

10 Civil–Military Relations and Democracy in Latin America in the 2020s

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On September 30, 2019, Peruvian president Martín Vizcarra issued a presidential decree formally dissolving the national congress and calling for new legislative elections. In response, lawmakers in the opposition-controlled legislature refused to accept the decree, voted to suspend Vizcarra’s presidential powers pending an impeachment process, and appointed Vice President Mercedes Aráoz as interim president. Aráoz, an estranged ally of Vizcarra, accepted the appointment. A short while later, however, commanders of the army, navy, air force, and national police met with Vizcarra at the presidential palace and publicly recognized him as the country’s constitutional leader (LatinNews Daily Report 2019f). This support appeared to tip the scales of the institutional stalemate in Vizcarra’s favour, and the following day, Aráoz resigned her position as vice president and relinquished her appointment as interim president.

Several other incumbents in the region also turned to the military to fortify weak positions. In Ecuador, the week following the Peru controversy, violent national protests ensued after President Lenín Moreno scrapped the country’s nationwide fuel subsidies and prompted the president to briefly relocate the country’s capital to Guayaquil. Heading off calls for his removal, he appeared on national television flanked by military leaders as he announced a state of emergency; he survived the ordeal. Later that month, amidst massive social protest and upheaval in Chile, President Sebastián Piñera also declared a state of emergency with a dozen officers at his side; he too survived. In Bolivia, meanwhile, incumbent Evo Morales called on military officers to “maintain the country’s political unity” after a disputed presidential vote and widespread protests. On November 10, however, Morales resigned after military brass urged him to step down (LatinNews Daily Report 2019b).

These episodes provoked real concerns from policy analysts and academics about the role of the armed forces in Latin American politics and the potential for democratic backsliding (Corrales 2019; Fisher 2019; Isacson 2020). These apprehensions intensified in 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic thrust militaries into the limelight across the region as key cogs in the realms of public policy decision-making, public security, and logistics, and citizens were faced with stay-at-home orders and other restrictions

on personal liberties that harkened back to darker periods in the region's history. On the basis of these experiences, this chapter asks: How did the role of Latin American militaries change during the intense protest wave of 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic? Has the military “returned” in Latin American politics, undermining civilian control of the military? And have changes in military roles or in civil–military relations contributed to democratic backsliding in the region?

I argue that despite their increased visibility, the roles of the armed forces in Latin America did not radically change in the 2019–2021 period. These organizations have long been arbiters of civilian political conflict, sometimes abiding by political orders and other times not. Similarly, they have been intimately involved in policy implementation, including in humanitarian and health missions. In that sense, their responses to the events of 2019–2021 are largely consistent with previous behaviour. Similarly, while presidents and regimes appear to be more dependent on their armed forces for survival than at any point in the recent past, those militaries have not sought to undermine their subordination to civilian authorities. In supporting presidents during times of crisis and carrying out tasks during COVID, most militaries in the region have not independently pursued prerogatives from civilian leaders but instead carried out responsibilities delegated to them—and later relinquished them when asked. The most notable and troubling exceptions to this are in Brazil and El Salvador, although mission drift in those places had less to do with the political moment than the civilian leaders in charge.

The chapter proceeds as follows. It opens by discussing civil–military relations in Latin America and the evolving political role of the Latin American military. The following section describes military responses to the 2019 wave of protests that swept the region and situates them in historical context, arguing that these responses largely adhere to democratic patterns of responses to presidential crisis. After that, I describe military task engagement in the COVID-19 pandemic, systematizing where and how militaries were deployed internally. The penultimate section evaluates the effects of these military missions on civil–military relations and democracy. The last section concludes.

Civil–Military Relations and Democracy

A democracy is not consolidated until its armed forces are subordinated to the legitimate authority and control of civilian authorities (Huntington 1957; Stepan 1988). Beyond democratic consolidation, ensuring civilians' preferences prevail over the military's across policy domains is fundamental to continued democratic governance. This can be a challenge, especially when the armed forces have been intimately involved in politics (Feaver 2003). Maximizing civilian control of the military therefore involves minimizing the scope of military prerogatives and areas of state policy in which the armed forces holds exclusive jurisdiction (Pion-Berlin 1992; Trinkunas

2005). New or weakly institutionalized democracies face an even tougher challenge, since leaders must ensure the military will not attempt a coup d'état or otherwise defy civilian authority (Kohn 1997).

