>Democratic government orders military garrisoned, despite protests or crime. Military obeys. Alternative well-trained security forces used instead, and abuses are lessened.</p>	<p>Box 2: Second Best</p> <p>Military strategically defies civilian orders to suppress protests or counter crime. Human-rights abuses are reduced.</p>
	<i>Low</i>	<p>Box 3: Second Worst</p> <p>Civilian control is respected, and military deployment results predictably in human-rights abuses.</p>	<p>Box 4: Worst</p> <p>Autonomous military defies civilian control and intervenes for national-security purposes. Human-rights abuses follow.</p>

within their legal rights to use force, militaries must normally comply with commands, and yet individual rights and freedoms must be respected. This is a difficult balancing act to pull off.

This tension between democratic duties—to respect civilian supremacy and to respect human rights—that can pull militaries in opposite directions is one we must grasp if we are to understand a range of actions carried out by the armed forces. The Figure is meant to help clarify by ranking four possible outcomes.

In Box 1, at upper left, we see the best outcome: The government has other and more mission-capable security forces (perhaps a national gendarmerie) to deploy, so the military remains garrisoned while more suitable agents of state power deal with protests and crime. The military obeys, grateful to avoid confrontations that could leave troops blamed for excesses. Rights abuses are lessened. In Box 2, the second-best outcome, the military shows more regard for human rights but less for civilian supremacy. In this scenario, troops opt not to deploy into a situation that seems too fraught with risks of harm to civilians. Lives may be saved, but military disobedience will cost the president command credibility and could even drive an administration from power. If the president survives, the military could pay a price as the enraged incumbent seeks to punish those who defied orders. Box 3 shows the situation where civilian control wins out and the military complies, but with the deployment harming citizens. Where militaries are untrained in minimal-force crowd control or lack basic policing skills and ignore rules of proportionality and restraint, obeying a presidential order to hit the streets will lead to rights being violated.

The scenarios depicted in Boxes 2 and 3 have been the most common in Latin America since the beginning of this century. One or the other

cherished principle is violated. Box 4 shows the worst-case scenario. This one was all too typical of predemocratic Latin America, where militaries mainly answered to themselves and readily trampled human rights when deployed domestically.

What the Figure fails to capture are borderline cases that do not fit neatly into a single box. In such a case the armed forces might try to hedge their bets, partly obeying (and thus partly defying) a president in hopes of avoiding both complete insubordination and, say, bloody street clashes with protesters or shootouts with gangs that catch civilians in the crossfire. When faced with risky and unwelcome obligations, resourceful militaries have a number of creative ways to equivocate between shirking a duty and fulfilling it.

While some of the less-conventional operations that Latin American militaries have recently undertaken have been fruitless or even harmful, there is scant reason to blame the soldiers for this. If the region's governments are too ready to send the military on public-order or crime-control missions, it does not follow that the armed forces have exploited this habit to slip free of civilian authority. Cases differ. In Venezuela (the least-democratic country in the region save Cuba), President Nicolás Maduro has *invited* the military to accumulate political (and economic) clout as part of his plan for staying in power.⁴ In Chile, President Sebastián Piñera called in the army to help keep order during huge public protests, but this happened without compromise of civilian control.

Assuming that officers are always out for political gain is not realistic. They may instead be trying to avert undesirable outcomes for themselves personally and for the military as an institution. Research on military responses to mass protests in Latin America and elsewhere shows that officers are often driven by powerful instincts for self-protection rather than a desire for political power.⁵ Difficult orders from the government force them to calculate how to respond based on their own self-interests, the perceived professional costs of undertaking certain operations, and the risks to individual careers. Human-rights concerns figure prominently in those calculations: Soldiers know that if abuses occur, they may find themselves in legal trouble. Also weighing in the balance are thoughts of loyalty to the service, one's superiors, and the constitution. In mulling their options, military officers as people and the military as an institution must weigh the expected risks and rewards of each.

As suggested above, a concern for institutional self-preservation need not result in perfect compliance; it can also motivate conditional compliance with or even outright disobedience of executive orders seen as too costly to follow. Today's democratic Latin America reveals a range of military responses whose common thread is not a drive for political power, but rather a desire to safeguard personal and institutional

well-being as civilian leaders send soldiers on sensitive and difficult domestic missions.

A Range of Military Behavior

Faced with difficult assignments from elected political leaders, militaries can choose among several possible responses. Briefly considering a few cases can help to illuminate the approaches that militaries might adopt.

