

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

García seeks unified command

The departure for Mexico of Peru's head of state leaves behind military turmoil and continuing coup rumors.

In the week prior to his March 23-26 trip to Mexico, Peruvian President Alan García was obliged to appear on national television twice to deny the insistent coup rumors that still inundate Lima. While things are under control for now, it appears that President García is facing the fiercest destabilization campaign of his 18-month government.

The coup rumors were launched in response to a proposal from President García for the creation of a single defense ministry, to replace the three largely autonomous ministries of the Army, Navy, and Air Force that have existed until now.

In proposing the change, and convoking a special session of the Peruvian Congress exclusively to debate and ultimately approve the law, García argued that his intention is to impose the principle of unity of command, as per the exigencies of modern military practice. He emphasized that the need to enforce such a principle was made most urgent by the state of virtual, albeit undeclared, warfare in which Peru finds itself.

The position of the Peruvian executive was immediately backed by the nationalist wing—both active and retired—of the armed forces, who, through their spokesman Gen. (ret.) Edgardo Mercado Jarrín, endorsed the concept of modernizing the operational structure of the Peruvian armed forces.

These nationalists not only defended the “unity of command” idea, but emphasized that such a restructur-

ing of the military would enable it to serve as a genuine “motor” of national development. By unifying the industrial and technological capacity of the armed forces—which today ranges from light industry to nuclear power—the military could function as the spearhead of an industrial development program for the nation as a whole.

According to polls taken in Lima, at least 60% of the population is in favor of García's proposal, with 25% opposed and more than 11% undecided.

On March 15, García insisted that opposition to his proposal was based on fear of change, and not rational arguments: “I don't believe that this proposal is inconvenient; what I think is that it provides for rationality and will modernize our State. . . . There must be a joint, coordinated ministry, budget, and administration, made up of all the resources the country has available. . . . for its defense.”

García went on to note that for too long the Peruvian citizenry yielded to the military as the great arbiter of who would rule and who would not. “I emphatically say: This is part of a history in which the coups and counter-coups prevented Peru's democratic development. . . . There is a great fear among civilians, among citizens, of touching these matters, but I for one have no such fear.”

The response came on March 19, when 155 former military officers published a statement in the press which, while not formally opposing

the defense ministry proposal, argued that it appeared at an “inopportune moment,” given the serious nature of internal warfare facing the country. The statement insisted that such a “modification” of the nation's defenses could only be arrived at after careful and global review, and suggested that García's proposal was in fact an effort to “politicize” the armed forces. The signers explain that their reason for going public is to avoid “political polarization” among active armed forces personnel which would not only act to the detriment of the military's national defense mission, but to the letter of the constitution as well.

Among the signers is former President, Gen. Francisco Morales Bermúdez, who headed the coup to overthrow Peru's nationalist leader Gen. Juan Velasco Alvarado in 1975. Sixty of the signers are former Army officers, 47 former officers of the Air Force, and 48 from the Navy.

The visible head of the anti-García elements within the military and ex-military layers is retired Gen. Luis Cisneros Visquerra, who served in the previous government of Fernando Belaúnde Terry. Cisneros Visquerra—nicknamed “El Gaucho” for his affinity with the generals of Argentina's “dirty war”—has been charged several times with involvement with the fascist Masonic lodge, P-2. The Peruvian press has named Cisneros Visquerra more than once as a protector of the drug trade. He published a statement March 18 giving his full endorsement to the published protests of the 155, and lamented that he was outside of the country at the time and thus unable to sign.

Alongside Cisneros stand such virulent would-be coup makers as retired Navy Adm. Luis Vargas Caballero, who was the author of a frustrated coup attempt against Velasco.