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PANAMANIAN POLITICS: THE LEGACY OF TORRIJISMO
AND PROSPECTS FOR DEMILITARIZATION

by
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June 1991

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**Panamanian Politics: The Legacy of Torrijismo and Prospects
for Demilitarization**

by

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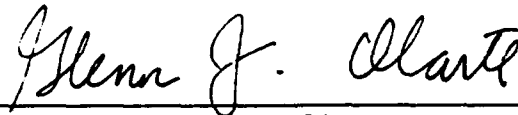
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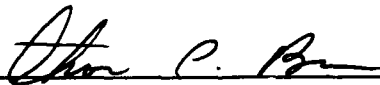
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Torrijismo's legacy and impact on the Public Force's professionalization and institutionalization in an attempt to ascertain prospects for the successful demilitarization of Panamanian politics.

As a result of the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama, 21 years of military dominance in Panama ended. The Panamanian military and police institution, the Panamanian Defense Force, was dismantled and replaced with a new organization known as the Public Force. Due to its large complement of former PDF members, the Public Force has been faced by civilian suspicion and mistrust. Public Force attempts at professionalization and institutionalization have been opposed for fear that Panama's armed institution will once again intervene in politics.

Dissatisfaction with the civilian government, and the increasing political clout of Torrijismo's political party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party, forebodes a new Torrijista, PRD-Public Force, political alliance. Based on this analysis, the author recommends that the United States delegate its mentor role to politically neutral agencies such as the United Nations or the Organization of American States.



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I. INTRODUCTION

"Operation Just Cause," the December 1989 U.S. military intervention in Panama, was viewed by a majority of Panamanians as a liberation from more than two decades of military rule. By defeating the Panamanian Defense Forces (PDF) militarily, the U.S. destroyed Panama's dominant political actor and dismantled the hated and feared dictatorship of General Manuel Antonio Noriega.¹ Despite the defeat of Panama's military institution and the installation of civilian rule, the prospect for the long-term survival of civilian rule in Panama is unclear.

In response to the chaotic period of rampant crime and civil disorder during the aftermath of the invasion, the newly-appointed government of President Guillermo Endara Gallimany chose to create another armed government organization, known as the Public Force, to assume the public security duties of the defunct PDF. Although formally under civilian authority, the Public Force has been met by widespread public suspicion and mistrust due to its formation around a core of former PDF members. Civilian apprehension centers on the

¹Devroy, Ann and Tyler, Patrick, "U.S. Forces Crush Panamanian Military; Noriega on the Run," *Washington Post*, reported in *Information Services Latin America* (ISLA) 1989, Volume 39, Number 6, p. 108, 21 December 1989.

fear that the Public Force will conspire to regain the military institution's former position of political dominance.²

The Endara government's campaign of national demilitarization and reorganization has left the Public Force severely weakened and in disarray, but the Public Force potential for threatening and endangering civilian rule remains high. As the Public Force reestablishes itself as a police force, the need for a professional identity and the development of institutional character will likely focus on its status as an armed institution. An organizational identity is crucial in instilling the sense of duty and cohesiveness necessary for the Public Force to effectively carry out its duties. The necessity for this sense of mission and institutional character is exacerbated by the bitterness and low morale of the Public Force resulting from the destruction of the military institution during the invasion, as well as Panamanian society's mistrust, lack of respect, and negative perception of the Public Force since its creation. The character of the Public Force identity will ultimately influence the permanence and stability of civilian rule in Panama.

This thesis examines the prospects for the successful transition of the PDF to an apolitical Public Force in the context of military rule in Panama under the late General Omar Torrijos Herrera 1968-81. The thesis of this paper is that Torrijismo will serve as the defining concept of the attempt to professionalize the Public Force. The

²Koster, K.M., "In Panama We're Rebuilding Frankenstein," *New York Times*, reported in *Information Services Latin America (ISLA)*, Volume 39, Number 6, p. 228, 29 December 1989.

"new" Public Force institution will endeavor to return to the old days of Torrijismo to achieve its institutional cohesion, strength, and identity. The implications of this renewed institutional character will be a strengthened and cohesive armed institution, and the emergence of the Public Force as a potentially strong political actor, likely to be drawn into Panama's unstable civilian political scenery. As such, the resurgence of Torrijismo in the Public Force will negatively affect the present demilitarization and future stability of civilian rule in Panama.

This research is relevant to the broader issue of transitions from military to civilian rule in Latin America. Unlike the other reversals of military rule in Latin America since 1980, Panama presents the unique case where the formerly dominant military institution has been totally dismantled.³ Despite this difference, Panama's potentially serious threat to civilian dominance from its armed institution is common to Argentina, Chile, Peru, and other Latin American countries.

In this thesis, the research will be approached through a chronology of related questions making a case for the relevance of Torrijismo in post-invasion politics and in the transition of the Public Force. First, how was Torrijismo able to transcend opposition

³In the case of Grenada, the dismantled People's Revolutionary Army was only a fledgling military force, hardly comparable to the Panamanian Defense Force, making the dismantling of the PDF the unique case of demilitarization in Latin America in the 1980s. Vasquez, Juan, "Military Leader of Island Coup Reported Seized," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 October 1983, reported in *Information Services Latin America* (ISLA) 1983, p. 266, Volume 27, Number 4.

to its military origins and create one of the most durable legacies of military rule in Latin America? Second, what is the contrast in the military institution between Torrijo's tenure and the Noriega years? Third, what are the current prospects for demilitarization and the transition of the Public Force to an apolitical force? Fourth, what is the relationship between Torrijismo and the Public Force in civilian politics and what will be its impact on the survival of civilian rule in Panama? And finally, what should the U.S. response be?

II. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF TORRIJISMO

A. ORIGINS AND IDEALS

Torrijismo as a national movement can be traced to the undisputed 13-year tenure of Omar Torrijos Herrera as the leader of Panama. Torrijos won a power struggle for leadership of the military following a bloodless military coup in October 1968 that overthrew Arnulfo Arias' civilian government. Torrijos' assumption of the mantle of leadership marked a watershed period in Panamanian history, the effects of which continue to impact the nation two decades after his death.

Born on 13 February 1929 in Santiago, Veraguas Province to middle class parents, Torrijos attended the Salvadoran Military Academy between 1947 and 1952 and joined the Panamanian National Guard, Panama's military and police force, in 1952. By the 1960s he was a senior officer assigned to the headquarters staff in charge of the National Guard's Civic Action program tasked with the improvement and development of the rural infrastructure. He regularly toured the Panamanian countryside in performance of his duties and developed numerous contacts that would eventually prove useful in legitimizing the National Guard's rule, as well as broadening his personal base of support. Torrijos' adeptness at coalition building allowed Torrijismo to transcend its military origins and become a widely supported national movement. The populist appeal and inclusionary character of Torrijismo became so successful that major

segments of groups that initially opposed military rule ultimately became part of Torrijismo's coalition. Torrijismo's continuing influence in civilian society has direct implications for the transformation of the Public Force to an apolitical force.

Torrijismo was never drafted into a doctrinal statement of ideology. It can best be described as a combination of Torrijos' personal views, and the progressive social orientation of the National Guard. It was a unique combination of socialism, populism, and Panamanian nationalism aimed at improving conditions for the traditionally economically marginalized and politically excluded segment of the Panamanian population. Its dominant theme was a repudiation and correction of Panama's traditional political, economic, and social status quo that was believed to cause the tremendous social and economic inequalities existent in Panama. Torrijismo collectively disowned not only the traditional elite who maintained the system and with it perpetuated the inequality, but also all the members of the system, the oligarchical Conservatives and Liberals, as well as the radicalized Socialist and Communists.

Torrijismo was an eclectic movement, as Torrijos had studied the works of Peruvian revolutionary José Maria Mariategui, Karl Marx, and learned first hand from Spanish refugee teachers about Spanish fascism's radical social experiment in Spain. Torrijos' admiration for the 1968 military coup in Peru and his implementation of collective farms and other radical reforms in Panamanian society have been described as proof of his leftist leanings, but closer examination reveals genuine non-ideological reasons for many of his actions. In a

letter to U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy describing his involvement in counterinsurgency as a junior officer, Torrijos reflected:

I was ...most convinced that these young slain guerillas were not the real cause but rather the symptom of discontent...if I had not been wearing a uniform, I would have joined them. This is where my determination arose that if one day I would direct our Armed Forces, I would unite them with the best interests of our country.⁴

In a later telegram to President Richard Nixon, Torrijos stated that included in his basic principles was the "...total repudiation of communism and all other extremist ideologies..." and that Panama's development programs would "...identify completely with the philosophy of the Alliance For Progress."⁵ In the wake of a 1969 counter-coup that almost unseated him, Torrijos moved to establish a base of support in order to maintain power by implementing reforms that addressed both the inequality and built support for Torrijismo. Reformist policies also reflected the times, as the U.S. Alliance for Progress funds could be used to finance reform projects.⁶ Torrijismo's mishmash of ideology eventually evolved into a broad-based movement, as many formerly excluded segments of Panamanian society gained inclusion in national politics through membership in the coalition of Torrijismo and the National Guard.

⁴Dinges, John, *Our Man in Panama*, p. 35, Random House Inc, 1990.

⁵Kempe, Frederick, *Divorcing the Dictator*, p. 71, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1990.

⁶Ropp, Steve, C., *Panamanian Politics: From Guarded Country to National Guard, 1968-1975*, p.48, Westview Press Inc., 1986.

An additional aspect of Torrijismo's reformist character was the historical context in which his generation of National Guard officers were trained to perceive their mission and role in society. With the world in the midst of the Cold War, continuous U.S. training and influence on the National Guard focused on the prevention of another Cuba in Latin America. U.S. training stressed the link between military security and economic development as a means to counter inequality along with the role of social justice in preventing revolutionary political violence. In this context, despite their reformist orientation, the majority of the National Guard's officers were strongly anti-communist, and highly suspicious of the political left. Torrijos had had extensive training in U.S. military facilities in the Canal Zone and fit this prototype. As a junior officer, Torrijos was one of the first Panamanian officers to gain actual combat experience in counterinsurgency against guerillas infiltrated into Panama from Cuba.

Despite the National Guard's traditional student role with its U.S. military teacher, another significant hallmark of Torrijismo was the opposition to continued U.S. presence in the Canal Zone and meddling in Panamanian affairs. Long a focal point of Panamanian-American relations, under Torrijos the Panamanian desire to gain sovereign control of the Panama Canal was internationalized in order to force serious U.S. attention to the issue. Torrijos also believed that the U.S. had been behind the 1969 counter-coup to overthrow him and this was reflected in Torrijismo's anti-American rhetoric and attempts to show Panamanian independence from American influence in the

international arena. Eventually Torrijismo came to symbolize Panamanian nationalism, as Torrijos' efforts resulted in the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties that won the Republic of Panama sovereignty of the Panama Canal and a termination date for the U.S. enclave presence in Panama. Nationalistic credibility also enhanced Torrijismo's transition from a military movement to one with more civilian support as Torrijos' successful negotiation of the Panama Canal Treaties had accomplished in ten years what generations of oligarchic civilian governments had been unable to do.

Torrijismo has been described as the only movement in Panamanian history to successfully encompass and create a balance between black and white, left and right, rich and poor, military and civilian. Torrijismo's primary success resulted from its ability to unite into a single movement, groups traditionally opposed to each other, such as university students and the National Guard, labor and the economic elite. The legacy of Torrijismo's pervasiveness with the various groups of Panamanian society is clearly evident in Panama today, and will probably remain so for years to come. As a result of Torrijismo's inclusionary, populist policies, substantial social, political, and economic advancements were achieved in Panama between 1968-81, especially benefiting the marginalized and excluded segments of the population. Under Torrijismo the military institution served as the transmission belt for these progressive changes.

The return to political dominance of the elite through the U.S.-installed government has created a perception that the advancements

of Torrijismo are being halted and reversed. However, the military institution's long affinity with marginal groups makes the Public Force a likely guarantor of Torrijismo's reforms. In addition, the patronage character of Panamanian politics is conducive to Public Force participation in politics. The current civilian adherents of Torrijismo also remain politically significant and organized enough to influence the Public Force's outlook on political participation. In order to understand this relationship, however, it is relevant to examine Torrijismo's past role in society. In order to measure and understand the present significance of Torrijismo it is necessary to briefly examine the scope and character of Torrijos' support in the previous years, as well as the long-term changes achieved because of Torrijismo, and its nexus with Panamanian militarism.

B. RISE TO DOMINANCE

Until 1968, there were three centers of power in Panama, the presidential palace, the rabiblanco⁷ oligarchy, and the U.S. Embassy. Due to the importance of business supporting the Panama Canal and the U.S. enclave Canal Zone, Panama was maintained as a businessman's (as opposed to banana) republic. Civilian presidents originating from the elite class succeeded one another in office

⁷Ropp, Steve, C., "Panama After the Invasion: Prospects For Democratization," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of American Political Science Association, San Francisco, California, 30 August-2 September 1990. Rabiblanco, literally "white butts" (sic) or "white tails" refers to the white Panamanian upper class vis-a-vis the rabiprietos or "brown butts" (sic) or non-white Panamanian lower and middle class.

usually with the approval of the incumbent. Even the single president from the ranks of the National Guard, Jose Antonio Remon was of elite origins. Political violence was rare⁸ as Remon was the only president assassinated in office. This tradition of white executives of European descent, was in stark contrast to the 90% black and mestizo population of more than two million Panamanians.

Regular elections were held, and Panama was regarded as a democracy, but vote rigging by the incumbent party was taken for granted. An election "victory" was a margin of votes so large the incumbent government's Electoral Tribunal could not annul the vote as General Manuel Antonio Noriega did in 1989. The common saying was, "Its not who wins that counts, but who counts that wins."⁹ Corruption was endemic but arguably conditions were not as severe as in some other parts of Latin America. Panama's excellent infrastructure and its first rate modern medical, educational, and communications facilities made her the envy of much of Latin America. Much of Panama was up to U.S. standards, a result of her long relationship with the United States. The poor were less hopeless, the rich less baronial, the elite less lilly white, and the military less repressive.¹⁰ Panamanians seemed to have a lower threshold for violence so differences, including political, were routinely settled through the transactional cutting of a deal. Politics consisted more of different

⁸Dinges, p. 41.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

business interests than recognizable ideologies. The threat from communism during the height of the Cold War, so tangible in much of Latin America, was limited to the several hundred leftist members of the Party of the People, predominantly intellectuals at the University of Panama. Labor unions were weak, campesinos lacked effective organization, and the Roman Catholic Church had a long tradition of noninvolvement in national politics. Panama's rabiblanco dominated political, economic, and social life, centered around the transit zone and U.S. presence and investment.

By the 1960s, the wave of increased social urgency in the Western Hemisphere led by the U.S. Alliance for Progress and the related fear of another Cuba in Latin America caused even the socially bankrupt oligarchy to initiate token actions to ease social inequity. President Roberto Chiari, of the Liberal Party, attempted a low-cost housing program funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development, but when his Liberal successor, Marco Robles, proposed economic reforms to tax oligarchy-owned business, the Liberal Party split over the issue. In 1968, partly because of the Liberal Party disunity, twice-elected and deposed Arnulfo Arias again was elected to the presidency, due to his sheer charisma with the general population rather than political ideology or organization. An anti-militarist, he had tried to weaken the National Guard, and disenfranchise many non-white and non-mestizo Panamanians in the past. Though personally popular, his open admiration of European fascism during his first term in 1940, had led to his overthrow by the National Guard in 1941, with U.S. government approval. Reelected in 1948, he was impeached after

attempting to alter the constitution and impose authoritarian rule. His final presidency in 1968 lasted only 11 days before he was again deposed and exiled by the National Guard.

C. THREE PHASES OF CONSOLIDATION

The 1968 overthrow of Arias was the event that brought Torrijos into national power. Bitter from his previous unseatings, Arias assumed office on 1 October 1968 and attempted to remove the two most senior officers of the National Guard. On 11 October, while President Arias was out with his mistress, the National Guard again deposed him.¹¹ The National Guard coup was a response to outside interference in the military institution's internal structure. As a result, the provisional junta that took power was unprepared to cohesively run the government. The junta's initial manifesto clearly illustrated this lack of direction, and even favored the quick return to civilian rule.¹² Inside the National Guard, Lieutenant Colonel Torrijos emerged as the new commander determined to maintain power and build public support for military rule.