Compliance with Civilian Orders: Chile 2019. The most common response in Latin America recently has been straightforward compliance. The bulk of military operations in the region—which has not seen an armed conflict between nation-states since Argentina fought Britain for control of the Falkland Islands in 1982 and Ecuador skirmished with Peru near the Cenepa River in 1995—are undertaken according to the directives of democratically elected presidents who cite constitutional provisions, executive decrees, or laws on internal security.

Military respect for civilian control cannot suffice to shield democracy against the bad consequences of unwise or poorly executed deployments, of course. Troops sent to reinforce police officers facing large public demonstrations have been known to overreact and use excessive force, though there have been cases when the civilians give the soldiers rules of engagement that keep them out of head-on collisions with protestors, and thus cause troops to inflict less harm than do the police.

Chile in 2019 was such a case. Sparked by a transit-fare hike but reflecting a deeper malaise over the neoliberal economic model and the profound inequalities it had generated, mass protests broke out in early October. Huge demonstrations occurred nationwide. One in Santiago, the capital and largest city, drew more than a million people, or about one of every eighteen Chileans. The mostly nonviolent protests were punctuated by violence, arson, and looting. Train stations and buses were among the things burned. Taken by surprise, President Piñera reacted to the mass outpouring of grievances by declaring that Chile was “at war with a potent and implacable foe who respects nothing and no one and is disposed to use violence and delinquency without limits.”⁶ He ordered tens of thousands of police officers and soldiers into the streets. Under constitutional state-of-emergency provisions, military commanders imposed curfews on major cities.

Rhetoric that harsh had not been heard since the days of General Augusto Pinochet, who ruled Chile as a military dictator, complete with “disappearances” and torture, between 1973 and 1990. Frightening memories of Pinochet-era state terror began to stir. Major-General Javier Iturriaga del Campo, who had been tasked with securing Santiago, sounded a note of calm on October 21 by insisting that “I am not at war

with anyone.”⁷ There had indeed been no orders to use violence, and Defense Minister Alberto Espina had instructed commanders to remain calm and not fire on protesters.⁸ The armed forces had little human-rights training and were ill prepared to deal with demonstrations of such size. Yet while there were cases of soldiers harming civilians, especially detainees, the army committed considerably fewer abuses than did the Carabineros, Chile’s national police force. The decades since Pinochet lost a plebiscite and left power had seen military officers prosecuted for offenses such as torture and murder; the Chilean armed forces were anxious not to return to the dock.

While Chile’s National Institute for Human Rights (INDH) does not classify rights violations by the perpetrating agency, it does provide indirect evidence via its recording of lawsuits filed on behalf of victims. The total number of victims represented in lawsuits is 1,631. Of those, 1,544 (94.7 percent) allege suffering at the hands of the Carabineros, with only 87 people (or 5.3 percent) charging that military personnel abused them. Four suits relating to charges of homicide or attempted homicide were lodged against members of the army or navy, while Carabineros faced twenty such suits.⁹ In short, military excesses appear to have been sporadic, in contrast to a pattern of abuses by the Carabineros. For the most part, soldiers adhered to the minister’s orders to avoid inflicting physical harm on protesters. From its deployment, the Chilean military gained no political leverage. On the contrary, the mere fact of its presence in the streets damaged its public image.¹⁰

Conditional Compliance Before and During Deployment: Brazil 2017–18. When a deployment impends, military officers have been known to press for changes in the terms of their engagement, seeking concessions in exchange for performance. These conditions might involve modifications in the mission itself, or side payments for agreeing to deploy. For example, the military may seek to make the mission more palatable by limiting its scope and duration, with troops perhaps confined to logistical roles (supporting police without having to be on the “sharp end”). Officers may request orders in writing—to clarify the means, ends, and limits of the operation, and also to put civilians on record as responsible for the decision. This may be particularly pertinent when soldiers sense a political-judicial risk. In Bolivia (2005), Peru (2010), and Ecuador (2014), rules of engagement have been rewritten in response to military complaints. In one case (Mexico 2017), the army pressed for and received new internal-security laws prescribing how missions are to be conducted. Fearing possible human-rights charges, officers may seek immunity from prosecution for transgressions committed in the line of duty.

In Brazil, it has long been a practice to send troops into major cities when the police falter. Most such public-security operations take place under a legal rubric known as “guaranteeing law and order” (GLO),

where the government deploys the armed forces episodically to address crises of public security. Since 1992, there have been 142 such operations, several of them in Rio de Janeiro, a city known for conflicts involving police, drug gangs, and mafia-like *milícias*.¹¹

The military follows civilian orders to undertake an operation, but then defines for itself what that operation will actually entail. Given officers' wide tactical discretion, militaries can typically "lean back" or "lean forward" once their boots hit the ground.

