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# Armed Forces in South America: The Ambivalent Dynamics of Civil-military Relations in the Context of the New Democracies

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(D'Araujo, Maria Celina. 2010. *The military, democracy and development. Brazil and South America*. Rio de Janeiro: FGV Editora)

## Time for democracy for all

Maria Celina D'Araujo's book is an original and coherent contribution on democracy and the achievements and difficulties of the South American, especially Brazilian, Armed Forces in accepting that differential treatment which has granted them corporative privileges is not appropriate under democracy, and that the past, present and future actions of the Armed Forces should be monitored through public rules and institutions as they are set up. The book has non-linear structure which identifies the profound ambivalences that surround the difficult civil-military coexistence in the context of the young South American democracies. This is the first key point of the book.

A second key issue is political change. It is highly likely that political scientists and International Relations scholars still have great difficulty in keeping up with political change that occurs in the region as a whole. This is evident from their attempts to understand the emergence of new leaders who challenge concepts such as populism or neo-populism, once valid for the "eager masses" in search of messianic leaders. D'Araujo's book is a modern contribution which, without ignoring the contribution of categories bequeathed by Latin American social sciences (such as the category of corporatism), is creative in producing new concepts to understand the nature of the political changes at work.

In order to understand this change, the book starts with the observation that there is something extraordinary happening today in South America: “democracy has become the rule for all”. This fact in itself represents the most fundamental change in the region’s political scene in almost two centuries of political existence. While in the past democratic regime was the exception, and those few exceptions only had influence at the domestic level, democracy has now become a fully regional fact. This fact has redefined the scope of internal political and social actions but has also been projected outwards, conditioning and socializing a regional democratic ethos which tries to shun outsiders who have not yet realized the public restraints which democratic rules establish.

D’Araujo’s book does not indulge in the rather *naïve* idea of socially or politically homogenous democracy in South America. She recognizes instead that there are problematic democracies, especially among the Andean countries, which have marked authoritarian traits. After a review of different forms of democratic political practice which have emerged in South America, one of the first significant observations of the book is made: that there is a democratic plurality emerging in South America, comprising systems that have established themselves as representative democracies, as well as those of participative democracies.

Democracy for all, today’s political fact in Latin America, is accompanied by a collective mechanism for defending democracy, an emerging structural condition which restrains and limits the practice of sectors that still think of government as reaching beyond the rules established by democracy. This is most evident in the mechanism of “democratic clauses”, i.e. a system of safeguards for democracy which have been consolidated since the end of the 80s in the Organization of American States (OEA), Mercosul, the Andean Community (CAN) and more recently the Union of South American Nations (Unasul). “A convergence of attitudes aiming at strengthening governability and democracy (...)” (p. 31) has emerged.

Perhaps because of this optimism towards internal democratic change and its institutional systems of systemic safeguard, the author unnecessarily adds that,

(...) despite the drama of internal violence, South America is a peaceful region, with low military expenditure; it does not represent a threat to the international order and continually makes efforts to strengthen regional cooperation and peace (p. 31).

Surely internal wars (those that are to do with public security and violent breaches of human rights in several South American countries, violence from drug trafficking and disproportionate police violence), and the fact that armed conflict still goes on in the region (especially in the rural parts of these countries), mean that we cannot emphatically state that America is a “peaceful region”. On this matter I prefer Holsti’s (1997) argument that

strictly speaking South America seems to be a region free of inter-state wars rather than a peaceful zone. Continuing along Holsti's line of argument, democracy (or democratization) does not sufficiently explain the emergence of a peaceful region in South America's case, since even during the dictatorship era, which went from the first half of the 1960s until the first half of the 1980s, there were no military conflicts between dictatorships in the region, even though there were tensions such as between Argentina and Chile in the dispute over the Beagle Canal in 1978.

Despite pointing out the gradation of democracies in South America which range from representative to participative, D'Araujo's book avoids the simplistic theory of two emerging political worlds, applied particularly to the Latin-American left, which has been classified by Carlos Castañeda's (2006) famous binary formula as the modern left and the nationalist, archaic and populist left. Her argument is instead designed to highlight political change in the South American region rather than being confined to defining reality in terms of dichotomies of authoritarian and democratic regimes, or even from a sociological perspective, in terms of modern versus traditional societies. The author is also aware of and criticizes the illusions and rapid conclusions that could be inferred from the rise to power of the South American left in democratic regimes:

Therefore, instead of thinking of a new revolutionary ideological cycle, we could think about a set of changes geared towards representative or participative democracy within a political space mediated by different tendencies and with authoritarian traditions (p. 15).