Unfortunately for most of Latin America, its experience is rife with direct military involvement in politics (Loveman 1999). Military dictators and military-backed caudillos governed much of the region throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and almost without exception, the region's initial attempts at democratization were interrupted by military coups. Moreover, since Latin American militaries engaged in relatively few inter-state wars in the twentieth century,¹ governments and military leaders tended to redefine threats to their sovereignty as internal—especially during the Cold War (Stepan 1973; Pion-Berlin 1988). During this time, political and economic crisis often resulted in direct military governance, from the repressive bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of the Southern Cone to the “revolutionary” military governments of the Andes to more traditional military dictatorships in Central America. In total, militaries directly governed in 12 of 19 countries at some point in the 1960s and 1970s.²

With the onset of the third wave of democratization, democratic leaders were challenged to rein in military autonomy and exercise civilian oversight of the armed forces (Rouquié 1987; Fitch 1998). As Brooks recognizes, “even after militaries withdraw to the barracks during democratization, [militaries] often retain significant domestic political power, which varies with the conditions of the transition, their popular support, and other factors” (Brooks 2019: 386). In Chile, for example, Article 93 of the 1980 Constitution prohibited presidents from hiring, promoting, or firing senior military leaders, while 1989 constitutional reforms gave the armed forces the right to appoint four of the country's 38 senators. In other places, like Brazil and Argentina, militaries were unhappy to lose their privileged positions and retained important informal powers (Hunter 1994).

Roles began to change in the 1990s and 2000s. Except for Panama, which joined Costa Rica in dismantling its armed forces, militaries across the region retreated from direct political governance but retained varying degrees of power and autonomy. Many militaries took on missions that exploited their organizational efficiency, including policing, infrastructure projects, and the administration of social services, while others moved into entrepreneurship (Brenes Castro and Casas 1998). Politicians also occasionally turned to the armed forces to adjudicate political conflict or support the ruling government in times of crisis.

Of course, even in places where democracy has endured, public attitudes and civilian control over the military remained an ongoing challenge (Battaglini 2015; Diamint 2015). Most notably, there have been successful military coups d'état in Ecuador (2000), Honduras (2009), and Bolivia (2019), and three failed coups in Venezuela (two in 1992; one in 2002). Unlike the past, however, in no cases did the military remain in power after

overthrowing the previous regime. Furthermore, the incidence of military coups has decreased markedly since 1990, with presidents far more likely to be removed through impeachment or as a consequence of mass mobilization (Llanos and Marsteintredet 2010).

Military Responses to Social Protest

Despite the armed forces' gradual return to the barracks, the political, economic, and social turmoil of Latin America in the late 2010s and early 2020s brought renewed attention to their role in domestic tasks (e.g., Corrales 2019). The first inflection point came in 2019, as five years of economic stagnation, myriad high-level corruption scandals, and questions of electoral integrity and the state of democracy conspired to produce an unprecedented wave of social protest. During that year, anti-government demonstrations took place in Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, followed by Puerto Rico and then, in the largest mass expression of political and social discontent, Ecuador, Peru, Haiti (again), Chile, Colombia, and Bolivia (see Table 10.1). Unrest led presidents across the region to call on their militaries in conspicuous ways, not only to repress protestors and/or restore order but to provide support for often precarious mandates, either through a public statement or a public appearance by the high command.

These anti-government demonstrations and military responses are systematized in Table 10.1. Classifications of what constitutes “significant” are, of course, subjective. I code based on whether protestors called for the removal of the head of state and whether or not they presented what I consider a credible threat to that leader’s survival. There were protests in various other countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico, Paraguay, and Uruguay, but these were aimed at specific policy gains or reversals and did not threaten the integrity of the regime. Further, this table is restricted to the extraordinary protest wave of 2019, and does not consider anti-government protests in other years, such as demonstrations in 2017 in Brazil (Soto and Boadle 2017), Honduras (Cuffe 2019), or Venezuela (Cawthorne 2017), or the massive anti-Ortega protests in Nicaragua in 2018, where police and militia repression led to the deaths of an estimated 500 protestors (Klein et al. 2022).

In total, there were nine significant anti-government demonstrations during the year (Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Venezuela), with the military playing some role in six of them (Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, Peru, Venezuela). While the military complied with orders from the head of state in four cases (Venezuela, Honduras, Peru, Chile), repressing protestors in at least three of them and publicly manifesting confidence in the president in all four, it only conditionally complied with orders in Ecuador and defied orders before later complying in Bolivia.

