Research Article

Militarism and Militarization in Latin America: Introduction to the Special Issue

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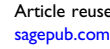

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Abstract

This Special Issue explores Latin America's recent wave of militarism across countries, the militarization of the rule of law, and its consequences on everyday life. It draws on the region's recent history of giving militarized responses to seemingly intractable social, political, and economical problems. We argue that the presence of military values, beliefs, and mentalities have permeated processes in which nations absorb and aspire to military practices, modes of organization, and martial discourses that require greater scholarly attention. The articles address a series of issues including various forms of militarism and the militarization of family, culture and education, diplomacy, policing, and public security in urban and rural settings. The contributions engage systematically with the roots of militarism and give evidence of militarization at the individual, national, and international levels, including a variety of case studies from across the Western Hemisphere.

Keywords

comparative politics, democratization, security studies, sociology

Introduction

On 27 March 2022, the Legislative Assembly of El Salvador approved a state of exception to address the country's violent gang crisis. The declared objective was to "continue strengthening the security of Salvadorans" (Asamblea Legislativa, 2023) by dismantling the country's street gangs or *maras*. After the end of the country's civil war in 1992, and a massive deportation wave from the US that ensued, the gangs of El Salvador established a strong grip over the country (see Zilberg, 2011). Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele re-animated the anti-gang policing iron fist or *mano dura* approach first implemented in the country in the early 2000s. While Bukele's uber-militarized policing effectively depleted gang structures and reduced homicides to a historical low, the price for democratic governance was high. As the local press put it, for gangs to be nullified, "we've had to give up our

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imperfect democracy, built after 100,000 deaths and thousands of disappearances during the armed conflict" (El Faro, 2023).

Human rights observers have reported massive and systematic human rights violations related to the state of exception and the territorial control plan was implemented jointly by the Salvadoran National Civil Police and the country's Armed Forces. One consequence was a further uncontrolled grow of the country's prisons with the mass incarceration of over 60,000 alleged gang members (WOLA, 2022). Even prior to Bukele going rogue against gangs, El Salvador had been the country with the world's highest prison population. To make space, the Bukele administration opened a new "super-prison" they named the terrorism isolation center (BBC News Mundo, 2023). As of February 2024, 1% of El Salvador population had been arrested (Janetsky, 2024).

Like El Salvador, Colombia, Brazil, and other countries in Latin America are an illustration of the underlying problematic of militarism in the region that pervades political authorities and the militarization of public policies such as security. Well beyond these cases that have been discussed extensively in the region, there are also more hidden patterns of militarization in countries such as Costa Rica, a country that abolished its army in 1948 but has nevertheless replicated some of the region's patterns of militarization inspired by counterinsurgent policing (see Hochmüller & Müller, 2023). This Special Issue seeks to explore Latin America's militarism wave and the militarization of the rule of law and its consequences on democracy, civil-military relations, and everyday life.

Despite, or rather because of, his heavy-handed approach towards gangs, President Bukele's popularity skyrocketed. As a February 2023 Gallup survey attested, the country's strongman counted with a 90% approval rating (Prensa Latina, 2023). President Bukele's militarization of the country became widely popular abroad with other countries emulating his tough on crime policies (Freeman, 2023). The Bukele government even offered support to gang-ridden Haiti as part of South-South cooperation (Charles, 2023). In 2023, the Haitian government had indeed issued a desperate call for international help. A poll found that around 70% of Haitians would welcome external military and police support that would support the country to get a grip on gang violence (Reuters, 2023).

Militarized solutions to massive violence by the hands of drug trafficking organizations have become widespread in Latin America (see Solar & Pérez Ricart, 2023). Famously, the Mexican President Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) declared a War on Drugs that has since claimed an unimaginable human toll. It is estimated that 360,000 Mexicans have been killed, and close to 80,000 have disappeared (Council on Foreign Relations, 2022). Despite an attempted shift away from the use of force in the anti-drug strategy, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024), has further militarized public security by creating the Guardia Nacional, a force that contributed to the "widespread human rights violations" according to a Human Rights Watch's systematic review (HRW, 2022).

