

Central Intelligence Agency



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PANAMA: ASSESSING INDICATORS OF NORIEGA'S SUPPORT

Summary :

Defense Forces Commander Noriega, the defacto ruler of Panama, has strong bases of support in the military, the ruling coalition, labor, and the lower classes which have enabled him to withstand pressure for his ouster. Displays of support by these groups will bolster Noriega's confidence that he can stay in power. Most importantly, we believe the continued staunch backing of the officer corps--which has portrayed charges against Noriega as a US ploy to discredit the military--will be the most important indicator that Noriega's position remains firm. The opposition's continued failure to orchestrate large protests would also indicate Noriega's hold on power remains strong. [redacted]

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Noriega's position could erode quickly, however, if the military began to view their Defense Chief as a liability to rather than a defender of the military institution. The officer corps would be especially alarmed if Noriega's traditional political supporters--

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particularly the dominant ruling Democratic Revolutionary Party or the lower classes--began to express concerns about Noriega. Such erosion in Noriega's traditional bases of support probably would occur in the event of significant economic deterioration and would make the military more reluctant to use lethal force to control violent protests. It also could foster splits within the officer corps and spur key factions to press for Noriega's resignation or, alternatively, to seek the support of the United States or the opposition in an effort to oust the Defense Chief. [redacted]

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The US indictment of Panamanian Defense Chief Noriega and President Delvalle's attempt to dismiss him have substantially increased the pressure on Noriega to step down. The Defense Chief remains confident, however, that the military supports him. His fear of extradition, and desire not to be seen as succumbing to US pressure probably have stiffened his resolve to stay in office. This paper assesses the bases of Noriega's support and lists developments that would indicate whether his position is likely to remain strong or is weakening. [redacted]

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#### Bases of Noriega's Support

Noriega is unlikely to consider stepping down as long as he believes he has the solid support of the Panamanian military--the only group that could force him from power. Moreover, Noriega probably remains confident that other sources of support such as civilian politicians in Panama's dominant the Democratic Revolutionary Party, organized labor, and the lower classes are unlikely to oppose him because they benefit from the military's dominant role in Panama. He also probably calculates that the opposition movement led by the business-oriented Civil Crusade would need to attract more support from other groups--and from within the military--to effectively challenge him. [redacted]

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#### The Military

Noriega continues to retain the support of the General Staff and influential majors--who equate attacks on the Defense Chief as attacks on the military institution. Charges made by former regime adviser Jose Blandon that Noriega and several senior officers were involved in drug trafficking have reinforced Noriega's portrayal of Blandon as a traitor and underscored the vulnerability of other officers to opposition attacks. In an effort to show support for their embattled commander, several majors petitioned the Defense Chief in early February to remove the US Southern Command from Panama. [redacted]

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The military's prompt opposition to President Delvalle's effort last week to dismiss Noriega probably has reinforced the Defense Chief's determination to stay in power. Numerous officers, including Chief of Staff Colonel Justines and majors commanding key military units pledged their support for Noriega following Delvalle's announcement, and they have described the recent attacks on Noriega as a US ploy to discredit the Defense Forces. Military and police units also moved quickly to shut down the independent media and to close the headquarters of the Civil Crusade and a major opposition political party. Such support reflects in large part Noriega's skill in playing on military fears that the opposition is intent on dismantling the Defense Forces. [redacted]

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### The Ruling Coalition

The military's domination of Panama's political institutions for nearly two decades has given many politicians a clear stake in preserving the current system. The Democratic Revolutionary Party--the dominant party of the ruling coalition--was created by the military and is a key defender of the Defense Forces' interests. Leading regime politicians, for example, share significant spoils of office with the military under the current system, and they see their political future as tied to the military's. For the most part, they have responded to Noriega's indictment by making public expressions of support, and denouncing US interference in Panamanian affairs. Ruling coalition politicians responded quickly to Delvalle's dismissal of Noriega by convening a late-night session of the Legislative Assembly to oust both the President and Vice-President. [redacted]