Table 10.1 Military responses to significant anti-government demonstrations (2019)

<i>Country</i>	<i>Significant anti-government demonstrations</i>	<i>Military response?</i>	<i>Compliance or defiance with orders</i>
Argentina	No		
Bolivia	Oct–Dec	Yes	Defiance, compliance
Brazil	No		
Chile	Oct–Dec	Yes	Compliance
Colombia	Nov–Dec	No	N/A
Costa Rica	No		
Cuba	No		
Dominican Republic	No		
Ecuador	Oct	Yes	Conditional compliance
El Salvador	No		
Guatemala	Apr, May, Sep	No	N/A
Haiti	Feb–March, Oct–Dec	No	N/A
Honduras	Apr–Jul	Yes	Compliance
Mexico	No		
Nicaragua	Mar	No	N/A
Panama	No		
Paraguay	No		
Peru	Nov	Yes	Compliance
Uruguay	No		
Venezuela	Jan–Apr	Yes	Compliance

Source: Author.

In roughly chronological order, the cases are the following:

- **Venezuela.** The first anti-government demonstrations in the region were aimed at Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro and began in January 2019. In that month, the opposition-controlled National Assembly swore in Assembly President Juan Guaidó as the country's interim president in an attempt to overthrow Maduro, who had been re-elected in the previous year in elections lacking international observation and tainted by accusations of coercion, fraud, and vote rigging. Beginning on January 23, protestors took to the streets to demand Maduro's resignation, taking up Guaidó's slogan of "Cessation of usurpation, transitional government, and free elections". The military was a crucial actor: opposition politicians including Guaidó called for members of the military to help topple Maduro, while the president visited military barracks and naval bases to rally support (LatinNews Daily Report 2019a). Despite some high-profile defections, the bulk of the military continued to profess loyalty to Maduro, ultimately ensuring

his survival. Moreover, the president deployed the state security apparatus against the population in subsequent protests, limiting dissent.

- **Honduras.** In Honduras, protest marches by teachers and health workers in April against a series of executive and legislative decrees aimed at education and health privatization morphed into broader anti-government demonstrations by the month of June (Cuffe 2019). This multi-sector movement pushed several demands but focused its efforts on removing President Juan Orlando Hernández from power. In response, the government announced the national deployment of the military to restore order. As with the Venezuelan state's reply to demonstrations, state security forces used tear gas to disperse protests as well as live ammunition, leading to some protestor deaths (LatinNews Daily Report 2019c).
- **Peru.** As summarized in the introduction to this chapter, executive–legislative crisis with accompanying pro- and anti-government protest in Peru was only resolved after commanders of the army, navy, air force, and national police publicly recognized President Martín Vizcarra as the country's constitutional leader on September 30 (LatinNews Daily Report 2019f). The president survived thanks to this military support.
- **Ecuador.** On October 3, President Lenín Moreno declared a state of exception in major cities across Ecuador's national territory in response to the violent protests being staged by the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador* and others, in rejection of the economic policy measures announced by his government. Protestors demanded a repeal of the decree eliminating subsidies and also sought to demonstrate their opposition to mining and oil exploitation, and ultimately, Moreno's resignation (LatinNews Daily Report 2019e). Through his state of exception decree, the president ordered security forces to re-establish order and even transferred the country's capital to the city of Guayaquil. Pion-Berlin and Acácio (2020, 2022) find that the military only conditionally complied with its orders, leaving most repression to the national police, and instead played a supporting role. Among other things, it provided public transportation to citizens and exclusively employed non-lethal weapons in an attempt to avoid confrontation. In some cases, this led to the injury of soldiers and their capture by protestors (Meza 2019).
- **Chile.** A fare increase on the Santiago metro sparked student protests on October 18 and which quickly escalated into broader demonstrations against the rising cost of living, economic inequality, and a host of other grievances in Chile. President Sebastián Piñera declared a state of emergency and ordered thousands of police officers and soldiers into the streets to curb violence, restore order, and impose curfew (LatinNews Daily Report 2019d). The military also publicly stood by Piñera amidst calls for his resignation. For some, the military's role evoked memories of dictatorship-era terror. However, Pion-Berlin and Acácio (2020) argue that while the armed forces appear to have committed some abuses in

maintaining order, these paled in comparison to abuses perpetrated by the country's national police force, known as Carabineros.³

- **Bolivia.** In Bolivia, protests broke out after irregularities emerged in the October 20 elections. Protestors first demanded a recount of the returns, and later the removal of President Evo Morales and new elections without Morales' participation (BBC News Mundo 2019). The president asked the military to intervene in the protests and increasingly violent disturbances in the cities of La Paz, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba, but in a letter, senior commanders refused (Machicao and Londoño 2019). Then, when Morales suggested he would run for the presidency in new elections, senior officers advised him to resign. This action set off a new wave of protests, this time from allies of the president. However, in this circumstance, the military responded with lethal force. It was bolstered by a decree issued by interim president Jeanine Áñez which granted exemptions from criminal responsibility for actions in "legitimate defence" or a "state of necessity" (Lozano 2019; Molina 2019). In sum, this was an example of a military defying orders and then complying with them (Pion-Berlin and Acácio 2022).

