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Analysis: Peru's Military Grows Restless But Divided

by John Neagle

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[The following article was distributed by Pacific News Service, 12/05-11/88. The LADB has authorization from PNS for reproduction.] By Carlos Hamann * Rumors of an imminent military coup that would shatter Peru's eight-year old democracy grow louder. Ironically, what may well prevent a coup are divisions in the military itself. Demands for the immediate ouster of President Alan Garcia are coming from all quarters, fueled by an uncontrollable 2000% inflation rate, a recent 50% devaluation of the currency, and a scarcity of everything from medicine to cooking oil. Leading Peruvian personalities have been demanding for months either Garcia's resignation, early elections or the formation of a politically independent cabinet to run the country. Garcia, elected in 1985 by a landslide margin, is widely accused of gross mismanagement of the economic crisis, the worst in Peru's republican history. He has nevertheless vowed to remain in office until his constitutional term expires in 1990. Until recently the general consensus was that the military would step in only if riots, vandalism and strikes got out of control. But with prices rising at blinding speed and items vanishing from the stores, food riots are already breaking out around the country. Two crippling national strikes have been organized in less than three months by the powerful communist labor union. And the Maoist Shining Path guerrillas have stepped up their war against the Peruvian state, routinely dynamiting Lima's power supply, murdering government officials and even poisoning Lima's main water supply. Money changers have popped up on almost every street corner, hawking US dollars to a population that has lost faith in the government and expects worse to come. Conservative naval officers, longtime advocates of a hard line against terrorism, would largely back a coup. Air Force officers have already clashed with Garcia several times, resulting in jet fighters buzzing the government palace last year. Yet the success of a coup lies with the army and army officers are ideologically split. On one hand a large group of officers remain influenced by the legacy of Gen. Juan Velasco, who came to power in a bloodless coup in 1968. Velasco nationalized most foreign investment in Peru, redistributed land and destroyed the old aristocracy, but was sacked by conservative officers in 1975 when his regime went too far to the left. Many believe the reforms did not go far enough. The United States, upset with the nationalizations, broke the close ties it had with the Peruvian army, forcing Velasco to turn to the Soviet bloc for supplies. Today Velasco is gone, but tons of Soviet equipment remain and a good 40% of all Peruvian army officers have gone to the Soviet Union on training missions. According to Peruvian naval officers, most return talking about class struggle and revolution of the proletariat. There is also a pro-government current within the three service branches, highlighted by a murky incident in October in which a general apparently attempted an 'auto-coup' to free Garcia of constitutional restraints, but found little support and was retired. Still, the majority of the top brass maintains a pro-democratic stance, headed by the highly respected defense minister Gen. Enrique Lopez Albuja. Their feeling is that the armed forces should defend democracy and stay out of government at all costs to maintain institutional integrity. The most vocal group is the conservative faction, led by retired Gen. Luis Cisneros, known as "El Gaucho" for advocating an Argentine solution to Peru's terrorist problem. (Argentina's military killed tens of thousands between 1976 and 1983 while crushing terrorism and organized labor.) These officers want iron-fist security laws to stamp out all unrest and a strong pro-business swing in the economy to invite foreign investment. Yet even Peru's businessmen and

conservative politicians, the natural allies of someone like Cisneros, are split on the idea of a coup. Many of today's right-wing political leaders were deported in the 70s during the Velasco regime, and still distrust the army. Novelist-cum-politician Mario Vargas Llosa, Peru's newest conservative leader and himself a 70s exile, has come out strongly against the idea of a coup. Ironically, Vargas Llosa's pro-democratic stance could have backfired. The world-renowned author is the last chance for a right-wing victory in 1990. Old guard conservatives have accused him of crass naivete for not holding on to the coup card, and many see this as proof that Vargas Llosa would be a lightweight, idealistic president hardly the strong leader they crave to impose law and order. In any case a military coup is exactly what the Shining Path revolutionaries have been trying to achieve for years. The repression following a coup would clear the way for an armed uprising that would sweep Sendero into power. Cynics say that the best thing that could happen to President Garcia right now is a military coup. "If he dies, he would go down in history as a martyr of democracy," says a taxi driver. "And if he survives, he would come back as a hero when democracy is restored." * Carlos Hamann, a graduate student in Latin American studies at the University of California, is a Peruvian born writer who was an editor at the Lima-based Andean Reports.

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