This idea certainly goes beyond the black-and-white conception of reality. The axis that spans these various forms of change, in which the region's left has been elected to power, is no longer so much a case of modern democratic opposition versus old authoritarian ways of doing politics, but is, above all, a political or social response to the unfulfilled promises of democracies and even of authoritarianism, which once dominated the State and which today persist in preserving privileged spaces. The target of the author's criticism of these actors who continue to preserve privileged spaces is the military, which has been the only non-civilian actor to have had and implemented a plan to hold onto power in past few decades in South America.

### **The Armed Forces: New Functions, New Functionalities**

D'Araujo hits upon an important point when evaluating South American and particularly Brazilian militaries, which is that as democracies in the region weaken, the military's remaining political space is strengthened. As many indicators show, the political

changes at work in South America occur within a context of a generalized suspicion of institutions on the part of national civil society, “the degree of trust of institutions is low” (p. 23). However, the Armed Forces are an exception to this mistrust. In general the Armed Forces are well regarded, especially in Brazil, with the exception of Argentina (p. 30). In other words, a double paradox seems to operate in relation to South American Armed Forces: firstly, it implies that despite the strength of the collective social memory of the repressive role played by these sectors in the past, there seems to be a feeling of “nostalgia for authority” among many sections of society, which was identified by O’Donnell and Schmitter (1988) more than two decades ago. A second paradox is to do with the fact that, even though political changes have affected most political institutions, the positions of power within the South American militaries have remained almost as they were, of which Brazil is the most emblematic case.

Nevertheless, D’Araujo’s book steers clear of the temptation to argue that nothing has changed. The most relevant changes that the author acknowledges are to do with civil-military relations. Of course the military power’s submission to civil power in South America has been undeniably slower than expected, but there have been significant changes:

The military issue in South America at the beginning of the twenty-first century can be approached from several angles. The most classic approach deals with civil-military relations and in this respect there have been significant changes: a greater subordination of civil power, even though the military has weakened as an institution (p. 39).

But to which Armed Forces does D’Araujo refer? They are certainly not those of the authoritarian years. To answer this we must look towards the nature of their new functions and the creation of new hemispheric institutionalities to harbor the changes that have shaped the roles of the militaries. Since 2003, when the Organization of American States (OAS) instituted the concept of multidimensional security in accordance with the notion of new transnational threats and the formulation of a new regional architecture of hemispheric security, the South American region has taken on this task, in both theory and practice. For a region where inter-state wars have practically disappeared, or for a region in which “new wars”, to borrow Mary Kaldor’s (1999) expression, are internal wars – against drug trafficking, corruption, money laundering, and different sorts of crimes, poverty among others – the internal functions of the Armed Forces have little to do with the old communist enemies, but instead with the adversaries of the “new wars”.

Although the consensus is that they should not return to power, some of the South American military sectors have discovered that, under the pretext of the “new wars”, it has been possible to achieve power through democratic means, such as in the cases of Hugo Chavez

in Venezuela and Ollanta Humalla in Peru. “The novelty (...) now is that the Army acts as an agent for elected governments” (p. 37). Thus they become needed and legitimate:

(...) the military continues to be a relevant social and political force in many South American countries. They have been used to arbitrate political disputes, such as in the case of Ecuador; to repress protests, such as in Venezuela; to administer public security, as in Brazil; to combat drug crime, as in Colombia; to hand out food, to oversee the provision of care, including healthcare, to the most deprived populations, as well as, of course, taking on humanitarian missions (p. 39-40).

D’Araujo also reminds us that the South American militaries have resumed their old dogmas on their role in their nation’s development, minus, of course, the notion of the (communist) internal enemy, and with more doctrinal autonomy in the face of foreign powers. Although we should agree with the author that only in Brazil was the military actually incorporated into a project of national development (remembering the different contributions of the military that go back to the days of the foundation of the National Research Council to their role in the creation of different state companies):

The close links between the defense and development industries are not as present in other countries as they are in Brazil, since no other South American country carried out such a successful industrialization process. In all countries, however, the idea that the military is directly related to the development strategy has always been predominant (p. 57-8).

