Second Ministerial Crisis for Peruvian President Ollanta Humala

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Erratic policies for dealing with social conflicts and the fight against narcoterrorism have led to two Cabinet shakeups in five months for the administration of Peru's President Ollanta Humala.

The first changes occurred in December, when a social conflict erupted in the department of Cajamarca, in the northern highlands, after residents opposed the development of the Conga mining project. The fallout resulted in the replacement of 10 Cabinet ministers and the designation of retired Lt. Col. Óscar Valdés Dancuart as prime minister (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2012).

This time, the Cabinet changes were the result of errors by the armed forces and police in the operation (Operación Libertad) to rescue 36 workers at the Coga and Skanska companies, which provide services to the Camisea gas consortium. The workers were kidnapped by narcoterrorists in the town of Kepashiato in the jungle province of La Convención, Cusco region, on April 9.

Kepashiato is in the Valle de los Ríos Apurímac y Ene (VRAE), an inhospitable jungle area where the remnants of the terrorist group Sendero Luminoso operate, under the leadership of the Quispe Palomino family clan and the drug mafias (NotiSur, March 23, 2012).

In a ransom note published in the local press, the captors demanded US$10 million, an annual "war tax" of US$1.2 million, and explosives. The government immediately declared a state of emergency in La Convención province and sent in 1,500 troops.

On April 10, Capt. Nancy Flores of the Policía Nacional del Perú (PNP) was killed when terrorists shot down her helicopter as it flew over the area searching for the hostages.

Rescue operation questioned

Five days after they were kidnapped, the 36 workers were released by their captors and arrived on their own in a jungle village.

President Humala, who was in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, attending the Sixth Summit of the Americas, called the rescue effort "an impeccable operation" resulting from joint police and military actions. "We have carried out an impeccable operation without any type of negotiation; we spoke very clearly with the companies involved and explained to them that the state's policy, and particularly that of the administration, is to not negotiate with terrorist criminals or kidnappers," said the president.

In a communiqué issued in Cartagena, Humala said that "the terrorists proceeded to free the hostages when they realized they were surrounded," and he repeated that the administration did not give in to blackmail.

Before long, however, the administration's triumphalism collapsed when it became evident that the government spin was nothing more than an attempt to hide the serious errors committed during the operation, which resulted in the deaths of eight soldiers and police.
On April 15, the government announced the disappearances of junior police officers Luis Astu quilca, age 21, and César Vilca, 22, who had participated in the hostage-rescue operation. The parents of the policemen told the press that their sons had been missing since April 12 but no government authority had any information on their whereabouts until April 15. César Vilca's father, Dionisio Vilca, told the press that the two junior officers had been abandoned by their superiors during the operation.

IDL Reporteros (of the nongovernmental organization Instituto de Defensa Legal) corroborated Dionisio Vilca’s statement. A 30-member police patrol, led by three captains, who were supposed to carry out a joint effort with the Navy and the Air Force, were ordered to go to the area where the narcoterrorists had downed the helicopter in which Capt. Flores was killed. They went by helicopter, and, once there, prepared to do a fast-rope descent.

Vilca and Astuquilca were the first to descend. After they reached the ground, shots were fired, at least one bullet hit the passenger cabin, and a junior officer received shrapnel wounds to the face. The helicopter pilot fled, abandoning the two soldiers. The other police urged their superior, PNP Capt. Jesús Soto Quintanilla, to go back to rescue their comrades, but he ignored their pleas.

After wandering for 17 days in the jungle, Astuquilca showed up alive in the town of Kiteni, in the Echarte district, La Convención province, said the Ministerio del Interior. In a subsequent official communiqué, the ministry said that Astuquilca was found thanks to help from the civilian population in the search efforts. "The operations of the Policía Nacional del Perú and the armed forces will continue in the area, the same operations that will lead to the pacification of the Valle de los Ríos Apruímac y Ene and the capture of the terrorist criminals," said the ministry communiqué.

However, it was Vilca's father who went into the jungle and on May 2 found his son's decomposed body. The authorities said that the father decided to go alone to search for his son's body to avoid risks. However, some reporters quoted Dionisio Vilca as having said, "If I didn't go, they would not have found my son."

The press also published reports of irregularities in the purchase of rations for soldiers in the VRAE and the acquisition of bulletproof vests that were useless against the 7.62 mm caliber ammunition used by the narcoterrorists.

