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Deriving a Solution to Venezuela: Civil-Military Relations Can Help

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How does one define “healthy” civil-military relations? The simplest definition would suggest a nation’s military is subordinate to its ruling body. In other words, the guys with all the guns listen to those without any. So how then would we evaluate this relationship in a country like Venezuela? The military has remained loyal and subordinate to the ruling body, so does it meet the criteria? It is providing the only real stability for the country despite the questionable legitimacy of this government. Our starting definition is thus far too simple. And yet, when you add layers of complexity or depth to the discussion, it becomes difficult to grade the health of a particular nation’s civil-military relations. Comparative analysis is difficult if not impossible in the field of civil-military relations.

The effective functioning of this relationship is best evaluated by the citizens of the respective nation. The citizens get to decide what government they want and how it operates, unless the military prevents it. All too often, we (US policy makers) apply our western [Huntingtonian](#) tradition as the example others should follow. This is impractical and has the tendency to result in poor policy options. We cannot apply the US model to fix or improve others in all instances. Instead, what if we identified the outcome we want, and then leveraged the existing framework to meet that goal? Attempting to alter the framework is futile, unless military intervention or the fomenting of a coup are on the table. The alternative, however, requires a citizen-like understanding of the country in question. For this brief analysis, Venezuela will serve as a case study to highlight how this recommended approach might work.

The Venezuelan military is arguably the last functioning apparatus of the government. The soldiers currently manage and [run the oil industry](#), perform trash removal duties, and even [change lightbulbs](#). As such, their political capital is high. They have ample leverage on the government should they demand change. So why then are they taking directives from a leader who is not recognized by the UN or OAS or most of the Western world? Recent [statements](#) by Venezuela’s Defense Minister offer insight. He suggests “Doing the right thing is doing what’s written in the constitution. ... Doing the right thing is respecting the will of the people.” An interesting take and the “correct” answer according to our own view of civil-military relations. Yet, who does he consider to be “the people”? Is he following all aspects of the constitution or only those portions that benefit his agenda?

Article 328 in Chapter III of Venezuela’s recognized [constitution](#) states:

The National Armed Forces constitute an essentially professional institution, with no political orientation, organized by the State to guarantee the independence and sovereignty of the Nation and ensure the integrity of its geographical space, through military defense, cooperation for the purpose of maintaining internal order and active participation in national development, in accordance with this Constitution and the law. In performing their functions, they are at the exclusive service of the Nation, and in no case at the service of any person or political partisanship. The pillars on which they are founded are discipline, obedience and subordination.

Key phrases such as “no political orientation” or “exclusive service of the Nation” stand out because common practice now suggests rampant violation of such principles. The constitution is used as an excuse to legitimize the military’s power when in reality, their loyalty is to the acting President, Maduro. The suggestion that the Army is acting on behalf of “the people” or “the country” is a fallacy. The “country” or “the people” are defined as literal card-carrying members of the party. The system in place is socialist. If you want to eat, you must show your party identification to receive aid. Those who question the government’s legitimacy through protest or other means are stripped of their cards and viewed as a non-

citizen. Therefore, only those who are loyal are considered “the people” and eligible for the protection provided by the military. A convenient way for the military to protect its political capital.

This mere wave-top understanding reveals numerous structural civil-military weaknesses if we use the US framework. This is not however uncommon in Latin America. So, then what is the solution? It depends on our objectives. The [US and dozens of other nations](#) want Juan Guaido recognized as the legitimate President. His [claim](#) to the position relies on the same constitution that Venezuela’s military is using to support Maduro. Can they both be right? The military has very real incentives to continue its support of the Maduro government. For example, Maduro has not and likely will not prosecute military members for previous or future war crimes. Guaido has recently [claimed](#) his desire to grant amnesty however that is less certain. Soldiers burned these amnesty letters indicating their support for the current government. Despite the negative civil-military implications of granting amnesty, the US and other Guaido supporters should continue to offer firm written agreements or proclamations to guarantee amnesty.

This is just one example of a myriad of civil-military relations aspects that should be analyzed in any attempt at crafting policy towards Venezuela. Any solution to the current crisis in the country must involve the Venezuelan military and its general officer corps. Even an attempt [to end the humanitarian crisis](#) with aid convoys must have the military’s support.

From a theoretical comparative civil-military relations viewpoint¹, Venezuela fails to meet most of the criteria of healthy relations. For example, the civilian government depends on the military as the primary means of internal security, the military has been employed against fellow citizenry in a policing role, civilian institutions are not so powerful as to dominate politics, bribery and other forms of corruption are present in the military, the country has a history of coups, strength of civilian institutions is low, the military is an economic stakeholder, the military is immersed in the daily administrative details of the government, and ultimately the military behavior undermines civilian supremacy in the long run. Policy that attempts to change any of these towards the healthier end of the spectrum will likely fail in the near term. It certainly will not help Guaido be endorsed and supported by the military.

An answer key to Venezuela exists. It starts with an understanding of the current system and ends with developing policy that works with the existing framework. Only after near term goals, such as the recognition of Guaido or the stabilization of the economy can structural changes be implemented to promote healthier long-term relationships between the military and the civilian government.

¹ Numerous sources and authors were used to generate these criteria: Finer, Samuel E. *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*. Praeger, 1962; Nordlinger, Eric A. *Soldiers in politics: military coups and governments*. Prentice Hall, 1977; Edmonds, Martin. *Armed services and society*. No. 2. Leicester University, 1988; Koonings, Kees, and Dirk Kruijt, eds. *Political armies: The military and nation building in the age of democracy*. Zed Books, 2002; Feaver, Peter D. *Armed servants: Agency, oversight, and civil-military relations*. Harvard University Press, 2009.