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PANAMA: NORIEGA'S POTENTIAL
SUCCESSOR AND HIS ROLE

6 May 1988

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PANAMA: NORIEGA'S POTENTIAL SUCCESSOR AND HIS ROLE

Summary

We believe Noriega's successor would be less powerful, but nevertheless would be the dominant actor--in the tradition of Panamanian politics--even in a government of national reconciliation:

- Even a military commander who wished to lower somewhat the military's political profile most likely would remain the chief actor in Panamanian politics because of the military's broad base of support and resources.
- The Defense Chief's dominating role in politics probably would be further assured by disunity within the opposition, which even now is divided over the issue of the appropriate role of the military in politics and which would have great difficulty maintaining a united front in a new government.

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Noriega will want his successor to be an officer who will defend the military's dominant political position. He also would favor an officer loyal enough to protect him from opposition retaliation and to allow him to exert influence behind the scenes.

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Noriega plans for Chief of Staff Justine to succeed him on an interim basis with Deputy Chief of Staff Castillo eventually assuming command. If in the course of negotiations for a reconciliation government, the

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This typescript was prepared by the Office of African and Latin American Analysis, with a contribution from Office of Leadership Analysis. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Middle American-Caribbean Division

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military agrees to mandatory retirement after 25 years, Noriega would be forced to choose a more junior officer on the General Staff--such as Chief of Intelligence Wong or his relative Lieutenant Colonel Sieiro. The prospects of a purged officer, such as Lieutenant Colonel Herrera Hassan, being selected as Defense Chief are extremely remote. [REDACTED]

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This paper discusses the degree of political power a new Defense Chief and the military would retain following Noriega's resignation and identifies possible successors to Noriega as Defense Chief. The assumption underlying our analysis is that Noriega will step down as Defense Chief and that a government of national reconciliation divided between present regime supporters and the opposition will be formed as part of a negotiated solution to the crisis. [REDACTED]

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The Roots of the Military's Supreme Position

The strongman tradition of the Military Commander in Panama dates to the 1940s when Police Chief General Jose Remon dominated politics and removed presidents at will. The current military-dominated political system in Panama was created by General Omar Torrijos, who fostered broad grassroots support for the military through coopting interest groups across the political spectrum and extensive civil action programs. The military's predominance in all facets of Panamanian political life has reinforced public perceptions that it is the only institution capable of running the country and has perpetuated weak civilian institutions. Panama's military commanders have demonstrated a willingness to use their power to ensure that political developments do not threaten the military's preeminent position in Panama; Noriega and his predecessor--General Ruben Paredes--removed three Panamanian presidents in the last six years and rigged the last presidential election to assure that the military's preferred candidate won. [REDACTED]

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A New Defense Chief's Power

Whomever the new Defense Chief is, we believe he will be less powerful than Noriega. He probably will need to devote time and energy to heal wounds in the officer corps stemming from the prolonged crisis. He may also concede some latitude in decisionmaking to the national reconciliation government as a result of a negotiated settlement. The military, however, is likely to strongly resist sacrificing any control of government institutions for fear of losing financial benefits and patronage positions. [REDACTED]

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We believe the new Defense Chief will remain the key political actor in Panama. The extent to which the new Defense Chief dominates a reconciliation government will partly depend on his abilities and inclination to rule, but even a commander willing to reduce the Defense Forces' role in politics would likely remain a principal actor in Panamanian politics because of tradition as well as the military's broad support base and resources. The President almost certainly would remain in a weak position and the major parties of the ruling coalition--assuming that the Defense Forces' will retain considerable patronage power--probably would remain allied with the military. Moreover, some elements of the military's support base--notably labor groups--would remain loyal because they are strongly opposed to many of the opposition's political objectives. Finally, any Commander who sought to disengage himself and the military from politics would confront the monumental task of restructuring the role of the Defense Forces, meeting significant resistance from many military officers and their political allies.

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Impediments to Opposition Influence

The Defense Chief's dominating role in politics most likely would be further insulated by the difficulty the opposition would have in presenting a united front in a reconciliation government. Present critical weaknesses such as distrust between the Civil Crusade and opposition political parties and factionalism within both groups would be magnified in a reconciliation government as opposition leaders jockeyed among themselves for dominance. Likewise, the opposition's inexperience in governing and narrow bases of support--with the exception of the Authentic Panamenista Party--will hinder opposition efforts to wean power from the military.

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The most critical impediment to opposition progress in exerting power in a reconciliation government, however, would most likely be differing views over the role the military should play in a new government. The opposition's present narrow focus on ousting Noriega has dampened debate on this issue to date but it probably would quickly become a source of contention that the Defense Chief could exploit to divide and weaken his opponents. The new Defense Chief might agree to some limited restrictions on the military's political role to appear receptive to opposition demands for reforms in hopes of coopting his more moderate opponents. [redacted] that some opposition groups are already maneuvering to cut a deal with the military to guarantee participation in a transitional government, and we believe the temptation to ally with the military will increase as opposition members in the government collide over objectives and ambitions. Indeed, even a reform-minded Defense Chief could find himself remaining the final political arbiter in Panama due to the inability of opposition forces to unite on the mechanisms and goals of powersharing.

