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Strategic Insight

Civil-Military Relations in Venezuela after 11 April: Beyond Repair?

by [Harold A. Trinkunas](#)

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May 3, 2002

On the evening of 11 April 2002, the third day of a general strike against the government, the Venezuelan armed forces rebelled against their president, Hugo Chávez Frias. Reacting to the bloody clashes between pro- and anti- government demonstrators near the presidential palace, the commander of the Army, General Efraim Vásquez Velasco, announced in a nationally televised address that he would no longer obey presidential orders. Other senior generals and admirals soon followed him onto the airwaves, expressing their solidarity with the Army commander and their opposition to the president. Within hours, the senior military officer in the Venezuelan armed forces, General Lucas Rincón Romero, announced President Chávez's resignation.

Remarkably, the transitional government formed by a leading figure of the opposition, businessman Pedro Carmona, and backed by many senior military leaders, lasted less than forty-eight hours. By 14 April 2002, President Hugo Chávez had returned to power, and his civilian and military opponents scrambled to pick up the pieces of their failed political adventure. At first glance, what may seem most surprising about the recent turn of events in Venezuela is the rapid reversal of the coup, particularly given the continuous political turmoil that has characterized the Chávez administration. The key significance of the military rebellion against the democratically elected government, however, is that it signals the collapse of government control over the armed forces in Venezuela after nearly four decades of civilian rule. Any future democratic government in Venezuela, whether led by President Chávez or a successor, will have to contend with the reemergence of the military as a political actor.

Undermining Civilian Control of the Armed Forces in Venezuela, 1998-2002

Although he failed to achieve power by military means during two coup attempts in 1992, Lt. Colonel Hugo Chávez succeeded brilliantly in the political realm in 1998. Beginning his presidential campaign with single digit poll ratings at the beginning of that year, he swept the December 1998 presidential election by capturing the highest favorable percentage of the vote in Venezuela's contemporary democratic history. One of the planks of Hugo Chávez's leftist political platform was the need to reform civil-military relations. He held the position that the armed forces had been wrongly excluded from participation in national development and were dominated by cronyism among civilian and military elites.

The Chávez administration's military reforms initially focused on three goals: loosening constitutional constraints on political participation by the military; expanding the role of the armed services in social and economic development; and increasing military autonomy by removing legislative influence over officer promotions. As part of the reform of Venezuela's constitution in 2000, the Constituent Assembly deleted language barring military deliberation on political issues, and granted active-duty members of the armed forces the right to vote, which had been withheld under the 1961 constitution. The armed forces' role in development activities greatly expanded under the president's *Plan Bolívar 2000*, which channeled large amounts of social welfare funding through the military garrisons in each Venezuelan state. This program led the armed forces to become involved in infrastructure construction and refurbishment, public transport, distribution of consumer items to the poor, and provision of medical services. President Chávez also

relied on nearly two hundred military officers seconded to senior positions in the public administration to enforce his authority over the state bureaucracy, which he perceived as controlled by supporters of corrupt traditional political parties. Finally, Chávez took charge of military promotions and assignments, alleging that the legislature's role in this process during the previous four decades had politicized it. Although the reform theoretically gave control over promotions to the armed forces, in practice these fell under the personal purview of the president.

While some aspects of these reforms proved popular with the officer corps, the overall impact on civil-military relations was negative. The extension of suffrage to the armed forces was welcomed, and some officers, particularly in the Army, genuinely appreciated the new opportunities to contribute to Venezuela's development. On the other hand, expanded social welfare roles for the armed forces created new opportunities for malfeasance, and charges of corruption involving military personnel became daily fare in the media. Officers assigned to public administration had important roles in shaping public policy, and as a result became *de facto* political actors. President Chávez exacerbated the politicization of the armed forces by using his control of promotions to favor officers who supported his political agenda with plum commands and assignments. Many of those generals and admirals who had opposed the Chávez-led 1992 coup attempts were shunted into administrative duties, retired, or placed on extended leave. Naturally, this overt manipulation generated discontent and opposition among military officers excluded from the president's favor. On the whole, President Chávez's reform of the armed forces undermined a number of the traditional elements of civilian control in Venezuela, which had relied on a non-political officer corps that confined its efforts to defense-related roles and missions.

Military and Political Aspects of the 11 April 2002 Rebellion

Although President Chávez's popularity had been declining throughout 2001, the successful general strike held on 10 December of that year demonstrated that the opposition, led by an unusual coalition of major business and labor federations, was finally coherent enough to raise a successful challenge to the government. The opposition's criticism of the Chávez administration centered on its policies toward land use, education, organized labor, and the economy, as well as a perceived foreign policy shift towards closer links with countries such as Cuba and Iraq, and expressions of sympathy for the Colombian FARC guerillas. President Chávez responded to his critics with characteristically tempestuous and aggressive language, heightening the tension between pro- and anti-government forces. The opposition's criticisms of the president found sympathizers in the armed forces, and a small number of senior military officers from all services began publicly to criticize President Chávez in a series of press conferences. Although these individual actions were not a serious threat to the administration's grip on power, they did undermine the President's claim of unconditional support from the armed forces.