In attempting to expand his following and coopt opposition to the military coup, Torrijos froze the price of basic food stuffs and rents, and diverted funds from the National Assembly to the University of Panama to placate militant students. The latter attempt failed and

¹¹ *Panama: A Country Study*, Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, Fourth Edition, p. 43, U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989.

¹² *Panamanian Politics*, p. 38.

resulted in the National Guard occupation of the University of Panama. Eventually the National Assembly was disbanded and the University of Panama closed for several months while its faculty and student body were purged.¹³

In January 1969 another power struggle ensued between Colonel Torrijos as Commander in Chief of the National Guard and Lieutenant Colonel Boris Martinez, his second in command. The brash Martinez, without Torrijos' prior concurrence, announced a national agrarian reform program that alarmed land owners and entrepreneurs. Martinez's proposals to discontinue using the National Guard to prevent national demonstrations also alarmed the U.S. residents of the Canal Zone. Memories of the bloody 1964 riots that occurred when Panamanian students attempted to raise the Panamanian flag in Canal Zone, and the lack of support by the National Guard resulting in violence between the U.S. military and Panamanian students, placed U.S. support behind the more moderate Torrijos.¹⁴ Torrijos prevailed and Martinez was exiled to the United States.

While not denouncing the proposed reforms, Torrijos sought to assure Panamanian and foreign investors, especially the United States, that their interests were not threatened. But in order to thwart potential criticism that he was a pawn of the United States, Torrijos quickly adopted some symbolic left-of-center policies and causes such as support for Cuba's Castro. While keeping key leaders

¹³*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 44.

¹⁴*Panamanian Politics*, p. 40.

of the Communist Party and militant student organizations imprisoned, scores of other leftists were released. Leftist student activists were appointed to the Agrarian Reform Institute, a government agency, while a gesture to urban masses and labor was also made by appointment of Romulo Escobar Bethancourt, a black lawyer long tied to organized labor, to the post of Minister of Labor.¹⁵

Torrijos' efforts at establishing a mass base of support among the majority of non-white Panamanians alarmed the white oligarchy that had traditionally ruled Panama. Perceiving the prospects of continued military rule as a direct threat to their dominance, the oligarchy attempted to reinstate themselves. While Torrijos, by then a Brigadier General, was on vacation in Mexico in December 1969, a counter-coup led by two National Guard colonels was attempted in order to depose him. The goals were to move away from Torrijos' leftist oriented policies, and return Panama to the pre-1968 dominance of the oligarchy. Torrijos was informed by his overthrow by telephone, and the coup plotters assumed control of the country, confident that Torrijos' location precluded any opposition to the coup. No troops were alerted or deployed against any possible action. Fortunately for Torrijos, other members of the elite supported him, as Fernando Eleta, a member of the traditional elite and former foreign minister who had accompanied him to Mexico, used his contacts in the U.S. to establish direct communication between Torrijos and loyalist officers in Panama under the command of Major Manuel Antonio

¹⁵ibid.

Noriega.¹⁶ Torrijos was able to arrange his return to Panama to confront the counter-coup. His popularity and support were such that news of his presence in Panama allowed him to regain power without firing a shot.

While the collusion of the military counter-coup plotters with the oligarchy was unique, given the military's traditional progressive outlook, the immediate, albeit short-lived reversal of some of Torrijismo's actions during the counter-coup clearly underscored the severity of Panama's volatile social divisions of race, and class. In creating his base of support, Torrijos had appointed two blacks to cabinet level positions, only the second and third ever in Panama's history. One of the first acts of the counter-coup was the immediate replacement of the two black cabinet members, Materno Vasquez and Rómulo Escobar Bethancourt despite the retention of the rest of Torrijos' cabinet. With the coup put down, Torrijos set about restructuring the upper echelons of the National Guard and government as well as moderating the leftist drift of his rule. Bethancourt and Vasquez were retained, but in less visible government positions.

To understand this interaction between race and politics, it is necessary to understand the relationship between race, ethnicity, and social class in Panamanian society. The social structure is stratified into four basic classes. The perception of status in descending order can be broken down as follows:

¹⁶Dinges, p. 68.

- 1) a predominantly white economic and political oligarchy at the top;
- 2) a racially mixed middle class, but traditionally dependent on the oligarchy for employment;
- 3) a marginal mulatto, mestizo, and black population;
- 4) rural peasants and farmers at the bottom.¹⁷

Until the 1968 coup, the National Guard was excluded from political participation by what it perceived as an alliance between the white upper class and the U.S. The National Guard naturally was drawn into an alignment with the other excluded groups of Panamanian society. The understandable affinity between the military institution and the non-white sectors eventually was formalized by inclusion in Torrijismo's populist coalition.

Establishment of Torrijismo as a national movement not surprisingly occurred during the tenure of Torrijos' rule. Unlike most of Latin America, military rule under Torrijos years was not marked by brutal repression of opponents, but alliance and coalition building with various sectors of Panamanian society. Torrijos envisioned a movement that would force beneficial changes for the majority of Panamanians and that meant addressing the needs of Panama's marginalized population. Three distinct periods during the Torrijos years can be distinguished by the changing relations between Torrijos and his various constituents. Differing degrees of political

¹⁷Priestly, George, *Military Government and Popular Participation in Panama*, p. 7, Westview Special Studies on Latin America, 1986.

institutionalization and closeness between Torrijos and his supporters characterized these periods as he avoided dependence on any one group. However, despite the changing relationship with various groups, he never alienated any of his supporters by diluting the gains of one group for another. His alliances were highly successful due to delivery of tangible benefits to his supporters. This significantly contributed to the steady growth of his already wide constituency. In the 1970s the strength of Torrijismo was impressive. Questionable elements of the National Guard and other constituent groups were purged, while new supporters such as the middle class were won over by new jobs with the expanding government bureaucracy.¹⁸

The significance of Torrijismo's phased consolidation of power was in its success in generating lasting bases of support in the disparate groups of Panamanian society. The differing character of the three phases illustrates Torrijismo's approach to creating a support base that made Torrijismo a civilian movement instead of a purely military one. The thirteen year span of three phases further reflect Torrijismo's importance as the legacy of its broad coalition, although more dispersed and fragmented at present, accounts for the wide presence of Torrijismo in the various sectors of Panama today.

¹⁸*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 46.

1. Phase One 1968-72

Phase one, the period from 1968-1972, was one of ad hoc coalition building with all sectors of Panamanian society, as Torrijos endeavored to find a workable combination of foreign and domestic policies that would minimize complaints from the United States, increase his popularity, and legitimize the National Guard's role in government. Torrijos endeavored to create political groups not tied or beholden to the U.S. or the oligarchy. Torrijos' model of a popular base was one comprised of alliances between the National Guard, with Torrijos as its commander, and the various sectors of Panamanian society that had been traditionally excluded by the oligarchy. Despite his strong charisma and popularity, the aim was never a cult of personality but establishment of an ongoing, progressive movement in order to achieve social and political equality with the oligarchy, as well as improved economic conditions for the marginalized sectors of society. Torrijos governed through decree, and any influence on national policy was through him. While there was a civilian president, the National Assembly had been abolished and all political parties were banned.

a. Constituents of Torrijismo: Oligarchy

The 1968 presidential elections resulted in a Liberal Party division over support of Arnulfo Arias. Prior to the elections, a group of Liberal party técnicos highly influential in the incumbent government's Ministry of Treasury, National Bank, and Ministry of Planning, wanted to implement economic reform policies. Reforms were being recommended by the U.S. administration as a prerequisite

to receiving aid under the auspices of the Alliance for Progress.¹⁹ More conservative Liberals, with substantial amounts to lose from the proposed economic reforms, allied themselves against the técnicos and with Arias, who also opposed the reforms. With Arias' election triumph, the técnico group lost all their influence over government policy.

Following the 1968 exile of Arias, Torrijos recruited the técnicos by promising to implement their economic reform programs and appointing them to influential positions in his government. Técnico-owned and related businesses also profited from government contracts awarded to them by Torrijos. Implemented by the Ministry of Planning, the reforms were primarily aimed at reducing rural-urban migration, increasing domestic agricultural production, and revising tax legislation in order to increase government revenue. The first two goals were consistent with Torrijismo and resulted in U.S. Alliance for Progress funds financing many of Torrijos' development and reform projects. The third was not incompatible with Torrijismo and generated much needed tax revenue for the government. While the relationship with the técnicos established an important base of support for Torrijismo in the oligarchy, most of the oligarchy never reconciled their displacement from power, many were also bitter about financing the regime through new taxes aimed at the well to do. Prior to the coup, most of Panama's businesses were tax exempt. The

¹⁹*Panamanian Politics*, p. 62.

new legislation cancelled this exemption and imposed substantial taxes on the private sector.

The Torrijos-técnico partnership had greater implications for Panama's economic future as it laid the groundwork for its emergence as a regional finance center. Panama was opened up to international banking in order to diversify the economy away from the traditional dependence on the Panama Canal and the Colon Free Zone, the idea of técnico Minister of Planning, Ardito Barletta.²⁰ The international banking community was attracted by Panama's unique combination of political stability, well educated work force, and liberal banking regulations. Under Torrijos the banking regulations were further liberalized in favor of customers, as secrecy of transactions was guaranteed, and limits on currency transactions were outlawed.

Only Panama's Banking Commission could inspect banks while disclosure of information regarding customers was declared illegal.²¹ Dozens of foreign banks and multinationals flocked to Panama and created hundreds of jobs, while hundreds of millions of dollars were invested or spent in the local economy. Offshore bank holdings eventually peaked at \$47 billion dollars.²² With domestic capital and business ownership concentrated in the hands of the oligarchy, this period proved a prosperous one for the oligarchy

²⁰*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 148.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²*Ibid.*, p. 150.

regardless of political persuasion, defusing many criticisms of Torrijos as a leftist and anti-oligarchy. Still, the majority of the oligarchy was never reconciled to their loss of national political hegemony.

With the exception of the técnicos' expanded roles, Torrijos followed a policy of non-confrontation with the oligarchy while creating his broad-based populist alliance. His disregard had left the majority of the oligarchy with no voice in national politics. With political parties officially banned after the 1968 coup, loosely organized interest groups became the primary forum for articulation of elite concerns but had little clout. By the mid-1970s external and domestic factors led to an economic downturn in Panama as decreasing traffic through the Panama Canal due to the end of the Vietnam War, international recession and inflation, coupled with the expensive agrarian reform programs and strong pro-labor policies. As in much of the rest of the world, Panama's rate of inflation increased, and the economic stagnation forced Torrijos to deal with the growing criticism from the economic elite and their interest groups.

In 1974, Torrijos established a special office within the Ministry of Commerce and Industry to address the numerous and valid complaints. The National Council of Private Enterprise (CONEP) increasingly became one voice of elite interests and criticisms of Torrijos. Sensing their momentum due to the economic conditions, the oligarchy through CONEP proposed easing of the conditions of the 1972 Labor Code in order to revive productivity. Always respectful of the oligarchy's crucial role in Panama's economic welfare, Torrijos

negotiated with the leaders of CONEP and his labor supporters to achieve a compromise solution on the 1972 Labor Code, without sacrificing the previous gains for labor. As a result of the negotiations, Torrijos decreed a 1976 law modifying the 1972 Labor Code in the context of the economic crisis that addressed the business elite's desires. Existing labor contracts were extended for two years, effectively reducing wages due to inflation. New businesses were exempted from labor contracts during the first years of operations resulting in the creation of "new" business from old companies to avoid organized labor, and the right to strike was modified to be permissible only in circumstances not negatively affecting the profits of a company.²³

By 1977, another organization representing elite interests, the Annual Conference of Business Executives (CADE), encouraged by the perception of increased leverage with Torrijos, attempted to go beyond the economic realm and reassert the oligarchy's role in directly influencing government policy making. Torrijos himself reversed his policy of non-confrontation and met directly with CADE, often debating CADE leaders, with the goal of improving the economic situation. Simultaneously, an internal debate raged within the elite over where the focus of the new clout should be. A more conservative faction of the traditional oligarchy favored a political focus with the restoration of the old system of party politics and democracy. Another faction, primarily of business people and newer members of

²³*Panamanian Politics*, p. 64.

the elite, favored an economic focus tolerant of military rule so long as economic concerns were met. The latter faction prevailed, and the oligarchy's opportunity to force an opening for a return to civilian rule and democracy was abandoned in favor of economic accommodation with Torrijismo and military rule. This lack of resolve to pursue democracy revealed the elite's exclusionary character, more prone to perpetuation of their narrow interests than of the common welfare.

While the possibility of achieving a successful transition back to civilian rule and democracy under Torrijos is debatable, a serious attempt to effect such a change might have eased the current distrust of the oligarchy-dominated current government. The oligarchy's compromise of democracy underscores their lack of belief in the concept and adds validity to criticisms that neither the pre-1968 nor post-1989 oligarchy dominated systems were democratic. It is significant to note that the emphasis on democracy in the oligarchy's platform throughout the 1970s, was due to U.S. pressure, in return for U.S. support.²⁴ CADE leaders had even suggested their participation in the Assembly of Corregimientos in return for economic concessions from Torrijos.²⁵

²⁴ibid., p. 65.

²⁵Prior to this period, the Assembly of Corregimientos was opposed by the majority of the oligarchy as an illegal, rubber stamp assembly for the military regime. By offering to participate in the Assembly of Corregimientos, the oligarchy was attempting to barter its endorsement of the military regime and Torrijismo in return for economic concessions from the government.

The military-técnico alliance and the later economic accommodation between Torrijismo and the commercial elite served Torrijismo by neutralizing much of the opposition to military rule. It also allowed Torrijismo to transcend its military origins and establish itself as a national movement with at least the partial support and acquiescence of the oligarchy. It must be pointed out, however, that the majority of the elite never fully reconciled the political dominance by those they perceived their social, educational, and racial inferiors.

b. Labor

Among Torrijos' first overtures, in 1969, were to organized labor. This area was especially important to Torrijismo in that it had dual implications for domestic and foreign policy. Labor's domestic significance was its traditional exclusion from national affairs, including labor policy. Labor also provided a foreign policy platform for Torrijismo's goal of dislodging American influence from all facets of Panamanian life. Torrijos' goal was a single national labor confederation. Many Panamanian labor leaders had long sought such an organization in order to improve working conditions for the majority of Panamanian workers. The unique history and character of Panamanian labor, however, had prevented the creation of such an organization due to powerful opposition by the oligarchy in the domestic sector and their U.S. allies in the enclave Canal Zone.

In order to construct the Panama Canal and meet the labor needs in the Canal Zone in the 19th century, a foreign working class

had been imported into Panama from the Caribbean Antilles.²⁶ Predominantly black, Protestant, and English-speaking, this imported working class had remained apart from Panama's Catholic, Hispanic native population, especially the dominant white oligarchy. The racial differences and often menial labor performed by the Antilleans conveniently fit the Panamanian perception of racial and class superiority of whites over blacks and further perpetuated the separation. Over the years, the national perception that the urban labor force was foreign, and the jurisdictional division between those employed in the Republic of Panama, and those employed in the Canal Zone, served as a structural obstacle in the organization of the labor force. In sole control of the majority of employment opportunities, the oligarchy and the Canal Zone elite successfully inhibited the growth of Panamanian labor into a political force, by keeping it divided.

As the Canal Zone was a territory of the U.S., Panamanians working in the enclave were organized into U.S. unions. Wages and benefits were geared to U.S. scales and thus substantially higher than earned by workers doing comparable work in the Republic of Panama. Canal Zone labor comprised a labor elite, who with the encouragement of their U.S. employers, strongly opposed any attempts to unite them under a single Panamanian labor confederation for fear of losing their higher wages. The oligarchy also opposed the single confederation as

²⁶*Panamanian Politics*, p. 55.

demands for higher wages by their workers would significantly reduce their profits.

In 1969, the strongest labor organization in Panama was the Confederation of Workers of the Republic of Panama (CTRP). Formed in 1956 with the sanction of the United States and Panamanian oligarchy in order to curb leftist organizing of Panamanian labor, the CTRP maintained strong ties to the U.S. AFL-CIO. Allied with the oligarchy and the United States, the CTRP successfully opposed Torrijismo's attempts to incorporate all Panamanian labor under a single confederation. Instead, in 1970, Torrijos organized the non-Canal Zone labor force into an alternative organization, the National Central of Panamanian Workers (CNTP). By 1978, CTRP membership was at 22,101 while CNTP membership had reached 21,629, and was still growing. The rapid growth of the CNTP and its close ties to the communist World Federation of Trade Unions successfully provided Torrijismo a counterweight to the U.S. and oligarchic-influenced CTRP.²⁷ Through its new influence, labor used the CNTP to influence national policy.

