

Venezuela military shows unease with Chávez

The Miami Herald
Nov. 21, 2007

Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez's push to radicalize his leftist "Bolivarian revolution" has sparked growing unease in segments of the armed forces, only partially reflected in the recent complaints by a former defense minister, military officers and analysts say.

The observers added junior officers are undisciplined, that there is a profusion of pamphlets criticizing Chávez circulating in military garrisons and resistance by some officers to carry out presidential orders and that there are complaints of corruption among senior officers loyal to Chávez.

Chávez is largely believed to have control of Venezuela's 120,000-strong security forces as the country approaches a Dec. 2 vote on constitutional reforms that would add to his already-vast powers. He has sidelined scores of critical officers and replaced them with loyalists since a 2002 military coup briefly toppled him.

Yet the dissent within the military could spread if voters approve the reforms, according to the analysts.

"If all these symptoms of dissent and unease in the Venezuelan armed forces in recent months are put into perspective, and we add the explosive statement by Gen. Raúl Baduel, the former defense minister, we are looking at a flammable environment that could lead to situations of violence," said Orlando Ochoa Terán, a Venezuelan security and defense analyst based in Pompano Beach who now works as a consultant.

One of the most revealing results of the discontent is a little-known outburst by corporals in the 40,000-member national guard that forced Chávez to abandon one of his constitutional-reform proposals that would have weakened the guard -- one of the key domestic security bodies.

The proposal, made public Aug. 15, would have changed the branch's name to Territorial Guard and allowed the nation's president to reassign its members to the army, navy, air force or police force.

"For all practical purposes, the national guard has been eliminated," retired Gen. Enrique Prieto Silva, the guard's former chief of operations, complained the next day. He warned that the change "could generate a situation of disobedience among the professional troops."

The complaints heated up two weeks later after a commission from the Armament Service of the Ministry of Defense announced its intention to collect all shoulder weapons and mortars held by the guard -- in essence leaving members with only pistols.

"The reform [proposal] . . . generated a tremendous malaise in the force," added an active-duty army colonel, who asked for anonymity out of fear of reprisals. "A campaign of e-mails immediately began, among them from many army officers, in defense of the guard."

Gen. Fredys Alonzo Carrión, the guard's supreme commander, acknowledged on Aug. 19 that "some agents within the institution have tried to generate confusion, generate mistrust, and immediately we proceeded to visit all the units, all the commands."

But while addressing an audience at guard headquarters in Caracas, Carrión met with a group of corporals and "had the novel experience of hearing the corporals criticize him openly," said the colonel, who said he had first-hand knowledge of the incident. Two other Venezuelans told El Nuevo Herald that they had also heard of the incident from guard officers who were present.

"They warned him that not only would they defend the institution from a potential constitutional elimination, but they would also fight to the death 'if they come to take our [heavy] guns,'" the army colonel added.

"That situation led [Carrión] to summon a meeting of the guard's general staff, and they decided to talk to Gen. Gustavo Rangel Briceño, the minister of defense. The minister spoke to Chávez, and [the president] withdrew his intention to eliminate the guard," the colonel added.

On Aug. 25, Chávez announced that he was withdrawing his proposal for the national guard.

"Chávez felt the protest and rejection of the national guard to his plans to change it into a territorial guard," said Aníbal Romero, a Chávez critic and political scientist who taught for more than 20 years at the Institute of Higher Studies of the National Defense in Caracas, where Venezuelan officers are formed.

The colonel added that in another show of discontent, the commander of part of an important military installation where he was based disobeyed an order from Chávez to train a large group of reservists and house them in the same barracks as his troops.

"But the commander did not trust them and ended up housing them in a shed so they would have no contact with the soldiers," the colonel said. Chávez has been trying to strengthen the reserves in what some critics have complained is an effort to establish an armed body loyal only to him.

Romero, currently a visiting fellow at the University of Miami's Center for Hemispheric Policy, said other signs of a lack of discipline among military officers have turned up in barracks bathrooms, littered with pamphlets and graffiti critical of Chávez and his policies.

Among the targets of the pamphlets: Cuban meddling in Venezuela's affairs; Chávez's threatening rhetoric against sectors that oppose his "21st century socialism;" massive corruption among senior officers loyal to Chávez; and the "unnecessary" constitutional reforms.

At Fort Tiuna in Caracas, the largest garrison in the country, "the distribution of such critical pamphlets is widespread," Romero said.

Many of the pamphlets are strewn in the bathrooms, and base officials have now detailed guards to keep track of who enters, according to Romero and the retired guard colonel.

Romero said the issues in the 69 proposed constitutional reforms that most annoy the security-force officers are unlimited presidential reelection, the weakening of the right to private property and a vaguely worded item that would allow Chávez, who has called Fidel Castro his "father," to create a federation between Venezuela and Cuba.

"Those are three extremely sensitive issues for the Venezuelan military, because Venezuelan officers are not communists," said Ochoa Terán, the analyst.

But the harshest complaint from the military sector came earlier this month when retired Gen. Isaías Baduel, until July the minister of defense, branded Chávez's proposed constitutional reforms as "in practice a coup d'etat [that] . . . would be consummated, violating the constitutional text in a shameless way."

The attack by Baduel -- a longtime Chávez supporter who played a leading role in helping him return to power after the short-lived 2002 coup -- shook even Chávez's ideological advisor, Heinz Dieterich, a leftist and professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

In an article called *Prevent the Collapse of the People's Project*, Dieterich said that Baduel's statements "opened a phase of uncertainty that could have grave consequences."

"With the danger of a defeat -- absolute or relative -- of the 'yes' vote [on Dec. 2], a new, likely chaotic phase opens in Venezuela, which in a few years could do away with Hugo Chávez's government," Dieterich added.

Former national guard Gen. Luis Alberto Camacho Kairús, who was vice minister for civilian security in 2002 and now lives in Miami, said that Chávez can no longer count on the security forces to secure his powers as Baduel did in 2002.

"The Venezuelan soldier is not willing to die for any politician, whether it's Chávez or anyone else," Camacho said. "He is willing to defend his country, the Venezuelan state, but not a government."

