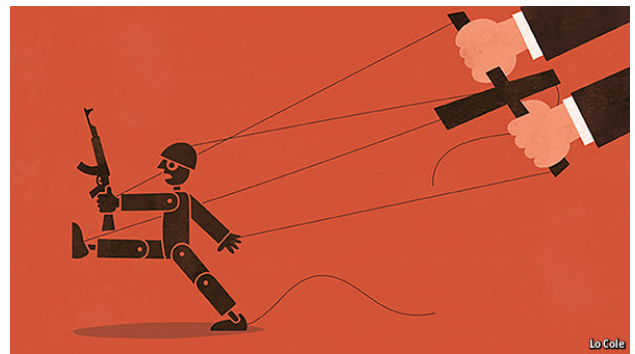


## Bello Of soldiers and citizens

**Latin America's armed forces have accepted democracy but remain a law unto themselves**

Mar 19th 2016 | From the print edition

ON MARCH 24th 1976 a military junta ousted Isabela Martínez, Argentina's president and the widow of Juan Perón, and took power in order to "put an end to the lack of government, the corruption and the scourge of subversion". What followed was state terror, aimed not only at murderous left-wing guerrilla groups but also at harmless dissidents. At least 8,960 people were killed.



In Buenos Aires memories of the coup remain raw. Barack Obama planned to be in town on the anniversary, and wanted to show his support for democracy and human rights by visiting a torture centre that is now a museum of memory. That annoyed activists—at the time, the United States had endorsed the coup. Mr Obama will play golf in Patagonia instead.

Few would have imagined so at the time, but it was to be the last time an army seized power from a freely elected government in Spanish-speaking Latin America (in 1980 Bolivia's army took power to prevent one from taking office). Tanks in the streets were a fixture of the region's politics for much of the 20th century: the 1976 coup was the sixth in Argentina since 1930. Yet it is now hard to imagine the armed forces taking over almost anywhere.

With surprising speed, they have lost political clout. There are caveats. In Honduras in 2009 the army acted on orders from the Supreme Court and the Congress to expel the elected president, Mel Zelaya, who had allied with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez. But it did not take power itself. In Paraguay in 2012 the military endorsed the lightning impeachment of Fernando Lugo, an ineffectual left-winger.

In only two countries—Cuba and Venezuela—does the army still play an important political role.

Cuba's president, Raúl Castro, was long the country's top general; the armed forces control at least half of the economy. In Venezuela Chávez turned the army into a branch of his political movement. Under his successor, Nicolás Maduro, military officers hold many government posts and the armed forces have amassed a business empire. But while generals still mouth regime slogans, there are signs that the army is retreating to a more institutionalist stance.

Most countries now have civilian defence ministers; some have exerted control over defence policy, through white papers and the like. In Colombia, soldiers who commit serious crimes are tried in civilian courts. Ecuador's president, Rafael Correa, last month sacked the high command after they protested over money.

The task of curbing military prerogatives remains unfinished. In Brazil the armed forces staved off, until recently, a truth commission's inquiry into their dictatorship of 1964-85; their amnesty remains largely intact. Mexico was long unique in excluding the army from political power. But the generals have exacted a price for sending troops to help the government crack down on drug gangs. They resist trials by civilian courts, and neutered President Enrique Peña Nieto's plan to turn up to 50,000 troops into policemen.

That was a setback. In a region largely free of wars between countries, governments have not worked out what their armies are for. Guerrilla insurgencies in Colombia and Peru are winding down. The main security threat in the region is from organised crime. Several governments have followed Mexico's lead in deploying troops against gangsters. Ill prepared for the job, they often end up killing innocents. More constructively, armies are responding to natural disasters, which are happening more often because of climate change. Then there are UN peacekeeping missions, to which the region is becoming a more frequent contributor.

Yet many armies are oversized for such limited roles. "Latin America has not had a particularly threat-based approach to defence spending," says Antonio Sampaio of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS), a London-based think tank. Faster economic growth in the 2000s brought a swelling of defence budgets. To bolster its image as a rising world power, Brazil embarked on a spending spree, which included purchases of submarines and advanced jet fighters. Now budgets are under pressure again: in real terms, defence spending in the region fell by 2% last year, according to IISS. But at 1.2% of GDP it is higher than it needs to be.

In Argentina, military prestige never recovered from the dictatorship and defeat in the Falklands war of 1982. Elsewhere, polls show that the armed forces enjoy greater trust than politicians. That should not mean that they are left to run their own affairs. Latin Americans are crying out for better-resourced police forces. It is high time for an adjustment in security priorities and spending.

## From the print edition: The Americas