Aware of labor's growing potential, along with the CNTP, Torrijos enacted a new labor code meant to solidify labor's support. The labor code significantly improved conditions for Panamanian workers, gave impetus to greater organization of the labor force, as well as strengthened the appeal of the CNTP's association with Torrijos as a medium of greater political influence for the labor

²⁷Ibid., p. 58.

sector. The Labor Code of 1972 increased the individual worker's job security, entitlements to benefits, and level of overall bargaining power. Additionally it strengthened the power of the unions by creating a superior labor tribunal for the settlement of labor issues. The code required obligatory collective agreements between business and their workers, and implemented payroll deduction of union dues.²⁸ In 1971, Torrijos had issued a decree that required a payment to all workers of an extra months salary each year known as the "13th month bonus." With these measures, Torrijos considerably added to the general support and overall momentum of Torrijismo.

Torrijos' courting of the labor sector was not without problems. As the service sector began to expand in the 1970s Torrijos was caught between his policy of noninterference in economic issues and the growing expectations of his labor supporters. Under Torrijos, Panama was rapidly becoming a regional center for international banking, transportation, and communications. Organized labor was pressing for labor organization of the service sector, which would have stymied continued investment by foreign multinational companies that were financing Panama's service center development. Torrijos opposed the organization,²⁹ and deftly maneuvered to broaden his support base with the economic elite. Benefiting from the expansion of the service sector, and therefore from Torrijismo, a considerable segment of the economic elite was willing to reach an

²⁸*Panama: A Country Study*, pp. 47, 139.

²⁹*Panamanian Politics*, p. 60.

accommodation with Torrijismo, thereby allowing Torrijos to decrease his reliance on labor's support while gaining an important new partner. Yet, Torrijos did not alienate labor by reducing their previous gains. Even when Torrijos modified the 1972 Labor Code in response to pressure from the economic elite, the labor sector remained firmly in support of Torrijismo.

By inclusion of labor into national politics, Torrijos fundamentally and permanently altered Panama's political system. Until the 1968 coup, the Panamanian labor movement was totally subordinated to the oligarchy and the U.S. via the Canal Zone. In addition, it was purposely kept fragmented to prevent its development into a national force of any kind. With the formation of the CNTP and other regime-sanctioned unions, labor actively entered the national political arena. The subsequent enactment of the favorable 1972 Labor Code represented quick and significant gains of labor under Torrijismo.

Eventually, progress was made in uniting labor into a single organization. As Panama assumed jurisdiction over formerly U.S. responsibilities in accordance with the 1977 Panama Canal Treaties, Panamanians previously in U.S. labor unions were incorporated into the national labor union. Due to Torrijos' negotiations with the United States, these workers retained their higher wage while still benefiting from the national labor union's political clout. Socially, the formerly separate descendants of the imported black Antillean labor force were integrated as equal members into a united Panamanian labor force. These accomplishments further helped

Torrijismo transcend its military origins and build wide civilian support.

c. Urban Poor

Torrijos also cultivated support from the marginalized sectors of both urban and rural society. In the cities, rural to urban migration in search of better economic opportunities in the transit zone resulted in burgeoning slums densely packed with original residents and the new migrants. Due to the increased demand caused by the migrants, low rent slums such as Chorillo, long the residence of the Antillean labor force, suddenly faced increasing rents. Constrained by the border with the Canal Zone on one side and by Panama City on the other, the slums could not expand, causing the rural migrants mainly employed in marginal economic activities such as street vending or as domestics, to create new squatter areas in the remote areas surrounding Panama City. Most of the occupied land belonged to the government which instead of evicting them, under Torrijos implemented policies to allow the squatters to slowly purchase their housing sites. Essentially rent-free, the squatters were able to devote large portions of their economic resources to their mortgages and the improvement of their neighborhoods. Far from the city limits and the reach of basic services, Torrijos further allocated government funds to build and upgrade additional low income housing in the urban slums. He was directly responsible for infrastructure projects that provided basic services such as potable

water and electricity to the old slums and new settlements of the urban poor.³⁰

While these policies succeeded in winning supporters for Torrijismo, as with the organized labor, the relationship was not problem free. In one celebrated case, residents of San Miguelito, the largest shanty town on the outskirts of Panama City, strongly opposed the 1968 military coup and were among the first Panamanians to openly demonstrate against the military government. Oddly, the poor appeared to be in league with the oligarchy versus the military. Upon further investigation, it became evident that their opposition was the work of religious clergy and lay leaders, and not due to any misplaced alliance or sympathy for the oligarchy. In another artful coopting maneuver, Torrijos diffused San Miguelito's opposition by diverting attention from national to local politics, emphasizing local aspirations by proposing the creation of an incorporated district with political autonomy for San Miguelito. Incorporation would free San Miguelito from administrative and fiscal control of the district of Panama. Incorporated, San Miguelito could control its own fiscal destiny by raising revenue through local taxes and enter in to legal contracts for loans,³¹ manage the infrastructure development and lobby for essential services. Most importantly, incorporation gave San Miguelito legal political status which entitled it to representation in the Assembly of Corregimientos, and an entry and

³⁰*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 107.

³¹Priestley, p. 41.

voice in national politics. The first free elections since 1968 resulted from incorporation when San Miguelito elected its first representatives to the Assembly of Corregimientos.

d. Rural Poor

The greatest emphasis of Torrijismo's populist policies was with the rural populace. Differing from the heterogeneous mix of races characterizing the urban marginal classes, the rural population was a largely racially homogeneous population of mestizo peasants and native Indians. Of rural mestizo origins himself, Torrijos readily identified with this constituency. Famous for frequent unannounced helicopter visits to the countryside, Torrijos generated strong support by dispensing favors to individuals and entire rural communities. Availing himself of previous ties made during his stint as head of the National Guard's civic action programs, Torrijos successfully parlayed his genuine desire to improve the rural infrastructure into grassroots support for Torrijismo.

But Torrijos' rural affinity did not result in automatic cooperation and support from the rural population. The National Guard had traditionally been the oligarchy's tool of repression against other elements of society such as university students and the peasantry. Many in the rural population were supporters of the National Guard's arch-rival, anti-militarist politician Arnulfo Arias. Like the residents of San Miguelito, many in the countryside opposed the 1968 coup that overthrew Arias. There was even some personal dislike for

Torrijos as he was famous for having killed students, who were leading peasant guerillas in Cerro Tute in 1959.³²

Torrijismo's policies in the countryside focused on agrarian reform, land tenure issues, and improved working conditions for banana plantation labor. Unique in Latin America where the power of the elite classes was derived from its ownership of land, most Panamanian fortunes had been centered around commercial activities in the transit zone, so Torrijos was free on any opposition from a landed class. The problem in the countryside was that the majority of campesinos were engaged in subsistence agriculture on plots of land they did not own, while the growth in cattle ranching was rapidly limiting the availability of land for agriculture. While the government owned the majority of land in the countryside, there were too many landless subsistence campesinos to solve the problem by simply distributing government land.

To alleviate the land problem, Torrijos adopted a system of collective farms or asentamientos to be the focal point of his land reform program. Landless campesinos and small landowners were organized to pool resources and labor in attempting to maximize efficiency and output. Despite substantial government resources allotted to the asentamientos and introduction of modern methods such as the use of mechanized equipment, the asentamientos were not self-supporting. Many accumulated debts for the machinery, causing

³²Ibid., p. 56.

members to seek other sources of income to pay debts incurred by the collective.

Despite the disappointing results of the agrarian reform, the political aspect of the asentamientos had succeeded in gaining more support for Torrijismo. Through establishment of the National Confederation of Peasant Settlement (CONAC) a government agency formed to manage the asentamientos, Torrijismo provided the rural poor a long sought inclusion into national politics. In the process, Torrijos reached an accommodation with the political left in return for patronage by appointing the communist Party of the People to the leadership of CONAC.³³ The Party of the People had long been associated with the campesino issues and had a sizable base of support. Although Torrijismo and communism were not usually compatible, they shared common themes such as opposition to the U.S. presence in Panama, as well as improved conditions for the campesinos. Through CONAC, the rural population was able to elect numerous campesino leaders to the Assembly of Corregimientos resulting in unprecedented, inordinate rural power in national politics.³⁴ In return for Torrijos' political patronage, the Party of the People, toned down its communist ideology and aggressively promoted Torrijismo and regularly provided strong peasant support.

Aside from political motivations, Torrijos was genuinely concerned with the improvement of the rural areas. As in the urban

³³Ibid.

³⁴*Panamanian Politics*, p. 69.

slums, he was directly responsible for bringing developmental infrastructure and improved social conditions to the countryside. Potable water, community health programs, medical clinics, and improved sanitation and sewage facilities significantly reduced infant mortality rates. Panamanian infant mortality went from 68 per 1000 in 1960, to 25 per 1000 in 1984.³⁵ Major improvements of educational facilities increased the rates of general education achieved by the campesinos and all Panamanians, as school enrollment rates for children between six and eleven years of age went from 68 percent in 1960 to 96 percent in 1980.³⁶

Despite his alliances with labor, and the marginalized rural and urban sectors, Torrijos was careful not to antagonize and alienate the economic elite. As part of the oligarchy, the economic elite had been accustomed to dominating the Panamanian economy while the oligarchic political parties dominated politics. Formed by a coalition of traditional, wealthy Panamanian families and the well-to-do descendants of European immigrants, the Liberal Party prior to the 1968 coup had been a dominant force in Panamanian politics.³⁷ Successive electoral victories for the Liberal Party had guaranteed the perpetuation of business and oligarchic interests.

³⁵Sheahan, John, *Patterns of Development in Latin America*, p. 26, Princeton University Press, 1987.

³⁶*ibid.*, p. 38.

³⁷*Panamanian Politics*, p. 18.

2. Phase Two 1972-78

Between 1972-76, Torrijos moved to consolidate and formalize his alliances into a more institutional structure through accommodations with the elite and marginal sectors of society. Torrijos envisioned an organization encompassing all the various groups of Panamanian society patterned after Mexico's Institutional Revolutionary Party.³⁸ Organizational problems prevented success of this idea, as political parties were still officially banned. It was not until the late 1970s, after the legalization of political parties, that a government party, the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), was formed.

A new Constitution drafted in 1972 granted Torrijos extraordinary powers, and designated him as the "Maximum Leader of the Revolution" charged with coordinating government activities. The dramatic political and social changes in Panama indeed warranted description as a revolution. Torrijos was constitutionally empowered to appoint government ministers, heads of autonomous agencies, members of the Electoral Tribunal, National Guard officers, and Supreme Court justices, but the term of his powers was only for six years, the same length of time as a presidential term. Panama's constituent legislature, the National Assembly, was banned and replaced by the Assembly of Corregimientos, a legislature of 505 elected representatives of administrative sub-districts established during colonial times. The Assembly of Corregimientos provided for

³⁸*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 45.

greater representation of the Panamanian population, and due to the greater proportion of rural corregimientos the oligarchic-dominated transit zone was given less representation, resulting in the loss of yet another oligarchic means for political domination.³⁹

3. Phase Three 1978-81

The final phase of Torrijismo's institutionalization ran from 1978-1981 and the General's untimely death. The beginning of this period was characterized by serious economic difficulties that forced Torrijos to re-evaluate his policies and the role of the National Guard in running the nation. Pressure on Torrijos as a result of the economic problems in part led to a political opening in 1978. In 1978 a constitutional amendment calling for direct presidential elections in 1984 was signed into law. Torrijos relinquished his extraordinary powers, appointed a new civilian president, legalized political parties, and established the PRD as the vanguard party of Torrijismo. Appointment of a banker to one of the vice presidencies as intended to signal domestic and international business that the new civilian government would be pro-business and responsive to their interests. New investment and commercial activity was crucial in reviving Panama's ailing economy.

Yet economic motivations were not the sole nor the primary cause of the political opening. After a decade of Torrijismo, Torrijos believed that Panama was ready for a gradual return to civilian rule

³⁹*Panamanian Politics*, p. 42.

as a democracy characterized by the political integration of formerly excluded groups. Torrijos' civilianization of the government and legalization of political parties was a significant step towards the return of Panama to civilian rule. From 1968-78, the military had directly run the country, but now they would be returning to the barracks. An important indicator of the move toward civilian rule was that Torrijos voluntarily relinquished the constitutionally-granted extraordinary powers at their expiration in 1978.

Legalization of political parties in anticipation of the upcoming presidential elections, was bolstered by new legislation aimed at allowing formation of new political parties. National politics was being designed by Torrijismo to guarantee all sectors participation in a pluralistic civilian political environment. Torrijismo's party, the PRD, was established to fill the void created by the National Guard's withdrawal from politics. But it was also during this period that the parties which helped comprise the post invasion ruling coalition, Arias Calderon's Christian Democrats and Endara's Panamenistas were able to increase their following relative to the traditional elite parties of the Liberals and Conservatives.

While the three phases of Torrijismo differ in significant ways, the common denominator in consolidation was the central political role of the National Guard. Prior to the 1968 coup, the National Guard role in national politics had been negligible. Despite existence of some paramilitary units, its character was overwhelmingly police-oriented reflecting its dominant mission. After the coup, through Torrijismo and a growing military character,

the National Guard, later renamed the Panamanian Defense Forces, attained total dominance of politics and society. In the wake of the invasion, the Public Force, the survivors of the PDF have again been relegated to a subordinate role in Panama. The Public Force's dissatisfaction with its current status, and attempts to reassert itself could very well lead to renewed military involvement in politics.

III. MILITARIZATION OF PANAMANIAN POLITICS

A. MILITARY INSTITUTION IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to understand the scope of change that the Public Force represents as well as the origins for the lack of confidence in the Public Force, a contrast between the traditional role of the military institution begun under Torrijismo, and that established for the newly-created Public Force in Panamanian civil-military relations bears examination. Since the founding of the Panamanian republic in 1903, the military institution has been a key institution called upon to perform both military and security functions. In a matter of decades, the military institution rapidly evolved from a purely police force to the paramilitary National Guard, and later to the military institution known as the Panamanian Defense Force, explicit with military and internal security missions.⁴⁰

The evolution of the Panamanian military institution appears to correlate with three periods characterized by differing patterns of military participation in politics. First, from 1903-31, the National Police force served as the enforcer of U.S. Canal Zone and elite Panamanian oligarchical prerogatives in domestic Panamanian politics. With the withdrawal of overt U.S. participation by the Canal Zone administrators in domestic Panamanian politics, the National

⁴⁰ Wesson, R., *The Latin American Military Institution*, p. 169, Praeger Special Studies, 1986.

Police was subordinate solely to prerogatives of the Panamanian aristocracy, which comprised the ruling political elite. The development of a cohesive internal National Police organization, however, produced a leadership intent on institutional development and participation in the political decision making process on the national level.⁴¹

During the second period, between 1948-1968, the search for an entry point for military participation in politics became associated with the adoption of a paramilitary mission and establishment of the Panamanian National Guard. Between 1948-1953, National Police Commander José Antonio Remón modernized equipment and training methods along more military lines, raised salaries and fringe benefits, and in 1953, created the National Guard from the National Police.⁴² Trained to be a professional military officer at the Mexican Military Academy, Remón dreamed of a Panamanian national army. Along with others in the National Police, Remón disliked the practice of "deprofessionalizing" military officers by relegating them to police duties. Like other officers who entered the National Police after graduation from a military academy, Remón experienced a sense of status deprivation, that fueled the widespread aspirations for a national army. These aspirations grew within the ranks of the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁴² *Panama: A Country Study*, p. 34.

National Police and led to Remón's eventual transformation of the National Police to the National Guard.⁴³

Despite the new title, the missions and functions of National Guard saw little immediate change, but its establishment was a significant step, reflecting progress toward a national army and an increased military role in political decision making. The Cold War international environment of the 1950s and 1960s witnessed the continued militarization and professionalization of the National Guard with substantial United States aid under the provisions of the Mutual Security Act. Military professionalization also saw an increasing number of National Guard positions requiring formal military training, as new public-order units and infantry rifle companies were formed. Although police work still comprised the majority of National Guard duties, the institution was gradually professionalized and improved militarily under the leadership of a small, but increasing core of Panamanian foreign military academy graduates⁴⁴ of which Torrijos was one. The 1960s resulted in a National Guard confident in its new, and increasing military role and self-assured of its readiness and ability to play a greater role in national politics.

