

10-6-1992

# Abimael Guzman's Capture: A Turning Point In The War?

Erika Harding

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur>

---

## Recommended Citation

Harding, Erika. "Abimael Guzman's Capture: A Turning Point In The War?." (1992). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/10355>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiSur by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [amywinter@unm.edu](mailto:amywinter@unm.edu).

## Abimael Guzman's Capture: A Turning Point In The War?

by Erika Harding

Category/Department: General

Published: Tuesday, October 6, 1992

[Appearing below are excerpts from an article which originally appeared in the October 1992 issue of *The Sendero File*, a monthly bulletin on Peru's Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) rebels published by the Federation of American Scientists Fund's Project on Peru. The FAS is a non-profit organization dealing with issues of science and society as well as international security. For subscription information, write to FAS Fund, 307 Massachusetts Ave. NE, Washington, DC 20002] Taking the initiative The immediate impact of the capture of Abimael Guzman was to strike a psychological blow against Sendero Luminoso (SL) when the Peruvian government and civilian society desperately needed it. In contrast to the entrenched pessimism following the July bombing offensive, Lima's middle and upper classes erupted into displays of euphoria and relief. "The psychological bubble was burst," said political scientist Cynthia McClintock. The more far-reaching consequence was to force SL to roll back its urban network and plans for challenging the government on its own terrain. Over the past two years, Sendero has concentrated huge resources and veteran cadres in Lima and exposed its local organizations in increasingly brazen shows of strength. The current retreat will set back SL's timetable substantially. Security forces moved to take advantage of this opening. In the hours following Guzman's capture, between 1 am and 6 am, huge operations employing more than 1,000 army and police troops combed SL hotbeds in Lima's shantytowns, like Huaycan and Pachacamac (a new section of Villa El Salvador), though most arrests were of people not carrying identification documents. During the morning hours, security forces carried out civic action programs, providing breakfasts, primary health care and even haircuts. Shantytown residents also used the police presence to reap a dividend for neighborhood safety by turning in thugs and drug addicts. There were also reports of identifying local SL cadres. The public enthusiasm over Guzman's capture, so vocal and widespread in middle and upper class districts is, however, more muted and cautious in the shantytowns. There were also signs that SL had made an orderly withdrawal. Raids did not find caches of arms or explosives. Fresh wall graffiti saying "Save the life of Chairman Gonzalo" and "Long Live the People's War" appeared on slum walls. Fresh killings of police and community leaders have also occurred, with a scattering of small bombs. In Ayacucho, SL staged an armed strike on Sept. 24. The government has also tried to exploit the psychological blow by portraying Guzman as a crazed psychopath and common criminal. The government is hoping that Guzman's capture will result in massive desertions. It has promised that those SL rank and file who turn themselves in will get lenient treatment, including a period of special military service and then a return to civilian life. The Roman Catholic church has offered to serve as an intermediary. Guzman's Legacy Makes Sendero an Enduring Threat The capture of Abimael Guzman raises as many questions about Sendero Luminoso's 12-year insurgency and the future of Peru as it answers about the short-term viability of the Lima government. The answers to key questions are limited by many factors, among which are the lack of information about how many other national leaders the Peruvian security forces swept up and how seriously and for how long SL operations will be compromised. In addition, the lack of reliable, up-to-date information from Peru's interior makes it difficult to judge how the war is going in areas where SL has been working for years. Guzman's capture is a huge setback for SL and comes at a crucial time when the organization was planning an unprecedented offensive to

demonstrate the government's vulnerability. Guzman himself has been laying the groundwork over the past eight years for SL to make a dramatic leap in striking capacity, which was going to be revealed in full in October this year. For nearly 30 years, Guzman has been the founder, ideologue and supreme strategist of Sendero Luminoso. He has shaped the party, its military apparatus and its organizational satellites in his image. He was the instigator of a personality cult and the arbitrator of internal disputes, playing a role which no other party member could fill. However, Guzman was not a typical Latin American caudillo, a revolutionary adventurer like Che Guevara or even a Mao Zedong, SL's paradigm for revolution. The capture compromises Sendero's whole organization from the top down. Although Sendero cadres, especially national and regional leaders, will quickly change identities and erase their trails, its leader's existence in government hands sets back Sendero's timetable and requires the party to reorganize completely under even stricter security requirements. In order to understand what remains of Sendero Luminoso in a post-Guzman era, this organizational build-up and institutionalization must be taken into account:

\* Guzman has endowed the party with a systematic codification of its ideology (in the Guzman interview, the party congress discussion documents and other materials published in *El Diario*, the SL mouthpiece). More than a philosophical dissertation meant to compete with other systems of thought, SL ideology is a compact, coherent piece of circular logic which can appeal in a fragmented, dysfunctional society. Guzman does not have to be physically present to reproduce his thinking, though its application may open up dissent within the organization. Because Senderistas are not made overnight, Guzman has emphasized the need to forge "new prototype" men and women, and has invested huge resources in creating a "revolutionary pedagogy" which reaches the common man as well as intellectuals. This ideological message is packaged in easily digestible capsules which activists spread through SL recruitment, its "people's schools" and even the public education system. For instance, a team of human rights educators recently went to Puno to give a course at the state-run Pedagogical Institute. The educators found their audience, "from the director down to the pupils," shouting SL slogans. \* Guzman has made the party, with its People's Guerrilla Army and satellite organizations, into a nationwide network with a decentralized command structure, tactical initiative and defined objectives. Guzman oversaw the expansion of a guerrilla force which is aiming to put a standing army in the field to demonstrate what the party claims as "strategic parity" against government forces. Estimates of its fighting force range from 5,000 to 10,000. SL retains its military apparatus intact and operative. Perhaps as many as 50,000 militants provide logistical support. From Piura on the Ecuadoran border to Puno on the Bolivian border, SL holds the high ground in geo-political and strategic terms. Though its urban activities have distracted public attention from its rural presence, it has not sacrificed its strongholds in the countryside. It has strong bases of operation in the northern Sierra above Trujillo (from Santiago de Chuco, La Libertad to Cajabamba, Cajamarca); a central Andean core which includes the Sierra of Ancash and the Huallaga valley; the traditional axis of Ayacucho, Huancavelica and Junin; a staging area in the remote provinces of Abancay; and a southern bridgehead in Puno. More than mere shadow government, SL is the only authority in these areas. It is impossible to surround, isolate and destroy these guerrilla strongholds in a single stroke. \* Guzman laid out a broad, multi-faceted and multi-front strategy which is strikingly matched with an organization to carry it out. In a country where few organizations work efficiently, Sendero does, and this fact gives it appeal. Although its terrorist attacks and guerrilla tactics have grabbed headlines, SL has marshalled far more resources for other lines of action: propaganda; recruitment and training; education; infiltration, neutralization and seizure of competing organizations; logistical support and communication for its clandestine network, its operating units and its command structure; intelligence gathering and processing; and

strategic planning at a national, regional and local level. \* The party has a firm source of funding through its connections with the cocaine trade in the Huallaga valley and elsewhere along the eastern slopes of the Andes. Though this connection could compromise the integrity of its regional commands through corruption, it will provide resources for the foreseeable future. Simultaneously, SL can still prevent the Peruvian economy from working (through power blackouts, knocking out bridges, car bombings and other acts of sabotage which frighten off Peruvian and foreign investors), thus depriving the State of revenue. \* Guzman oversaw a Senderista penetration in urban areas, a risky transition for any guerrilla movement, but a prerequisite for taking power. Although the outcome of this shift is still uncertain, SL today is engaged in urban activities which were unimaginable five years ago. In other words, Guzman has left his organization tangible assets which will make Sendero resilient and resistant. Indeed, as the organization has grown and diversified, Guzman was becoming more of a chairman of the board, rather than a hands-on field general, and had to rely on competent subordinates with tactical autonomy and command authority. The Peruvian government does not have the manpower, logistics or funds to exploit this windfall of intelligence and psychological initiative. The intelligence haul at the safe houses and any additional information which can be obtained from those captured is a perishable commodity in tactical terms, but will have great usefulness in piecing together an understanding of how SL functioned. It will give the government the most comprehensive view of Sendero and its modus operandi that it has ever had. The Fujimori government is trying to exploit the psychological blow by ridiculing Guzman and the party and plant seeds of doubt about the organization's invincibility and motives. From reports from Lima, there is a discernible, risky tendency of concentrating in Guzman all Sendero's destructive capacity and wiles, and downplaying Sendero's capacity to absorb the blow and continue its rebellion. The state of euphoria and relief among Peru's national elites and middle class, mainly confined to Lima, may lead to missing another golden opportunity to regain the initiative. For the government, the crucial question is how to turn this SL setback into a tide change. It must put in place medium-term policies and programs which will extend the state's presence and legitimacy, rebuild durable social and political institutions, and jump-start a limping economy. This effort requires a viable counterinsurgency strategy which goes beyond the last-ditch defenses which the Fujimori government has mounted, based on military force, intelligence, self-defense committees pressed into service from the general population, and short-circuiting legal defense. The underlying causes of the insurgency and the setting of social and political decay have not changed with Guzman's capture. The historical motherload of ethnic and class hatred is still there to be mined. The economic recession is still grinding up scores of companies and spewing out massive unemployment. Narcotrafficking and corruption are undermining institutions already weakened by the impact of 15 years of crisis. The government has failed to provide minimum public services, especially in the areas of health, education and justice. The political system is fragmented and in upheaval, facing a crisis which predates the April 5 coup and will continue for the foreseeable future. News Conference: Guzman Gives Marching Orders The mastermind of Peru's Maoist insurgency, Abimael Guzman, known to his followers as Chairman Gonzalo, made his first public appearance in 13 years, but far from the circumstances which he would have wished. For the international and Peruvian media, the government staged a scene straight out of the movie, "Silence of the Lambs." Dressed in a comical black-and-white striped prison uniform, which Peruvian authorities had never previously provided to inmates, Guzman appeared inside a cage from behind raised drapes. Though he had sat under a blazing sun for five hours before being presented, he immediately launched into a belligerent harangue, shouting through questions from reporters and jeers from police guards. He told his followers that they should continue fighting and follow the