Military responses were largely consistent with contemporary precedent in the region, partially as a result of them possessing an internal security function and partially a result of how presidents have employed them in times of crisis. If the cases deviated in any way, it is only because militaries more often complied with presidential directives in 2019 than in the recent past. Indeed, Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas (2010) show that presidents (and protestors) frequently called upon Latin American militaries to resolve constitutional crises in the 1990s and 2000s. However, unlike most of the examples described here, Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas find that militaries between 1990 and the late 2000s generally refused presidential orders⁴ to intervene against civilian opposition forces during such crises and instead remained quartered (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2010). Compliance with government directives to restore public order that has been disrupted, of course, is characteristic of a military under civilian control—not one run amok with autonomy.

Military Responses to COVID-19

Right as the region began to emerge from these protests in late 2019 and early 2020, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic again thrust militaries into the spotlight as first responders, and then in the realms of decision-making, public security, and logistics. In fact, all governments in the region with armed forces deployed their soldiers in a variety of COVID-19 activities. In doing so, militaries were not forced to undertake "unfamiliar domestic tasks" (Wilén 2021). To the contrary, governments in the region have long employed their armed forces for all sorts of domestic task implementation, including crisis response and humanitarian relief (Pion-Berlin and

Arceneaux 2000; Pion-Berlin 2016). Macias Herrera and Croissant (2022), for instance, find that all 17 Latin American national militaries had been deployed in instances of humanitarian or disaster relief prior to COVID-19. This is even true globally, where an increasing number of countries have employed their militaries in support of health efforts (Michaud et al. 2019).

One reason militaries are used for domestic task implementation has to do with the benefits they offer in comparison to more conventional bureaucratic agencies, especially in organization and logistics. Most professional militaries boast the ability to rapidly mobilize and respond to crises with manpower and operational support, such as food distribution, emergency medical services, and other health efforts (Heaslip and Barber 2014). Militaries may be more able to carry out policies more quickly and effectively than civilian bureaucratic agencies due to a lack of agency capacity to provide the services (Brömmelhörster and Paes 2004). Crisis situations or urgent developmental tasks need to be met immediately, and under many circumstances, the military represents the only organization capable of meeting those needs—especially missions that require large amounts of human capital or mobilization. Globally, Erickson, Kljajić, and Shelef (2022) find that 95% of the world's states used their armed forces to respond to the pandemic in some fashion; further, 71% of all states employed the military for coercion, 72% for logistics, 66% for healthcare, and 36% in policymaking. Turning to the military, then, to deal with the fallout from COVID was a natural response for Latin American leaders.

The ways politicians employed the military to deal with the challenges of the pandemic, however, were not uniform across the continent. In their analysis of 14 Latin American democracies with militaries, Passos and Acácio (2021) identify six areas in which involved militaries responded to the pandemic: border security, logistics, medical care, defence industry production, crisis management, and policing. While all 14 governments turned to their armed forces, they found that governments in Uruguay and Argentina delegated only a limited number of pandemic responses to the military, while governments in Peru, Brazil, and Honduras intensively deployed the military in an array of tasks across all six identified domains.

Similarly, Macias Herrera and Croissant (2022) carry out a comprehensive and detailed mapping of Latin American military roles and missions during the pandemic.⁵ Functions which all militaries in the region performed include providing border security, establishing and/or guarding isolation, quarantine, and health centres, and providing assistance in health-related matters. Other near-universal roles include the production of medical equipment (16 of 17 countries), transport and distribution of said equipment (14 of 17), street patrols to enforce stay-at-home orders (15 of 17), and the distribution of food and water (15 of 17). Few militaries engaged in the protection of critical infrastructure (4 of 17), the dissemination of COVID-19 information (4 of 17), or appointed a military officer as health minister (only Brazil and Cuba).