The third period, 1968-1989, began when the coup of 1968 firmly established the Panamanian military as the powerbroker of Panamanian politics. The former arbiter role played by the National Guard between feuding factions of civilian political elites gave way

⁴³ Wesson, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 222.

to the decision making role assumed by the coup's surviving leader, Torrijos. Torrijos also continued the modernization of the National Guard in order to improve the potency of the National Guard as a military force. Simultaneously, Torrijos engineered the National Guard's direct role in politics, imprinting the legacy of institutionalized militarism in the National Guard as well as in the political consciousness of the Panamanian people that continues to make Torrijismo a part of post-military rule Panama. The belief in the inevitability of military intervention in politics carried over from the Panamanian Defense Force remains ingrained in the collective memory of the Public Force today.

Torrijos exercised control over Panama through tight control of the National Guard. Formerly an institution of low social esteem and ignored in traditional national decision making circles, the National Guard in turn gained prestige and respect under Torrijos, and ruled Panama through use of the National Guard's highly centralized command and administrative structure.⁴⁵ Torrijos exercised sole command over the deployment of all paramilitary units and personally approved all officer assignments and promotions. The relatively small size of the National Guard under Torrijos, 5000 men and 465 officers,⁴⁶ allowed him to maintain close, personal working relationships within the National Guard.⁴⁷

⁴⁵*Panamanian Politics*, p. 43.

⁴⁶*ibid.*

⁴⁷*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 222.

B. MILITARY INSTITUTION UNDER TORRIJISMO

Following the 1968 coup, the General Staff exercised political power and influence second only to Torrijos. While routine decisions were usually made by civilian government officials during the 1970s and 1980s, it was not uncommon for important official rulings to be deferred to members of the General Staff. Even with the return of the National Guard to the barracks and the resumption of civilian rule, government ministers often experienced difficulty in implementing policies not in keeping with the judgement of the General Staff.⁴⁸ Within the General Staff, prerogatives in civilian matters led to spheres of influence among the individual officers. The spheres of influence encompassed specific functional areas, geographic regions and/or government ministries. Certain positions on the General Staff became critical in both military and political terms. Lieutenant Colonel Noriega, for example, though not the most senior officer on the General Staff, rose to be considered the second most influential military figure in the Torrijos regime through his position as head of G-2 Intelligence.⁴⁹ Noriega controlled all national intelligence functions and exercised influence over the issuance of the cédula or civilian identity document required of all legal resident of Panama over the age of 18.

No less prevalent on the lower echelons of National Guard, military prerogatives and political intervention were also exercised

⁴⁸ *Panamanian Politics*, p. 45.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

by junior officers. The power relationship between the civilian population and the National Guard reflected the power relationship in chain of command that existed within the National Guard itself. Stationed in each province was a military zone commander, usually a major or captain. Under Torrijos, the commanders of the 10 military zones were responsible only to Torrijos and as such functioned as *de facto* provincial governors.⁵⁰ The zone commanders regularly influenced decisions at the regional level and senior civilian government ministers were known to be overruled by these junior officers. Successful zone commanders could expect subsequent assignment to more important military zones closer to the capital or to more influential positions on the General Staff.

The ability of the National Guard to play such a central political role in Panamanian society after 1968 was a *direct result of the institutional growth, modernization and transformation of the National Guard under Torrijos.*⁵¹ Militarization in 1959 had resulted in the formation of a special public order force in response to an invasion of Panama by supporters of deposed President Arias' supporters launched from Castro's Cuba. The public order force became the prototype of the infantry rifle companies that comprised the National Guard's military component. The location of these units throughout Panama was not haphazard but well thought out, as these units constituted the basis for Torrijos' domination of Panamanian

⁵⁰ *Panama: A Country Study*, p. 228.

⁵¹ *Panamanian Politics*, p. 42.

society. Most units were situated in and around the capital of Panama City, while two companies were stationed at Río Hato in Coclé Province. Torrijos' operational headquarters was also located at Río Hato, just two hours by automobile from Panama City. In event of a unrest in the capital the two companies in Coclé served as a reserve force sufficiently removed but within striking range of Panama City.⁵² In addition, lines of authority ran directly from Torrijos to all the rifle companies, with no input from the General Staff.

The military coup of October 1968 resulted as a common response by National Guard officers to external tampering with their command structure by President Arias. Once the outside interference had been removed, the goals of the coup became unclear. The provisional junta's initial manifesto reflected a lack of direction and appeared desirous of a return to civilian rule. But with the consolidation of the coup under Torrijos following an internal National Guard power struggle, the long-standing National Guard aspiration for a more influential role in civilian politics emerged.

Prior to the 1968 coup, the president of the republic was Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard, as specified by the 1946 constitution. As such, the president possessed the right, if not always the power, to remove and appoint National Guard personnel. Under the provisions of the 1972 constitution, the president had no such power. Article Two stated that government agencies were to act in "harmonic collaboration with the National Guard." Under Torrijos

⁵² Ibid., p. 45.

the military mission, capability and outlook of the National Guard had been dramatically enhanced. After the 1968 coup military involvement in civilian politics increased as well, as military prerogatives and domination of Panamanian politics became firmly entrenched. The central deliberative role of the Panamanian military became firmly etched in the fabric of Panamanian society.

The relationship of the National Guard with Panamanian society underwent dramatic changes under Torrijismo. Having divorced itself from subservience to the Panamanian elite, the National Guard sought to strengthen its national governing credentials with the marginalized urban and rural groups of Panamanian society. Due to the traditional lack of social prestige the National Police and the National Guard had been forced to recruit from the urban ghettos and rural areas of Panama.⁵³ The resulting composition of the military institution was predominantly of marginalized urban blacks or campesinos. It is of note that the complement of the National Guard's military rifle companies were recruited primarily from the rural provinces, similar to where Torrijos had grown up. Through recruitment of these rural troops, Torrijos ensured personal loyalty from the rifle companies.

As a result of the early police structure of the National Guard the lines between the enlisted ranks and officers was never clearly defined. Although the officer corps of the National Guard and PDF were increasingly strengthened by military academy graduates, there

⁵³ Wesson, p. 6.

were always a handful of officers who had risen from the ranks.⁵⁴ The lack of social barriers based on differing racial, and class backgrounds facilitated the ascendance of "police" officers into the ranks of the "military" officers. Under Torrijos, officers were cross-trained into the various units and missions of the National Guard, professionally trained military academy graduates and officers from the ranks were rotated between the military and increasingly unpopular police units. The unity created by this common experience within the institution also fostered a strong sense of institutional identity and loyalty among the officers. The fairly similar economic backgrounds of the majority of the personnel also contributed to the strong sense of institutional loyalty and esprit de corps enhanced and intertwined with Torrijismo. Under Torrijos this institutional esprit de corps was carefully nurtured in order to maintain the perception of the military institution's superiority and separation from the rest of society.

The lower class backgrounds of many military officers and men also assisted the National Guard's legitimization of their post-1968 dominance to the marginal sectors of Panamanian society. The location of the National Guard and later PDF central headquarters in the ghetto of Chorrillo had long given the military institution a geographic identification with the urban masses. Under Torrijos, five of twelve troop commanders were promoted from the ranks, of these

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 28.

five three were born in the ghetto of Chorrillo in close proximity to the National Guard headquarters.

A factor that contributed to Torrijos' populist reform orientation was the reformist orientation of the 1968 General Juan Velasco Alvarado military coup in Peru. Key members of the General Staff, Manuel Noriega and Roberto Díaz Herrera, Torrijos' cousin, had graduated from the Peruvian Military Academy in the early 1960s. This "Peruanista" influence resulted in establishment of a school modelled on a Peruvian military academy designed to provide the National Guard with trained personnel proficient in non-military areas such as agronomy. Under direction of Peruanista Díaz Herrera, a National School for Political Capacitation (ESCANAP) was established to bring military personnel, officer and enlisted, together with civilians from various sectors in order to institutionalize reformist political learning in both military and civilian sectors.⁵⁵ ESCANAP was one of Torrijismo's primary engines of diffusing Torrijismo throughout various segments of society. ESCANAP served as a medium for education and policy coordination between the marginalized sectors of society, the ruling National Guard, and Torrijos. The military's search for greater acceptance led to a roughly defined but growing political role in national development, through Torrijismo. As a result, the military institution developed new non-military expertise and an increased scope of political prerogatives.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

With the significant increase in political power came negative aspects of National Guard behavior that hurt its public image. The officer corps, especially the General Staff and military zone commanders, regularly used their political influence and/or military power in questionable business activities meant both to generate personal wealth and increase welfare of the troops. Remón had started the practice of using control of the "defenders of the public", the police force, to accumulate "gift" stocks from major companies.⁵⁶ The National Guard also profited from and eventually grew to control prostitution, smuggling, and drug trafficking in Panama. The combination of military and police functions eventually led to direct control of immigration, customs, ports, airports and tax collection by the PDF. This direct control over the revenue-generating infrastructure resulted in rampant corruption on all levels of the military, up to the commander.

Corruption in the military was an accepted way of doing business and reinforcing ties of personal loyalty, but was not unique to the military. Corruption was endemic in Panamanian society and government. In many cases the corruption was instigated by civilian attempting to purchase influence with National Guard officers. Promotion to more powerful positions usually was accompanied by the increased opportunity to line the pocket. As officers grew more powerful, they concentrated on less obvious corruption, focusing instead on activities such as money laundering, tacit tolerance of

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

drug activity and transshipment, as opposed to actual participation. Strategically placed cronies or relatives in private firms or legitimate government agencies oversaw operations diverting public attention from the military. Believing in their existence as a separate, privileged class exempt from the jurisdiction of civil society, the National Guard embodied the exemptions and prerogatives of the colonial *fuero militar*, in which crimes committed by the military were rarely prosecuted by the judiciary.⁵⁷

C. NORIEGA YEARS AND DEPARTURE FROM TORRIJISMO

The July 1981 death of General Torrijos in a highly suspect plane crash did not end continued military domination of politics but signalled the beginning of a new era marked by wanton abuses, excessive corruption and manipulation of the National Guard, eventually leading to the military institution's downfall through external intervention. After a brief leadership under Colonel Florencio Florez, Torrijos' Chief of Staff, the new National Guard commander and Torrijos protégé,⁵⁸ General Rubén Darío Paredes, formulated plans to run for the presidency in 1984. Even though still on active duty, Paredes publicly condemned the Torrijos-appointed civilian President Aristides Royo for the economic deterioration and

⁵⁷ Fitch, S., Lowenthal, A., *Armies and Politics in Latin America*, p. 205, Holmes and Meier, Inc. 1986.

⁵⁸A loyal Torrijista, Paredes had been groomed by Torrijos to succeed him since 1975.

corruption in administering Panama's social security system.⁵⁹ In the midst of public unrest against Royo, Paredes intervened in July 1982, and with the support of the National Guard, forced the resignation of Royo and most of his cabinet. In his place was chosen Vice-President Ricardo De La Espriella who immediately referred to the National Guard as his "partner in power."⁶⁰

In November 1982, a series of draft amendments to the 1972 Constitution were proposed. One provision banned participation in elections by active duty military officers. Approved by national referendum, this provision appeared to be a significant step in lessening the power of the National Guard. In reality, the National Guard was to retain its dominant position. In accordance with the new constitutional provision, General Paredes retired from the National Guard to run for president. In an alleged deal between several senior members of the General Staff, Paredes was to be supported in his presidential campaign by the National Guard, while the position of National Guard commander was to be rotated between the other senior officers. The first of those officers, Manuel Antonio Noriega, succeeded Paredes, but then announced that neither he nor the National Guard would support any candidate for president in the 1983 elections. The reality of Panamanian politics had not changed. Without a popular base of support and the endorsement of the National Guard and its commander, Paredes could not become president.

⁵⁹ *Panama: A Country Study*, p. 60.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

With Paredes removed from the political scene, the National Guard under Noriega continued in its progression towards establishment of the national army. One of Noriega's first acts was to have the Assembly of Corregimientos restructure the military institution and create the Panama Defense Force. The paramilitary National Guard had matured into a military force, as the mechanics behind its creation asserted the very real political power still exercised by the military despite the recent constitutional amendments. Although the president of the republic was the nominal head of the Panamanian Defense Force, real power in Panama rested with Noriega, who assumed the new title of commander of the Panamanian Defense Force.⁶¹

The establishment of the Panamanian Defense Force did not result in any dramatic changes from the power and character of the National Guard. If anything, establishment of the PDF legitimized the previously adopted role of the National Guard in civilian politics and national development in the eyes of the institution. Under Noriega, the military institution was not ready to relinquish its unlimited scope of power and unsubordinated role in society. Noriega was to continually show the military institution's dominance in civilian politics by installing and removing four Panamanian presidents.

During the 1984 presidential elections, the military-supported, Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) again faced three-time Panamanian president Arnulfo Arias Madrid of the Alianza

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 61.

Democrática de Oposición(ADO).⁶² Arias emphasized the need to reduce military influence in Panamanian politics, and especially called for the removal of a 1983 defense bill that gave Noriega's PDF control over all security forces and many government services.⁶³ The campaign was bitterly contested, but election day, May 6, was peaceful. In order to ensure military prerogatives in Panamanian politics, Noriega ordered military intervention in the vote counting process. The Panamanian Defense Forces took custody of many vote boxes 24 hours before the vote count. Further irregularities and errors in voter registration and the vote count led to 2,124 credible charges of electoral misconduct and fraud. On May 17, the members of the National Board of Vote Examiners declared their inability to continue the vote count due to massive fraud and turned over the process to the government's Electoral Tribunal. Opposition charges that election results had been destroyed before counting were dismissed by the Electoral Tribunal. On May 16, 1984, the Electoral Tribunal announced that the government backed PRD presidential candidate, Nicolás Ardito Barletta, one of Torrijos' Liberal party técnicos, had won the election. Through fraud Noriega had triumphed and circumvented the Arias threat to military political power.⁶⁴

By October 1985, President Barletta had been forced to resign by Noriega. Panama's lack of its own national currency and traditional

⁶²*Panamanian Politics*, p. 22.

⁶³*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 62.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 63.

reliance on the American dollar led to government development projects being financed mainly through international borrowing. Attempting to deal with Panama's \$3.6 billion debt to foreign commercial banks and international lending institutions, President Barletta independently engaged the international lending institutions in closed-door discussions. In attempts to deal with this problem, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank demanded that Panama change its spending habits, but Barletta's contemplated economic austerity measures were perceived by a significant proportion of Panama's population as detrimental to their interests. This disenchantment with Barletta's planned economic policies was followed by Barletta's decision to investigate the alleged murder of Noriega rival Dr. Hugo Spadafora by the PDF. The climax came when Noriega replaced Barletta with his *First Vice-President*, Eric Arturo Del Valle.⁶⁵

In February 1988, Del Valle announced the dismissal of General Noriega as commander of the PDF in response to two indictments from grand juries in Tampa and Miami. Noriega was accused of numerous counts of racketeering, drug trafficking, money laundering, as well as providing Panama as a haven and transshipment point to drug traffickers for millions of dollars in bribes.⁶⁶ However, the colonel chosen to replace Noriega rejected his appointment and along with

⁶⁵Ropp, S., "General Noriega's Panama," *Current History*, Volume 85, Number 515, p. 422, December 1986.

⁶⁶Elaine, Sciolino, "Panama President Dismisses Noriega: Situation Unclear," *New York Times*, 26 February 1988.

others in the officer corps, pledged their loyalty to Noriega. In response, Noriega convened the Assembly of Corregimientos which voted to oust Del Valle and replaced him with the Education Minister, Manuel Solís Palma. Solís Palma was to complete the remainder of the term and relinquish power to the winner of the May 1989 presidential elections.

After elections held on 7 May 1989, both Carlos Duque, the government backed PRD presidential candidate and Guillermo Endara of the opposition Democratic Alliance of Civic Opposition (ADOC) coalition claimed victory. Five hours after the polls closed, Duque claimed victory based on an "ample majority" in early returns. An hour later, Endara also announced a landslide victory with returns from 82 of Panama's 4,255 national polling stations. Endara's results gave 78% of the vote to ADOC and 21% to Duque.⁶⁷ Witnessed by international observers including Jimmy Carter, Senator John McCain, and Congressman John Murtha, the vote had been considered relatively fraud free, but the vote count was another story. On 8 May, the Noriega backed government raided vote counting centers and delayed the start of an official tally.⁶⁸ However, a statement by the Panamanian Episcopal Conference comprised of Panama's 12 Roman Catholic bishops said results of a "quick count" by its workers showed a ADOC with 74.2% of the vote in contrast to 24.9% for the Noriega-

⁶⁷Coone, Tim, and Barber, Lionel, "Both Sides Claim Victory in Panama," *Financial Times*, 9 May 1989.