In connection with this point on the new roles of the Armed Forces, D’Araujo is quite optimistic about the emergence of mechanisms of cooperation on defense which systematically strengthen the South American democracies, and which redefine the new functions of the Armed Forces which comprise various forms of military action both at the hemispheric level and the South American level. Among these institutionalities, we should agree with the author that the Conference of Defense Ministries of the Americas is an important piece of hemispheric cooperation for the coordination of defense policies, even though it has produced many normative elements and few concrete mechanisms or plans of action since its creation.

However, what D’Araujo’s book fails to look at in a more detailed way is that this forum has clearly served to distinguish U.S. views of the military’s new functions in dealing with new threats, especially regarding the Army’s policing role, from those expressed by some South American countries. In South America’s case, a large number of the region’s countries do not disagree about adopting the concept of multidimensional security which assigns a new role for the regional Armed Forces, as has been institutionalized by the OAS since 2003, but all except Colombia disagree with the U.S. on the idea that they should be

used in policing roles especially in dealing with threats from drug trafficking and terrorism. The VI Conference of Defense Ministries of the Americas (2004) (available at [www.oas.org/csh](http://www.oas.org/csh). Accessed in June 2011) which took place in Quito, was further evidence of the distance between these perspectives. The subject of the conference was designing a new architecture of continental security and “the participating countries refused the proposal of the role of the Armed Forces being transformed from one of defense to one of security and policing” (Guzzi 2007, 43). During the same VI Conference of Defense Ministries of the Americas, Brazil’s Defense ministry made the significant proposal to include extreme poverty as a generalized threat to security and democracy in the region.

For these reasons I disagree somewhat with D’Araujo’s premise that

(...) even democracies with low institutionalality face economic and social problems, and at the same time try to now respond to the defense topic under new conditions. In other words, it is not about defending themselves from aggression from other states, but about guaranteeing the state’s monopoly on force in dealing with organized crime and new threats in general (p. 47).

What are these democracies of low institutionalality? Actually, the search for state monopoly of force in dealing with organized crimes and “new threats” has become a topic discussed in all South American countries, be they democracies with strong or low institutionalality.

However, as the author reminds us, even though a large number of the delegates agreed that the threats for democracies, which have redefined the role of the Armed Forces, should take the region’s specific social and political problems into account, it is common knowledge that there are big differences among South American countries regarding plans for political action to face the “new threats”, although it is clear that the institutionalities that are emerging go beyond the topics of the Armed Forces and defense. The author maintains, and I agree, that there are two projects nowadays that in theory could lead to a fork in the path taken to deal with the challenges facing region’s democracies:

The coexistence of Alba and Unasul show the ideological differences within the region and the search for institutional balance to express them. We could say they express old and new ways of politically understanding the continent’s problems, and the causes of its poverty, political instability and economic difficulties (p. 38).

However, an important finding in the author’s research is that there seems to be a clear perception that in a context in which the Cold War rivalries have ceased to exist, it makes more sense to concentrate on the South American cooperation efforts in various fields rather than to get caught up in ideological divisions. In other words, there is a collective effort to turn away from ideological differences and towards more autonomous



and adequate ways of dealing with problems specific to the region. Unasul and its defense organ, the South American Defense Council, follow this logic:

(...) it was becoming clear that South America would have more to gain from cooperation that would go beyond the immediate political demands. As a result, there was an increasing focus on an institutional design which, while respecting the sovereignty of each country, allowed them to deal together with technology, communications, industry, transport, energy and defense (p. 46).

Thus, for the author, despite the ideological debate surrounding the new forms of socialism, there is a constant effort to negotiate common interests (p. 38). Unasul and its South American Defense Council epitomize these new institutionalities, which turn the continent into a common platform to think about topics of economic development and defense. An example of this, and of how the region is beginning to come up with autonomous responses for specific problems, was Unasul's decisive action in dealing with the internal conflict in Bolivia in 2008 which strongly opposed the central government and the autonomist provinces in the East of the country. By reinforcing the legitimacy of Bolivia's democratic institutions, only Unasul's intervention managed to open up a channel of dialogue between the fighting political actors.

