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Power Struggles, Authoritarianism Cast Shadow Over Peruvian Democracy

by LADB Staff

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Peruvian democracy has been battered by recent power struggles between President Alberto Fujimori and Gen. Nicolas de Bari Hermoza Rios, head of the Peruvian military. While the president downplayed the disagreements, the political opposition and the press questioned whether the president or the military is running the country. At the same time, Congress has been paralyzed since mid-December because of maneuvers by members of the governing Cambio 90-Nueva Mayoria to allow the president to run for a third term.

The friction between Fujimori and Gen. Hermoza erupted on the anniversary of the December 1996 takeover of the Japanese ambassador's residence by Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru rebels. Hermoza had recently published a book describing his role in carrying out the commando raid that ended the hostage crisis in April 1997. In the rescue operation, one hostage, two commandos, and all 14 MRTA rebels were killed (see NotiSur, 01/10/97, 01/31/97, 02/07/97, 04/25/97).

Fujimori criticized the book in an interview published on the anniversary of the MRTA takeover. The daily newspaper El Comercio quoted Fujimori as saying Hermoza participated in neither the design nor the strategy of the rescue but only in executing the operation. "I know perfectly how the operation was developed," Fujimori said. "I designed it." Military stage show of support for Gen. Hermoza Military and police officers closed ranks behind Hermoza, going out of their way to praise him publicly.

Military commanders from around the country arrived unexpectedly in Lima, where they attended a public ceremony along with the ministers of defense and interior and Vladimiro Montesinos, de facto head of the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional (SIN). "You, general, personify and represent the army of Peru," said Gen. Carlos Pergamino to Hermoza during the televised ceremony. "Any attempt to discredit your accomplishments is an offense to our institution as a whole."

The move by the military set off rumors of a possible coup, but Fujimori once again demonstrated his ability to operate under stress. With typical brinkmanship, he ordered the generals to "return immediately to your respective command posts and carry out the responsibilities to which you are assigned." After the crisis subsided, Fujimori emphasized his authority over the armed forces, but said that for the time being no changes would be made in the military hierarchy. "What has been demonstrated is the armed forces' subordination to civilian power," said Prime Minister Alberto Pandolfi. Many Peruvians disagreed, however.

As the influence of Hermoza and Montesinos has increased, so have calls for change. Following the latest incident, opposition politicians denounced the "civilian-military clique" that runs the country, and they called on Fujimori to retire Hermoza, replace Montesinos, and reorganize the military high command to make it subordinate to civilian authority. "Fujimori has wanted to replace

Hermoza since 1994, and it has become clear that he does not have the power to do it," said Enrique Obando, an expert on Peru's armed forces. Fernando Rospigliosi, a political analyst and expert on the military's role within Peru's civilian governments, said that in 1994 Fujimori sent an envoy to Hermoza to tell him he had been named defense minister and to congratulate him. "Hermoza laughed and rejected the job," said Rospigliosi. "He knows better than anyone that the defense minister has no power and the head of the armed forces does." Commentators warned that the problems only appear to have been smoothed over. "

The friction between Fujimori and Hermoza could have caused, and can still cause, the breakup of the democratic order," said an editorial in the financial daily *Sintesis*. Heavy-handed lawmaking sets off congressional crisis. The feud between Fujimori and the military "is only the tip of the iceberg," said Federico Salazar. "It clearly indicates the precarious nature of the balance of powers."

The democratic order is also threatened by Fujimori's other power struggles. The legislature has been paralyzed since mid-December, when the *Cambio 90-Nuevo* Majority legislators passed a law in a late-night session to allow Fujimori to create temporary judges. The opposition said the new law will allow Fujimori to handpick the judges who will oversee future elections, which could help him win an unprecedented third term of office in 2000. The government insisted the legislation is intended to ease the judicial backlog, not boost Fujimori's re-election chances.

The action by Fujimori's backers in Congress so outraged opposition legislators that they disrupted Congress with placards and hung banners calling the legislation "the fraudulent-election law." Congressional President Carlos Torres y Torres Lara then suspended full-chamber activity, and pro-government deputies created a 30-member committee with ample lawmaking powers. But the opposition has refused to sit on the specially-created committee, making the legislature effectively inactive and holding up legislation on key bills. The president has called the opposition's tactics "childish."

On Jan. 7, the opposition proposed a debate without interruption on the controversial "fraud law." Alfonso Grados Bertorini, of the *Union por el Peru* (UPP), said if the majority accepts the minority will agree to debate the pending bills before the current session ends on Jan. 31. The opposition is also spearheading efforts to organize a referendum on a third term for the president. Alejandro Santamaria, of the *Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana* (APRA), said demonstrations against any re-election efforts will continue even at the risk that the president might once again dissolve Congress.

Opposition increasingly vocal but ineffective

Still, political analyst Mirko Lauer said the objections of the small, stubborn opposition are largely in vain, because compliant pro-government parties simply rubber-stamp Fujimori's legislation. "From one scandal to the next, the opposition just ends up pushed further into a corner, where it sits on a tiny protest box, systematically sidelined so that it has no chance of bringing about any changes," Lauer said.

To most observers, each confrontation increases Fujimori's control over the other branches of government as he prepares for his re-election bid. But his heavy-handed tactics have also created

enemies and left him isolated, which in turn has strengthened the hand of Montesinos, the most unpopular public figure in Peru and the third member with Fujimori and Hermoza of Peru's uneasy triumvirate. The erosion of the other branches of civil power has further weakened the nation's fragile democracy. Foreign investors have frequently named the weakness of democratic institutions as the main drawback to the country's otherwise attractive investment conditions. (Source: El Nuevo Herald, 12/17/97; Associated Press, 12/20/97, 12/22/97; Spanish news service EFE, 12/15/97, 12/23/97, 01/06/98; Reuter, 12/22/97, 12/23/97, 01/06/98; Notimex, 12/17/97, 01/07/97)

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