

THE LARGE FIGHT AGAINST TERRORISM AND POSSIBLE PERSPECTIVES IN PARAGUAY

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Introduction

The word terrorism may not be closely linked to Latin America as is in other regions like the Middle East, or Africa. However, from about 1950 to the 80s, a lot of terrorist groups existed in most of the countries in LATAM, especially those with military governments, coordinated and supported by Operation Condor; a USA-backed campaign to coordinate the fight against the influence of communism in the hemisphere.

This operation worked with the government of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) in Paraguay, Videla (1976-1981) in Argentina, Benzer (1971-1978) in Bolivia, Pinochet in Chile (1973-1990), and Aparicio Méndez (1976-1981) among others. The balance: around 60,000 deaths according to files analyzed by the BBC (2016), and countless damages to democracy and human rights that continues to this day in such countries.

Currently, even if most of the terrorist groups disappeared in the region, there are some maybe small but dangerous criminal organizations in countries like Paraguay, which is the case to analyze in this paper.

Overview of Armed Terrorist Groups

The image that we could have about organized crime in South America could be the following: groups linked to drugs, weapons, and narcotics trafficking. However, in a little-known country called Paraguay, an armed terrorist group has been committing kidnappings, homicides, and similar crimes for years, putting the national government, and much of the country in jeopardy. And not just for financial inspiration but for ideological reasons.

The self-proclaimed “Army of the Paraguayan People” (Spanish abbreviation: EPP) defines itself - according to its leaders - as Marxist-Leninist, and claims historical figures of Paraguayan nationality such as Dr. José Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia, one of the heroes of the independence of the country and former dictator for several decades. This is not the only one, but the famous one among the terrorist groups in Paraguay.

This group shares links with “Las FARC”, one of the largest and most well-known terrorist groups in South America, to which thousands of deaths have been attributed since the 1960s in the worst years of Colombia. (Euronews, 2022).

To date, around 80 deaths between police and military personnel have been attributed to the EPP since 2008 (Euronews, 2022), in addition to kidnappings of police and military personnel, the

daughter of a former president, a current National Senator: Fidel Zavala, and also a former vice president appears on the list.

Although there is no consensus about the number of militants that the group would have, some studies estimate a range from 20 to 100 members, distributed in departments in the north of the country; Concepción, San Pedro, and Amambay, rural areas, rich in livestock production but with low socioeconomic levels. This region is also one of the poorest in the country: and this is probably one of the most important facts to understand why a group like this still has “success” in 2022.

The situation of the EPP is constantly a trending topic in the country and generally defines the media and political agenda above almost all issues. As in any political scenario, the topic of “security” is vital for the government, and even more during electoral periods; keeping in mind the upcoming presidential elections in 2023.

It must be kept in mind that among the constant news about kidnappings and attacks, the government had spent about 128 million dollars (Ultima Hora, 2021), on personnel, infrastructure, etc. in order to fight against this group of fewer than 100 members: not small amount considering a country with a small economy like Paraguay.

The EPP is not the unique terrorist group in the country: from the incision of this group created the “Armed Peasant Group”; also a left-wing armed group, that “works” in the same area of influence, but with less reach and popularity among the local population. As the first group, they dedicate themselves to occasional kidnappings and homicides in the area, with about 10-20 members and about 10 crimes in their “goals list”.

Government Response to Armed Groups

The situation has not improved since the appearance of these groups about 20 years ago. There had been some policies created by the governments to address this situation, with maybe relevant but insignificant goals in the past decades.

Starting with former president Fernando Lugo (2008-2012), the Government began to articulate more comprehensive public policies focused on fighting the threat of terrorism. Lugo declared a “State of emergency” in the group’s area of influence in 2010, which would end without major achievement, despite having mobilized around 3,000 troops. (BBC, 2010) and the subsequent spending.

During the next government, president Horacio Cartes (2013-18) promoted a law - supported by Congress - that gave him more powers to mobilize troops without prior notice. (Reuters, 2013). This was a concrete effort to fight terrorism using force, a classic but maybe not too effective approach, and triggered a series of mobilizations by the national population fearing that these superpowers would be counterproductive for the population. It must be remembered that Paraguay had 35 years long dictatorship and one of the greatest fears has always been the return of an Executive Branch with extensive military powers.

The same government established the first holistic plan to combat the threat, by considering other factors which have a relationship with terrorism: the Strategic Plan of the Paraguayan State to Fight Money Laundering, Financing of Terrorism (FT), and Financing of the Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (FP), which was approved by Decree 112001 (2013). This plan was developed thanks to the help of the Inter-American Development Bank (Seprelad, 2013). The clear intention of this Law was to coordinate the efforts:

The Plan is a government policy whose objective is to organize the action of the competent institutions to effectively prevent, detect and punish the acts punishable for money laundering, and financing of terrorism, as well as the Anticipation of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. (Presidency of the Republic, 2013)

But these coordinated plans and the extensive financial resources coming to the situation did not change it significantly: kidnappings and homicides would continue to increase in the country. The fact that the IDB provided the resources for the plan is not a small element in the analysis of the importance of the threat.