⁶⁸Branigan, William, "General Noriega Forces Delay Vote Count," *Washington Post*, 9 May 1989.

backed Coalition of National Liberation (COLINA), supporting Endara's victory claims. The Episcopal Conference results covered 27,723 voter of Panama's 1.18 million eligible voters, and 115 of the national polling stations.

On 11 May, faced with an overwhelming and surprising opposition victory, the government's Electoral Tribunal annulled the vote count citing "obstruction by foreigners" and lack of official tally sheets as justification.⁶⁹ Head of the Electoral Tribunal announced that the executive branch would be responsible for resolving the problem of presidential succession once the term of Noriega appointee, incumbent Manuel Solís Palma expired on 1 September. After the failure of almost three months of tripartite negotiations, between the ADOC, the government-backed PRD, and the PDF, mediated by the Organization of American States to resolve the post election crisis, Noriega installed the last military-backed president. On August 31, 1989 Francisco Rodriguez was announced as President of a new provisional government. The National Comptroller since 1983, Rodriguez had been a high school classmate of Noriega. In addition, Noriega abolished the National Assembly and replaced it with a National Legislative Commission, comprised of Noriega supporters.

Noriega's successive manipulation of politics and the presidency, was a direct result of Torrijismo's involvement of the military in politics. However, Noriega's abuse of the Torrijismo's legacy out of

⁶⁹Gruson, Linsey, "Noriega Foes Say Vote Must Stand," *New York Times*, 12 May 1989.

lust for personal power eventually drew opposition from within the military institution. Many in the military believed the numerous accusations against Noriega were bringing dishonor to their institution. A departure from the military cohesiveness of Torrijismo had begun. Noriega's alienation of even members of the military contrasted sharply with Torrijismo's broad alliance that had transcended the military and encompassed even factions of his opponents.

D. INSTITUTIONAL DECAY

In the latter half of the 1980s, Panama had suffered a political and economic crisis and experienced tension in its relationship with the United States. As a result of the U.S. indictments of Noriega, the United States had cut off all aid to Panama, and put into place strangling economic sanctions. The United States engaged in an action-intermittent, rhetorically-constant campaign to dislodge Noriega as the ruler of Panama. But the first crack in the institutional shell of the military institution, was revealed by the forced retirement of Noriega's fellow Peruanista, and second in command of the PDF, Colonel Diaz Herrera. Diaz Herrera as the director of ESCANAP had been a strong proponent of Torrijismo, had been a constant reminder to Noriega of the less excessive days of Torrijismo. Diaz Herrera had consistently opposed Noriega's policies as detrimental to the military institution and inconsistent with Torrijismo. Forced to retire by Noriega, Diaz Herrera called a news

conference to publicly denounce and accuse Noriega of complicity in the deaths of Torrijos, Spadafora, and in the 1984 election fraud. Díaz's revelations were not significant in what they said about Noriega but because he was the first high-ranking PDF officer to break the traditional military code of silence about the institution's activities. The traditional lack of societal scrutiny of the military institution had ended, and the institutional decay had begun.

Díaz's confessions unleashed an unprecedented wave of public protest against Noriega and the government. The opposition National Civilianization Crusade composed of over 100 civic groups began to pressure for the establishment of an authentic democracy. Anti-government protestors began regular marches and demonstrations not seen since the establishment of the military government in 1968. Even the normally uninvolved Roman Catholic Church played a surprisingly active role by sponsoring masses where demonstrators and opposition members could gather with impunity. A growing sense of anti-government militancy surfaced in Panama, three of six morning newspapers failed to submit articles for government censorship,⁷⁰ many businesses closed and Panama City was virtually shut down as the protests turned violent.

Noriega responded by imposing a state of emergency on June 12, 1987 that was to last 19 days. Constitutionally-guaranteed civil and political rights were suspended as the University of Panama and all

⁷⁰Kinzer, Stephen, "Three Panama Papers Won't Publish Without Censorship," *New York Times*, 13 June 1987.

high schools in Panama City were shut down to prevent students and teachers from joining the anti-government protests.⁷¹ For the first time, active if not somewhat clumsy repression of civilians occurred as riot police from a PDF public order company, the "Dobermans," using tear gas and buckshot were unleashed against the street demonstrators. Though the Dobermans were unskillful in the execution of their new tasks of repression, they soon improved. By July, the level of repression increased, anti-government protestors began to discover they had to confront not only riot police, but uniformed soldiers and paramilitary goon squads of armed civilians.⁷² The heavy repression contrasted sharply with its absence under Torrijos. The repression was effective, however, as anti-government demonstrations began to recede as opposition leaders began to report abusive treatment of demonstrators detained by the government.⁷³ The Panamanian military institution that had once been the transmission belt of reform in Panamanian society under Torrijos was now employing brutal repression of unarmed citizens. As the crisis deepened, civilian challenge to the military's traditional political dominance also resulted. Former presidents, Royo and Barletta, made

⁷¹ Kinzer, Stephen, "Panama Calls State of Emergency After Fourth Day of Violent Protest," *New York Times*, 12 June 1987.

⁷² Kinzer, Stephen, "Panama Boils," *New York Times*, 15 July 1987.

⁷³ Kinzer, Stephen, "Released Panamanians Tell of Abusive Treatment," *New York Times*, 16 July 1987.

public statements to the effect that they had been removed from office by the military institution.⁷⁴

Most damaging because of their potential impact within the military institution itself were Diaz Herrera's accusations, and former commander, and Torrijista, General Paredes' pleas to his comrades in arms to remove Noriega. Clearly Noriega was damaging the cohesiveness of the institution. In March 1988, Panamanian Chief of Police, Colonel Macias attempted a coup to remove Noriega from his post. Macias' disloyalty was significant in that it was out of professed loyalty to Noriega that he had refused Del Valle's offer of Noriega's position just one month before. In response to Macias' failed coup, Noriega restructured the military high command creating the Strategic Military Council dominated by mid-level and junior officers personally loyal to him. Initially meant to counterbalance any potential disloyalty on the General Staff, the Strategic Military Council diluted the authority of the General Staff as Noriega retired senior members of the General Staff and replaced them with relatively junior officers of the Strategic Military Council.⁷⁵ The institutional instability within the military manifested by the opposition to Noriega was a direct result of his clash with Torrijismo, prominent among the officers whose loyalty he questioned were senior Torrijista officers on the General Staff such as Diaz

⁷⁴ Ropp, S., "Panama's Struggle for Democracy," *Current History*, Volume 86, Number 524, p. 421, December 1987.

⁷⁵ Ropp, S., "Military Retrenchment and Decay in Panama," *Current History*, Volume 89, Number 543, p. 19, January 1990.

Herrera, and Lieutenant Colonel Eduardo Herrera Hassan. Noriega had departed from the traditions of the institution that Torrijos had come to symbolize.

Eventually Noriega was to ignore the General Staff in all important issues and rely solely on his Strategic Military Council. In addition to the creation of the Strategic Military Council, Noriega took steps to ensure the officer corp was loyal to him by conducting regular "loyalty" seminars for each officer rank group and promoting those whose continued personal loyalty to him was especially noteworthy. Ironically, it was this move to consolidate his position that hastened the institutional decay of the PDF leading to the coup attempt of October 1989. Some officers on the Strategic Military Council had been promoted, others had not. Noriega's erratic promotions and retirement of General Staff Officers had destroyed the continuity of the officer corps and the network of personal lines of protection, patronage, and support that senior members of the General Staff had extended to junior officers.⁷⁶ Officers not under the traditional "protection" and patronage of Noriega began to perceive themselves as increasingly vulnerable as the bonds of the institution were destroyed by Noriega.

The diminished authority of the General Staff had critically damaged the *compadrazco* system of informal and highly personalized protection, patronage, and support that senior members of the General Staff had extended to junior officers. As the

⁷⁶ibid.

traditional system was dismantled, officers not connected to Noriega through the *compadrazco* system began to perceive themselves as increasingly vulnerable. The failed October 1989 coup attempt personified the crumbling of the institutional fabric of the Panamanian Defense Force. Unlike the "police"-led March 1988 coup, the October coup attempt was spearheaded by the combat trained, 4th Rifle Company "Urraca," led by Major Moises Giroldi. Noriega's response to this coup was swift and brutal as he ordered the summary execution of an undetermined number of officers and men. The breakdown of the *compadrazco* system had even affected Noriega, as the godfather to Giroldi's children, he was Giroldi's "compadre."⁷⁷

The failure of the October coup increasingly portrayed the crumbling of the institutional fabric of the PDF. Unlike the previous "police"-led coup attempt, the October coup attempt involved one of the PDF's combat trained military rifle companies whose ranks Torrijos had filled with his campesino compatriots. In response to the failed coup Noriega ordered the summary execution of an undetermined number of officers and men. The Panamanian Defense Force had turned on itself in order to guarantee its survival and very existence. Many argue that the success of either coup attempt would not have led to the establishment of civilian government or democracy in Panama because the coup plotting officers had been more interested in furthering their own careers than democracy or civilian

⁷⁷"Compadre" is the common form of address between persons linked through godparent relationships in the *compadrazco* system.

rule. In as much as one of the goals of the attempted coups was to restore the institution to its former balance, a move to civilian rule would not have been an impossibility. It would have been easier to have dealt with a new regime instead of an entrenched and cornered Noriega as the potential successors would not have been facing U.S. indictments. With the removal of Noriega, U.S. pressure may still have brought about the slow progress to civilian rule that Torrijos had begun. Indeed the proclamation of the October coup plotters had clearly stated that theirs was strictly a military movement with no politics involved and that their sole aim was to return to the guiding principles of General Torrijos.⁷⁸

The disintegration of PDF cohesiveness under Noriega was hastened by the U.S. invasion in December 1989. Following the shooting death of a an unarmed, off-duty U.S. Marine officer who attempted to run through a checkpoint in front of the Commandancia, along with brutal treatment of other U.S. military personnel and dependents, on 20 December 1989, President Bush ordered U.S. troops into combat in Panama. Pointing out that one week before, General Noriega had declared the existence of a state of war between Panama and the U.S., President Bush cited the U.S. military mission as to protect U.S. lives and property, U.S. interests in connection with U.S. responsibilities under the Panama Canal Treaties, restoration of democracy in Panama and the arrest of General Noriega stemming

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, p. 38.

from U.S. indictments.⁷⁹ The quick U.S. victory resulted in the installation of a civilian regime in Panama under the leadership of ADOC's Guillermo Endara. In its first major act, the U.S. installed civilian government was forced to create the Public Force in order to fill the vacuum left by the defeat and destruction of the Panamanian Defense Force.

⁷⁹"Excerpts From Pentagon Briefing," *Washington Post*, 21 December 1989.

IV. THE PUBLIC FORCE AND THE LEGACY OF TORRIJISMO

A. DEMILITARIZATION

Drawing from the members of the Panamanian Defense Force to create the Public Force produced a crisis of legitimacy as well as a potential threat to the civilian government. The overwhelming criticism and public distrust of the Public Force due to the retention of PDF elements in personnel, as well as because the distinction between the periods of Torrijismo and Noriega to the general population are blurred. Memories of military repression and abuse of power color the resentment voiced by those critical of the Public Force. Critics also point out that the attitudes and aspirations of the former military personnel are the same and even more dangerous as the military institution has lost all the privileges and perquisites formerly enjoyed during the 21 year reign of the National Guard and PDF.

In attempts to dispel fears of the Public Force, the First Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderon ruled out the possibility of a coup because "the new Panamanian Public Force was not created against the military but with them, and this will prevent resentment, frustrations, and possible coups d' etat."⁸⁰ Arias Calderon, who at the time also served as Government and Justice Minister with supreme

⁸⁰ACAN-EFE release in Spanish reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Services, Latin America*, p. 28, FBIS-LAT-90-044, 6 March 1990.

command of the various units of the Public Force, stated that he had complete trust in the Public Force, as: "The day I lose trust in a Public Force chief, he will no longer be serving as such."⁸¹ In defense of the government's retention of large numbers of the PDF membership, Arias Calderon points out that over 18% of the officers from Noriega's PDF have been discharged or retired from the Public Force. Of the five colonels on active duty on 19 December 1989, not a single one is on Public Force duty; only three of 17 lieutenant colonels remain; of 69 majors 43 are still serving; of 137 captains, 94 remain; and of 252 lieutenants, 202 remain.⁸² Arias Calderon also points out that 49 officers remain under arrest pending the government's internal evaluation of their complicity in torture, corruption, or human rights violations during Noriega's repression of the political opposition.

The civilian government asserts that the Public Force will be controlled by civilian control of the budget. Under military rule no one really planned or controlled the budget, and the 1989 military expenditures were placed at about \$150 million. Arias Calderon stated that in contrast, the Legislative Assembly now has the responsibility of establishing both the manning and the budget of the Public Force, and projected the new budget to be about \$80 million.⁸³

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Panama City Television Service in Spanish, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Services, Latin America*, p. 40, FBIS-LAT-90-054, 20 March 1990.

⁸³Ibid.

Arias Calderon also contrasted the new structure of the Public Force with that of the PDF, as within 75 days of civilian government, the Immigration and Naturalization Department and the Traffic and Transportation Department, and prison system were no longer under military authority. The DENI has been transformed into the Technical Judicial Police with a different purview than its secret police functions, and upon approval by the Legislative Assembly will be under the authority of the national Attorney General.⁸⁴ The central basis of PDF power, the military units, have been disbanded and are being transformed into government entities responsible for providing a specific public service.

Nevertheless, the critics, such as ADOC leader Alberto Conte, point out, that it is not the structure but the attitude, loyalty, and intentions of the Public Force that are in question. By admission of the former second in command of the Public Force, Lieutenant Colonel Valdonedo:

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 39.

The Public Force is currently going through a very difficult time, the institution has just suffered the trauma of an invasion. The...members have just experienced ...seeing their officers flee...the imprisonment of their top commander, who unfortunately commanded these troops for a very long time...this very institution and its men are feeling open rejection by some groups in our community... they are the object of resentment that Panamanian society has accumulated for a very long time...the members are confused. These very men, however, joined the Public Force responding to a call by the Panamanian government...they trusted President Endara and this government's leaders...they joined the Public Force to contribute to our country's reconstruction. Current members...experienced the same trauma that the Panamanian people experienced during the dictatorship...they experienced the trauma from a different perspective but they and their families did experience that trauma...they were confined to their barracks...they did not see their wives and families for long periods of time...these men were victims of false and distorted propaganda...they were the victims of lies and bad superiors...thus they are having a very difficult time. However, they have the ability to overcome this for a number of reasons...the traumatic experience of the dictatorship makes them reject any possibilities of returning to the past...they want to contribute to this country's reconstruction... sometimes the community's rejection and resentment fill them with insecurity...this attitude makes them feel uneasy and prevents them from acting up to ...society's expectations. Over the past six years, Noriega approached training... from a military point of view. Today we have men eager to become good and professional policemen, but they necessarily have to go through a transition and training period to offer the service the Panamanian society deserves.⁸⁵

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 40.

The foundations for the reservations, criticisms, and fears of those opposed to the Public Force as well as the origins of the difficulties currently faced by the Public Force are rooted in the legacy of Torrijismo and military dominance, not only in civilian politics, but indeed in all aspects of Panamanian life. The early aspirations for a national army, and participation in national politics fueled the evolution of the Panamanian military institution and led to the establishment of a powerful military institution that dominated Panama for decades. The extent of military prerogatives ranged from manipulation of the presidency and the constitution, abuse and corruption of government institutions, and brutal repression. The seemingly interminable duration of military rule ingrained its acceptance, however grudgingly, within the consciousness of the Panamanian people. This same reality fostered the institutional belief in military superiority, uniqueness, separation, and privilege, within the military institution created the institutional identity that allowed even the employment of the extremist measures to maintain the institutional prerogative and dominance in civilian politics.