Although deployments have always come at the request of political authorities, the army has at times asked for certain conditions to be met prior to missions being undertaken. Aside from material support—generally forthcoming—commanders often seek legal protections for troops as well as specific rules of engagement. If called on to police the streets, the army argues, **soldiers should not have to answer to civilian courts**

and prosecutors for any misconduct charges; rather, military courts alone should deal with these. In Brazil, the military system of justice is separate from the civilian tribunals and has been little affected by reforms since the return to democracy (after two decades of military rule) in the 1980s.

In June 2017, General Eduardo Villas Bôas, the army commander at the time, testified before Congress in support of a bill to replace the practice of special-exemption decrees with a law permanently transferring to military courts all GLO-related criminal cases against military personnel. He made clear the military's distaste for such operations, calling them exhausting, dangerous, and ineffective at reducing crime.¹² In October 2017, the army got its wish as then-President Michel Temer signed the bill into law, altering the military penal code.

A few months later, with the new legal protections in place, a massive, federally mandated deployment to Rio de Janeiro began. As troops took to the city's streets in mid-February 2018, **General Villas Bôas was publicly vocal about the need for his troops to be shielded from any truth commission that might later scrutinize their behavior.**¹³ The army has also lobbied to obtain "flexible" rules of engagement similar to the ones **that had been in force during the 2004–17 UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti** (Brazil had sent about 2,400 troops under a Brazilian general to provide the military contingent for this mission). Such guidelines would be looser than the restrictive limits on force that govern police.¹⁴ The current rules of engagement for GLO operations mandate that troops use force only in a *gradual* manner, which may explain why, during the Rio deployment, the army adjusted its tactics so that it mostly avoided confronting criminals directly.

This sort of tactical shift may be understood as a species of compliance during deployment. The military follows civilian orders to undertake an operation, but then defines for itself what that operation will actually entail. Given officers' wide tactical discretion, militaries can typically "lean back" or "lean forward" as they choose once their boots hit the ground. One well-known practice, meant to reduce military exposure to human-rights complaints while ensuring that police take any blame for repression, is for troops to assume rear-guard positions during joint crowd-control or antigang operations. When it came time to take matters to Rio's *favelas* in 2018, the army was content mainly to "secure the perimeters" of these neighborhoods, instructing troops to refrain from violence altogether, while letting police officers carry out most of the actual street patrols.

Conditional Compliance During Deployment: Ecuador 2019. An example of a military following presidential orders but doing so in its own way comes from Ecuador. In early October 2019, troops deployed for civil-order operations on command from the chief executive, but reshaped their tactics to avoid confronting protesters. On October 1, President Lenín Moreno had announced that he was ending fuel subsidies and adopting austerity measures in order to gain US\$4.2 billion in credits from the International Monetary Fund. There were large protests, especially among the indigenous population, and calls for Moreno to resign. He declared a state of exception and a curfew in major cities, ordering police and soldiers to quell protests and reestablish order. With street protests having driven presidents from office in 1997, 2000, and 2005, Moreno also temporarily (and legally) moved the seat of government from inland Quito to Guayaquil on the Pacific.

Faced with rising violence by protesters, Defense Minister Oswaldo Jarrín, a retired army general, publicly stated that "acts of criminality or terrorism will be met with real force such as the armed forces employ if necessary."¹⁵ Article 165 of the 2008 Constitution does authorize the president to suspend the exercise of certain rights during a state of exception, to move the capital, to declare all of the country or any part or parts of it to be "security zones," and to deploy the armed forces and the police as well as all their reserves. The Supreme Court approved Moreno's state-of-exception decree.

The active-duty military seems to have had ideas that differed from those of the defense minister, however. The army deployed troops, but sent them out wielding softer tactics that it saw as in line with its training and sense of professionalism as well as the demands of the situation. The presidential order was understood as one to be carried out in light of the military's own 2014 human-rights protocols. These call for troops to choose less-lethal weapons whenever possible, and to use those only rarely. In practice, soldiers took supporting roles while leaving repression to the police.

There were instances where troops secured commercial streets and areas, and transported citizens out of harm's way, giving them rides during the transit strike. There were even occasions when the army faced down police in order to shield protesters.¹⁶ The military observed a high degree of restraint, often going unarmed and avoiding confrontations even when it meant tolerating injuries, the loss of military equipment, or soldiers being held hostage by indigenous protesters. During the October protests, 80 soldiers were injured while 255 were captured.¹⁷ The crisis ended around the middle of the month when Moreno agreed to restore fuel subsidies and to replace his austerity proposals with measures negotiated with the leading protest groups. Once this resolution was reached, Moreno cashiered both the chief of the armed forces and the army commander.

