

## Security and Militarism in the Americas

By Gabriela Agatiello

On March 2, 2005, CERLAC and UCGS hosted a panel discussion on the social, political, and economic implications of militarism in Latin America. The panelists included Justin Podur, a journalist for Z-Net, Simon Helweg-Larsen, an MA candidate in Social and Political Thought, and Elena Cirkovic, a PhD candidate in Political Science. The panel was moderated by Shana Shubs, an MES graduate and CERLAC's Administrative Assistant.

Shana Shubs opened the panel with a discussion of how discourses around the war on terror have been used to legitimize the militarization of social unrest and popular dissent in Latin America and have contributed to the further militarization of state borders. She also pointed to increasing US pressure towards economic integration in Latin America and its political and social consequences.

Justin Podur then proceeded to discuss the various ways that the United States has tried to intervene in the affairs of Venezuela. Podur pointed to a perceivable pattern that the US tends to follow in trying to undermine political projects in the global south; a pattern that he believes is evident in the case of US intervention in Venezuela. From the coup attempt in 2002, to the national strike that tried to create massive economic sabotage in 2002/2003, to the failed recall

referendum in August 2004, Podur maintained that the U.S. government has been working along with the opposition to try to topple Hugo Chavez's regime. He pointed to statements made by US state department officials like Condoleezza Rice and Robert Zoellick, describing Chavez as a negative force and part of an authoritarian trend in the region, as well as to documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act that demonstrate US involvement in the 2002 coup attempt.

Podur also discussed the increasing tensions between Colombia and Venezuela and noted that military pressure from Colombia serves the interests of the US in that it deprives Chavez's regime of the time and breathing room it needs to advance its political project. These tensions also facilitate the connection that the United States has been trying to make between the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] and Chavez's government, in order to suggest that Venezuela is a terrorist state. Despite the military and political pressure, Podur maintained that Chavez and the Bolivarian movement have achieved a number of notable successes. By developing its constituency and consolidating its social and political gains, Chavez's regime has been able to successfully resist the political, military and economic

pressure from the US and its fiercest opponents. The Bolivarian movement has systematically tried to develop its base through programs and initiatives like the Bolivarian University and Bolivarian circles, neighborhood associations and cooperatives, and the community media. Concrete steps have also been taken towards improving the well-being of the population, two examples being Chavez's proposed land reform and literacy programs like Misión Robinson. It is through these various initiatives that the movement has been able to advance its own political project and resist the imposition of a neoliberal economic and political agenda in Venezuela.

Simon Helweg-Larsen continued with a discussion of the role of the military in Guatemala since the signing of the peace accords in 1996. He noted that historically, the Guatemalan military has been one of the most brutal and powerful organizations in Latin America. The Guatemalan truth commission implicated the military in 93% of the crimes committed during the war and the UN has classified as genocidal its systematic and coordinated extermination of over 600 indigenous Mayan villages. Despite the signing of the peace agreements, which laid out specific reforms for the funding and size of the military and its role in Guatemalan society, the military

has been able to largely maintain its autonomy and power. Although its troops have been reduced by 33% since 1996 and its budget cut to 0.66% of the total GDP, certain loopholes have allowed its budget to change during the course of each year so that it is usually doubled by the end of the year, and it has also been able to maintain complete secrecy on how it spends its funds. In addition to not being accountable to the public, the failure of the 1999 referendum also permitted the military to continue to be led by its own head of organization, rather than controlled by a civilian. Failure to change the constitution has also meant that the military retains the responsibility for the peace and internal security of the country.

Despite all of this, it wasn't until the arrival of Alfonso Portillo's presidency and the FRG [Guatemalan Republican Front] party in 2000 that the role of the military in society expanded significantly since the signing of the accords. Not only has the military become involved in fighting drug and arms trafficking, but they have also joined the civilian police in patrolling the streets. In the 2003 elections, thousands of military troops were stationed in the streets. Once more, they have taken on the role as an apparatus of political repression. Their interests are now combined with those of an economic elite, and increasingly they have used their power of repression to protect national economic structures and the interests of international investors. Helweg-Larsen pointed to examples where peasants have been forcibly evicted off their land for economic interests, and to cases where political protest against mining activities have been

violently quelled by the police and the military. The use of police and military repression has also been directed at human rights activists, prosecutors, judges, forensic anthropologists and generally anyone seeking justice for the victims of the civil war. Under the regimes of Portillo and his successor, Oscar Berger, the police and military have broken into the offices of human rights organizations and attacked human rights leaders like Rigoberta Menchú. Helweg-Larsen maintained that even though the military does not control the government, they are closely aligned, and greatly influence government decisions with regards to the military. Under Portillo and Berger, their role in society has not only increased, but they continue to act with complete autonomy and impunity.

Elena Cirkovic's presentation focused on the truth and reconciliation commission in Peru (CVR) and how its findings have shaped the discourse of human rights in that country. The CVR was established in 2001 to investigate the human rights abuses and violations committed between 1980 and 2000 by the government armed forces and self-defence groups, the Shining Path Maoist group and the leftist Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA). It concluded that out of approximately 69,000 victims 75 percent were of Quechua speaking indigenous or mestizo origin. The Commission was supposed to create a political space for the traditionally marginalized indigenous population of Peru and allow them to tell the truth about violence and repression in so-called 'Audiencias Públicas'. Indigenous people, however, were represented only as victims, and the actual

commissioners of the CVR were mostly white male intellectuals, including anthropologists and representatives of the Church. Cirkovic noted in the Q&A period that both leftist and conservative sides of the political spectrum in Latin America (past and present) continue with racist policies in relation to indigenous populations.

At the end of the presentations the audience was invited to ask questions and an animated discussion followed. The panelists commented on a range of issues, from whether they thought the Bolivarian movement would survive Chavez to a discussion of US involvement in Peru and Guatemala. Overall, it was an engaging panel discussion that considered the multiple ways in which militarism in the region – still very much a concern today in many parts of Latin America – has been employed to further elite economic and political interests, with immense social costs.



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