The many years of military rule established a well founded insecurity and distrust of the military institution. Current conditions exacerbate the distrust as the institution referred to by Lieutenant Colonel Valdonedo is still in a state of "withdrawal" from the loss of its many privileges, and control of the political scenery. Valdonedo's references to the institution's suffering the trauma of invasion, seeing its officers flee, uneasy attitude and traumatic experience with dictatorship point to an institutional identity that is currently

"in pain." This pain is a result of the imprisonment and killing of fellow officers and men during the previous coup attempts, from the deaths and wounded sustained during the invasion, and the military institution's loss of the premier position in Panamanian society.

The Noriega influence, in contrast, is rejected as responsible for the institutional decay and the low point that the institution currently finds itself. Noriega's personal manipulation of the PDF's chain of command and traditions, are faulted for the instability in the institution, while his intransigence against U.S. pressure are blamed for the invasion and the diminished Public Force role in society. The current uncertainty, pain, and identity crisis within the Public Force will eventually heal as the institutional cohesiveness and identity is established. Herein lies the major obstacle to the Public Force's transition to an apolitical, subordinate, police force. Since Torrijismo was responsible for installing the military institution at the apex of Panamanian society, it will again be favorably viewed as the basis of a renewed Public Force identity, and new role in society. Torrijismo is remembered for creating the greatest period of institutional cohesion, legitimacy and prestige, which resulted in the durability of the dominance of the military institution. As this strength-infusing institutional identity grows, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, the Public Force will be characterized by the military traditions, and concepts of Torrijismo. In light of the traditional disdain for police work, the Torrijista aspiration for a national army will surface again. Also dissatisfaction with the civilian government's political and economic problems will rekindle the desire

for more participation in national decision-making that could be supported by a growing segment of the population. Continuance of social inequality and reversal of social progress under Torrijos will also revive military determination to play a greater role in the political process as the guardian of social progress.

In time, an armed institution will arise in Panama with aspirations beyond the simple police duties envisioned by the civilian government. Whether the character of this institution will follow the traditions of the National Guard and the PDF remains to be seen, but the probability is high that it will. In a country of weak civilian institutions, the reestablished cohesiveness of the Public Force under *Torrijismo* will make the transition to an apolitical police force difficult. Panama's political culture does not bode well for the near term strengthening of civilian institutions such as political parties and government ministries, even under civilian rule. Patronage in politics is still predominant and control of civilian institutions is more a vehicle for political patronage and favors than public service. Despite the existence of nominal democratic institutions and processes, Panamanians have often opted for strong, personal, charismatic, leadership and patronage politics rather than strong civilian government institutions and cohesive, party politics.

B. PUBLIC FORCE WEAKNESS

In a the current period of material and institutional weakness, the traditionally strong and most organized institution in Panama, the

Public Force, is attempting to professionalize. The weakness makes the establishment of institutional identity even more important. Inevitably, the professionalized and strengthened institution may be required to once again play a crucial role in deciding the political future of Panama. The current weakness of the Public Force is only temporary, resulting from tight government control. Reinstitution of the Public Force's institutional identity will allow it to once again become a strong player as part of the system of political patronage that characterizes Panamanian politics.

Since the announcement of its ad hoc creation by the Endara government on December 23, 1989⁸⁶ all aspects of the Public Force have been marred by problems and setbacks. Formation of the Public Force with a core of former members of the military has led to public fears that a reconstitution of the Panamanian Defense Forces is taking place. Public mistrust has exacerbated this problem of credibility for the Public Force as a legitimate government institution. The continuous changes in leadership within and the undefined nature and character of the Public Force, has resulted in widespread misunderstanding of the Panamanian Public Force.

The civilian government has defended the creation and existence of the Public Force and attempted to explain the rationale behind the Public Force, while simultaneously trying to keep it weak. In response to opposition to the retention of former PDF members, the

⁸⁶ibid.

government points to its legal basis under the constitution. According to Arias Calderon:⁸⁷

The Public Force is being organized under constitutional laws that allow the president of the Republic--with participation of the pertinent minister--to appoint the chiefs and officers of the Public Force according to the promotion roster and to stipulate the use of the Public Force.⁸⁸

The civilian government position is that in addition to providing for public security, manning of the Public Force by ex-PDF members is a positive step towards national demilitarization. The government points out that many former PDF members suffered under the dictatorship, enduring persecution, imprisonment, exile, and even torture and death. Having suffered, they will have as much stake in preventing a repetition of the abuses of past as the civilian populace. In retaining the majority of the Panamanian Defense Force the government has made positive steps toward national reconstruction and reconciliation. To have excluded all members of the Panamanian Defense Force would have judged them categorically, not as individuals which is their right as Panamanians.

⁸⁷At the time Second Vice President Ricardo Arias Calderon also occupied the Cabinet post of Government and Justice Minister. In this position Arias Calderon functioned as the senior civilian head of the Public Force. Due to the removal of the Christian Democrats from the ruling coalition, Arias Calderon no longer serves in this dual capacity.

⁸⁸"Arias Speaks on Creation of Public Force," Panama City Domestic Service coverage of a live speech in Spanish, 18 January 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 38, FBIS LAT-90-015, 23 January 1990.

Creation of the Public Force, was a step at strengthening civilian rule through their inclusion.⁸⁹ However, government rhetoric in support of the Public Force has not prevented it from interfering in the institution to maintain strong control over it. Through demilitarization and restructuring of its organization, the Public Force has been kept weak. The effectiveness of strict budgetary controls, stifling of any outspokenness from public force leaders, and denial of access to former sources of patronage, contrasts the Public Force with PDF of the past.

Arias Calderon outlined the Public Force mission as protection of the lives, honor, and property of all Panamanians, maintenance of public order, prevention of crime while respecting human rights, enforcement of traffic regulations, vigilance against possible urban guerrilla warfare from the Dignity Battalions, prevention of drug violence, and prevention of external subversion of the Panamanian government.⁹⁰ In a temporary measure to regulate the Public Force until the National Assembly can draft more permanent legislation, the Panamanian cabinet on 10 February 1990 adopted Cabinet Decree 38. In the interest of demilitarization it states:

⁸⁹Ibid.

⁹⁰"Arias Calderon Interviewed on Public Force" radio interview in Spanish on Panama City Cadena Exitosa, 12 February 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 18, FBIS LAT-90-031, 14 February 1990.

Article 1: The Public Force of the Republic of Panama is organized with the technical and professional responsibility for public security and national defense...the Public Force answers directly to the executive of the Republic with full respect for human rights as a safeguard and support of democratic institutions.

Article 2: The president of the Republic is the supreme chief of the Public Force, he will rule over the Public Force through decrees, rules, orders. ⁹¹

The decree leaves no doubt as to the civilian authority with regard to the Public Force.

Under Decree 38, the Public Force consists of the National Police, the National Air Service, and the National Maritime Service, each with its own command, salary, and rank scale under the authority of the executive branch through the Minister of Government and Justice. This new structure results in three distinct public service agencies instead of a single public security organ reflecting the decentralization within the Public Force.⁹² The National Department of Investigations (DENI), formerly attached to the Panamanian Defense Force Intelligence Directorate, or G-2, in accordance with Cabinet Decree 38, has been redesignated the Judicial Technical Police (PTJ), temporarily under the Government and Justice Ministry. Independent from the Public Force the Judicial Technical Police will eventually be

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 19. The article also goes on to state that with the participation of the pertinent minister, the president will appoint and remove the leaders, officers and members of the Public Force; grant promotions and give instruction on the use of the Public Force as the Constitution provides.

⁹²Ibid., p. 19.

assigned to the office of the national Attorney General.⁹³ Yet the Public Force is not entirely limited to nonmilitary mission as Article Seven of Decree 38 allows for some paramilitary units:

With the approval of the country's president and government and justice minister (sic), special National Police Units can be organized to guard the the borders and protect our national integrity; to protect the Panama Canal according to the 1977 canal treaties and in accordance with Foreign Ministry instructions...these units will be separated from the National Police if the law so stipulates. The country has certain security needs that cannot be met by a regular police force.⁹⁴

With two exceptions, all military combatant units have been dissolved and integrated into the Public Force, comprising the bulk of the police service. Noriega's prized infantry rifle companies, the end product of years of militarization of the National Guard, and the core of the Panamanian Defense Force institutional identity have been dismantled.⁹⁵ Officially disbanded were the 1st Rifle Company in Tinajitas; the 2nd Rifle Company, "Pumas" in Tocumen, site of the international airport; the 4th Company, "Urraca", responsible for Commandancia⁹⁶ security prior to their participation in the 3 October 1989 coup attempt; the 5th Rifle Company, "Los Cholos" of Fort Amador; the 6th Rifle Company, Mechanized in Rio Hato; the 7th Rifle

⁹³Ibid., p. 20.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 40.

⁹⁶The main headquarters of the Panamanian Defense Force was commonly referred to as the "commandancia."

Company, "Macho de Monte" of Rio Hato; and the 8th Rifle Company, Colon. Only two old units remain, the Paz (Peace) Battalion and the 3rd Rifle Company, "Diablos Rojos," both assigned to patrolling the Costa Rican border in Chiriqui province.⁹⁷

The typically military functions of what used to be the Panamanian Air Force and National Navy have been eliminated by the dictates of Decree 38. As hinted to by the names of the new services, the National Police is responsible for the protection of lives, honor, and property, maintenance of public order security and crime prevention, and regulation of traffic on public highways according to the law and traffic regulations. The National Air Service is responsible for air transportation and support of government agencies, support of government socioeconomic development programs, National Police functions, and search and rescue operations. Similarly, the National Maritime Service is tasked with seaborne government transportation and support, while also acting as a maritime police. As there exists a legitimate need for coast guard services, the maritime police duties are particularly aimed at preventing piracy, illegal fishing, contraband, and illegal immigration. The National Maritime Service is formally tasked with support of the General Customs Directorate and the Immigration and Naturalization Directorate.

⁹⁷Ibid. Although referred to simply as infantry companies by Arias Calderon, author has added additional information to further identify unit, mission, and any noteworthy details.

Noncombatant military service units with application in public service such as the military health battalion and the military engineers battalion have been dissolved. Medical personnel who provide services to and with the Public Force will be civilian personnel assigned to the government Health Ministry or to the Social Security Fund. Military engineering equipment has been divided up between the Government and Justice Ministry and the Public Works Ministry.⁹⁸ Even the Catholic Church has eliminated all military chaplain positions and will allow for spiritual services to members of the Public Force through priests without military rank.

Former agencies known for rampant corruption under military control, the Immigration and Naturalization Department, along with a newly created Passport Office, and the National Directorate of Land Traffic Management and Transportation (DNMT) are under the Ministry of Government and Justice.⁹⁹ Mismanaged and tolerant of human rights violations under Noriega, the Penitentiary System, charged with monitoring of penitentiaries and jails, is also under direct civilian supervision of the Government and Justice Ministry's Rehabilitation Directorate.¹⁰⁰

Emphasis on the technical responsibilities of the Public Force in the area of public security are aimed at ruling out any deliberative

⁹⁸Ibid., p. 39.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰"Arias Calderon Discusses Public Force Organization," reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 30, FBIS LAT 90-007, 10 Jan 1990.

political function for the Public Force. Article 15, the pertinent article of the Cabinet decree states that:

The Public Force is not deliberative--precisely because it is a technical and professional organization--and its members will under no circumstance intervene in party politics, except for casting their votes.

The leaders and officers of the Public Force will not exercise coercion of any kind over members of the force when they cast their votes in elections. They may not participate in public posts, directorates, or boards of directors outside of the branch of the Public Force to which they belong except as provided in international treaties and future laws.¹⁰¹

In keeping with the article, active duty Public Force members are barred from any political activity of any kind including formal involvement in party politics or even making partisan political statements. This article is especially indicative of the civilian government's paranoia of the Public Force.

The decree also defines the context of Public Force relations with civilian authorities from the provincial level down to the municipal and corregimiento levels. Article 8 decrees:

The National Police will act in consultation and coordination with civilian authorities at the provincial, municipal, and corregimiento levels and, as an agent of those authorities, it will obey the orders dictated by the authorities in the exercise their legal functions.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹"Arias Calderon Interviewed on Public Force," p. 21.

¹⁰²ibid.

This decreed civilian subordination of the Public Force contrasts strongly with previous days when Panamanian Defense Force officers assigned as military zone commanders in the provinces exercised authority and prerogatives as de facto provincial governors, often vetoing more senior civilian government ministers.¹⁰³ Article 8 also provides for the autonomy and protection of the internal structure of the Public Force with regard to civilian authorities external to the Public Force chain of command. Civilian authority at the various levels of government are strictly prohibited from interfering with the internal structure Public Force as an institution, especially in the area of internal discipline.

In discussing this, Arias Calderon states that:

the authority of the governor, mayor, and *corregimiento* representative is not part of the internal discipline of the institution,...we are not stating that local authorities should become a part of the National Police's internal organization...we are saying that when local representatives exercise their authority and require the National Police's support to carry out ...orders, the National Police has to obey those orders.¹⁰⁴

In relation to civilian apprehension over military resurgence in the Public Force, the government contrasts Panama's Public Force with other Latin American countries formerly under military dictatorship and now attempting transitions to democracy. Arias Calderon makes two compelling points by observing that first, all democratizing

¹⁰³"*Panamanian Politics*," p. 45.

¹⁰⁴"Arias Calderon Interviewed on Public Force," p. 22.

former Latin American dictatorships of the last two decades --Peru, Ecuador, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, have left their armed forces intact. Except for changes on the very highest levels, the same military institutions that put into power and supported military dictatorships were left in place as government institutions supportive of democracy. Because of Panama's failure to make a transition to civilian rule on its own, it has gone much further than the other civilian governments and is attempting demilitarization. Not only has it reorganized the former military institution, but it has submitted the entire membership of the Panamanian Defense Force to intensive background investigations for any wrongdoing during the dictatorship.¹⁰⁵ Hundreds of former PDF members have been barred from the Public Force while serving members of the Public Force have been expelled or retired from service upon discovery of incriminating evidence. Second, the nightmare of dictatorship was also suffered by the members of the Panamanian Defense Forces that now make up the Public Force. Not only did they witness the deterioration and manipulation of an institution according to the personal dictates of one man and his cronies, they took part in armed, intra-PDF combat which led to executions and deaths of members. Furthermore, they lived through the military destruction of their institution and are now feeling the rejection of the people and nation they are sworn to serve.

¹⁰⁵ibid.

Materially, as a public security force, the Public Force is barely a remnant of its former self, lacking even the rudimentary equipment to police the streets effectively. Communications equipment such as portable radios for street cops and mobile patrols are in short supply, preventing timely dispatching of policemen to crime scenes, or contact with headquarters. Mobile patrols are hindered by a scarcity of patrol cars, and adequate weaponry to fight crime. The outgunned policemen are reluctant to engage armed criminals as they are restricted by the government to patrol only with small caliber weapons, such as .38 caliber revolvers, while criminals often possess more powerful high-caliber weapons such as AK-47's and grenades leftover from the military regime. In a section of downtown Panama City containing some of the capital's worst slums, there are only 775 policemen and seven dilapidated vehicles to patrol seven precincts containing 210,000 residents and daily workers.¹⁰⁶ In the past police concentration in Panama City was well over 1000, and this number was reinforced by a reserve force of paramilitary riot police known as the First Public Order Company, or the Dobermans.¹⁰⁷

Due to the high crime rate, involving high-caliber automatic weapons, that has continued since the invasion, Alberto Conte, an ADOC leader and publicist, has criticized the government restrictions stating that the government sensitivity to criticism regarding excessive force or abuse of human rights by the Public Force is

¹⁰⁶"Life After Manuel Noriega," *US News and World Report*, p. 29, 30 July 1990.

¹⁰⁷*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 221.

actually encouraging crime. In a scene reminiscent of Noriega's infamous public order companies, riot police have already fired tear gas and bird shot at rock-throwing student protestors. Other civilian leaders, such as Roberto Eisenmann, editor and owner of the newspaper *La Prensa*, support the restrictions, contending that the Public Force is using the crime wave as justification for more firepower and militarization.¹⁰⁸

Prominent members of Panama's business community have even called for reinstatement of PDF officers. According to Edgardo Lasso, president of the Panamanian Banking Association, the Public Force is just not capable of containing Panama's mounting crime:

It is time we lost our fear, if the personnel of the Public Forces are not capable,...it is necessary for the government to find people who do know how to do this job.¹⁰⁹

Though not explicitly mentioning the PDF, the implications were clearly understood. A phone-in organized by Cadena Exitosa, a radio station, confirmed this feeling as many who called in stated that the "old defense forces" should be reassembled.¹¹⁰

In a realistic assessment when still Public Force commander, Colonel Eduardo Herrera, acknowledged the problem and quietly lamented the civilian government's material control of the Public

¹⁰⁸Laura Brooks, "Crime Wave Corruption Tie Up Panama's Police Force," *The Christian Science Monitor*, p. 4, 28 August 1990.

