



## SOUTH AMERICA ALERT Former Coup Leaders Make Gains Miguel Diaz

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Military men who have recently led coup attempts seem to be faring well these days on South America's political stage. In Ecuador Lucio Gutierrez—a colonel who led a successful revolt in January 2000 against the democratically elected government of Jamil Mahuad only to give up power days later—looks like a sure bet to be elected president on November 24. In Paraguay, a failed coup leader and political exile, former General Lino Oviedo, has formed his own party and is a strong contender ahead of next year's presidential elections. The emergence of such military firebrands—including Venezuela's president, former paratrooper Hugo Chávez—as prominent political players is no coincidence, but indicative of a crisis of democracy in much of the region.

The political viability of Messrs Gutierrez, Oviedo, and Chávez is due in good part to the disintegration of traditional parties in several countries. In Venezuela, the country's two main traditional parties—COPEI and Acción Democrática—had largely collapsed amid allegations of corruption and nepotism by the time the 1998 presidential elections came along. This left the field open to three independent candidates to fight it among themselves—Chávez, Proyecto Venezuela's Henrique Salas Romer, and a former Miss Universe, Irene Saez.

Weak parties make it easier for political mavericks to rise to prominence. It also removes an important firewall to protect against unsuitable presidential aspirants. One of the many functions of political parties is to vet the democratic credentials of prospective candidates. Strong parties in Latin America have been successful at this because many of them were formed in opposition to military regimes. Thus, inherently, they are resistant to military men serving reaching the highest office, particularly those who have resorted to violence in an attempt to attain power.

The added risk for countries such as Ecuador and Paraguay in electing leaders of dubious democratic credentials is that they also lack other institutional checks (a strong Congress, Supreme Court, etc) on autocratic leaders. In Venezuela, Chávez was able to do away with weak governmental bodies by creating new ones and rewriting the constitution to his liking, at a great cost to political stability in that country.

### Looking for leaders

Yet the appeal of military strongmen is attributable to more than just a lack of strong and credible political parties. It also may be symptomatic of a conscious or unconscious desire on the part of electorates to return to the old days of authoritarian regimes. Alarming, it appears that there is a yearning among some segments of society for the kind of law and order that existed in the days before democracy was restored. This is somewhat understandable, as personal security is a fundamental human right that many democratic governments have failed to safeguard. Given this, Latin Americans are looking increasingly to outsiders and strongmen who can deliver. To some, a former coup leader is as close an option to having a military government as there is.

There is also an economic nostalgia for the days of old that this new breed of populist military politicians is capitalizing on. Some believe that only a strong leader can rid a country of corruption and undertake needed economic reforms. The advocates of this view point to Chile and Gen. Augusto Pinochet as the model, not fully appreciating the human costs involved and the fact that most of the economic reforms actually took place after democratically elected regimes took over from Pinochet. Notwithstanding, economic growth in the region was on average higher during the military regimes of the 1960s and 1970s than it has been during the democratic governments of later decades. With some countries in recession and in severe economic crisis, the yearning for better economic times is not without foundation.

It may also be that Latin American citizens are drawn to these individuals because these men have acted on the pent up resentment and anger that the population at large feels but cannot always vent effectively. After all, violence has historically been a mechanism used in the region to bring about political change. Moreover, leaders like Chávez often carry a "Robin Hood" type image-and are believed capable of righting social wrongs by taking from the advantaged and redistributing to the poor.

### **Inherent risks to stability**

Nonetheless, the potential risk presented by the political rise of former coup leaders is a real one, as the intensifying political crisis in Venezuela attests. The economy is suffering badly and political violence is increasing as Chávez's opponents seek to drive him from office. The country, ever more polarized, is on the verge of civil war.

Governments led by former coup leaders are likely to be inherently less stable than those headed by non military leaders, for they invite violent actions by those who deem them not to be fully legitimate. Here again, Venezuela is an example. The alternatives available to voters in countries such as Ecuador and Paraguay, where some of the political parties are quite discredited, may not be much more appealing. But the dangers should not be overlooked. The growing clout of such politicians, should it spread elsewhere, would be alarming indeed and constitute a bad omen for democracy in the region.

### **About the Author**

Miguel Diaz directs the CSIS South America Project, which focuses on advising U.S. policymakers and the private sector on political and economic developments primarily through the U.S.-Mercosur Study Group (a bipartisan group in the U.S. Congress). The project also provides briefings for the Washington policy community and private sector. Diaz brings nearly 10 years of investment banking experience to CSIS, having worked most recently as the senior Latin American economist/strategist for Nikko Securities Inc. in New York City. In the early 1990's, Diaz worked as an economist for the Central Intelligence Agency and as a strategic market analyst for Eaton Corporation. Diaz has worked as a consultant and journalist, and remains a regular columnist for the *Economist Intelligence Unit* and other publications focusing on Latin American financial issues. He holds an M.A. degree in Latin American studies from the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a B.A. degree in political science from Hobart College. Born and raised in New York City, Diaz has also lived in Colombia, Venezuela, and Mexico.

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