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Rumors of Military Coup Re-emerge

by LADB Staff

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Rumors of an impending coup to overthrow President Alfonso Portillo began last October and continued into March of this year. While some analysts suggest the rumors originated inside the administration, Portillo blames them on unnamed opponents or disgruntled forces in the private sector who object to his reforms. Meanwhile, the political chaos caused by an array of unsolved problems gives credibility to the coup rumors.

The daily La Prensa said last October that it was receiving a rash of telephone calls reporting the coup rumors in what seemed like an orchestrated campaign. The rumors were bolstered by unconfirmed reports of ominous troop movements. Defense Minister Gen. Juan de Dios Estrada Velasquez said the reports were baseless and the military activities were routine. He attributed the rumors to "persons who only want to create a climate of insecurity" (see NotiCen, 2000-10-19). Portillo also dismissed the rumors, but his loud protests and accusations against unidentified sinister forces appeared to give credence to the rumors.

By early November, over half the respondents in an Vox Latin opinion poll said they believed a coup was possible. While denying a coup was afoot, the president's secretary of strategic analysis Edgar Gutierrez acknowledged that there was a disconnect between the government and society. But he traced the problem to Portillo's difficulty in making social reforms with a government made up of disparate elements. Administration critics agreed with this assessment.

The governing Frente Republicano Guatemalteco (FRG) includes former leftists like Portillo and Gutierrez and right-wingers like Congress president retired Gen. Efraim Rios Montt, Vice President Francisco Reyes, banker Francisco Alvarado, and Gen. Francisco Ortega. Rios Montt, Alvarado, and Ortega are widely believed to wield great power in the government perhaps more than Portillo does.

The rumors picked up again in February and March and included fanciful accounts of Portillo's resignation and flight into exile. Portillo said the rumors came from elements in the business community who were angry at his efforts to lower import tariffs and break up monopolies in the cement, sugar, flour, fertilizer, and poultry industries. The latest round of rumors came amid a series of suspicious events and new turns in old scandals. Accompanying the turmoil are the unresolved issues of poverty and landlessness.

A massive demonstration last October by campesinos demanding the land reform mandated by the 1996 peace accords led to nothing. Government estimates indicate that 85% of productive land in Guatemala is held by 3% of the population. A consensus has emerged from various attempts outside of government to analyze the coup rumors. The rumors appear to have come from within the government and stem from the disparate groups pulling the administration in different directions.

In a round-table interview conducted by the daily *Prensa Libre*, a group of independent observers agreed that there was no destabilizing group at work, but rather a government unable to maintain stability. Helen Mack of the *Fundacion Myrna Mack* said the destabilizing impetus came from the three "Pacos": Francisco Alvarado, Francisco Reyes Lopez, and Francisco Ortega, Portillo's closest advisors. "Portillo's attempt to create a pluralistic and heterogeneous government failed, and what exists now is an amalgam in which everyone does what is convenient," Mack said.

Claudia Samayoa of the *Fundacion Rigoberta Menchu* said, "These destabilizing movements are generated by groups near the government, interested in acquiring their quotas of power and enrichment, and in deflecting the attention of Guatemalans from the real problems that confront the nation, like the economy and the lack of security."

Crime is also a problem for administration

Another critical problem facing Portillo is the high crime rate. In early February, Interior Minister Byron Barrientos sent soldiers into the streets to back up the inefficient *Policia Nacional Civil* (PNC). The assault on crime was dubbed "Saturacion," and Barrientos quickly claimed crime had diminished. But human rights groups contested the claim and opposed the militarization of public security as a dangerous unleashing of the army and a violation of the peace accords.

Mario Polanco, head of the human rights organization *Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo* (GAM), said the move exposed Barrientos' inability to reduce crime, which even government officials now admit is out of control. To many, recourse to the military expedient suggested that the political leaders are out of ideas. Some observers say the military is part of the crime wave since the recent discovery that weapons used in 12 bank robberies and assaults on armored cars were manufactured by the military.

While street crime heightens the sense of a government losing its grip, the inability of the state to resolve the three-year-old murder of Bishop Juan Gerardi has left Portillo open to charges that he will not move against military impunity (see *NotiCen*, 1998-04-30, 2000-11-12). The case has yet to reach the trial phase even though several suspects have been imprisoned for months. The chief suspects are three former members of the military. That fact has nurtured a theory that the military invented the coup rumors to warn the administration against proceeding with the trial. Several prosecutors and judges have resigned from the case saying they had received death threats.

In February, unidentified assailants attacked the wife and daughter of retired Gen. Otto Perez Molina, an administration critic involved in forming an opposition political party. Court issues landmark ruling in Guategate case In the legislative scandal known as Guategate, the *Corte Suprema de Justicia* (CSJ) swept away the last in a series of defense motions to stop or slow the judicial process.

On March 3, the court ruled that the case may go forward. The ruling has the force of an indictment and strips 24 lawmakers of their congressional immunity from prosecution. They now face trial on charges stemming from the illegal alteration of a beverage-tax law in June 2000 (see *NotiCen*,

2000-10-19). All 24 indicted deputies, including Congress president Rios Montt, are members of the FRG. They face up to 28 years in prison for Guategate-related crimes.

Just before the court handed down its decision, the FRG's majority in the legislature eliminated a congressional rule that required deputies indicted for a crime to leave their leadership posts. Five of the 24 legislators hold such posts. On hearing the ruling, Miguel Angel Sandoval of the Movimiento Ciudadano pro Justicia y Democracia said the congressional executive body (Junta Directiva) was now illegitimate and "ought to resign out of shame."

Civil "coup" planned

Meanwhile, civil leaders have called for a different kind of coup. In early March, Mario Polanco of GAM called for a peaceful "overthrow" to head off a military coup and end the current political chaos. He said Portillo was probably not going to finish his term, which has nearly three years to go. The plan is to announce on TV a civil coup d'etat with the backing of prominent business leader Dionisio Gutierrez, human rights activist Helen Mack, and congressional Deputy Nineth Montenegro of the Alianza Nueva Accion (ANN). Planners of the "civil coup" have not given details about what they hope will come from their action.

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