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### Lower Classes

Urban workers and rural peasants represent the backbone of the military's public support. The Defense Forces have successfully inculcated an image of the military as the defender of the poor by promoting civic action projects benefiting these groups. The regime has cited the fact that relatively small numbers of urban workers and peasants have participated in protest activities as proof that the opposition Civil Crusade represents only upper middle-class interests. [redacted]

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### Organized Labor

Since the Torrijos era, the military also has emphasized the need to cultivate key interest groups such as organized labor. Although the Defense Forces have succeeded in giving them a stake in the present political system, these groups are sensitive to the interests and attitudes of their constituencies--particularly regarding the deteriorating economy--and probably would begin to distance themselves from the military if they appeared to be losing grassroots support by backing Noriega. The loyalty of public sector groups, in particular, would be severely tested if economic conditions necessitated mass payroll cuts or layoffs.

Some organized labor groups allied with the regime already are concerned that Noriega's options are becoming limited and fear reprisals should the opposition take power. Moreover, the US Embassy reports that many Panamanian labor unions affiliated with US labor organizations have felt reluctant to weigh in with support for Noriega. [redacted]

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Indicators that Support for Noriega Remain Strong

We believe the following developments would indicate that Noriega's support remained firm and that the opposition's prospects for ousting him were poor:

- Opposition efforts to mount major demonstrations or a general strike fizzle. [redacted]
- Key ruling coalition politicians or organized labor groups denounce the allegations against Noriega and condemn US interference.
- The military supports repressive actions against the opposition, by closing independent media, arresting opposition leaders, and using force to intimidate or put down anti-regime rallies.
- Military officers complain that the charges against Noriega are aimed at discrediting the Defense Forces as well.
- The military encourages Noriega to take stronger action against US interests in Panama, for example, by actively pushing for the removal of the Southern Command.

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In our judgment, the military's continued willingness to back Noriega publicly--even in the face of widespread popular antipathy--would be the key indicator that Noriega's position remains secure. Statements of support by traditional political supporters and key interest groups would strengthen the military's belief that it could withstand pressure and that its power base was not threatened. The inability of the opposition to sustain protest activity--particularly if announced strikes and rallies fail--would further reinforce perceptions that the Civil Crusade was a narrowly based group unable to seriously undermine the regime. [redacted]

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Indicators that Noriega's Support is Eroding

We believe the following developments would indicate that Noriega's bases of support were beginning to erode, potentially leading to conditions under which he might be ousted:

- Government officials or politicians in the dominant Democratic Revolutionary Party begin to denounce Noriega or resign to protest his continued tenure.

- Urban workers and peasants become increasingly active in the opposition movement as the economy further deteriorates.
- Demonstrations become more violent and the military shows reluctance to use lethal force or is unable to maintain control.
- Pro- and anti-Noriega factions begin to develop in the officer corps, and some officers become identified as leaders of a dissident cabal.
- Military officers begin talking to opposition leaders or US officials about the need to secure Noriega's departure. [REDACTED]

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Ultimately, the Defense Forces' willingness to support Noriega will be the critical determining factor and is likely to erode, in our view, only if his continued tenure is seen as undercutting the military's institutional interests. We believe key officers could come to see Noriega as a liability particularly if his continued leadership sparked uncontrollable unrest or defections among the military's traditional supporters. The growing participation of urban workers and rural peasants in anti-Noriega demonstrations because of worsening economic conditions would be particularly alarming, since it would contradict Noriega's depiction of the opposition as an elitist movement. Under this scenario, the military probably would be increasingly reluctant to use lethal force to control increasingly widespread protests. Splits in the officer corps over Noriega's fate probably would spur dissident officers to initiate a dialogue with the opposition or to seek alternative ways to orchestrate the Defense Chief's departure. [REDACTED]

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