Importantly, the region's armed forces largely played a supplementary or sometimes complementary role to civilian responses instead of one of replacement. And despite the overall expansion of military roles, these began to shrink as the pandemic wore on. Many logistical and healthcare tasks, like guarding quarantine centres and posting COVID-19 information, were temporary by nature, and disappeared as vaccines became more ubiquitous and the health sector gained the ability to keep up with COVID cases. In short, presidents' use of militaries to respond in a variety of ways to the challenges raised by the pandemic were consistent with how they have been employed in recent decades, and while this involved task expansion, it was largely temporary.

Civilian Control and Democracy

As a consequence of these crises and leaders' responses, Latin American militaries have been more visible in the political realm than at any other moment since the region's return to democracy in the 1980s. Predictably, this raises concerns with how engaging the military in the 2019–2021 period may affect civil–military relations and impact Latin American democracy.

Evaluating the relationship between military roles and democracy is a complicated task. Increased task implementation by the military does not necessarily constitute a lack of civilian control of the military—nor is it evidence of democratic decay. On the contrary, civilian leaders can allocate institutional prerogatives and choose when to delegate authorities to the military while still exercising control over the institution (Feaver 2003; Croissant et al. 2010). The task is to determine when and where militaries claim formal prerogatives or whether they seek to contest civilian authority informally (Brooks 2019: 386). In other words, does the military seek prerogatives from civilian authorities or is it asked by civilian authorities to bear those responsibilities?

Social Protest and Civil–Military Relations

Public military support of presidents during moments of institutional crisis represents both a victory for civilian control of the military as well as a potential danger. Unlike in the mid-twentieth century or before, most decisions by security forces about whether to support or withhold support from elected leaders does not result in direct military intervention, a coup d'état, or a military dictatorship. In the six cases from 2019 highlighted here, only in Bolivia did the armed forces make a decision to actively decide a political outcome. And while supporters of Evo Morales decried the military's intervention as a coup, many opponents described it as a victory for Bolivian democracy and stability after an episode of electoral fraud (Graham-Harrison and Collins 2019).

At the same time, the military's role in maintaining domestic order and determining who does or does not stay in power harkens back to a

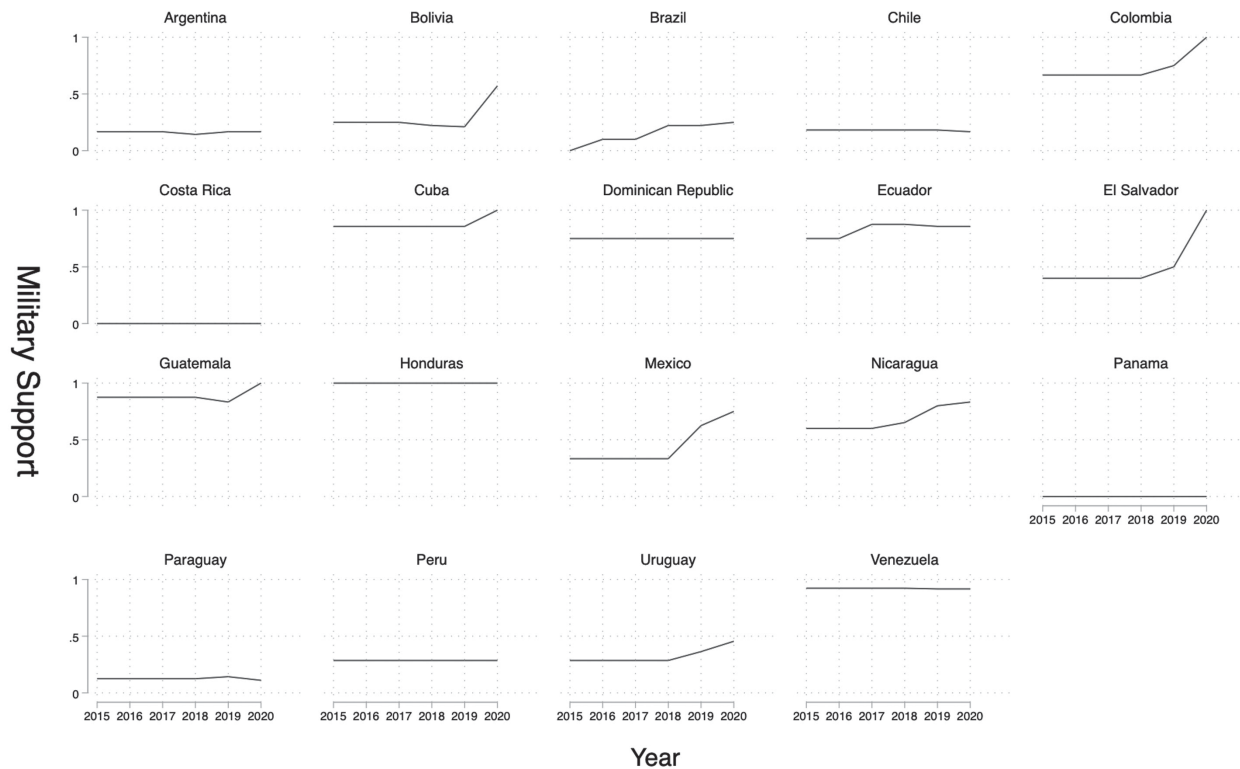
previous era of praetorianism. In fact, it appears that Latin American presidents are more dependent now on the military for legitimacy and survival than they have been in a long time. Figure 10.1 plots “reliance on military for regime survival”, a standardized measure which captures the extent to which retracting military support would substantially increase the chance that the regime would lose power. The figure shows that in the 2018–2020 period, regime reliance on the military increased in ten countries (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay) with one country, Honduras, already at its maximum. This jump is put into further relief by the relative lack of intra-country variation between 2010 and 2015, suggesting that the change in perceptions about the military’s role was related to its conspicuousness in many places immediately prior to and during the pandemic (i.e., presidents appearing on national broadcasts during times of social protests or political crisis surrounded by senior officers).

