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EL SALVADOR: Moderates in Government Threatened

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by [redacted] CIA

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The administration of President Magana is being undermined by maneuvering between rightists and moderates within the military and government. Despite warnings from the high command to stop tampering, ultraconservative assembly leader D'Aubuisson apparently is attempting to increase his influence by encouraging some key commanders who would like to oust Defense Minister Garcia. D'Aubuisson is also trying to take advantage of the growing dissension among some of the parties. (S NF NC OC)

Garcia has been the principal force for moderation since the elections in March. He is stepping up his efforts to neutralize D'Aubuisson and his backers. The Defense Minister appears to be losing room for maneuver, however, and he may choose to force a showdown soon. (S NF NC OC)

Military Dissatisfaction

The ultraconservatives probably represent only about 15 percent of the armed forces, but some of them are important field commanders who are popular within the military. These officers include Lieutenant Colonel Monterrosa, commander of the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion, and Lieutenant Colonel Ochoa, whose ambitions appear heightened by his widely acclaimed successes on the battlefield. (S NF NC OC)

Ochoa is strongly critical of Garcia's emphasis on large-scale operations at the expense of small-unit tactics and civic relations programs designed to undercut the guerrillas' base of support. He suggested that the high command's conventional warfare strategy proceeds from Garcia's reliance on sophisticated US military aid, the effectiveness of which Ochoa questions. (S NF)

Although such criticism reflects Ochoa's own success with a local pacification program, it may also be ideologically motivated. Ochoa and other like-minded officers are increasingly frustrated by Garcia's enforcement of reforms and believe his public endorsement of the agrarian program has aligned the military with the liberal Christian Democrats--long anathema to the generally conservative armed forces. (S)

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D'Aubuisson sees opportunities in such dissatisfaction to break the power of Garcia and to expand his own support within the armed forces, which appears small at this point.

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[Redacted]

Garcia's Tactics

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The Defense Minister is confident that the loyalty of most units precludes his removal by force. Moreover, even his most outspoken critics in the military reportedly realize that such a move would have detrimental domestic and international repercussions. (S NF NC OC)

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Garcia nevertheless sees a growing movement to compel his resignation, even among the junior officers who make up his longtime base of support. Some of them have alleged that he is isolated from the war and is protecting a few corrupt and incompetent commanders. The involvement of key field officers such as Monterrosa and Ochoa, however, presents him with the dilemma of having to support their command roles while seeking to limit their political maneuvering. (S NF NC OC)

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[Redacted] he is trying to neutralize the threat. He has warned extreme rightist officers to desist and has stepped up his visits to field units. Chief of Staff Flores Lima, generally respected within the officer corps, is supporting Garcia [Redacted]

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Garcia also is attempting to reduce the influence within the military of ultraconservative politicians, particularly D'Aubuisson.

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Civilian Politics

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The pressures facing the high command come amid increasing disputes over sharing power in the civilian government and internal divisions within the parties. These conflicts appear to give D'Aubuisson additional opportunities to isolate moderate elements, expand his base of support, and complicate Magana's efforts to maintain unity. (S)

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The primary dispute involves the reallocation of over 260 mayoralties. The majority of these are held at present by the Christian Democrats, who believe that prompt local elections will safeguard their equities. The two major rightist parties--including D'Aubuisson's--want the mayoralties to be redistributed among the three government parties by executive order. The Christian Democrats, increasingly discouraged by the ultraconservative maneuvering, have [redacted] indicated [redacted] that they will leave the government if they lose on this issue. (S)

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All three major parties are divided to some extent. The most serious split, however, is in the National Conciliation Party, which holds the swing position in the government and in the past has been aligned with the military. A break between moderates and hardliners may be imminent, and this could inspire major defections to D'Aubuisson. Party moderates recently told [redacted] that D'Aubuisson already has "bought" the majority of the party's 14 deputies. (S)

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Outlook

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Garcia and other moderates, realizing that any concerted move to neutralize D'Aubuisson will divide the country more deeply, probably would prefer conciliation over confrontation. D'Aubuisson's simultaneous meddling within the military institution and the political arena, however, may force Garcia's hand. The Defense Minister remains convinced that a government controlled by D'Aubuisson and ultraconservative officers would undercut the reforms of the past few years, increase domestic and international support for the insurgents, and eventually lead to victory for the leftist guerrillas. (S-NF-OC)

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