

3-16-2018

Decision to Give Soldiers Domestic Policing Role Draws Fire in Argentina

Andrés Gaudín

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

Recommended Citation

Gaudín, Andrés. "Decision to Give Soldiers Domestic Policing Role Draws Fire in Argentina." (2018).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/14589>

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.

Decision to Give Soldiers Domestic Policing Role Draws Fire in Argentina

by *Andrés Gaudín*

Category/Department: Argentina

Published: 2018-03-16

After winning the Argentine presidency in 2015 by fewer than 700,000 votes, businessman Mauricio Macri set about dismantling the existing social-economic system ([NotiSur, Jan. 29, 2016](#)). Undoing efforts by the three previous administrations to distribute wealth more equally, he instead reintroduced the kind of neoliberal policies that dominated the region in the 1990s ([NotiSur, March 25, 2016](#), and [June 17, 2016](#)).

Macri also turned his back on the successful policies that had made the country an international leader in human rights ([NotiSur, July 29, 2016](#)). And now, in his third year in power, the president is upending the country's security balance by bending the rules that bar the armed forces from participating in domestic affairs.

This move came just as Argentina signed a series of agreements last month—in Washington, DC, and Miami—with the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and advisers with the US Southern Command.

Among those opposing the new security approach is former defense minister Agustín Rossi (2013-2015), who accuses the Macri administration of “putting the country's institutional integrity at risk.” But the officials responsible for the aforementioned agreements—Defense Minister Oscar Aguad and Security Minister Patricia Bullrich—say the policy shift is needed to improve law enforcement.

“The idea is to create a rapid-deployment force with members of the three branches of the military (Army, Navy, and Air Force) to offer logistical support in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking,” Aguad said.

Opposition members pointed out that the Argentine military isn't trained to take on terrorists or drug traffickers. Aguad responded by saying that technically speaking, the armed forces “won't be involved in domestic security affairs, because that's prohibited by law.” He was referring to the Ley de Seguridad Interior (Domestic Security Law), which limits the military to act domestically only in extreme cases, and when an official state of emergency has been declared.

“This force will be based in the far north and northeast of the country (near the borders with Bolivia, Brazil, and Paraguay). The Army has 40,000 soldiers who are operationally prepared and can provide a lot of help with logistics,” Aguad added.

But according to Rossi, the military already offers logistical support in certain situations by using its planes or trucks to transport supplies, for example, to health stations. “In no case, though, does that mean using a rapid-deployment military force,” he said. “Why would they want a unit like that if not for domestic security?”

The former minister—now a leading opposition deputy in the legislature—added, “In no part of Latin America has the involvement of the armed forces in the fight against drug trafficking produced

positive results. In fact, it's had the opposite effect." The prime example, he said, "are [the drug cartel] Los Zetas in Mexico, the first country to follow the doctrine of the Southern Command. Los Zetas ended up forming their own security force." Rossi believes the government's "rapid-deployment" plan is a way to begin involving the armed forces in domestic policing. "It's at the limit of the law and gives the impression that we're headed toward more of a military-police state, with an increase in the power to repress, which could then lead to higher levels of violence," he said.

'Conflict hypothesis'

Aguad had just announced the creation of the rapid-deployment force on Feb. 9, when that same day, Bullrich explained that the DEA would increase its presence in Argentina—in precisely the same strip of land where the special task force will operate. The security minister made the announcement in Washington, DC, and like Aguad, talked about the need to fight drug trafficking and terrorism.

Groups like Manifiesto Argentino, a collective of academics and intellectuals, accuse the Macri administration of exaggerating the security threat. Terrorism and drug trafficking "are absolutely secondary problems in the country," the organization argued in a press release. "First, Argentina doesn't produce drugs, nor is it a major consumer. Second, direct terrorism doesn't exist [here]. This insistence by Aguad and Bullrich is really problematic because it means 'buying' into a conflict hypothesis that doesn't pertain to us. And it means taking a huge step toward breaking down the democratic institutional integrity that cost us so dearly to establish after seven years of bloody dictatorship (1976-1983)."

Along with the DEA decision, the Macri administration also reached an agreement with the FBI to train Argentine police. "The commitment from our North American friends includes the arrival of more analysts to help us figure out where the drugs are coming from," said Bullrich after meeting with the DEA's acting administrator, Robert Patterson. The new DEA unit will operate in the province of Misiones, in the far northeast of the country, and work with a similar group already installed in Salta, in the far northwest.

"They asked us to send seized drugs to the United States so that they could analyze it there and determine where it comes from," Bullrich was quoted as saying by the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12*. "But that would be really tricky, since it would require asking individual judges to authorize the release of seized material. It's better if they send us the technology and train our people, so that we can analyze the substances ourselves, right here."

The US officials who welcomed her and Aguad, according to Bullrich, talked about how "seriously concerned" US authorities are about "the presence in the Triple Frontier area of 'sleeper cells' of the Islamic organization Hezbollah." The Triple Frontier is the name used to describe the area connecting the communities of Iguazú (Argentina), Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), and Ciudad del Este (Paraguay). It is a hotspot for commercial activity, much of it involving people of Middle Eastern origin who came to the thriving area fleeing conflict zones.

Periodically, news outlets from the three countries with interests in the Triple Frontier echo the ideas held by the heads of the DEA and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) about the supposed terrorist threat. And yet, no one has come up with any evidence of these imaginary "sleeper cells," or identified any of their supposed members. In statements to the state-run news agency *Télam*, Bullrich insisted, nevertheless, that, "It's important to collaborate with the United States. We've

offered to work together to disrupt the terrorist plans, and we believe that besides the DEA, other intelligence bodies will send undercover agents to the Triple Frontier.”

Capital punishment

In the background of all this is a renewed public debate about the death penalty, an issue the political right rekindles on a regular basis. The difference this time around is that the subject was broached by a foreign-born presidential adviser, and for the sole purpose of justifying a very public meeting between Macri and a police officer who killed an unarmed suspect by shooting him in the back.

In making his case, the adviser—Jaime Durán Barba of Ecuador—cited an unidentified poll to suggest that “the vast majority of people want the death penalty, because we can accept criminals having more rights than the police.”

In an interview with a state-run radio station, Durán Barba added, “No country in the world has fallen apart because a police officer kills a criminal. The police are there to stop [the criminals], not hug them.” Referring again to the supposed poll numbers, he said that people want to “brutally repress criminals” and that in “Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Mexico, and everywhere else, the vast majority wants the death penalty.” Durán Barba didn’t answer when asked to give more precise numbers.

The Macri administration allowed the debate to unfold without any intellectual and scientific base, treating an issue of such profound ethical significance as if it were of only minor importance. The only government official who did speak out was the minister of justice, Germán Garavano, who said he is “morally and philosophically opposed to the death penalty” and that it’s been “shown by studies to be ineffective.”

Of the major news outlets and pro-government newspapers, only the daily La Nación took up Garavano’s position. It published a long report based on studies by the human rights groups Amnesty International (AI) and the Washington, DC-based Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC). The organizations note that in the US, the 32 states that don’t have the death penalty have lower homicides rates than the 18 that do. “There’s no proof anywhere in the world that, as a means of dissuasion, the death penalty is more effective than jail time for reducing crime,” AI argues.

-- End --