### **Changes and ambivalence in South American and Brazilian civil-military relations**

As the book develops, an extremely important question emerges which D'Araujo tackles with great coherence and which constitutes one of the most crucial points of the research: after two decades of retreat, what political space does the military occupy today in the South American countries? Very generally, D'Araujo's reply to this central question does not seem very convinced that the military, even under democracy, has abandoned or reduced its space in the public sphere:

(...) if the threat of a military coup seems to rebuild around the turn of the twenty-first century, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that in several countries, it is the military that defines the course of crises (p. 58).

It seems that a certain degree of praetorianism, in Huntington's sense of the word, did not completely disappear with the emergence of the new South American democracies. Brazil's case appears paradigmatic in this way, and the author is evidently correct when she says that democracy has not necessarily meant that the Brazilian government and people have restricted military activity. But the author's message is that not all seems to be lost in



South America. Some countries, such as Argentina's case, can console us:

The increasing distance between Brazil and Argentina is gradually being confirmed, in that the latter has been more efficient in producing policies and legal instruments that control and regulate military activity, restricting their actions exclusively to a military and humanitarian context. The latest step towards this goal was to abolish the military justice in Argentina in 2009, while in Brazil plans for extending its functions are being discussed (p. 67).

In contrast to what has been happening in some other South American countries, the Brazilian military still receives differential treatment in many respects, such as a corporative military justice, and with the opportunistic support of civil political sectors, it “has maintained its power of veto when it comes to discussing the human rights abuses of the dictatorship” (p. 109).

Nevertheless, the process portrayed by D'Araujo in Brazil's case is hardly straightforward. Highlighting the dialectic between conservatism and change, the author points out that the country's democratic achievements have coincided with the maintaining of privileges for the military. It is true that military activity still does not correspond well with the controls and equality before the law which democratic practice supposes, but it is also true that the military has not managed to keep hold of all aspects they monopolized during the dictatorship. The idea that the military was an interlocutor of civil political power remained a steadfast idea during the first 15 years of redemocratized Brazil. The existence of three military ministries representing the Army, the Air Force and the Navy in the government reinforced this idea of the military's privileged interlocution. This meant that they shared a certain “polyarchy” of authority with the legitimately constituted civil government. But this “polyarchy” suffered a small but important setback with the creation of the Ministry of Defense, in 1999, which meant both the loss of their privileged position in and interlocution with the government, and fundamentally, a timid but important statement of civil political authority: The creation of the Ministry of Defense meant “(...) touching on subjects that were taboos, or rather on subjects which stirred up the past and which proposed to put the military under the control of a civil ministry” (p. 117). As the author points out, although there is resistance, for example, the fact that members of the military still run the Ministry's administration, the creation of this new institution marked an important change which bodes well for the future of civil political power.

We can definitely say, therefore, that there is an ambivalent dialectic of set-backs and achievements in civil-military relations in contemporary Brazil. This dialectic is evident in long-term projects, as we see for example with the creation of the Ministry of Defense, but also in temporary situations such as the 2008 airline crisis. The crisis perfectly demonstrated how the Brazilian military can take advantage of the gaps in civil authority, especially

when this political authority is too weak to challenge the military's autonomy in different areas of the State: "The crisis showed two perspectives from which civil-military relations in Brazil should be seen: on one hand, corporatism (...) on the other, the dismantling of civil authority over this subject (...)" (p. 171-72).

However, civil-military negotiation vigorously persists in many aspects of the State, beyond the creation of the Ministry of Defense and the 2008 airline crisis and even under democracy (when in fact the relationship should be of military subordination to civil authority). There are areas in which the military sector is not only an interlocutor but also continues to carry out its own political and judicial acts. A good example of this, documented by the author, are the military courts, which continue to exist even though the political condition under which they were created – the threat of the national communist enemy – has gone, "(...) which shows how much the military was seen as a project of an authoritarian government and state and how secure people felt in setting up this project" (p. 233).

Nevertheless, where are the roots of the dynamics of the ambivalent civil-military relationship in the case of Brazil? Maria Celina D'Araujo has a brief answer to this question. The military, as they manage to hold onto some of their pre-democratic privileges, embody one of the most ubiquitous historical characteristics of the Brazilian social and political structure: corporatism. The author sets out a sound argument in chapter 5, which is that

(...) a large part of what is today known as the Brazilian military's autonomous political project should be considered as a corporatist defense of the Armed Force's interests. They benefited from the development of corporatism as a state policy, and after the dictatorship they used this resource as a way of staking their claim over corporatist demands (p. 125).