The militarized approaches of public security seen nowadays in the Americas include the violent repression of social protests by hand of the security forces. In Peru, the government declared a state of emergency that enabled the participation of the armed forces in police actions of social control after the failed self-coup of President Pedro Castillo, who was eventually removed from office and replaced by his vice president. The case of Peru, however, also shows the effect of militarizing public security on the affairs of civil-military relations. Despite the brute force against protesters used by the Peruvian police and military alike, the latter did not support then President Castillo's power grab. In a different yet similar vein, the Brazilian security forces have demonstrated to be divided after four years of a national government led by Jair Bolsonaro (2019–2022), an apologetic defender of the country's 1964-1985 military dictatorship. After Bolsonaro had left office (and the country) and President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had taken power in January 2023, the military police in the Brasília federal district have been criticized for their weak stance against the right-wing rioters who attempted an insurrection in the country's capital. On the other hand, though, the federal security forces re-established public order relatively quickly when called upon by Lula. Nevertheless, as one observer has argued, "[d]

ecades after the end of Brazil's military dictatorship, civilians still do not fully control the country's security establishment. This is the biggest weakness Brazil's democracy faces today" (Stuenkel, 2023).

The contributions of this Special Issue explore the legacies of the region's militaristic past, analyze underlying dynamics of militarism in wider society, and interrogate the current militarization of domestic security. Contributors to this volume argue that militarism and militarization are both the driver and the consequence of current state responses to intractable social, political, and economical problems. As citizen distrust in the police is widespread across the region, for instance, the military have become increasingly attractive partners for a wide range of domestic non-military missions for governments across the region (Solar, 2020).

Militarism and Militarization

In this Special Issue, contributors argue that the blurred lines between law enforcement and defense missions and roles, including the militarization of public security, call for careful definitions, historical contextualizing, as well as clear conceptualization. While militarism refers to the presence of military values, beliefs, and mentalities in people's everyday life, militarization relates to the processes in which nations absorb and aspire to military practices, modes of organization, and martial discourses (Solar, 2021, p. 6). The armed forces have played a key role in the formation of nation-states. Against the background of the Cold War, US and Latin American politicians envisioned the military as a key modernizing actor for the nascent states. However, as inter-state wars played a limited role, the region's military forces turned into the defender of the nation from internal threats (Centeno, 2002). Their reputation became tainted following a wave of authoritarian regimes and bloody civil wars. For example, in a seminal article, Alan Angell (1973) explored the "road to militarism" that led Chile to oust President Salvador Allende and installed a military junta. The vision that the armed forces could return order after economic and political debacle was supported partly on the belief of military preparedness to support democracy which became particularly relevant at the beginning of the 20th century (Garrison, 1916; Schurz, 1899), and during the post-World War II ere (Powell, 1965). The Cold War was however dominated by worrying patterns of militarism, especially among heavily militarized societies in both democratic and authoritarian nations (see Eckhardt and Newcome, 1968; Simes, 1981). Since then, militarism and the militarization of policy issues other than defense became commonplace under both neoliberal and Marxist models of economic and political governance (Bacevich, 2013; Payne, 1986).

While in Latin America civilian power was strengthened gradually as the armed forces returned to the barracks, the "military prerogative" (Stepan, 1988) of defending national security—both externally and internally—survived until this day with varying degrees. More recently, in the context of growing social discontent and complex security situations, the involvement of the Latin American military has intensified as we have briefly illustrated above. The Latin American armed forces are dominant institutions in the region, and while the threat of a coup had significantly decreased, the armed forces continue to have several important roles to fulfil, ranging from border control and defense to internal security, natural disaster relief, social programs, and international peacebuilding missions. Furthermore, the military are involved in a diverse range of state policies including managing public assets in the health, energy, education, and transport sectors (see Pion-Berlin & Martínez, 2017), and have taken over roles in development and the economy (see Hochmüller & Pérez Ricart, *forthcoming*).