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Candidates for the Next Defense Chief

Noriega will want his successor as Defense Chief to be professionally competent and able to protect the military's dominant role in politics. In addition, Noriega will want assurances that the new military commander would protect him and other officers from opposition retaliation. Ideally, Noriega would want an officer whose loyalty to him is certain and through whom he could try to remain influential behind the scenes.

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Noriega probably would name a successor in accordance with the military's traditional chain of command and respect for seniority, thus assuring General Staff approval. According to tradition, Chief of Staff Colonel Marcos Justine is next in line; Noriega and all of his predecessors became Defense Chief after occupying the Chief of Staff position.

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however, that Noriega plans for Justine to act as an interim replacement for only a few months. Although Justine is five years past the military's informal retirement date (25 years) and has long stated his desire to retire when Noriega does, we believe he would accept Noriega's offer. Noriega may hope that installing Justine--a dedicated career officer and his point man--would allow him to continue exerting power behind the scenes during the critical transitional period, particularly since Justine reportedly is not a forceful commander.

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Deputy Chiefs of Staff Colonel Alberto Purcell and Colonel Elias Castillo are second and third in line for command, and both have been mentioned as possible successors to Noriega.

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Purcell, who heads the Air Force, is a longtime crony of Noriega's, notoriously corrupt, and highly nationalistic. While Castillo, who heads the Ground Forces, is not known as a staunch Noriega supporter, his reputation as a more professional and apolitical officer probably would make him more acceptable to the opposition members of any government of reconciliation as well as to the General Staff.

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reports Noriega plans for Castillo to become Defense Chief--after a short interim period of leadership by Justine--because of his strong support within the officer corps. Noriega's reported suspicion that Justine and Purcell were aware of coup plotting last March probably also improves Castillo's chances for advancement.

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The odds of a dark horse candidate being selected as the next Defense Chief would increase substantially if a negotiated resolution to the crisis includes a stipulation for mandatory retirement of all officers with 25 years of service. All of the full colonels have at least 25 years, as do many of the lieutenant colonels on the General Staff. Of those remaining, Noriega may favor Lieutenant Colonel Aquilino Sieiro to succeed him. Noriega's brother-in-law and a staunch loyalist, Sieiro has

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21 years of military service and was promoted to lieutenant colonel following the March coup attempt. [redacted]

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[redacted] Noriega is grooming Sieiro for a leadership position and has made repeated comments to members of the General Staff that he is a well-rounded officer who would be acceptable to the US as a military leader. Noriega, however, probably would find the General Staff more amenable to naming Lieutenant Colonel Guillermo Wong the next Commander because of his seniority and reputation. Although not regarded as a long-time Noriega loyalist, Wong's recent elevation to Chief of Intelligence--a traditionally important position Noriega himself held for a number of years--indicates Noriega trusts him and has confidence in his abilities. [redacted]

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We believe that the prospects for a successor to Noriega emerging from below the General Staff or among purged officers are remote. Although many middle-level officers are Noriega loyalists and owe their careers to him, concern about leaving the Defense Forces in inexperienced hands and fear of creating internal strains in the military probably would cause Noriega to refrain from advancing an officer without seniority. Neither Noriega nor most of the General Staff would consider naming any officer dismissed from the Defense Forces--such as Lieutenant Colonel Herrera Hassan--as a possible successor. Noriega has long regarded Herrera in particular as a potential threat to his power, [redacted] and now believes that he has joined the opposition. The Defense Chief views Herrera as a traitor, and undoubtedly fears that Herrera's reformist tendencies would erode the military's political power and threaten Noriega's interests--perhaps to the point of endangering his life. [redacted]

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Officers of the Panamanian Defense Forces General Staff

(Number in parenthesis indicates years of service.)

Colonels

Marcos Justines (30)	Chief of Staff
Alberto Purcell (25)	Deputy Chief of Staff/Aviation
Elias Castillo (25)	Deputy Chief of Staff/Ground
Angel Mina (29)	Chief, Economic Services
Rogelio Alba* (27)	Chief, Joint Committee on Canal Defense and Security
Julio Ow Young* (25)	Chief, Panama National Police
Eros Cal* (25)	Commander. Fort Espinar

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Lieutenant Colonels

Ricardo Garibaldo (30)	Chief, Administration and Personnel
Eugenio Corro (27)	Chief, War Materiel Services
Eric Aguilera (25)	Chief, Penitentiary System
Eduardo Herrera (23)	Ambassador to Israel
Alfredo Remon (23)	Chief, Protocol
Roberto Armijo (22)	Commander, Navy
Guillermo Wong (23)	Chief, Intelligence
Teodoro Alexander (25)	Chief, Adjutant General Staff
Gerardo Garcia* (23)	Chief, Logistics
Nivaldo Madrinan* (19)	Chief, National Department of Investigation
Moises Correa* (22)	Chief, Operations
Aquilino Sieiro* (21)	Chief, Combined Board
Virgilio Mirones* (21)	Chief, Civic Action
Aristides Hassan* (26)	Inspector General
Carlos Velarde* (14)	Chaplain General
Carlos Garcia* (24)	Senior Medical Officer

*Promoted in March 1988

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