Although it is true that indigenous groups called for these dismissals (reputedly on the ground that the army had acted too harshly),¹⁸ Moreno and Jarrín leaned toward the opposite reason for wanting new top generals: They felt that the army had not been firm enough in dealing with protesters who destroyed public property and took military personnel hostage. In his farewell speech, army commander General Javier Pérez defended his troops' conduct. He said that they had operated in keeping with professional standards, in a spirit of "maximum prudence and extreme tolerance." Had they failed to do so, he added, soldiers "would be recovering dead bodies, and this is not what we are here to do."¹⁹

Military Shows of Support: Peru 2019 and El Salvador 2020. In some instances, armies have publicly expressed support for controversial presidential decisions, often when the executive is clashing with the legislative branch. Presidents worried about their political standing look to the armed forces to shore them up, by means that can range from public statements to actual shows of military force.

In Peru in 2019, the military's show of support for a president in crisis came in the form of a public meeting. On September 30, President Martín Vizcarra dissolved the country's unicameral Congress over a dispute involving Constitutional Court nominations. The legislature immediately struck back by naming Vice-President Mercedes Aráoz "interim president." That night, Vizcarra summoned top uniformed officers to a meeting at his official residence, with photographers present. The national police and the armed forces joint command issued a statement saying that they still recognized him as Peru's lawful president and commander-in-chief.²⁰ Aráoz resigned the next day, and Vizcarra called snap elections for 26 January 2020. These produced a Congress more sympathetic to his anticorruption agenda, and with many fewer seats held by the party of his main rival, Keiko Fujimori.²¹

On this occasion, as in others in Latin America of late, soldiers acted in response to a presidential order, and not on their own initiative. Viz-

carra called in his service chiefs and demanded their public support. In giving it, they were complying with civilian control, but by the nature of the situation they were forced into collision with other tenets of democratic civil-military relations, such as not expressing political positions. To partisans of Congress in the constitutional quarrel, it would also have seemed as if the military and police were blessing the actions of one branch of government as it interfered with the functioning of another coequal branch.

A more troubling instance of the military showing support for the executive came in Central America in early 2020. On February 9, El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele ordered soldiers and police, dressed in camouflage fatigues and carrying rifles, into the chamber of the country's Legislative Assembly. He was frustrated that lawmakers had been delaying approval of his request to seek a \$109 million U.S.-backed loan to fund his domestic-security plan. A few days earlier, the Council of Ministers had used its constitutional authority to call the Assembly into special session, but not enough deputies showed up for a quorum. Bukele himself accompanied the armed contingent and issued an ultimatum: If the Assembly did not approve the loan request within one week, he would provoke a "popular insurrection" under Article 87 of the 1983 Constitution and dissolve the legislature. Bukele accused the deputies of lawbreaking by nonattendance, though two days later the Supreme Court ruled that his actions had been "contrary to established constitutional ends."²²

How to assess this incident? The Salvadoran soldiers and police officers who entered the Assembly probably believed that they were acting within the law and obeying proper civilian authority, having sworn an oath of loyalty to the president. But they also swore a constitutional oath which, under Article 235, says that they must uphold the basic law "notwithstanding laws, decrees, orders, or resolutions to the contrary." In view of this oath, members of the armed forces had no right to interfere with the legislative process, let alone to act in a threatening manner toward members of the Assembly. Although this incident was menacing, it stopped short of a self-coup since Bukele, after grouching about the Supreme Court on Twitter, quickly said that he would obey its ruling. The Assembly soon returned to ordinary session.

Military Noncompliance: Bolivia 2019. Completely disobeying orders carries obvious risks, but there are times when militaries will do this. In politically fraught situations, military institutions may fear that following commands will harm their reputations, cause internal splits, or even put officers and troops in legal jeopardy. In Latin America and elsewhere, one response—especially in the context of mass civilian protests against incumbents—has been to remain in the barracks.

Staying quartered also carries risk, of course, since there could be re-

prisals for ignoring a civilian command to mobilize. But fears of public scorn, dissension in the ranks, or prosecution for carrying out orders later deemed unlawful can weigh more heavily. Whether intended or not, a benefit of soldiers' staying on base is that it makes civilian casualties less likely. In a stepped-up version of noncompliance, some militaries have reacted to the prospect of crackdown orders by not merely standing down, but by actively pressuring a controversial leader to quit office in the face of large and determined public opposition.