¹⁰⁹Time to Recall Noriega Officers?" *Latin American Weekly Report*, p. 11, WR 91-07, 21 February 1991.

¹¹⁰*ibid.*

Force. Characterizing lack of equipment as the Public Force's main problem, "...most of the patrol cars, equipment, and facilities to lodge personnel were destroyed...we are rebuilding some of these facilities which were the target of looting, and we are replacing the vehicles, some of which were destroyed by military action, ...concerning the weapons that were turned over to U.S. military personnel, we are gradually obtaining through the Government and Justice Ministry, what is necessary for the police service."¹¹¹

While the primary duty and force structure of the Public force is police-oriented, problems of understaffed police precincts, inadequate funding, equipment and firepower hinder the Public Force's efforts at controlling crime.¹¹² In addition, according to Colonel Eduardo Herrera, any Public Force use of firearms in the line of duty often resulted in dismissal or arrest of the Public Force member. This situation has demoralized the Public Force members who feel the struggle against criminal elements is waged unequally.¹¹³

Reflective of civilian control of the Public Forces is civilian oversight of Public Force purchases of equipment, personnel strength, and operations. Article 11 of Decree 38 limits the total number of Public Force members to a percentage of the population (to be

¹¹¹"Colonel Herrera on Public Force Needs," published in *Crítica Libre* in Spanish, 24 January 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 41, FBIS LAT-90-019, 29 January 1990.

¹¹²*Ibid.*

¹¹³"Three Civilians Appointed To Top Police Posts," published in *La Prensa in Spanish*, 20 July 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 20, FBIS LAT 90-142, 24 July 1990.

determined later by the legislative assembly). In case of war or serious public disorder, the provision allows the executive branch to decree a temporary increase in the numbers of members. Article 12 assigns the Comptroller General's Office with controlling and supervising the budgeted funds for the various Public Force services.¹¹⁴

Additionally, an inter-ministerial committee composed of members from the Ministries of Finance and Treasury and the Presidency, headed by the Government and Justice Ministry, has been established to determine the disposition of the properties of the former military. Under the dictatorship the military and their civilian cronies had control of virtually all major sources of wealth in Panama, illegal and legal. The Panamanian Defense Force was able to transform government institutions into sources of personal enrichment. The most compelling example was control of the Planning and Economic Policy Ministry. As an appendix of the military, the military exercised total control of the national budget and expenditure. According to Comptroller General Ruben Dario Carles:

¹¹⁴"Cabinet Decree Number 38 Creates Public Force," Text of Decree 38 approved by the Cabinet Council in Panama City on 10 February 1990 published in *El Panama America*, 14 February 1990 in Spanish, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 45, FBIS LAT 90-34, 20 February 1990.

The military went to the extreme of transferring \$5 million balboas from the government's bank account at the National bank to the barracks every month by pressing a few buttons on their computers. Not even the Comptroller General's Office or the Treasury and Finance Ministry knew about that movement of funds.¹¹⁵

The controversial Public Force retention of former Panamanian Defense Force members was legalized by Cabinet Decree 38. Article 13 allowed that:

Seniority and retirement benefits earned by former members of the extinct Defense Forces are recognized in favor of those who join the various services of the Public Force. Public Force members affected by the termination of service will have a right to retire after completing 25 year of active service...¹¹⁶

The civilian government points out, however, that highest echelons of the former military have been barred from the Public Force.¹¹⁷ Arias

¹¹⁵"Comptroller General Views Military Corruption," on Circuito RPC Television in Spanish 31 January 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 26, FBIS LAT 90-025, 6 February 1990.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 46. Author believes this is to be the only formal written reference to the consolidation of former PDF members in to the Public Force. Presumably personnel who were never in the PDF are also allowed into the Public Force, but in an interview with *Critica Libre* on 24 January 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, FBIS LAT 90-019, then commander Colonel Herrera Hassan stated, "... for the time being, we are not accepting applicants who are not former member of the Defense Forces because we would have to train them. We are only taking down information on secondary school graduates who are interested in enrolling in the new Police Academy."

¹¹⁷"Arias Calderon Views Makeup of Public Force," reported by ACAN-EFE in Spanish, 4 January 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 38, FBIS LAT 90-004, 5 January 1990.

Calderon points this out as proof that the selection of former military members for the Public Force has not been careless.

Civilian subordination and control of the Public Force is also clearly evident in other areas. Of the three lieutenant colonels considered sufficiently untainted by corruption, human rights abuse, and free of political prerogatives during their former military service, none remain on duty only months after the establishment of the Public Force. Lieutenant Colonel Roberto Armijo, formerly on the General Staff as head of the National Navy and first Public Force colonel and commander was in office for only two weeks. The Endara government's ongoing investigation of the activities of the former military uncovered discrepancies in Colonel Armijo's personal finances, forcing his replacement by the government.¹¹⁸ Succeeding Armijo as Public Force commander was Colonel Eduardo Herrera, former Panamanian Ambassador to Israel under Noriega until he was forced to resign his post out of disagreement with the former dictator.¹¹⁹ Herrera returned from self exile in Miami to serve with the Public Force. Credited with his years of military service, Herrera retired ostensibly due to reaching mandatory retirement criteria, but the retirement was amid controversy concerning his alleged dissatisfaction with commanding a thoroughly demilitarized and weak Public Force.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹⁹In reality, Herrera Hassan was in "golden exile" or a relatively comfortable exile away from the PDF due to opposition to Noriega's policies.

In May 1990, accused of committing crimes against freedom of the press, Lieutenant Colonel Aristrides Valdonedo, the deputy commander of the Public Force, was removed by President Endara and Government and Justice Minister Arias Calderon. According to the Attorney General which issued a warrant for Valdonedo's arrest, under Noriega Valdonedo took part in closing of newspapers and radio stations, and in burning down a store owned by opposition members, as well as torture during a stint as G-2 chief of staff.¹²⁰

In September Herrera's successor as Public Force commander, Lieutenant Colonel Fernando Quezada was fired after writing a letter to a newspaper defending himself against allegations of corruption. The Endara government interpreted the letter as setting a dangerous precedent for military outspokenness not to be tolerated while civilian control of the Public Force was still being consolidated. Quezada was replaced provisionally by Ebrahim Asvat, the first civilian in 40 years to head the Panama's security forces. The implications of these civilian dismissals of the Public Force commanders is especially significant and indicative of the civilian government's real authority and control over the Public Force. In contrast with President Arturo Delvalle's failed attempt to fire General Noriega from his post as Panamanian Defense Force commander in 1988, the civilian authorities appeared to have established their control over the Public Force.

¹²⁰"Further On Police Official's Dismissal," published in *La Prensa* in Spanish, 16 May 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 15, FBIS LAT 90-097, 18 May 1990.

However, a December 1990 mutiny by about 100 members of the Public Force, led by prison fugitive, Colonel Hassan, pointed to the very questionable control of the Public Force by the civilian authorities. After, a daring helicopter breakout of the imprisoned Colonel Hassan, the mutineers succeeded in taking over the National Police headquarters. Lack of intervention by the remaining units of the Public Force resulted in the deployment of 500 U.S. troops at the request of the Endara government. The U.S. troops succeeded in retaking the headquarters as the mutineers surrendered. While their stated demand was to bring attention to specific problems in the Public Force, except for U.S. intervention, the Endara government might have fallen. The attempted mutiny was a clear indication of dissatisfaction within the Public Force with their current status. With renewed institutional identity and vigor, the next mutiny may not be as easily put down, if the entire Public Force participates.

Despite the Public Force complement of former military personnel, the existing realities of equipment shortages, budget reduction, demilitarizing reorganization, civilian domination, absence of any strong leadership and breakdown of the institutional identity has resulted in a severely weakened Public Force, thought to be unable to mount any direct threat against the civilian government in the near future. The December 1990 mutiny has disproved this. But Public Force priority remains rebuilding the institution consistent with Torrijismo instead of a power-taking coup. Indicative of Torrijismo in the mutiny was that the mutineers went to the trouble of freeing Herrera, a traditional Torrijista, from prison. Had the attempt been

simply a military attempt to return to power, another officer could have been chosen lead the attempt. In addition, neither were any ex-PDF Noriega loyalists, who would have gladly participated, included in the mutiny. More significant was the civilian response which was not one of opposition to the mutiny, but rather of condemnation for the U.S. intervention and uproar at the death of one of the mutineers at the hands of the U.S. troops. Consistent with Torrijismo's opposition to U.S. intervention in Panamanian affairs, the response to the latest intervention was marked change from the welcome given the invasion just one year earlier.

Relative gains and losses also strongly influence Public Force motives, the current inheritance of severe economic disarray and a national reconstruction burden currently from the civilian government serve as major disincentives for any potential coup plotters. Damages in the billions of dollars remain from U. S. trade sanctions before the invasion, fighting during the invasion, and looting in its aftermath. With a population of just over two million , the estimates are that more than one million people are living in poverty, while 500,000 are unemployed.¹²¹ As economic conditions worsen, anti-government demonstrations by students and radical political groups will probably be joined by ordinary Panamanians. Demonstrations have been suppressed at government orders by Public Force using tear gas, and tactics reminiscent of the old Panamanian Defense Force

¹²¹Catto, William, "Poverty Puts Panamanians' Patience to Test," *Times of the Americas*, p. 1, Volume XXXIV, Number 17, 5 September 1985.

public order companies has fueled already strong anti-Public Force sentiment.

V. CIVILIAN POLITICS

Prior to the 1968 coup, Panamanian politics was with few exceptions the domain of the oligarchy. Torrijos permitted a limited form of civilian party politics in order to legitimize military rule through creation of opportunities for popular civilian political participation. While overall power remained with Torrijos, the new politics succeeded in widening political participation.

Torrijos' social and political reforms towards the traditionally excluded elements of Panamanian society resulted in increased representation for the rural constituencies at the expense of the urban commercial oligarchic elite. For the first time in Panamanian history, black and mulatto leaders were incorporated into the national government.¹²² Even middle class opposition parties used the limited opening in politics to the advantage of their parties. The Liberal party was coopted to participate in politics under the military government rule, while the Panamanian Christian Democratic Party (PDC) used their new political status quo to broaden their party's base beyond the confines of the urban academic and professional community.¹²³ Lower middle class support for Torrijismo was gained, in some cases weaned, from other political parties through provision of jobs and other special perks. Social security benefits as

¹²²*Panamanian Politics*, p.78.

¹²³*Ibid.*, p. 85.

well as newly constructed large numbers of public housing units were provided for these workers.¹²⁴

Similarly under the Endara government, the traditional patronage rules govern the civilian bureaucracy as well as civilian politics. Conspicuously absent is the overall political power wielded by the military under Torrijismo. Without a dominant force in Panama today, civilian politics is entering a new phase of Panamanian history. Freedom from the military rule has resulted in a level of civilian politics unrestrained as never before seen in Panama. The weakness of Endara's presidency was evidenced by its failure to significantly stimulate economic reinvigoration and reconstruction, or begin political reconciliation vital to the post-invasion recovery. Endara's weakness has fueled the politicking in Panama that resulted in breakup of the ruling coalition in April 1991.

While it is unrealistic to expect changes overnight, Endara has not attempted to increase his base of support among the lower classes. The benefits of his regime are perceived to be going to a minority of rabiblancos at the expense of the majority rabiprietos. Only two cabinet posts were offered to leaders outside the rabiblanco class and Endara has attacked Torrijos' reformist rule with the same force he has criticized Noriega's more venal rule.

Consistent with Panamanian tradition, nepotism and patronage have been the rule in filling government posts since the invasion. It is the apparent misappropriation of patronage within the ruling

¹²⁴Panamanian Politics, p. 96.

coalition that prevented the cohesion of the civilian government. Political divisions along traditional party lines prevailed over loyalty to the civilian government. Ill will between Endara's Partido Arnulfista (PA) and Arias Calderon's Christian Democrats over the allocation of government posts has existed since the installment of the coalition. With the largest representation in National Assembly based on the annulled 1989 election results, the PDC took the largest number (5 of 12) of cabinet seats.¹²⁵ Endara's Arnulfistas have complained that the PDC dominance has been at their expense. The PDC on the other hand holds Endara's leadership to blame for the coalition's dramatic drop in popularity. Voter opinion polls taken in March 1991 show Endara's popularity with the voters at 17% compared to 89% in the 1989 elections.¹²⁶

The fragile anti-Noriega coalition which initially selected Endara as its presidential candidate because he offended the fewest number of people, rapidly disintegrated, having lost its *raison d'etre*.¹²⁷ Support for Endara in the May 1989 elections was more an indictment of Noriega than political support for Endara.¹²⁸ Any legitimacy

¹²⁵"Panama's Coalition Close to the Brink," *Latin American Weekly Report*, p. 6, 18 April 1991, WR 91-14. Of the balance of the 12 seats, Partido Arnulfista has one, the rest went to the Movimiento Liberal Republicano Nacionalista (MOLIRENA) and the Partido Liberal Autentico, PLA.

¹²⁶*Ibid.* Popularity was measured by asking whether respondents would again vote for Endara if elections were held that day.

¹²⁷"Endara: The Wrong Man," A Council on Hemispheric Affairs Statement, 30 August, 1990 published in *The Times of the Americas*, p. 6, 5 September 1990.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*

possessed by Endara was compromised by his installation into the presidency on a U. S. military base on the eve of the invasion and the calling in of U.S troops to quell the December 1990 mutiny. The unrestrained political maneuvering within even his government coalition, point to rough times ahead for an already tenuous civilian government.

Partial legislative elections held in January 1991 gave the ruling coalition a serious setback. The elections were to select officials for positions left vacant due to inconclusive results during the 1989 elections. Most significant were the nine seats vacant in the National Assembly. The results of the elections gave five seats to the opposition formerly aligned with the military and Torrijismo. Of the five seats, the PRD took three, the Partido Liberal took two, and the Partido Laborista (PALA) took one. The government coalition's PDC won two seats, along with two for the Movimiento Liberal Republicano Nacionalista (MOLIRENA). Endara's party did not win any. Both the PDC and MOLIRENA took the opportunity to lash out at the Endara government. First Vice President Arias Calderon of the PDC called the shift to the opposition a "warning," while Second Vice President of MOLIRENA called it "a loud and clear" indication "...that the population is dissatisfied with the government's performance."¹²⁹

Signs of a major schism in the ruling coalition were initially apparent on the highest levels when in an interview with Agence

¹²⁹"Ruling Coalition Takes a Drubbing," *Latin American Weekly Report*, p. 4, 14 February 1991, WR-91-06.

France-Press on 3 September 1990, First Vice President Arias Calderon accused members of other parties in the governing coalition of collaborating with Noriega allies and stated that the coalition government was in danger of falling apart.¹³⁰ In August at a party leadership meeting, First Vice President Arias Calderon, the top Christian Democratic Party leader asserted that the government of President Guillermo Endara required urgent changes. While reaffirming PDC loyalty to the government, Arias Calderon stated that if momentum toward democracy were lost, the PDC would consider withdrawing from the government.¹³¹

Intergovernmental tensions have led to serious confrontation; Colon Governor Jose Huc of Endara's Arnulfista Party suspended Christian Democratic Mayor Alcibiades Gonzalez for 20 days, prompting the mayor to reject the suspension and declare himself in a state of rebellion against the governor. President Endara has publicly challenged the PDC to follow through with its threat to secede from the coalition. In April 1991, Panama's Institutional Protection Service (equivalent to the U.S. Secret Service), publicly searched and disarmed Vice President Arias Calderon and his bodyguards as they arrived at the presidential palace for a cabinet meeting.¹³² The incident was perceived by many as clear provocation for the PDC to

¹³⁰Catto, William, p. 1.

¹³¹"PDC Calls for Change in Endara Government," Circuito RPC Television in Spanish 1 August 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 42, FBIS LAT 90-151, 6 August 1990.

¹³²"Panama's Coalition Close to the Brink, p. 6.

leave the government. Earlier in 1991, Endara's controversial new wife publicly accused the Christian Democrats of conspiring to destabilize the government.