After it became clear that President Chávez would not meet their demands, the leaders of the opposition called for a new general strike for 9 April 2002. Highly successful, the strike was extended indefinitely by the leader of the national labor confederation, Carlos Ortega, on 10 April. Progressively larger anti-government demonstrations were held on successive days in Caracas, leading to a clash between the private sector media and the Chávez administration over news coverage of the strike. Tragically, the massive anti-government march of nearly 500,000 people on 11 April ended in violence when protesters converged on the presidential palace. Here, they clashed with pro-government members of the *Círculos Bolivarianos* and were fired upon by unidentified snipers. An estimated 12 persons died and over 100 were injured. Live coverage of the bloody events, shown in a split-screen format simultaneously with President Chávez's televised address to the nation, prompted the administration to close down private television transmissions. According to one rebellious Army officer, General González González, President Chávez also ordered the armed forces at this time to take military control of the capital, although the Chávez administration has since denied this.

In the face of a worsening crisis, the military acted, although their intervention at first resembled a sit-down strike rather than a coup. There were initial reports on the evening of 11 April that a number of senior officers had attempted to broadcast a message against the government. Censorship of television and radio broadcasts began to break down as the coup gathered momentum. The turning point of the

rebellion occurred when the commander of the Army, General Efraim Vásquez Velasco, stated in a televised address surrounded by his officers that he would not obey presidential directives to suppress anti-government demonstrations and ordered all of his troops to remain confined to base. In his speech he characterized President Chávez's directives as illegal, and in short order, senior generals in *Guardia Nacional* (a militarized national police force charged with internal security) and admirals in the Navy echoed his sentiments in radio and television broadcasts. Active duty officers who served in the government, such as the Minister of Finance and the Vice-Minister of Citizen Security, resigned their positions. Although President Chávez claimed in his national address of 11 April that he would hold out in the presidential palace with his honor guard and supporters to the bitter end, his resignation was announced by General Rincón Romero, Inspector General of the armed forces, in the early hours of 12 April. A transitional government soon formed under Pedro Carmona, leader of the national business federation FEDECAMARAS.

General Vásquez Velasco's refusal to obey the president made it appear that the armed forces had turned decisively against the Chávez administration, yet the military rebellion never extended very far beyond the upper ranks of the officer corps. Venezuelan investigative reporter Patricia Poleo, in her published account of how the coup was hijacked by conservative elements of the civilian opposition, reveals that the rebellious elements of the armed forces controlled almost no combat troops. Although some senior officers admitted after the rebellion that they had been conspiring since summer 2001, most anti-Chávez military officers simply improvised, with poor results. The strategic military installations in the city of Maracay, where Venezuela's armored, airborne and air forces are concentrated, never accepted the new government, and rebel military control in Caracas was spotty at best. The military consensus in favor of deposing President Chávez rested on the shared conviction among officers that they should not be involved in repressing civilian anti-government demonstrators. Once the unconstitutional nature of the transitional government became clear, this consensus fell apart.

Pedro Carmona's transition government committed a number of fatal political errors during its brief existence. First, it was drawn from a narrow right-wing slice of the political opposition that excluded key elements of the resistance to Hugo Chávez, most notably organized labor. Footage of the well-heeled participants in the televised self-proclamation of Pedro Carmona as president quickly confirmed the sectarian upper class nature of the new government, particularly to poor and working class Venezuelans where pro-Chávez sentiments are concentrated. Second, Carmona's decree dissolving the National Assembly and the Supreme Court made it clear to many military officers that the new government was completely unconstitutional and not prepared to meet even minimum democratic criteria. Third, Carmona erred in the military arena, appointing as Minister of Defense an admiral who had very little authority within the officer corps, rather than a senior Army general. He then selected a recently cashiered officer, Admiral Molina Tamayo, as head of presidential security. These appointments, which contravened military lines of seniority and merit, angered a number of senior officers who had initially supported the Carmona government.

In another critical miscalculation, nobody in the Carmona administration thought of replacing the troops in charge of security at *Miraflores*, the presidential palace. Once pro-Chavez demonstrations and riots began on 13 April 2002, loyal presidential security troops ejected the Carmona administration from *Miraflores* and allowed President Chávez's ministers to enter, reconvene the National Assembly, and temporarily swear in the vice-president, Diosdado Cabello, as interim president. As Pedro Carmona sheltered in a nearby military base, the junior and mid-ranking officers who actually commanded the combat units of the armed forces made it clear to their superiors that they would only support efforts to restore constitutional rule. This paved the way for a swift return of Hugo Chávez Frias to power on 14 April 2002.

Implications for Venezuelan Civil-Military Relations

The Chávez administration faces a very complex and highly polarized political environment in the aftermath of the 11-14 April upheaval. One of its most difficult challenges will be to rebuild democratic civil-military relations. The Venezuelan armed forces are once again split into three factions: anti- and

pro-Chávez minorities and an institutionalist majority. Resolving this unstable dynamic without precipitating a new coup would be difficult even in the absence of political turmoil; the level of polarization in Venezuelan society is likely instead to produce further civilian appeals for military involvement, to the detriment of democratic rule.