This is a worrying development for civilian control and ultimately, for democracy. Dependent civilian leaders may be less willing to restrict, contradict, and even send orders to militaries upon which their survival depends, weakening checks on the military. Moreover, it is a clear indication of praetorianism, insofar as the armed forces and not voters or legislators determine which civilian leaders survive and which fall. The Bolivia experience from 2019, in which the military refused to obey orders from Evo Morales, suggested his resignation, and later stood by and followed orders from successor Jeanine Áñez is an example. Authoritarian regimes in the region may be even more beholden to their militaries than democratic ones. Macias Herrera and Croissant (2022) identify regime maintenance as a central mission in Bolivia, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Notably, all save Bolivia are authoritarian.

With that being said, Varieties of Democracy data also indicate that the military was the group that political regimes relied on most strongly in order to maintain power in only two countries in 2021 (the most recent year available) and seven countries since 2000: Argentina (2010–2017); Brazil (2004–2020); Colombia (2009); Cuba (2005–2018, 2020–2021); El Salvador (2001–2009, 2011–2021); Guatemala (2009–2020); and Peru (2002–2016). This tells a slightly different story of military dependence. In this less praetorian version, the armed forces are just one in a constellation of institutions and groups that contribute to regime survival throughout the region, and in most cases in contemporary Latin America, are not the most vital group.

COVID-19 and Civil–Military Relations

Military responses to COVID-19 were probably even less detrimental to civil–military relations. Although some political analysts and scholars worried—justifiably—that the militarized response to the pandemic would undermine civilian control of the armed forces, this does not appear to



Source: Varieties of Democracy v12

Figure 10.1 Reliance on military for regime survival (2015–2020).

have been the case (e.g., Isacson 2020; Passos and Acácio 2021; Akkoyunlu and Lima 2022). While it is true that civilian leaders expanded the number of tasks they delegated to their armed forces during the height of the pandemic, these were not autonomous choices of the military. Instead, they complied with civilian orders, a behaviour which demonstrates the maintenance of civilian control.

The fact that most militaries did not exploit the pandemic to seek additional institutional autonomy is also noteworthy. Pion-Berlin and Arceneaux (2000) argue that the impact of internal military missions on civilian control hinges on three questions: (1) the existence of capable civilian organizations to fulfil the operation, (2) the willingness of military officials to relinquish control when a civilian organization exists, and (3) the creation of an alternative civilian organization to carry out the action in the future. As a result, they find that role expansion in the 1990s did not lead to increased military autonomy in Brazil or Argentina when presidents enlisted the military's help in distributing food or providing health services. Similarly, Latin American governments' employment of the military during the COVID-19 pandemic meet at least the first two of these criteria, since militaries responded to an extraordinary circumstance at the behest of civilian governments before later voluntarily relinquishing these roles.

There is also little indication of military-led mission creep. Though the pandemic accelerated military participation in aspects of governance, the military typically acted on the initiative and according to the directives of civilian leaders. The effect of militarization on democracy, then, was differentiated by what tasks militaries were called on to perform. Macias Herrera and Croissant (2022) find that military COVID-19 activities were less likely to cause damage to democratic civil–military relations if they were limited to policy implementation and excluded enforcing punitive public security measures. Military autonomy granted by civilian leaders also played a role. Public security roles for militaries with high autonomy, for example, tended to result in more human rights abuses (Acácio et al. 2022).

