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Peru: Implications of Foiled Coup Bid [REDACTED]

Peruvian Army troops loyal to President Fujimori quickly suppressed a poorly conceived coup attempt led by retired Army generals on 13 November. The event, which was uncharacteristic for Peru in that it would have led to open clashes within the armed services if not preempted, highlights a weakening of traditional hierarchical discipline and growing dissatisfaction among many officers over the President's handling of internal military affairs.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The Thwarted Plot

The coup attempt was the first serious military move against Fujimori since he took office. [REDACTED] a small group of former and current officers—led by inveterate coup plotter, retired Army Gen. Jaime Salinas—planned to use penetrations of the elite presidential guard to arrest, or perhaps kill, Fujimori and his top security aide, Vladimiro Montesinos, early on 13 November. Salinas planned to call on military commanders and the rank and file to support the coup from a Lima television station owned

by a prominent businessman and collaborator and invite former Vice President San Roman to assume the presidency. [REDACTED]

Although the military high command was tipped off to the plot only a few hours beforehand, it had little chance for success. Once alerted, Army Commander Hermoza ordered trusted troops—backed by armor—to stop the coup plotters from approaching the Pizarro Palace. Hermoza's troops escorted the President to safe haven at a nearby Army base after a brief visit to the Japanese Embassy, where family members sought refuge.

The Army quickly arrested Salinas and some 180 other suspects, and launched an intensive internal investigation. Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Gen. Jose Valdivia, who press reports previously had linked to past coup plots, was the highest ranking officer to come under suspicion when he failed to attend an emergency meeting of top commanders later on the morning of 13 November. After being humiliated by Fujimori, who publicly said the General was unavailable because he was with his mistress, Valdivia was exonerated by the President.

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Growing Frustration in the Ranks

Although most top service commanders and heads of key palace guard units in Lima continue to support the

¹Soon after Fujimori dissolved the Congress and suspended the Constitution on 5 April 1992, a rump Congress inaugurated then Vice President Maximo San Roman as "Constitutional President." Although his inept statements and often pathetic posturing have increasingly reduced his influence, San Roman has remained a strident critic of the President, whom San Roman believes is disqualified from serving. Since the coup attempt, San Roman has admitted to meeting with Salinas beforehand, although the former Vice President denies any direct role. He nevertheless endorsed the action because its aim was to restore the "constitutional democracy" that existed before April [REDACTED]

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President, some mostly middle to lower ranking officers have become privately critical of the regime's handling of internal military affairs [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] They especially resent Montesinos's influence over Fujimori on behalf of a select group of officers from the Army's artillery branch—in which the aide served before being dishonorably discharged in the late 1970s. Many officers are displeased by the government's reluctance to markedly raise military salaries, which remain among the lowest in the hemisphere. In recent months, such grievances have spurred an unknown number of junior and noncommissioned officers to form the clandestine group known by the Spanish acronym "COMACA." Government prosecutors reportedly are investigating COMACA's role in the November plot. Although COMACA members have expressed support for many Fujimori policies, the group's fliers have called for Montesinos's dismissal as well as investigations into corruption of senior military officers. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

The post-coup purges are likely to alienate some senior officers. A few Army officers have already bristled over Montesinos's role in preparing the new promotions list [REDACTED] and others reportedly have been angered by what they believe was Fujimori's exploitation of the rebellion for political gain. Some probably fear that Fujimori will embark on a wider reach hunt that might undercut Peru's effort to reestablish international legitimacy or establish a fealty oath to the President as a prerequisite for gaining command [REDACTED]

Outlook and Implications

The rebellion has opened wounds in the armed forces that could produce additional disciplinary problems before the troop command rotations occur in January. In quelling the challenge, Fujimori and Montesinos have fueled some officers' concerns that the ranks are being manipulated to benefit the regime politically. The rebellion also has drawn the attention of many in the armed forces to such sensitive issues as military salaries and promotions [REDACTED]

Nevertheless, Fujimori and Montesinos have carefully placed most Army units needed to stage a successful coup in the command of trusted officers. Moreover, through Montesinos's well-honed intelligence network, Fujimori and his senior commanders are poised to detect most serious breaches in discipline early and thus may be able to take corrective action [REDACTED]

We doubt that military discontent, especially in the critically important Army, will become serious enough to pose a near-term threat to the government, especially with Fujimori's still-strong popular support—now over 70 percent. Most senior officers respect the President's moves on the economy and the counterinsurgency, and they are aware of Fujimori's popular mandate. Moreover, we suspect that Fujimori, still shaken by the November rebellion, will begin to address key military concerns soon. For instance, he may agree to a modest salary increase that does not erode Peru's fiscal discipline, while also reducing Montesinos's profile in influencing promotions. When new commanders are sworn in, the President will be better able to control key Army units that are essential to a successful coup [REDACTED]

Over the longer term, however, senior officer attitudes toward Fujimori may change if he fails to address key military concerns, challenges their authority, or otherwise weakens the institution of the military. Top officers will come under renewed pressure from below if the President does not raise military salaries adequately. If they perceive that internal discipline is seriously threatened—such as by the prospect of a "barracks revolt"—the commanders may press the President to meet their concerns in order to preserve the integrity of their command [REDACTED]

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Short of coup making, indifference by Fujimori to senior officers' concerns could lead to a breakdown in internal discipline, possibly impairing Peru's increasingly successful counterinsurgency efforts or leading to increased human rights abuses. Weakening

discipline also could hamper government efforts to control narcotics corruption, which is widespread in drug-producing regions. [REDACTED]

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