In 2019, contrary to law and to the result of a 2016 referendum, Bolivia's President Evo Morales sought an unprecedented consecutive fourth term in office. On October 20, early returns suggested that the race between Morales and his challenger, Carlos Mesa, was close enough to force a runoff. Then the electoral tribunal—whose members were handpicked by Morales loyalists—shut down the unofficial quick vote count for 24 hours, only to resume it with an announcement that the president held a commanding lead. The Organization of American States found computational irregularities that it concluded were sufficient grounds to question the validity of the results.²³

Mass demonstrations ensued. When Morales asked the military to step in, it refused. In an open letter, thousands of officers vowed loyalty to the constitution and warned that soldiers would never take up arms against the people. Morales stood his ground, and said that he might seek to run in a new election. It was then that General Williams Kalliman, the country's highest-ranking military officer, publicly advised him to step aside. Morales resigned and went into exile.

The armed forces' refusal to suppress the protests was clearly in-subordinate. Yet in remaining quartered, the military also undoubtedly saved lives, given its bloody record when facing public protests. In 2003, during the crisis that had paved the way for Morales to rise to power, security forces had killed eighty civilians and wounded hundreds more when sent to put down unrest over the government's natural-gas policies. Armed forces that insist on staying quartered often do so knowing that if blood is spilled, they are the likeliest to suffer punishment. After the 2003 crackdown, two cabinet ministers went to jail, but five military officers did, and for longer terms.²⁴ Militaries have reasons for wanting to solve crises in ways that keep soldiers off the front lines and out of court.

The armed forces' boldest act was telling Morales to leave office. It is tempting to label this a coup, but it might be better to see Morales's removal as the logical conclusion to a sequence of events that triggered massive popular revulsion and protests over a bid for continued power that the incumbent should never have made, and electoral irregularities that he himself precipitated. Whereas coup instigators normally seize the reins of power (even if temporarily) the Bolivian armed forces refrained from doing so, and instead left it to civilian politicians to sort things out.

**TABLE—VARIETIES OF MILITARY BEHAVIOR
IN DEMOCRATIC LATIN AMERICA**

Case	Type of Behavior	What the Military Does
Chile (2019)	Compliance with Civilian Orders	Complies with presidential directives under the guidance of constitutions, decrees, or laws of internal security.
Brazil (2017–18)	Conditional Compliance Before and During Deployment	Exerts pressure to change terms of deployment and modify mission, secure side payments, and gain legal protection for potential transgressions.
Ecuador (2019)	Conditional Compliance During Deployment	Deploys but uses tactical discretion to reorient the operation to its benefit.
Peru (2019) and El Salvador (2020)	Military Shows of Support	Makes public statements or a show of military force to back controversial presidential decisions.
Bolivia (2019)	Military Noncompliance	Stays in barracks, ignoring orders to deploy. Or pressures leader to quit office in the face of substantial public opposition.

Moreover, it is important to avoid using political outcomes to make facile inferences about military motives. The interim government that replaced Morales has the hallmarks of a right-wing power grab, and has persecuted the former president and his followers. These results do not establish that the Bolivian military is to blame, however. There is no evidence that the armed forces were part of any right-wing plot to unseat Morales. They had little institutional reason to be discontented with him: He had cultivated good relations with the military, even rewarding it with higher defense spending. Instead, the variable military responses—defying one president and obeying the next—can be best explained by the armed forces’ desire to safeguard soldiers from judicial recriminations, and to shield the military as an institution from internal divisions and further harm to its reputation.

The Table summarizes the findings for all the countries and types of military responses. In Latin America today, armed forces are not finding themselves shorn of all influence. Rather, what we see are military maneuvers mostly within the democratic, lawful rules of the game as officers seek advantages for their institutions and their own careers. Military actions may and usually do have political content, but the goals of these actions are not necessarily nefarious. When soldiers enforce states of emergency, occupy legislative chambers, or defy presidential orders, they may do so more out of a drive for institutional self-protection than for reasons of political aggression and aggrandizement. Behind everything the military does in a fraught domestic situation—be it following a

presidential order or shirking it—will lie calculations of expected harms and benefits both to soldiers individually and to their institutions.

In making these calculations, militaries have responded in a variety of ways, ranging from full compliance to outright defiance. There can be an element of the tragic to these situations: Choosing obedience or disobedience often means choosing between civilian control and human rights, each of which is essential to liberal democracy. But as we have shown in the cases of Brazil and Ecuador, sometimes militaries manage to steer between the Scylla of insubordination and the Charybdis of human-rights violations by complying conditionally with presidential orders. While this is an uncommon outcome, it remains feasible for Latin American democracies determining when, and if, to call on their militaries.

NOTES

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