Global Militarism and Latin America

In this Special Issue, we argue that the globalization of militarism is a theoretical and empirical phenomenon traveling back and forth between different geographies and realities. Militarism has

affected the industrialized countries as well as those in developing stages under critical world events following the Cold War's end such 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and between the Ukraine and Russia (Boogs, 2002; Bacevich, 2013; Minakov, 2022). The evidence of militarism worldwide is surmounting even outside war zones. Diaz and Mountz (2020) identified a pattern of severe nationalism and militarism during responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States; meanwhile, Gelot and Sandor (2019) exposed the heavily militarized and commercial responses to African security problems. The empirical links between militarism and globalization have exposed pressing matters this Special Issue engages with, including, the militarization of family (from childhood to adulthood), education, policing, and the environment.

The articles speak volumes of both public perceptions and empirical evidence of militarism in Latin America. The goal is to decipher key issues to advance our knowledge including the police and military security nexus, militarism across geographies and the militarization of urban and rural life, and how social representations of military intervention in public life are perceived, and many times supported by the public.

The contributing authors expose the militarization of many forms of political violence (i.e., crime and conflict). They build on a tradition of social sciences studies on issues the literature identifies as the "permanent war" public authorities' mindset which have perpetuated militarism at the higher echelons of governments (Cunningham, 2004; McGarry & Walklate, 2018; Stavrianakis & Stern, 2017). The "constabularization of the military" (Flores-Macías & Zarkin, 2021, p. 520), for example, is used by governments to gain electorally from this situation, promising and implementing iron-fist policing. This has shown problematic consequences in terms of human rights, but also obstructs much-needed reform processes of the region's demilitarization of the security sector. The phenomenon is not unique to the region. The militarization of essential policing duties is now evidenced from Turkey to Canada (see Atak, 2017; Roziere & Walby, 2019).

While we observe the militarization of law-and-order, in this Special Issue, we ask whether we are witnessing the continuity or a rupture with past trends of militarized involvement in domestic problems. Pion-Berlin and Acacio (2020: 152), for instance, argued that "the current wave of military activism is, in fact, not a return to the past." Harig (2022: 478), on the other hand, comes to a different conclusion, arguing that control over the re-militarization of politics is limited and "politicians might actually lose control if military officers seize the opportunity for broadening their power." Overall, there is no doubt that Rut Diamint (2015: 155) was correct to observe that "the role of the military remains a puzzle and a problem for Latin America's democracies," as the armed forces are a powerful actor on the streets, and indeed also the ministries, parliaments, and even non-physical environments such as cyberspace (Solar, 2023).

Contributions to this Special Issue

For this Special Issue, we invited authors invested in contributing with original research on the roots of militarism and militarization and their effect on the rule of law, democracy, civil-military relations, and society in Latin America. The contributions address a series of issues including militarism in culture and education, civil-military relations, armed forces' missions and roles, policing and public security, everyday life, and urban and rural development.

Wil G. Pansters and Mónica Serrano discuss civil-military relations in Mexico over the last three decades, in which the country has witnessed an exponential militarization of the battle against the drug trafficking armed organizations vis-à-vis democratic life. According to Pansters and Serrano, the deeply rooted militarized decision-making at the top of the state has allowed for the militarization of public security, eventually weakening civilian control over the armed forces at the risk of democratic backsliding. On a similar note, Sergio Padilla Oñate and Carlos Pérez Ricart agree on Mexico's public security overtly militarized processed evidenced at the local level and under different political colors. The authors uncover

the subnational impact of militarism and militarization focusing on the relationships between police forces and the military in the states of Jalisco, Nuevo León, Guanajuato, Sonora, Sinaloa, and Zacatecas. They argue that the military has permeated the state's public security institutions up to a point which police forces mimic the military on everyday activities at the subnational scale. Next, José Coutiño Trejo and Alejandro Madrazo complement the previous articles by providing an insightful account on the militarized high schools in Mexico as an example of militarism permeating the educational system. The authors argue that these schools promote values such as nationalism and patriotism in areas traditionally reserved to civilian authorities overseeing the schooling curriculum.