The Military and Long-Term Democratic Trends

In short, there does not appear to be much evidence that the 2019 protest cycle or domestic responses to COVID significantly altered the role of Latin American militaries or undermined civil–military relations. Empirical data measuring democracy suggest that countries in the region continued along longer-term trajectories of democratic deepening, democratic decay, or steadiness which began prior to the 2019 protest wave.

To illustrate, Figure 10.2 uses data from the Varieties of Democracy project to plot liberal and electoral democracy scores for all countries across the region between 2010 and 2021. The sharpest drop (and subsequent recovery) came in Bolivia in 2020, after direct military involvement

in precipitating a change in power. As described earlier, President Evo Morales stepped down on November 10, 2019, after General Williams Kaliman and the military high command called on him to resign in order to restore peace and stability to the country amidst post-electoral violence. The next most prominent decrease came in El Salvador, although this drop happens to coincide with the arrival to power of President Nayib Bukele, who has frequently threatened and flaunted democratic norms while in office. Other democratic erosion began before 2019, including in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Uruguay, and Venezuela.

Still, this is not to say that militaries have not contributed to democratic backsliding, or that this was not exacerbated by the protest cycle or pandemic. Broad measures fail to capture how the militarization of politics may have contributed to or accelerated pre-existing democratic erosion—or conversely, how militaries refusing to follow presidential orders may have blunted that decay. Two examples of democratic erosion in Figure 10.2 are Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022) and El Salvador under Bukele (2019–present), countries whose presidents held weak normative commitments to democracy used their militaries to contribute to democratic erosion. Both cases of pandemic militarization are covered in detail by Acácio, Passos, and Pion-Berlin (2022) and Macias Herrera and Croissant (2022). Suffice it to say that in each country, the authors find that military COVID-19 roles did not drive democratic backsliding, but rather intensified existing patterns.

In Brazil, for example, Akkoyunlu and Lima (2022) argue that autonomous military decisions taken by officers on a quest for political influence threatened civilian control and democracy beginning under the Michel Temer presidency (2016–2018). Bolsonaro, an ex-Army captain, accelerated this process, giving preferential treatment to the military and appointing an estimated 8,450 military personnel to administrative positions in his government (Penido et al. 2021). It is no surprise, then, that Bolsonaro appointed military men to top civilian government positions in the Ministry of Health as well as the Crisis Committee for Supervision and Monitoring of the Impacts of COVID-19. While this may not undermine democracy, it does challenge norms of civilian control.

Concluding Thoughts

Latin American militaries played a key role in responding to the social unrest that swept the region in 2019 and the pandemic that followed. This does not represent as wide a deviation from the past as it may first appear. Militaries have been arbiters of civilian political conflict in Latin America since the 1990s and have assumed humanitarian and health missions that civilian leaders have delegated to them in times of crisis. With few exceptions, militaries have not sought to undermine their subordination to civilian authorities or independently sought autonomy from civilian