The anti-Chávez military faction, comprising mostly senior officers, has been hard hit by its defeat during the rebellion. The officers' association with the unconstitutional Carmona government is likely to have discredited them among their subordinates, and the Chávez administration has begun legal proceedings against many of them. Military prosecutors report that they have detained 58 officers, 24 of whom are generals or admirals. In the Army, detainees have come mostly from the logistics and aviation branches, underscoring the fact that the senior officers involved in fact controlled few combat troops. Equally telling, the Chávez administration has been handling these officers with kid gloves, allowing many of them to remain under house arrest or confined to headquarters rather than in military prisons. This suggests that President Chávez is not secure enough in power to purge his enemies decisively from the officer corps.

Pro-Chávez forces have emerged from the rebellion with a mixed record. Key senior officers closely identified with the president's revolutionary program sided with the rebels on 11 April. As a result, almost the entire military high command was replaced in the days following Hugo Chávez's return to power. Many junior officers and some senior officers at the Maracay military bases, however, have demonstrated that they are committed supporters of President Chávez and the constitutional regime. There are even reports that five relatively junior generals, led by General Baduell of the 42 Paratrooper Brigade stationed in Maracay, have temporarily constituted themselves as a parallel military high command to support the president in the event of any new military upheaval.

Lastly, the institutionalist majority in the Venezuelan armed forces emerges from the 11 April 2002 coup in a stronger position politically, although political prominence is hardly what many of its members desire. By deposing President Chávez in the first place, the institutionalists have shown that they are willing to place limits on his actions, preventing him from using force to achieve his political objectives. Given how often the armed forces figured in his veiled threats against the opposition, this limitation is a serious blow to President Chávez. However, the institutionalist support for democratic principles and the constitution also show that Venezuelan armed forces are not willing to support an outright dictatorship by the opposition. These officers will constitute the 'swing' vote in military support for President Chávez in the foreseeable future.

The Chávez administration has been seriously weakened by the military rebellion, and the armed forces are well placed to emerge as an important political actor in Venezuelan politics. In the past three years, President Chávez has repeatedly asserted that one of the strengths of his regime is the solidarity of the armed forces with his revolutionary project. This claim of a seamless connection between military support and government authority is no longer credible. Moreover, although the efforts by Chavez to manipulate the officer promotion process did place a number of supporters in key positions, his policy of personal control was not enough to prevent a nearly successful rebellion. The small number of rebellious officers who have been detained and the judicial delicacy with which they have been treated to date indicate that the administration faces limits on how aggressively it can move in the wake of 11 April. More importantly, Venezuelan society increasingly will look to the military to gauge its level of support for the government. Whether the institutionalist majority in the officer corps likes it or not, the armed forces have become an independent political actor in Venezuela.

Implications for U.S. Relations with Venezuela

U.S. relations with Venezuela, never good during the Chávez administration, will worsen in the aftermath of the 11-14 April turmoil. President Chávez's leftist political program and friendship with Fidel Castro were unlikely to endear him to any U.S. administration, although Venezuela's importance as an oil supplier has up to now ensured that its government received the benefit of the doubt. Relations began to take a significant turn for the worse after October 2001 when, in a nationally televised speech, President Chávez equated U.S. military actions in Afghanistan with the terrorist attacks against the United States on

11 September 2001. The Bush administration's coolness since this outburst was reflected in the U.S. response to the 11 April rebellion, which U.S. officials blamed on Hugo Chávez's policies. The Bush administration's delay in condemning the coup has been interpreted in Venezuela and many other Latin American countries as support for the Carmona interim government, a point of view given credence when the *New York Times* revealed that officials from the Bush administration had contact with members of the opposition prior to and during the 11 April rebellion. The U.S. response, moreover, stood in stark contrast to the condemnation voiced by almost all O.A.S. member states against the overthrow of President Chávez. The poor condition of U.S.-Venezuelan political relations nevertheless is unlikely to affect oil supplies, since both sides have an overwhelming interest in maintaining a stable trading partnership.

Relations between the U.S. military and the Venezuelan armed forces are likely to worsen as well in the aftermath of the April uprising. Although generally quite close during the first four decades of Venezuelan democracy, military-to-military relations chilled once President Chávez took power in 1999. Privately, U.S. and Venezuelan military officers report considerably more friction in the relationship, often as a result of interference from the highest levels of the Chávez administration. The senior officers who led the 11 April 2002 rebellion are more conservative than the officer corps as a whole and are likely to have had closer relationships with their U.S. counterparts. The failure of the rebellion means that the officers remaining in the armed forces after 11 April are those who have had less contact with and sympathy for the United States. The U.S. response to the events of 11 April will most likely prompt additional restrictions by the Venezuelan government on future military-to-military contacts, making it even more difficult for the U.S. armed forces to rebuild their relationship with their Venezuelan counterparts.

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