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Special Analysis

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EL SALVADOR: Politics in the Military

The conflict between Defense Minister Garcia and Army Field Commander Ochoa--the country's most successful field commander--has damaged military unity and revealed broad discontent in the armed forces over the handling of the war effort. Despite the agreement reached by the adversaries, the situation remains fluid. It is set against a backdrop of maneuvering by the extreme right and increasingly aggressive tactics by the guerrillas. (S-NF)

The high command has tried to reduce tensions by giving Ochoa a choice assignment abroad and by gaining Garcia's promise to retire within two or three months. This compromise enables both to save face and allows the officer corps time to reach consensus on a new leader. The recent appointment of one of Ochoa's backers as commander of Cabanas Department appears intended to reassure his supporters that no reprisals will be taken. (S-NF)

Nevertheless, the high command's refusal to punish what was widely seen as a serious breach of military discipline already is giving rise to additional agitation by Garcia opponents. [Redacted] two key commanders have stated they will lead their units in rebellion if Garcia reneges on his pledge. Despite the agreement, the Defense Minister reportedly wants to retain his post and plans to canvass the officer corps for support. (S-NF NC OC)

Military Uncertainty

Garcia's position appears untenable. [Redacted] 80 percent of the officer corps now favors his resignation. Although this figure probably is exaggerated, many of Garcia's staunchest military and political allies have remained conspicuously silent. (S-NF NC OC)

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The erosion of support follows six months of growing criticism in the armed forces over Garcia's judgment and leadership. His failure to gauge the extent of his opposition at the beginning of Ochoa's rebellion probably has reinforced longstanding fears that he has become isolated from the war and his troops. In addition, his reported refusal to balance his original order to remove Ochoa by transferring some corrupt and inept officers indicates his emphasis on loyalty rather than competence. ~~(S NF NC OC)~~

The sympathy for Ochoa also underscores growing military frustration over Garcia's reluctance to adopt a more aggressive war strategy. Ochoa had repeatedly criticized the high command's emphasis on large-scale operations. During Ochoa's rebellion, his condemnation of Garcia's conventional strategy was endorsed by officers from a variety of units, particularly those in the Air Force. ~~(C NF)~~

Such issues probably will not be resolved soon, even with Garcia's retirement. General Vides Casanova, the director of the National Guard, is next in line to head the armed forces. ~~(S)~~

Vides has indicated to US officials that if the line of succession is maintained, his main objective would be to act as a conciliator and preserve military unity. He lacks a broad base of support in the armed forces, and his ability to institute tactical and strategic changes would be limited. ~~(S)~~

The Rightist Connection

Ochoa's disagreement with the high command also is based on ideological factors. As an ultraconservative, Ochoa and other like-minded officers have become increasingly frustrated by Garcia's enforcement of government reforms, particularly the agrarian program. Although the ultraconservatives probably represent only about 15 percent of the armed forces, a number of them are important and popular field commanders. ~~(S)~~

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Extreme rightist Assembly leader D'Aubuisson increasingly has tried to exploit dissatisfaction in the military to break the power of Garcia, whom he holds responsible for thwarting his bid for the presidency. D'Aubuisson,

[redacted] is using the rebellion in an effort to divide the armed forces and strengthen his own power base. D'Aubuisson's party was the only political grouping that publicly supported Ochoa's actions.

~~(S NF OC)~~

Party officials have admitted to contact with Ochoa as the rebellion progressed, but they have denied any involvement in his actions. Nevertheless, [redacted] Ochoa has profited financially from his association with D'Aubuisson, and [redacted] he ensured the loyalty of his troops with bribes. ~~(S NF NC OC)~~

Encouragement for the Insurgents

The guerrillas have exploited the military power struggle for maximum propaganda and tactical effect. Clandestine radiobroadcasts have emphasized the split in the high command to support the insurgents' claims that the tactical situation is now in their favor. The guerrillas also have used some of Ochoa's allegations of corruption in the high command to buttress their appeals that government troops join with them against military leaders and foreign interests. ~~(S)~~

The insurgents have long planned an offensive for the beginning of this year and may have advanced their timetable to take advantage of the rebellion. They are increasing actions against towns and economic targets throughout the country, particularly in the northeast.

~~(S)~~

The government has launched a major counteroffensive partly designed to indicate the crisis within the armed forces has not deterred its ability to carry the war to the guerrillas. Nevertheless, the operation is being directed almost exclusively by the regional field commander with little support from the General Staff. This is an indication that the military hierarchy may be increasingly preoccupied with its own power struggle. ~~(S NF)~~

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