Thus, we have to look to the long-term historical-structural traits in Brazilian politics rather than to factors within the institution in order to explain the military's *status quo* in some State sectors. These traits have become incorporated into and made use of by the military who "defend the institution's interests, want differential treatment in social and wage policy and silence about the past, but do not speak about their plans to hold onto power" (p. 173). In cruder terms, these plans could be confused with the survival of corporatism as a structural trait of Brazilian politics.

Nevertheless, despite D'Araujo's sound and sharp argument, perhaps some aspects of the country's civil-military relations cannot be properly understood only from the macro explanation based on corporatism. Corporatism may be one of the key elements which explains why the military tends to dictate the way in which some topics should be dealt with publicly, but it might not be sufficient as an explanation for the ambivalences mentioned

above. The impact and appropriation of corporatism can only be understood well if you look at who the political actors are, in this case the civil political class, who should question and produce public agendas which do not use the corporatist *status quo* acquired over time by social and political groups.

The author herself provides us with a key explanation for a more complex understanding of the problem: it has to do with the responsibility of the civil political class and a lack of desire or possibilities to exert public control over the military sector. Once again we go back to the subject of affirming civil political authority. Although civil political authority surfaces at specific moments, for example the already mentioned case of the creation of the Ministry of Defense, there has been little political will to regulate and cut down corporative military space:

(...) we should remember that these corporative demands, up until now, have been very successful because no civil government has dared to impose political rule over the institution which continues to be treated differentially (...) no political group in power wants to upset the military (...) (p. 173).

However, at moments in which this political rule has triumphed, the years of the military regime have been handed over to the public sphere through policy. One example has been on the subject of the amnesty, especially in the case of the archives on the disappearance of political activists during the regime, archives which until today the military denies exist. In this respect, the author acknowledges that “(...) even though was not possible to gain access to all military archives, we did manage to establish a public policy on the matter” (p. 135-36).

But why do these public policies persist? Since the review of the Brazilian Amnesty Law, nothing has revealed so well the ambivalent nature of the civil-military dynamics, the existence and, at the same time, absence of public debate on military matters, especially those related to human rights. On this subject, D’Araujo’s book very accurately portrays the tough debate that took place during president Lula’s second term, with sectors in favor of a review of the Amnesty Law – human rights defense groups, the Ministry of Justice and other government bodies – opposing sectors against the review – the military, some members of parliament and the Ministry of Defense. The end result, i.e. no review of the Law, showed how much the military’s power of veto still prevails. It also revealed a large distortion of what the mission of the Armed Forces should be. As the author concisely concludes, “The institution took it upon itself to defend the oppressors, and they treated it as a mission. A pact of silence prevailed, a veto on the past” (p. 146).

The debate ended upon the decision of the president of the Ministry of Defense at the time. However, what explains the strength of the military’s power to veto this review was not

the space occupied by corporatism, but mostly the fact that, in contrast to countries such as Argentina and Chile, the topic of the “desaparecidos” (political activists who disappeared during the dictatorship and are still unaccounted for), and of military accountability for the crimes they committed during that time, are not yet problems that society is willing to tackle and it is still not completely in the power of civil politics to do so. In other words, it is not yet a topic that moves Brazilian society and the political class is not yet willing to assert its authority. It should also be said that time has worked in favor of the military sectors: the generation that lived through the era is forgetting, and the generation that did not live through the years of the Brazilian dictatorship is misinformed. However, there do seem to be reasons for being optimistic. In fact, a conclusion that we can reach from the author’s research is that the public sphere around the review of the Amnesty Law started to take form, a little late perhaps, but nevertheless within the State. “(...) it was the first time that ministers showed support for the review of the law, and for punishing the torturers, and effective policies were set up to recover archives from the dictatorship” (p. 147).

Because of this, the author’s argument that, “The matter [the review of the Amnesty Law] is off the government’s agenda, but not off the public’s agenda” (p. 160) is certainly enlightening. In general terms, we can conclude that the exceptionality of the Brazilian military with regard to accounting for past acts has three determinants: i) the absence of pressure from society in the debate (although some sectors do speak up); ii) civil authority’s lack of will to question this exceptionality, which would mean taking over political direction of the process and iii) the formation of a public sphere in which military acts, past and present, are increasingly subjected to political and juridical responsibilities, something that is so crucial and pertinent to consolidated democracies.

Translated by Hedd Megchild

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