orders contained in the "Sixth Plan," the strategic blueprint for this phase of the revolution, and obey the instructions of the Central Committee. In other words, he ordered that the party and its followers should not allow his capture to change their plans. His arrest, he said, "is just a bend, simply a bend in the road. We will triumph." There were varied reactions to the spectacle. For SL followers, many of whom had probably never seen him before, his appearance probably increased their resolve to fight on. Guzman was unrepentant and unbroken, belying the government's line that he was debilitated physically, mentally and morally by his poor health and alleged debauchery. Some analysts thought the humiliation would stir SL to take revenge. On the other hand, for the Peruvian general public, Guzman's diatribe followed the script of an unrepentant Marxist, a tired political message repeated by Peru's left wing parties for nearly three decades. "All this killing for musty old ideas," reacted a Lima historian. After nearly 13 years of clandestine life in which Guzman acquired legendary stature and mystique, he was revealed as a vulnerable human being. "It is a crude but effective campaign to show Guzman as irrational, out of touch, a hate-filled beast, but caged," said an experienced Lima observer. Sendero's Future: The Big Question Mark "For an organization which has planned each step to the last detail, it is unimaginable that it has not planned for the possibility of Guzman's capture," says Pablo Rojas, a Peruvian human rights leader. Since Guzman could also have been incapacitated by illness, he himself probably drew up the contingency plans. However, the sudden, deep blow to SL's command structure makes smooth implementation of any plan extremely difficult. Most analysts agree that SL will first take dramatic action to restore the "shield of fear" which protects its cadres from being fingered. SL can choose from many options: hostage taking, car bombs, massive sabotage or a spectacular attack. "We're telling our clients to act as if the capture had never taken place and to err on the side of caution," says a Lima security company executive. Second, the party will have to regroup and weigh how much effort it wants to invest in keeping Guzman alive (or even rescuing him), and how important it is to stay as close to the time line for revolution. Guzman himself has already told the party to proceed with current plans. Beyond these short-term priorities, Sendero will have to fill the void in national leadership and unified command. The guerrilla expert Gustavo Gorriti believes that the remaining apparatus will seek a collective leadership, in part because Guzman never designated a successor. The SL central committee has between 18 and 22 members, and the heads of the six regional committees (Metropolitan Lima, Primary or Ayacucho, North, South, East and Central) are automatically members. Though the Lima and national leadership has been hard hit, regional and military commands have, for the most part, been unscathed. A more thorough leadership shake-out will take place over the next three to 36 months and even longer if Guzman remains alive. There will be a host of competing factions within the party, each trying to get the upper hand and playing out its position in both internal debate and armed actions. A first fault line will run through the regional committees: the Ayacucho regional committee, which has historical preeminence within the party; the Huallaga command which controls the party's purse strings; and the Lima metropolitan committee, which will have to take the blame for Guzman's capture. Other potential fissures are the strain between party politicians and guerrilla army; those who demand Maoist ideological purity (applying the universal laws of history) and those who emphasize the indigenous nature of the revolt; those who endorse stepping up the pace of the revolt by penetrating Lima and those who back a prolonged struggle in the countryside; Guzman's favorites versus outsiders and ambitious middle-tier leaders ready to fill vacancies at the top. Over the years, Guzman has overseen internal tensions, instigated debates and channeled the friction into almost ritualistic purges of the upper tiers of the party, without permitting the organization to spin out of control. Without his firm hand and fiat, this power struggle may divide and weaken the party and its organizations. On the other



hand, both the conditions of Guzman's confinement and the remote chance of his freedom will serve to string out the conflicts. Sendero will also be undergoing the strains of an institution passing from the founder's direct control to an institution in the hands of second- and third-generation militants. As Gorriti points out, Maoist guerrilla groups have generally fizzled after the loss of their founder, but fundamentalist movements, with which Sendero has strong similarities, have weathered the transition better. However, a Sendero Luminoso without Guzman to dictate an ideological hardline does not guarantee the group's demise. It might become more politically flexible and reach out to those who support the violent overthrow of the government but have been unwilling to accept SL's goals or methods. Grassroots leaders frequently say that a constraint on Sendero's appeal has been its rigid ideological stance and its dogmatic refusal to enter into political alliances. Nor does an eventual SL decline necessarily mean a reduction of violence in Peru. Peruvian society has been brutalized by Sendero, abusive security forces, government incompetence, the economic adjustment program, and crime. During the past decade, SL has claimed a monopoly on violence and kept other competitors off its turf. Instead of having political violence wielded by SL with almost surgical precision, Peru may degenerate into a slaughterhouse filled with scores of amateur butchers, as other equally violent, but less savvy groups occupy both the political and social scenes. These could be SL factions, other insurgent groups, narco-traffickers, bandits, mafia-like organizations, rogue bands of police and military, and the self-defense committees now being encouraged by the Fujimori government.

-- End --