

Hard-Learned Lessons:

Plan Colombia and Democracy in Peru

By Carlos Reyna Izaguirre

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For there to be a successful antidrug policy in Peru, two conditions must be met. First, there must be a clearly democratic government, with executive, legislative, judicial, police, and military institutions that effectively guarantee a balance of powers and enforcement of the rule of law—all of which will prevent impunity and increase government accountability to the country's citizens. And second, there must be an economic policy that makes a priority of reducing unemployment and improving the rural economy.

Any antidrug policy that forsakes or underestimates the decisive importance of democratic institutions or economic and social issues will always be counterproductive and play into the hands of drug traffickers. And any antidrug policy that is based on a vision stressing police or military actions will have the same perverse effect. After all, the main ally and instrument of drug trafficking is corruption, which, according to studies, is directly associated with institutional distortions—such as the concentration of power, a lack of transparency, and impunity. The case of Peru in the past decade provides solid evidence of this.

Former presidential adviser Vladimiro Montesinos deceived many people regarding the reality of drug trafficking in Peru. The duped included the very U.S. agencies responsible for U.S. policy in Latin America. The favorite indicators of those who wanted to believe that drug trafficking had been dealt an important blow in Fujimori's Peru were the

number of acres used for growing coca leaves and the arrests of members of drug trafficking gangs. As far back as the mid-1990s, however, there was evidence of increased cocaine production on Peruvian soil. Moreover, since 1999 the price for coca leaves in the Huallaga and Apurímac valleys has increased slowly but steadily. And we now know that Montesinos encouraged drug trafficking by corrupting the military and police while he hoarded the profits from the arms trade.

But we cannot say that the agencies in charge of U.S. policy in Latin America were unaware of how dangerous Montesinos could be for democracy or for an antidrug policy that claimed to be promoting democracy.

As far back as 1990, the Peruvian press released reliable reports of Montesinos' links with drug traffickers and with members of the military violating human rights. Even the U.S. press started reporting on those links at least as far back as 1992. Moreover, on April 16 of that year the *Miami Herald* ran a report by Sam Dillon that pointed to Montesinos' CIA ties. In 1996 Montesinos was openly accused of demanding payoffs from a known drug trafficker; in that same year and in 1998 U.S. drug czar general Barry McCaffrey voiced extreme displeasure over the dissemination of photos and videos showing Montesinos and McCaffrey in official meetings. By late 2000, after Fujimori and Montesinos had been ousted from power, then-secretary of state Madeleine Albright admitted that Montesinos had worked for the

CIA “until a certain time,” though she declined to specify when.

Hence, these agencies were not duped by a lack of knowledge. Rather, they made a political calculation, adopting a specific attitude toward Peru that made them vulnerable to this gangster. That political calculation gave precedence to a free market, order, and the financial discipline supposedly embodied in Fujimori’s regime, and spurned issues related to democracy and public ethics. Not until the first half of 2000, when the Fujimori regime turned grotesquely dictatorial and, in mid-2000, when Montesinos’ role in international arms trafficking became clear, did all American agencies completely sever their ties with him.

How did Montesinos build his empire of corruption? He did so by militarizing the Peruvian state and politics. First he conjured the specters of the Sendero Luminoso guerrilla threat, crime, and drug trafficking to concentrate powers in the armed forces and in the intelligence services and to free them from citizen oversight. Next he wove a network that penetrated law enforcement agencies and all institutions in charge of resources or information. He thus created a system that was marked by the concentration of power, a total lack of transparency, and impunity.

What is the main risk of the so-called Plan Colombia for Peru? The princi-

pal danger is that it will become a beachhead for a renewed militarization of the public affairs that should be handled by civil authorities and institutions—specifically, the campaign against drug trafficking. This new outbreak of the militarization of the public order could, in turn, interfere with and complicate the democratization currently underway in Peru.

Why is this possible? Remilitarization could occur if the interdiction efforts to be carried out through Plan Colombia are successful, because this would once again displace drug cultivation and trafficking toward Peruvian territory. According to specialists, the Peruvian jungle would be a better alternative than either Bolivia or Ecuador—because of both the quality of Peruvian coca as well as the country’s geographic, social, and institutional characteristics.

The areas potentially or already used for coca cultivation are vast and difficult for the police to monitor. Unemployment and the recession have grown worse in the past three years, and many impoverished or unemployed peasants may swell the ranks of the coca-growing peasants. Some cells of Sendero Luminoso remain active in the coca-growing areas. All this could trigger increased drug trafficking, while providing an argument for the military to take charge of operations requiring force.

The problem is that Peru’s armed forces have not yet sufficiently strengthened the morale of their officers and troops so as guarantee that they will not once again become corrupted by contact with drug traffickers.

The Peruvian military has just embarked on a process of institutional reform, while an interesting debate is beginning on their role in a democracy. The idea that they must not assume duties beyond those strictly related to national defense has been gaining adherents of late, and this encourages the country’s democratization.

Unfortunately, the spirit of Plan Colombia and of U.S. government initiatives regarding drug trafficking increases pressure for a greater involvement of the armed forces in antidrug efforts. Hence, just as in the early 1990s, the eagerness to produce short-term results as well as the emphasis on military solutions could once again translate into an intensification of drug trafficking in Peru and a resumption of the armed forces’ extrainstitutional roles. And this would stymie the building of democracy and, ultimately, interfere with efforts to stamp out drug trafficking. How difficult it is to learn from the mistakes of the past.

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