From bad to worse

"The actual toll for [Interior Minister Daniel] Lozada, [Defense Minister Alberto] Otárola, and [Prime Minister] Valdés' Operación Libertad is staggering: eight military and police dead, many wounded, a downed helicopter, weapons lost, a native population feeling invaded and affected by the aerial operations (rocket and machinegun attacks), official credibility at rock bottom, the sense of institutional solidarity broken, no proven subversive casualties, etc. It could not have been worse," wrote Raúl Wienner in his La República column titled "Impeccable Defeat."

Opposition legislators questioned the interior and defense ministers' leadership in the fight against narcoterrorism, and they introduced a motion of censure. In addition, some questioned (and still question) Valdés as president of the Consejo de Ministros.

"I do not feel censured but I do feel, very personally, that I back my ministers, all my ministers, and I will continue doing so. I believe that both have worked hard, there have been some technical
inaccuracies, but that does not detract from all the work that they have done," Valdés told América Televisión on May 10.

The same day, Otárola and Lozada resigned, thus avoiding the imminent congressional censure. Both lasted barely 150 days in their jobs. The opposition said Valdés needed to resign along with his ministers.

On May 14, Production Minister José Urquizo Maggia, a cooperativism expert, was named defense minister, and retired Army Gen. Wilver Calle, who was vice minister of policy for the Ministerio de Defensa, was named to head the Ministerio del Interior.

IDL criticized both appointments, saying they showed "the government's clear disinterest in responsibly addressing citizen insecurity, terrorism, drug trafficking, and organized crime."

IDL's statement says that, regarding the new defense minister, "the concern is great that Urquizo, by all indications, has neither the knowledge nor the grasp of the issues in the sector and, in addition, until a few days ago appeared as the principal politician responsible for the hake fishing crisis, which cost the lives of two fishers."

Urquizo had been severely criticized in recent weeks for his performance as head of the Ministerio de Producción since taking office in December 2011. Protests in late April by small-scale fishers from Paita, who complained about the delay in the ministry's approval of an increase in the hake quota, left two dead. Vice Minister of Fisheries Patricia Majluf resigned May 14, accusing Urquizo publicly of caving in to pressure from large fishing companies and failing to protect sea resources.

Political analysts considered Urquizo's appointment a response to a suggestion from retired Army Col. Adrián Villafuerte, an advisor to President Humala. Valdés says Villafuerte is an expert on national defense and citizen security.

Fernando Rospigliosi, a political analyst who was interior minister during the administration of President Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006), wrote in his May 20 La República column titled "Montesinismo sin Montesinos" that Urquizo is "the perfect puppet who will occupy the ministerial position as long as he can, using his formal and informal advantages, and let the military appointed by Humala and Villafuerte do whatever they want."

As for Calle, IDL said that his role as a former member of the military could lead to subordinating the Policía Nacional to the armed forces, especially since the new minister signed the subjugation act imposed by Vladimiro Montesinos and the military high command in 1999.

Despite the criticism of Calle for having signed the subjugation act that supported the 1992 self-coup by dictator Alberto Fujimori (1990-2000), President Humala expressed his full support for the new interior minister. "He has recognized his mistake," said Humala, adding that "not all those who signed that controversial document are bad people."

The new interior minister told the magazine Caretas that he regretted signing the act. "Yes, I made a mistake and I regret it. I should not have signed," he said, insisting that he had not known exactly what the document was. Initially, Calle denied to the press that he had signed the act but later said he thought it was the attendance list for a luncheon.

For many national analysts, the fundamental issue is the need to change the policy in the fight against narcoterrorism. Several have proposed creating an autonomous ministerial-level authority,
above the armed forces and the national police, to assume responsibility for the strategy in the anti-subversion and anti-drug effort in the VRAE. The suggestion is that all involved sectors (justice, health, agriculture) work together, coordinating with regional and municipal governments.

Security analyst Rubén Vargas Céspedes says this authority should have "direct political" responsibility for anti-subversion and anti-drug activities in the VRAE, recognizing the residents as citizens with all rights and trying, directly and sincerely, to bring state resources to the area. "They must be given development opportunities beyond what coca leaf and drug trafficking offer. To do that, alternative-development programs must be intensely and seriously promoted," said the analyst to Diálogo Ciudadano, a publication of INFOREGIÓN in the VRAE.

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