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Andrés Gaudán

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Honor Court Ruling Highlights Uruguay’s Many Military Pension Perks

by Andrés Gaudín
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A minor episode that occurred two years ago but only came to light recently, two weeks before the end of President José Mujica’s term in office, has stained the reputation of a man otherwise considered the most popular and highly regarded leader in the 190-year history of Uruguay, the most democratic and anti-militarist country in South America.

The controversy involves a former high-level Army officer who was convicted and sentenced nearly a decade ago for multiple cases of murder, torture, and abduction committed during the years of the dictatorship (1973-1985). The man in question, Col. Gilberto Vázquez, was a key participant in Operación Cóndor (NotiSur, April 12, 2013), a coordinated and clandestine program of state repression organized in the 1970s by the dictatorships of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

As if that weren’t enough to make it newsworthy, the episode also pulled back the curtain on a series of special economic benefits that only military personnel enjoy and that the general public was not only unaware of but has been financing—in the form of taxes—all along.

A question of "honor"

Vázquez was sentenced in 2006 to 25 years in prison. As part of his punishment, he was also stripped of two-thirds of his pension. That same year he tried unsuccessfully to escape from the Hospital Militar Central in Montevideo, where he was being treated, thanks to the complicity of a military physician, for what proved later to be a nonexistent illness. Since then, however, the prisoner has demonstrated "good behavior," at least according to a military honor tribunal that revisited the case in 2012 and decided, in December of that year, to lift the economic sanction and thus restore Vázquez’s full pension.

Before it could take effect, the court resolution first needed to be validated by the Ministerio de Defensa, which in turn needed approval from the president’s office. Each gave its consent, though neither Defense Minister Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro nor President Mujica—both ex–guerilla leaders with the Movimiento de Liberación Nacional-Tupamaros, whose members were victimized by Vázquez’s actions—thought to inform the public that a man known to have committed so many human rights violations had just been rewarded for his "good behavior."

Aside from the issue of how the minister and president handled the matter, the episode offered insight into what, from the military’s standpoint, constitutes "honor." In an article published Dec. 26, the weekly newspaper Brecha noted that the honor court found Vázquez to have demonstrated "good behavior" even though, in a 2011 interview with the daily Últimas Noticias, he said he was "proud" of participating in the dictatorship, defended the use of torture, and admitted that with some of his torture subjects, "things got out of hand," meaning they died. In that same interview, Vázquez referred to the disappearance of the daughter-in-law of Argentine poet Juan Gelman (NotiSur, May 12, 2000)—an emblematic Operación Cóndor case—as "collateral damage."
In October 2011—again within the period of time the ex-Army officer is considered to have behaved so well—Vázquez was charged with the kidnapping and murder of Gelman’s daughter-in-law (NotiSur, Nov. 18, 2011). That same month, a group of approximately 20 women held as political prisoners during the dictatorship (and subjected to various types of sexual abuse) accused Vázquez of participating in a plan to systematically destroy them physically, morally, and psychologically.

Special treatment
The episode created an uproar as well because of what it revealed about the military’s privileged pension system. Future labor minister Ernesto Murro complained publicly that, "for every peso that goes into the Caja de Pensiones Militar (military pension treasury), five come out. The other four pesos are provided by the pubic, through their taxes." Murro explained that the state supplements the Caja to the tune of US$80 million per year. "Is it right," he asked, "that those officials who enjoy privileged retirements don’t contribute to their own Caja Militar?"

Sen. Constanza Moreira of the governing Frente Amplio (FA) criticized the system, too, noting that the Caja’s deficit pushes defense spending up by 57%. Defense is the government’s second-most-important budget item and represents 4.2% of total spending. The only way to understand the deficit, the senator explained, is to look in detail at a series of special norms included within the Ley Orgánica Militar (military code), which the dictatorship enacted in 1974. Moreira then outlined the various military retirement privileges included in the code:

* Officers can retire after completing 20 years of service while civilians must work at least 30 years and be 65 or older to receive the full pension payments they are due. For military personnel, every year of service spent abroad—basically time spent in professional training programs or on UN-organized peacekeeping missions—count double, meaning the 20-year service requirement can be significantly reduced.

* Generals go into mandatory retirement at age 60 or once they have spent eight years with that rank. For colonels and lieutenant colonels, the mandatory retirement age is 55 and 52, respectively. There are no cases in which such age limits apply to civilians. After retiring, furthermore, military personnel are allowed to take on private-sector jobs without any effect on their pensions.

* Officers receive pension payments equivalent to 100% of the salary they earned the month before retirement. Pensions for civilians, in contrast, are calculated at 50% of the average monthly salary earned during the best 10 years of their working lives.

* Military pensions are automatically adjusted based on the median wage index. Civilian pensions depend on special adjustments that may or may not correspond to the median wage index.

* Officers who go into mandatory retirement, either because of age or the number of years spent in their rank, receive a pension equivalent to the salary of the next rank up in the military hierarchy. A colonel, for example, retires with a general’s full salary, which is precisely what Vázquez has been able to do since the honor court validated his good behavior. The punishment that the honor court overturned was not, in reality, all that severe to start with: Vázquez may only have received one-third of his pension, but the rest went to his wife, children, and one other family member designated as a beneficiary.
* Every year retired members of the armed forces receive a complementary salary (equivalent to an extra monthly salary) paid in two installments, in June and again in December. This benefit is not extended to retired civilians.

**Penchant for peacekeeping**

While it is true that the aforementioned benefits apply only to a relatively small number of people (altogether there are only 22,563 people serving in the various branches of the Uruguayan armed forces), it is also the case that Uruguay has the region’s highest number of military personnel per capita: 66 for every 10,000 inhabitants, followed by Venezuela (63) and Colombia (55), according to the Argentina-based Atlas de la Red de Seguridad y Defensa de América Latina. Its much larger neighbors, Argentina (18) and Brazil (17), have nowhere close to Uruguay’s per capita military presence.

It should also be noted that, when figures are adjusted for population, Uruguay contributes more soldiers to UN peacekeeping missions than any other country in the world. Since the first "Blue Helmet" mission (1947 in Greece), the country has participated in 24 such operations, providing more than 30,000 people overall (nearly 32% more than its total number of military personnel). Currently there are 1,809 Uruguayan officers and enlisted soldiers assigned to different peacekeeping missions. These figures are especially relevant given what Sen. Moreira explained regarding Uruguay’s military retirement norms, which stipulate that every one year spent in the service of the UN brings soldiers two years closer to retirement.

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