

18 Nov 19
1983

Special Analysis

EL SALVADOR: Threat From the Right

The more selective use of violence by extremists of the far right reflects the fear that they will lose political influence as the country moves toward presidential elections early next year. They also are frustrated by their failure to reverse the reform process, by the armed forces' loss of momentum on the battlefield, and by the government's dialogue with the insurgents. Efforts to curb terrorist activity will continue to be hampered by the organizational independence of death squads and vigilante groups, as well as by the weak resolve of government and military authorities.

To eliminate challenges to its power, the far right traditionally has used civilian vigilante organizations, elements of the armed forces, and death squads funded and led by wealthy elites. Compartmentation, a rigid code of secrecy, and the shifting whims of extremist leaders make estimating numbers of the terrorist organizations and their personnel difficult.

The breadth of terrorist operations, however, suggests that perhaps a dozen groups may be active at any given time. Some groups frequently coordinate their activities, and a few occasionally engage in violent rivalries with each other.

Violence remains especially severe in the countryside, where elements such as the Territorial Service and Civil Defense Forces—which provide local security and collect intelligence for the military—function as peasant vigilantes. In addition, civilian mercenaries and fanatics allied with specific individuals or political groupings routinely wage their own vendettas against suspected subversives and personal enemies. Civilian terrorists also employ both active-duty and retired military personnel in their campaigns.

Death squads in the Army and the three security forces apparently operate out of urban military headquarters and rural outposts. They are led by senior enlisted personnel and junior officers, and they may function with or without the knowledge of immediate superiors. Some may owe allegiance to military officers from other units or be on the payroll of civilian sponsors. (S NF)


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Approved for Release


NOV 1993




Motivations and Tactics


Although the level of violence against suspected subversives remains fairly steady, the increasing selectivity of terrorist operations reflects the extreme right's growing sense of political isolation and weakness. Extremists have stepped up operations against union leaders and others that they fear might rally labor behind the Christian Democrats in the election. They also are intimidating government, military, and Church officials who are supporting economic reforms. 

Despite these efforts, Constituent Assembly President D'Aubuisson and other extremist leaders are likely to be deeply concerned about their failure to form a coalition that can protect their base of power. Although they have impeded efforts by moderate conservatives and liberals in the Assembly to codify land and other reforms, they have failed to halt these measures. Moreover, their sense of frustration is heightened by government efforts to develop a dialogue with the insurgents. 

D'Aubuisson and other rightwing leaders now appear to believe, probably correctly, that the armed forces will be crucial in determining their future role in national politics. Consequently, a minority of officers aligned with or sympathetic to D'Aubuisson's National Republican Alliance is maneuvering for greater power in the military. 

The group hopes to take advantage of the conservative political orientation of Defense Minister Vides by trying to insert itself into the military hierarchy. Rightists also are urging Vides to adopt a more aggressive strategy on the battlefield and to assume a more direct political role on behalf of the military in the government. 

Constraints on Moderation

The far right's growing influence in the military—the only institution that can quell extremist violence—is making Vides's position increasingly difficult. The Defense Minister's adherence to moderate and pragmatic leadership underscores his desire to maintain armed forces unity while also ensuring greater cooperation and material aid from Washington. At the same time he probably feels obligated to respect the prevailing consensus of the senior officer corps on issues potentially embarrassing to the military. 

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[REDACTED]

Vides is further constrained by the knowledge that some of his most effective commanders are ambitious allies of D'Aubuisson. In addition, he almost certainly realizes that some of them have knowledge of, or are directly involved with, terrorist organizations. Mindful of the fate of his moderate predecessor, General Garcia, Vides probably is unwilling to risk his own position by forcing a halt to extralegal activities. [REDACTED]

The country's corrupt and paralyzed judicial system and weak and fractious civilian government also impede any national leader from clamping down on terrorism. This has been underscored by the lack of progress in a three-year legal case involving National Guardsman who publicly confessed to murdering two US labor advisers [REDACTED]

The killers have yet to be brought to trial. Moreover, two junior officers who are said to have ordered the murders and furnished the weapons are believed to be under protection from prosecution by rightist military officers aligned with D'Aubuisson's political party. [REDACTED]

Outlook

Growing public scrutiny of death-squad activity may provide some temporary constraints on the ultraright as it weighs the possible effect of the squads' activities on US and other foreign support. Nevertheless, external pressure on the military to purge itself of extremists could provoke deep nationalistic resentment against foreign personnel. It also may increase tensions between moderates and the far right as the elections approach. [REDACTED]

The threat of extremist violence, therefore, is likely to grow in direct proportion to the level of rightist frustration with the political situation and, to a lesser extent, with the inability of the armed forces to wage a more effective counterinsurgency effort. Over time, such pressure could prompt conservative military officers and their civilian allies to plot against Vides and any other leaders whom they may come to view as threatening their interests. [REDACTED]

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