The situation did not change significantly; this year Osvaldo Villaba, one of the top leaders of the EPP was killed by the Joint Task Forces (Spanish abbreviation "FTC") in the zone of Amambay, one of the EPP's areas of influence. This hit was announced by the President of the Republic, Mario Abdo Benítez with notorious satisfaction, but the tranquility would not last long: the murdered terrorist was also the brother of Carmen Villalba, another member of this group; she threatened the authorities with a "massacre" if they did not allow her to dismiss her brother's coffin, to which the authorities in a privileged treatment yield.

This situation created a perfect storm of anger and rejection towards the government: it was just a management error, or did the authorities act in this way in fear of retaliation by terrorists? The main criticism towards the government came from the victims and relatives of the hostages who expressed their anger at this special treatment of the murderer terrorist and his sister. We should not forget that there are 3 citizens who are still kidnaped by this group.

On the same day, the Minister of Justice, Edgar Taboada, and other authorities would be dismissed by direct order of President Mario Abdo, unleashing a political and media storm in the country. These facts are the subject of an investigation to date and could culminate in even more dismissals.

Several members of the National Congress would speak out arguing that the government, by allowing the dejected terrorist to be greeted by his imprisoned sister, would be favoring criminals. (Abc Color, 2022)

On the other hand, it must be considered that all governments were and are criticized by the population for their actions against the EPP. None of the governments that faced these threats had positive results that have been celebrated by the population.

However, it should also be considered that this - the killing of Villalba - is one of the worst political events as a consequence of the EPP.

Conclusion and Future Expectations

We reach some conclusions for the future.

There are some reasons why a group -or some groups- with relatively few members, in a wooded and rural area cannot be caught and even maintain an entire country in distress.

A popular opinion would be the acceptance of the group in the absence of the government in the north of the country and poor zones; specifically, the absence of basic services like public health and infrastructure. Terrorist groups like these usually try to gain the support of the local people, with donations, robberies of the rich, delivery of groceries, etc. They have done it countless times with local producers, demanding that rich families donate goods to the poor people in the area under penalty of attack. (Paraguayan, 2017). A lot of rich families in the zone had donated food to poor families or even indigenous tribes in order to avoid being attacked but these groups.

One of the politically relevant elements in this situation is that the EPP could be one of the last terrorist groups with Marxist ideology in Latin America. After the negotiation of the FARC - or the vast majority of its members - with the Colombian government and its subsequent transformation into a political party, this group identified with left-wing ideas disappeared and became a part of the Congress.

The truth is that the leftist political projects laid down their arms to choose to build an electoral proposal, and eventually win elections. This was not the case with the EPP, which to this day continues promoting openly Marxist-Leninist discourses and even a class struggle, of the poor against the rich.

There are no significant advances from the EPP against the government. they did not expand their areas of influence or increased the number of soldiers for example, but there is also no advance by the Government against the EPP, except for isolated events such as the recent downfall of Villalba, which we have mentioned. So it's a status quo situation where neither side makes significant progress against the other, and there is no perspective to finish it in the next years.

Some of the challenges that the government has to eradicate these groups are: firstly, the existence of cells that blend into the population. There is not a defined place where they live or act, but an enormous zone where they isolatedly and sorpresively attack. So, it is impossible to define a stable place and attack it as a normal war.

Secondly, the small number of members in a relatively large place: we mentioned the EPP and other groups have less than 100 members distributed in cells and cities. And finally, the geography itself of much of Paraguay is a challenge: large forests, and almost wild terrain, as well as a marked absence of the government in one of the poorest areas of the country: which can foster the idea of revolution among the population. Keeping in mind these realities, the fight against these groups incorporated also public services and infrastructure for the local population.

About the future, the case of Colombia could be a solution: the EPP becomes a political party and obtains some places in the National Congress in exchange for disarmament and the signing of peace. But a decision like this should have not just the approval but the support of the population, and maybe most importantly: his pardon. Does not sound possible.

Marxism had never completely disappeared in the region countries like Chile has now an openly socialist President, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela, who calls himself Socialist of the 21st Century, or Lula Da Silva who just got the presidency of Brazil (again): the country with the biggest economy and territory in the region.

In Paraguay, the current government of Mario Abdo belongs to the Partido Colorado, the same as former dictator Alfred Stroessner aforementioned, and his party is trying to get the presidency again in 2023, but there are interesting possibilities that the opposition got it: there is an alliance among almost all of the parties, in the last elections (2018) Abdo won the election by just a 3% difference.

Some sectors think that a government with more military powers is necessary to eradicate this group, while others that this militarization fosters the criminalization of the social fight for fields and opportunities: a pending task of the government in one of the poorest and unequal countries in the region. There seem to be no signs that this fight will end and the criminals will be brought to justice.

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