

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

12 September 1988

GUATEMALA: Potential for a Coup

Summary

Officer discontent with both President Cerezo and Minister of Defense Gramajo over their handling of the counterinsurgency and alleged tolerance of corruption is building. Gramajo probably is in greater danger of being removed than Cerezo because key officers in the High Command--whose support would be crucial to the success of any plot--are concerned about the international consequences of ousting a civilian president. We believe Gramajo's removal would marginally defuse tensions within the military and buy time for the President. Nonetheless, doubts are likely to persist among officers about Cerezo's commitment to rooting out corruption and leftist policies in his government, and the President's hold on power will remain tenuous.

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Civil-military tensions in Guatemala have escalated in three key areas since the failed 11 May coup, and the risk of another putsch is high. Officers are expressing strong criticism of the

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government's conduct of national security issues, particularly its handling of the counterinsurgency. In addition, there is strong concern about civilian meddling in the military, and growing numbers of officers believe that Minister of Defense Gramajo is ineffective in dealing with the President. Finally, President Cerezo's economic policies and slowness to weed out corrupt government officials have fueled more discontent within the officer corps.

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Motives For Coup Plotting

We believe the critical force driving coup plotting among officers is the perception that top civilian and military leaders are undermining efforts to defeat the leftist insurgency.

many field officers blame the Defense Minister and the President for the Guatemalan Army's chronic shortages of weapons, uniforms, logistic support, and transportation, which they believe have contributed to a relatively high casualty rate--some 800 combat casualties since last September--among units in the field. Many officers also are disillusioned that Cerezo has not garnered substantial increases in US military and economic aid since the return to civilian rule in 1986.

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Officers also have long harbored suspicions that the President is trying to gain control of the Army and make it subservient to civilians. Cerezo's efforts to strengthen the National Police, for example, were viewed by the Army as an attempt by the President to build his own politically controlled military force. The military has been concerned throughout Cerezo's term that the President is trying to manipulate military politics.

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Policy initiatives undertaken by Cerezo have aggravated the situation. His previous diplomatic openings toward Cuba and the

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Soviet Union--such as allowing their press representatives to establish offices in Guatemala--were perceived by officers as a backdoor attempt to give Communism a foothold in Guatemala. Talks in late August between the Guatemalan National Reconciliation Commission and Marxist guerrillas ended in failure but probably reinforced perceptions within the officer corps that the government is trying to reach an accommodation with the left. Economic reforms implemented in August are perceived as making life more expensive for the average citizen--but especially the soldier in the field--and are further fueling discontent in the military. [redacted]

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A clique of wealthy rightwing businessmen and retired officers who have long resented Cerezo's ascendancy to power are pursuing a campaign to foment unrest in the Army and to discredit the President. These groups have enormous resources at their disposal and, in our judgment, are trying hard to undermine confidence in the current civilian administration. Businessmen, for example, are buying space in the news media to attack Cerezo and his policies, [redacted]

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Threat to Gramajo

Minister of Defense Gramajo--who is criticized for pursuing political ambitions and ignoring his military obligations--probably is in more immediate jeopardy than is the President. [redacted]

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attache, Gramajo himself believes these officers have the means to organize and launch a coup and views their discontent as a serious threat. [redacted]

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Gramajo has tried to defuse tensions in the military by reassuring the officer corps that he supports their concerns and is a reliable advocate on their behalf with the President, [redacted] We believe, however, that the Defense Minister has largely lost his credibility with junior officers and key officers in the High Command. Gramajo probably could not regain their confidence without distancing himself from the President. [redacted]

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Replacing Gramajo, in our view, probably would placate dissident officers only temporarily. Budgetary constraints would hinder efforts by any new Minister to purchase items--such as helicopters--that would improve the lot of troops in the field. Failure to make substantial improvements in the military probably would result in a resurgence in discontent. In addition, there is no consensus within the Army regarding the best successor for Gramajo. Both Chief of Staff Callejas and Honor Brigade Commander Marroquin aspire to be the Defense Minister and their joint participation in a move against Gramajo would be essential to ensure a smooth transition and minimize the chance of further infighting. [REDACTED]

