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Special Analysis

EL SALVADOR: Increased Tension in the Military

Another showdown may be approaching in the Salvadoran officer corps over Defense Minister Garcia's status. Garcia would prefer to remain in office through the presidential elections in December, even though subordinate commanders are seeking to oust him. Tension may ease over the short term if Garcia is forced out, but continued stability in the military will depend heavily on the personality of his successor. (S)

Garcia reportedly has reaffirmed his intention to submit his resignation to President Magana in the next several weeks. Magana has not indicated if he will accept it, but he is likely to come under strong pressure from Garcia's critics to do so. He may be tempted to wait until the end of April, at which time Assembly President D'Aubuisson—his principal rival—has stated he would resign from office to begin his election campaign. (S NF NG OC)

Probable Successors

If Magana accepts the resignation—which is not at all certain—Garcia's replacement probably would be General Vides Casanova. He is currently serving as head of the National Guard and is generally respected in the officer corps for his professionalism. (S)

Vides would be likely to assume a caretaker role and follow a conciliatory line designed to strengthen the unity of the armed forces. He has a pro-US outlook, and he probably would continue to support agrarian reform, democratization, and human rights but largely as a means of ensuring continued US aid to the country. (S)

Vides might be vulnerable, however, to pressures from civilian and military ideological hardliners and from ambitious young officers seeking new career opportunities and a more aggressive counterinsurgency strategy. Moreover, his lack of combat experience and personal following among the troops would be likely to hinder any efforts to increase control over traditionally independent regional commanders. (S)

Air Force commander Colonel Bustillo, First Brigade leader Colonel Blandon, and Deputy Defense Minister Colonel Flores Lima are other possible candidates for Garcia's post. They all appear able to handle the job. (S)

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The three officers are pragmatic conservatives who would focus on unifying the military and cooperating with the US. To varying degrees, however, they would face problems similar to those confronting Garcia. (S)

Renewed Coup Plotting

If Garcia refuses to quit voluntarily, some reports suggest coup plotting would resume among some key field commanders. Although the officer corps would seek to avoid a coup at this time, senior officers critical of Garcia would be likely to urge Magana to remove him. Some individual commanders might even refuse to obey orders from Garcia until he agreed to step down. (S)

Such unrest in the military would have a debilitating impact on the power structure. As the principal force for moderation in the provisional government, the military leadership has been crucial to ensuring continued compromise among rival civilian parties and enforcing the reform process. (S)

Insurgent Reaction

The insurgents probably will try to turn any political problems in San Salvador to their own advantage. In January, following the rebellion of dissident field commander Lieutenant Colonel Ochoa, the guerrillas moved up their operational timetable and launched offensives in several regions. (S)

The insurgents are now regrouping and resupplying. To keep government forces off balance during this process, they are engaging in harassing actions. The Army, anticipating a renewed large-scale insurgent offensive, has sent quick-reaction forces to the northern departments of Chalatenango and Morazan to reinforce permanent garrisons and to launch preemptive operations. (S)

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