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No. 707

Chile: Military Unrest Serious, But Frei Administration Should Survive

Widespread discontent and some serious plotting within the Chilean armed forces have presented the Frei administration with a grave problem and belie the traditional concept of the Chilean military as apolitical. Concern over professional conditions, especially low pay, has found increasingly organized and vigorous expression at certain levels, and while an overthrow of the civilian government does not appear likely at this time, the possibility of an attempt by some portion of the army cannot be ruled out.

Increased military politicization. Chileans are understandably proud of the traditional noninvolvement of their military in politics, and public esteem has both boosted military morale and reinforced the armed forces' strict professionalism. While as recently as last year some 400 officers threatened to resign unless a pay raise were forthcoming, the supremacy of the civilian branch was not placed in question, and there was never any danger of a coup. Since then, however, there have been signs of increasing politicization within the armed forces. The Peruvian example does not seem to have stirred any thoughts of emulation, but other factors, such as general Chilean concern over the country's position as a democracy surrounded by military regimes, and speculation over whether the armed forces might either remove or preclude a Marxist government in Chile, may have heightened the military's awareness of politics. It appears, nevertheless, that the preponderant preoccupations have been professional: low pay, poor training, inadequate equipment.

Plotting in the army. In the past several weeks, while coup rumors in Chile were flatly denied in public by the government, clandestine reporting began to reveal the existence of a group, composed of some 40 field-grade army officers headed by a general, which felt strongly that both the civilian government and the top echelon of military leaders had gravely neglected the armed forces. The general is Roberto Viaux, commander of the First Division in Antofagasta, who is known for his opposition to the Christian Democratic Party and to President Frei. He has a reputation for competence and dynamism, and early this year was linked to a plan to seize top-level military leaders in order to compel an improvement in the economic conditions of the military. According to the most recent reporting, he now plans to depose Frei unless the President agrees to replace Defense Minister Marambio with Viaux.

Viaux' scheming is known to the government and may be connected with an urgent request by Frei on September 29 for heavy protection for his residence by the Carabineros, the paramilitary national police force. Marambio is reportedly planning to remove Viaux from command in early October.

Coup difficult—but might occur anyway. Viaux thus seems slated either to accept defeat or make his move. We do not know the extent of his following in terms of troops commanded, but any coup attempt would seem certain to encounter serious difficulties. We assume that the Chilean public and political parties would react negatively, and widespread and violent acts of opposition would have to be anticipated, particularly from leftists. Viaux may be deluding himself about the lengths to which his military colleagues are prepared to go in pursuit of a pay raise, and some splitting within the armed forces appears likely.

The position of the crack Carabineros is not known, but there is no evidence that they have been involved in the plotting, and their commander is considered loyal to Frei. They could play a decisive role, for although they do not have the army's heavy equipment, they are its equal in manpower; and defense of the president is one of their responsibilities. Finally, the dissidents' ability to obtain support could easily be severely undercut by a pay raise for the military, and apparently Frei's administration is planning such a raise, although not very soon.

On balance, then, we do not feel that Viaux' chances of a successful coup are very good. Nevertheless, there always remains a chance that Viaux will make his move, in desperation or based on a mistaken calculation of his strength. Thus Marambio's acting to remove Viaux could trigger a coup attempt in the coming week.