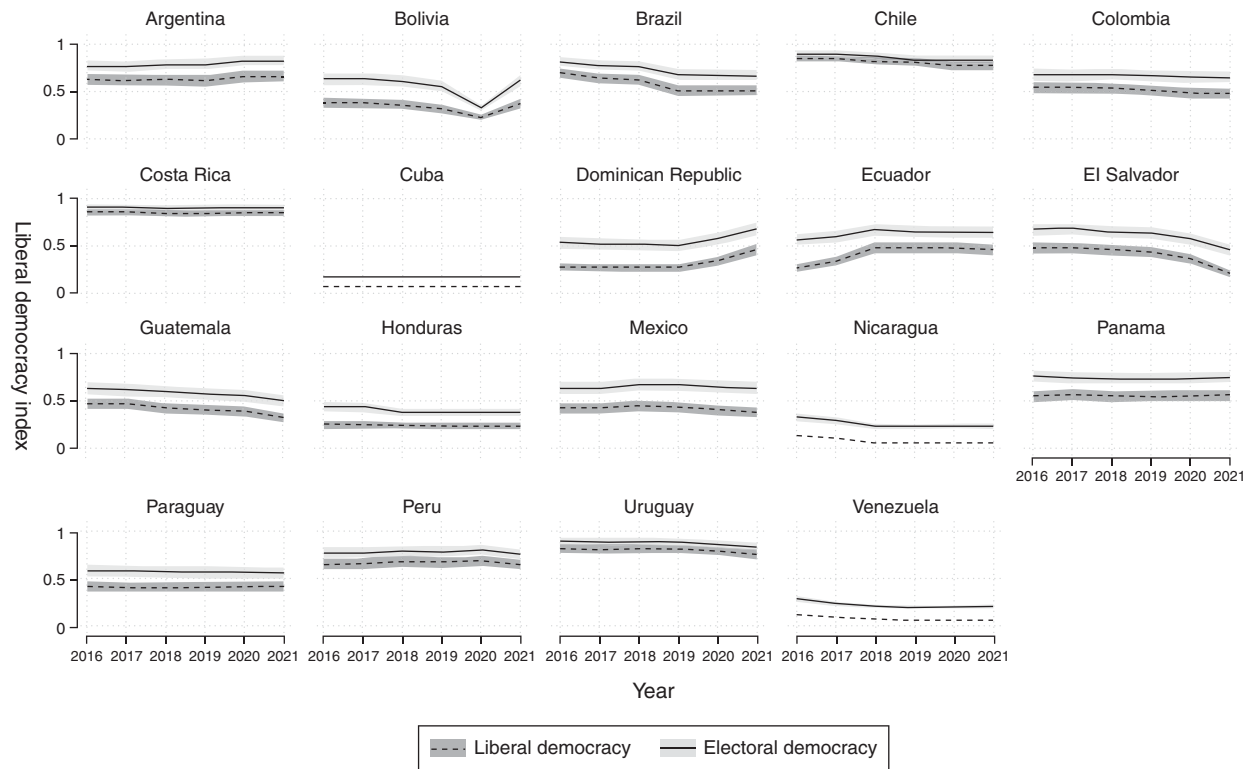


Figure 10.2 Democracy in Latin America (2010–2021).

leaders. Instead, they have assumed an expansion of the tasks delegated to them and before relinquishing them. As such, it does not appear to represent the “return” of the military to the political sphere or the return of civil–military relations to the days of the Cold War (Pion-Berlin and Acácio 2020).

That is not to say that all is well. According to some figures, civilian leaders in Latin America are more dependent on the support of their armed forces for survival in the face of institutional challenges than at any moment in recent history. This is a troubling development for a region with a history of military interruptions and praetorianism, as this could threaten military subordination to civilian control. The type of task expansion that accompanied the response to COVID-19 also poses the risk of mission creep, especially in places where presidents may not demand militaries give back the responsibilities they acquire. In other countries, would-be authoritarians may direct armed forces to assume tasks and duties that undermine democracy and contribute to backsliding, as in Brazil or El Salvador.

Ultimately, civil–military relations in contemporary Latin America may be driven more by civilian leaders than the military. It is civilian leaders who turned to the armed forces in Venezuela, Honduras, Peru, Ecuador, Chile, and Bolivia during times of crisis in 2019, not only to restore domestic order but to demonstrate public shows of support for their leadership. Similarly, it was civilian leaders who responded to the challenges of the pandemic by sanctioning vast military role expansion in 2020 and then decided when to terminate these activities. This points to the importance of democratic checks and balances, both vertical and horizontal, on politicians as key mechanisms for citizens to exert authority over their armed forces.

Latin America’s reaction to extraordinary governability challenges in the late 2010s and early 2020s is not unique in a global context. However, given the region’s history and precedent of military involvement in politics, presidents, legislators, and citizens may wish to exercise greater caution in how they decide to delegate autonomy to their armed forces than leaders in more consolidated democracies.

Notes

- 1 The Chaco War, the so-called Soccer War between El Salvador and Honduras, and the Falklands War, and then a border war between Colombia and Peru and three border wars between Ecuador and Peru.
- 2 Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Peru, and Uruguay.
- 3 Using lawsuits filed on behalf of alleged victims of abuses, they show that 1,544 Chileans alleged suffering at the hands of the Carabineros while only 87 people charged abuses by military personnel (Pion-Berlin and Acácio 2020).
- 4 In 9 of the 13 cases they examined.
- 5 They identify four roles and 15 different missions within those roles: (1) Decision-making and planning (a military officer as health minister, military-led emergency

units); (2) Public security (border control, street patrols, crowd and riot control, protection of critical infrastructure); (3) Logistics (decontamination of public areas, distribution of food/water, repatriation of nationals); and (4) Healthcare (production of medical products, distribution of medical products, transportation of medical personnel/patients, establishment of COVID-19 isolation/quarantine/health centres, assistance in health-related functions, dissemination of COVID-19 information).

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