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Risks to Cerezo

The President lacks the clout to intervene in a decisive way on the issue of Gramajo's tenure because he is himself vulnerable. If Cerezo fights to keep Gramajo in place, rightwing dissidents probably would be able to convince key senior officers to back a coup. If he acquiesces in Gramajo's removal, he would face an Army increasingly resistant to civilian direction. [REDACTED]

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The removal of General Gramajo by Cerezo might initially defuse some of the unrest within the military and buy time for the civilian government. At a minimum, it would be seen in the Army as a signal of the President's commitment to address concerns voiced by dissident officers. In particular, senior officers apparently believe that by replacing Gramajo the military would be able to exercise more authority over the President and give more attention to the counterinsurgency effort. [REDACTED]

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The ouster of Gramajo, however, would carry risks which could aggravate civil-military tensions and threaten Cerezo as well. Although Cerezo has the constitutional right to replace Gramajo, for example, he must ensure that the military high command makes the actual decision in naming the new Defense Minister or risk being accused of meddling in traditional military affairs. Moreover, Gramajo takes pride in his record of actively defending the civilian government during the past two years, [REDACTED] and is likely to feel betrayed if there is an orchestrated effort by Cerezo to remove him. In this circumstance, Gramajo may turn against Cerezo and attempt to rally troops loyal to him to topple the government. [REDACTED]

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Even if Cerezo manages to improve relations with the military, the extreme right is likely to continue public attacks against the President and his policies. We believe Cerezo will remain vulnerable to such attacks because he is unlikely to make

the changes in his lifestyle that would alter his public image [redacted] 25X6
 [redacted] Moreover, he is also unlikely to accede to 25X6
 strong pressure to replace political allies, such as Foreign
 Minister Cabrera and Minister For Specific Affairs Sarah
 Mishaan [redacted] who are abhorred by both the military 25X6
 and the rightwing. At the same time, he probably will have less
 control over the ruling party and face worsening labor unrest
 that the right could exploit if the recently imposed economic
 reforms fail to improve the economy's performance. [redacted] 25X1

Outlook

A coalition of dissident officers and the political rightwing is likely to make another attempt to oust President Cerezo and Minister of Defense Gramajo before the end of the year unless present civil-military tensions are defused. Even though the extremists have been unable to rally broadbased support for such a move so far, their schemes are likely to gain momentum if the President fails to adjust some of his most irritating policies and Gramajo remains in place. In our judgment, a coup is likely if the following conditions exist:

- Three of the four key military units based in Guatemala City--the Mariscal Zavala Brigade, Air Force Tactical Group, Honor Guard Brigade, and Presidential Guard--agree to back a coup.
- At least one person with political stature, such as Chief of Staff Callejas or Honor Brigade Commander Marroquin, agrees to support the ouster and help restructure a post-Cerezo government.
- The plotters believe they have an effective strategy to deflect international criticism. [redacted] 25X1

We do not believe all the elements necessary for another coup attempt are currently in place. In particular, the leadership required for a coup attempt appears to be lacking. Although senior officers like the Chief of Staff and the Commander of the Honor Brigade are unhappy with the President, [redacted] 25X1
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[redacted] concerns about the fragile economy and the 25X1
 possibility that a coup would dry up international aid is a
 potential restraint or those now fomenting unrest. However, the
 momentum and cooperation necessary for a successful coup could
 build suddenly and with little advance warning. [redacted] 25X1

If the President were ousted in a coup, the military probably would establish a caretaker government headed by a civilian and announce its intent to hold new elections. [redacted] 25X6

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[Redacted] In our judgment, growing public discontent with the President does not imply strong public backing for military rule. Consequently, most Guatemalans probably would press the military to hold new elections, perhaps as early as 1990.

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