Adding to the turmoil, Endara was accused of setting up a clandestine "spy" agency, Consejo de Seguridad Publica y Defensa Nacional, in the presidency, and appointing a former senior Noriega official to run it. Claiming the agency was illegal, the National Assembly created a special legislative commission to investigate the agency. The National Assembly claimed to be the sole entity able to authorize the existence of a spy agency. Endara pointed out that the agency had been created using the same emergency powers he had utilized to authorize the recount of the Norega-annulled 1989 elections. The implication to the legislative commission was that if the spy agency was illegal, so was the mandate of all the legislators in the National Assembly. Local newspapers also alleged that the spy agency had been allocated a \$2 million budget, and its 100 members were being advised by the CIA, Taiwanese, and Venezuelan intelligence services.¹³³

Endara is also accused of links to the drug trade, as the PRD produced an affidavit signed by a DEA agent linking Endara to money laundering. Faced with similar charges in the past, Endara was cleared of any wrongdoing in 1990. The new DEA affidavit links Endara's law firm as the Panamanian agent of a money laundering

¹³³"Endara Attacked Over 'Spy' Agency," *Latin American Weekly Report*, p. 11, WR-91-04.

consortium of international companies.¹³⁴ Finally Endara has been charged by the PDC of secretly purchasing arms abroad for Partido Arnulfista supporters. Endara countered this by providing documents implicating PDC members in arms purchases abroad as well. Armed altercations between political parties at the minimum would necessitate Public Force involvement in politics merely through the maintenance of order.

Toward the end of April 1991, President Endara reshuffled his cabinet, resulting in the exclusion of the Christian Democrats.¹³⁵ Endara justified his move by blaming the PDC's "overbearing attitude" and constant opposition to government policies as leaving him no choice. While MOLIRENA remains with the coalition, it was not rewarded for past loyalty. Three of the vacated cabinet seats instead went to Endara's PA, two to the PLA and one to an "independent." The implications, however, are significant as the PDC still retains its majority in the National Assembly. The PDC holds 28 seats in the National Assembly, versus 27 for the government coalition. The Torrijista PRD possesses 10 and its PALA allies have two. Thus the PRD is the swing vote essential to passage of legislation in the National Assembly.¹³⁶ An Endara spokesman confirmed that an arrangement with the PRD is being sought, but the PRD reportedly is

¹³⁴"Panama's Coalition Close to the Brink," p. 6.

¹³⁵"Endara Ditches DC Coalition Allies," *Latin American Weekly Report*, p. 4, 25 April 1991, WR-91-15.

¹³⁶*ibid.*

not interested in a long term alliance, and prefers accommodation only on a case by case, vote by vote basis.

The new controlling position of the PRD has potentially positive implications for the Public Force as an institution and as a potential political actor. The Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), formed in 1978, was to incorporate and guide the numerous political groups that had been supporting the military regime. The PRD was intended to be the successor in a tradition of official government political parties in Panama. It was mainly via the PRD that the military derived legitimate political support. According to its declaration of principles, the PRD was democratic, multi-class, nationalistic, revolutionary, popular and independent. Its primary mission was to continue the goals of the 1968 coup through coopting and inclusion of business groups, organized labor, peasants, professionals, teachers, public employees, women and youth, under different fronts of the PRD.

The PRD's ties to the military government were extremely close. Similar to the institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Mexico, the PRD did not give the government a monopoly over party activity, but rather ensured close political collaboration between the military, government, and party leaders aimed at controlling the political opposition.¹³⁷ Like the military institution, the PRD suffered an institutional breakdown and crisis of legitimacy during the Noriega years. Under Torrijos the PRD had symbolized reforms and progressive socioeconomic and political changes for Panama. Under

¹³⁷*Panamanian Politics*, pp. 80-81.

Noriega, the party became associated with being the mouthpiece of a brutal, corrupt, repressive dictatorship. Due to growing opposition in PRD sectors the alliance between the PRD and military had become problematic. Military liaison officers had to be assigned to PRD organizations and politicians by Noriega to ensure that voting was consistent with approved military positions.

Since the invasion, the PRD has been severely weakened. Several key members and former leaders are either in exile or in hiding. While a significant remainder of hardline elements continue to reject any dealings with the new civilian government, other members have recognized the legitimacy of the new government and assumed office as full-fledged opposition legislators in the National Assembly. In order to achieve some credibility with its former constituents, much of the post-invasion PRD has moved to disassociate itself from Noriega, but not necessarily the Public Force. Some prominent PRD members such as Ernesto Perez Balladares, the party's former coordinator, and Jorge Ritter, Noriega's former foreign minister, personally met with President Endara to announce formation of the PRD as an opposition political party aimed at strengthening Panama's democracy through political participation.¹³⁸

Despite its new determining political role, internal divisions as well threaten to destroy the remaining elements of the PRD. Those who express desire for real change are accused of treason, and PRD

¹³⁸"PRD Leaders Meet With President Endara," on Circuito RPC Television in Spanish 8 January 1990, reported in *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Latin America*, p. 39, FBIS LAT 90-006, 9 January 1990.

rank and file members who continue to work for the new government are expelled from the party.¹³⁹ A leftist faction under the leadership of members in exile in Mexico are allegedly attempting to take control of the party, while other members including former PRD presidential candidate in the 1989 election, Carlos Duque, are attempting to publicly distance themselves from their previous dealings with Noriega. With the mutually beneficial relationship between the PRD and the military institution weakened and in disarray, and both institutions in the process of rebuilding and reorganization, new rooting in Torrijismo could lead to joint endeavors in the future. But with the professionalization of the Public Force, a renewed Public Force-PRD relationship could undermine efforts to consolidate civilian rule.

Since the invasion, Panama has been in a new period of civilian politics. Without dominance by the military, political parties are bitterly competing to advance their political agenda in the new political environment. One extreme is that partisan civilian politics has weakened consolidation of civilian rule by breaking up Endara's ruling coalition. On the other extreme, the PRD representing groups excluded from the political process before Torrijismo, now controls the crucial swing vote determining national legislation. With the deterioration of the Endara coalition, the traditional nexus of a

¹³⁹"PRD Reportedly Suffers Internal Disputes," published in *El Siglo* in Spanish 4 June 1990 reported in, *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, p. 45, FBIS LAT 90-112, 11 June 1990.

strengthened Public Force and PRD could well result in a political role for the Public Force.

VI. THE PUBLIC FORCE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Monitoring of and assistance to the U.S. installed government in Panama since the invasion has created a difficult policy dilemma for the United States with regard to the Public Force. Endara's civilian government remains dependent on U.S. troops in Panama for internal security and domestic political stability. Meanwhile, the Public Force, which is being trained to assume those duties, is feared to be the civilian government's most formidable threat. Since the invasion, the United States has provided training and equipment for the Public Force and has provided military support to assist the Public Force in carrying out its police functions. In December 1990, U.S. troops intervened to put down a mutiny by Public Force members that could well have toppled the Endara government. The United States is caught in the middle, as the fulcrum between continued civilian rule or Public Force political intervention. As U.S. troops must withdraw from Panama by the year 2000, long-term civilian government dependence on U.S. troops is unfeasible. U.S. policy must eventually make a choice to either remain involved in or withdraw from exerting direct influence in domestic Panamanian politics.

In February 1991, Congress approved funds for the training and equipping of the Public Force. The legislation approved up to \$1.2 million for both judicial and police training under an Administration of Justice program, and approved previously obligated military

assistance funds estimated at \$9.3 million to procure law enforcement equipment.¹⁴⁰ Funds for lethal equipment is limited to \$500,000. An unspecified portion of \$420 million appropriated by Congress in May 1991 will also be spent on bolstering and training the Public Force; not more than \$5 million of the funds may be spent for the procurement of non-lethal law enforcement equipment.¹⁴¹ By April 1990, more than a dozen professional U.S. trainers, mainly former F.B.I. agents, had arrived in Panama under the Administration of Justice's International Criminal Investigations and Training Assistance Program (ICITAP).

The political options for the Public Force appear to be limited. They range from the relative extremes of a genuinely apolitical Public Force totally divorced from civilian politics on one end, to a return to military dictatorship on the other. Torrijismo, in the form of a Public Force-PRD alliance, represents a third alternative. In a country where civilian dominance of politics has meant political exclusion of other civilian constituencies, Torrijismo continues to represent the only politically inclusive movement in Panamanian history.

While the ideal focus of U.S. policy should be the option embodying an apolitical Public Force, the United States should recognize that the current political situation in Panama makes this option unlikely. Given the positive legacy of Torrijismo, U.S. policy must account for a

¹⁴⁰Sullivan, Mark, "Panama-U.S. Relations: Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service Issue Brief, p. 10, The Library of Congress, IB90044, 22 March 1991.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

movement towards Torrijismo within the Public Force and Panamanian society. While Torrijismo was hardly benign, its negative aspects remain overshadowed by its positive achievements. Under Torrijismo more money was put into national health, education, and rural infrastructure than in any other period of Panamanian history. Torrijismo was responsible for the political inclusion of all previously excluded groups as well as legislation leading to the existence of a pluralistic political system including disparate political parties. Torrijismo's implementation of liberal banking laws coupled with political stability resulted in the one of the most economically prosperous and stable periods of Panamanian history. Perhaps most noteworthy was Torrijismo's negotiation of the Panama Canal Treaties with the United States. The most serious allegations against Torrijismo remain corruption in government, a practice which preceded Torrijos, and exile of political opponents. The abuses and excesses attributed to the military dictatorship such as violent political repression, disappearances, and deaths all occurred during Noriega's tenure.

While many fear a return to Torrijismo will result in an eventual return to a Noriega-style military dictatorship, the possibility of a dictator arising from the Public Force is low due to the weakened Public Force leadership. The current Torrijista leadership, especially in the PRD, would probably move to prevent resurgence of a dictator in order to preserve their power. In addition, the PRD suffered diminished credibility and legitimacy due to their association with Noriega's dictatorship and are unlikely to risk their new political

power by supporting a dictator. Unlike the previous unequal relationship between the PRD and the military, any PRD-Public Force alliance in the 1990s will likely integrate the civilian political party and the Public Force as equal partners. Within this new relationship, PRD leaders are unlikely to subordinate themselves to the Public Force leadership. This will make it more difficult for any one person, civilian or Public Force member, from becoming politically omnipotent. As such the political involvement of the Public Force will not approach the total dominance of the PDF.

The Noriega years were not a natural outgrowth of Torrijismo. Noriega had to resort to extreme measures to monitor and control Panamanian life in order to maintain power. This contrasted strongly to military rule under Torrijismo. If Torrijos ruled without severe repression, arguably, a Noriega tenure consistent with Torrijismo could have governed benevolently as well. In addition, had Torrijos lived past 1981, it is questionable whether Noriega would ever have risen to command the National Guard. Two strong contenders would most likely have received Torrijos' endorsement before Noriega. Torrijos' chosen successor was Colonel Ruben Dario Paredes, a loyal Torrijista. After Paredes, any Noriega accession to commander would probably have been successfully contested by Colonel Diaz Herrera, Torrijos' first cousin.

It is unlikely current U.S. policy will improve chances of success for development of an apolitical armed force in Panama. Given Latin American sensitivities toward the U.S. involvement in their affairs, continued U.S. presence in Panama's political-military development

could well prove counterproductive. Favorable agreements between the United States and Panama regarding the Panama Canal and the U.S. military could be construed as manipulation by the United States and not the result of impartial negotiation. On the other hand, with continued close U.S. involvement in Panamanian affairs, Panama may attempt to develop policies divergent from U.S. desires in order to prove Panamanian independence from U.S. influence.

In order to reduce the U.S. role in Panama and support development of an apolitical armed force, training and material support of the Public Force could be coordinated under international auspices of the Organization of American States or the United Nations. A long-term international training program would provide training personnel that do not represent a single national interest, and neutralize opposition based on national sensitivities regarding sovereignty.

U.S. policy in relation to the Public Force should not focus on an exclusive U.S.-Panamanian relationship, with the United States as mentor and Panama as the student. Recent events have proven the limitations of U.S. influence on Panama's armed institution. They have also demonstrated the difficulty of rooting U.S. values, such as the concept of an apolitical military. The current mentor and financing role played by the United States would better serve Panamanian and U.S. interests in the long term if delegated to a politically neutral, international agency. Traditional U.S. dominance leaves open the possibility that the Public Force would take advantage of a close relationship with the United States to pursue parochial political interests instead of apolitical, public service.

VII. CONCLUSION

This thesis examines the prospects for a successful transition of the PDF to an apolitical Public Force. The transition is crucial for Panama in that the success or failure will directly influence the demilitarization of Panamanian politics as well as the continued survival of civilian rule. However, since its inception, the Public Force has been affected by serious problems that have implications for its apolitical development.

Created as an armed organization in the chaotic aftermath of the U.S. invasion, the Public Force complement of ex-PDF members is confronting a serious crisis of legitimacy. Civilian suspicion, mistrust, and fear of the Public Force are based on the perception that the Public Force is the PDF reconstituted, intent on eventually staging a coup to reinstate military rule. This insecurity with the Public Force exists even in the civilian government, resulting in lack of support for the Public Force.

As a result, the Public Force has been unable and increasingly less willing to perform its public service duties. Public Force morale and institutional cohesion is poor. Low esteem from the population and material weaknesses from deficient government funding make maintenance of law and order extremely difficult. Normal police work is increasingly life-threatening as arms constraints on the Public Force leave them outgunned by criminal elements. Morale is further

debilitated by the institutional disarray of the Public Force. Formerly the most institutionalized and cohesive of government entities and indeed of Panamanian society, the Public Force has been reduced to a severely weakened, subordinated position.

However, this weakness and disarray is only temporary. With professionalization a necessary part of any armed organization, the Public Force is seeking to re-establish its institutional identity rooted in Torrijismo. Torrijismo remains especially appealing for the Public Force as it is remembered for creating the greatest period of political and military power, institutional cohesion, legitimacy, and prestige for Panama's armed institution. Through Torrijismo, the armed institution occupied the apex of Panamanian life and served as the transmission belt of popular demands, and the engine of national progress. Torrijismo negotiated the Panama Canal Treaties, was responsible for health, education, and housing development projects, social reform, and political inclusion of Panama's marginalized and excluded segments of the population. In contrast, the Noriega years are bitterly rejected as the cause of the current weakness and disarray of the Public Force.

From the institutional perspective, Torrijismo provides renewed momentum for the aspiration for more than police duties in the Public Force. In light of the upcoming Panamanian assumption of the Panama Canal's security, a more military mission for the Public Force gains credence. Article V of the Treaty Concerning Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal states that:

After termination of the Panama Canal Treaty, only the Republic of Panama shall operate the Canal and maintain military forces, defense sites, and military installations within its national territory.¹⁴²

Herein lies the major obstacle of the Public Force transition to an apolitical, police force. The Public Force is not a military force and is unable to carry out duties stipulated by the treaty. For Panama to fulfill its treaty obligations, a more military organization must be developed. With a more military mission and an institution imbued with the military and social legacy of Torrijismo, a cohesive and strengthened Public Force will probably not settle for subordination to weak, elitist civilian governments. Without development of strong civilian government institutions in Panama, the Public Force may be forced to play a political role in government, as its strongest and most cohesive member.

The patronage character of civilian Panamanian politics may also serve to pull the Public Force into political participation. The weakness of the civilian government does not augur well for the strengthening of civilian government institutions. The collapse of the ruling coalition in April 1991 has the dominant Christian Democratic Party as part of the opposition. The increasing unpopularity of the Endara government has ironically made Torrijismo's vanguard party, the PRD, the determining bloc in Panamanian politics. One possibility is the establishment of a new Torrijista alliance between the Public Force and the PRD. Another possibility is the forging of an

¹⁴²*Panama: A Country Study*, p. 290.

accommodation between the Public Force and the Christian Democrats under Arias Calderon. As Minister of Government and Justice, Arias Calderon installed his own civilian bureaucracy to run the Public Force, and had been accused of becoming the Public Force's civilian caudillo. Finally, faced with disintegration, the Endara government may grant concessions to the Public Force in return for maintaining Endara in power.

Despite the defeat of Panamanian militarism, the legacy of Torrijismo plays a role in Panama through the Public Force. The reestablishment of Torrijismo in the Public Force institutional identity will result in a strengthened and more cohesive Public Force. In several ways, and for a variety of reasons, the Public Force may again be politicized. Whatever the outcome, Torrijismo's legacy in the Public Force will result in the continued militarization of Panamanian politics.

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