Andrea Oelsner, Deborah Tasselkraut, and Carina Solmirano discuss defense diplomacy in Latin America and the role it plays in containing the power of the armed forces and to shifting the balance of power between soldiers and politicians in favor of the former. Exploring why Argentina's armed forces have partially dominated aspects of the country's foreign policy, the authors address a gap on diplomacy in the defense literature and bring in a powerful perspective of South-South military relations. As it happened elsewhere in the region, the democratically elected authorities that followed the military juntas that ruled in the late 20th century decided to put the military to cooperate in foreign policy tasks to lessen their role in national security. The authors question how the process of militarizing foreign policy occurred in the period immediately after the 1983 return to democracy. They argue that certain roles and missions of the military have been included in the foreign policy agenda to allow a smoother transition repurposing the role of the military and easing civil-military relations. Frank I. Müller discusses the ongoing pattern of "weaponized" urban development in Rio de Janeiro where he carried out fieldwork among residents living under constant threat of armed militias. Going beyond state-centric approaches on militarism and militarization and developing an analytical lens informed by scholarship on terrain and political materiality, Müller's study focuses on the non-state armed groups and the mechanisms through which they enforce criminal governance over public spaces that they claim theirs. Müller argues that these militias have spread militarism by constituting themselves as "armed developers" across a range of practices including civil construction, laying infrastructure, and landscaping. The militias' control over urban areas upsets the everyday life of a large part of the marginalized urban society. Continuing with the case of Brazil, Manuela Trindade Viana, Maira Siman, and Victoria Santos approach the military as experts of management. From this perspective that expands the often-narrow focus on soldiers as violence workers, the authors shed light on processes of militarization in South America's largest country in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors deal with the worldwide trend that put the armed forces to deliver health services, control the territory, and manage logistical chains (Gibson-Fall, 2021; Kalkman, 2021). In Brazil, the expansion of roles for top-brass military officer in governmental affairs preceded the pandemic but it peaked as the federal authorities increased military presence in relief agencies based on the presupposed credentials in managerial roles attributed to the military. The re-articulation of the "war ethos" specific to the military profession was consequently replaced by an ongoing "crisis response culture," according to the authors.

Similarly, Juan Corredor-García and Fernando López Vega observe processes of militarization in the context of the 2018–2022 Colombian government's mobilization of the armed forces in defense of the country's rainforest against armed non-state actors predating natural resources for illegal commerce. The authors engage with the growing phenomenon of "green militarization" in Latin America. They unveil that the counterinsurgent approach to defend the Amazon region was inspired by established military actions that the region had witnessed in the past, for instance, in the war on drugs, and that has been refurbished against the backdrop of global climate change.

Rafa Martínez and Alberto Bueno make an overlapping claim in their article that explores the militarization of non-traditional military emergencies across multiple internal missions. The authors challenge whether policy transfers from Spain to Latin America in the provision of emergency relief reflect the current trend by regional states to militarize emergencies considering replacing less prepared or less capable state units or corps. The authors use the case study of the Emergency Military Unit and the implementation of a civil defense model using military resource as a "wildcard" policy

tool favored by political authorities, thereby examining how models travel across the globe and what lessons the Spanish experience would hold for Latin America's armed forces deployed by their governments in a broad range of missions well beyond their core tasks of national defense.

The Special Issue also includes a series of policy-focused commentaries. Florina C. Matei addresses the constant challenge of intelligence reform in the region under acute institutional militarism and policy militarization of the defense and criminal justice sectors. Matei argues that intelligence democratization remains dependent on operational effectiveness and transparency and accountability standards which government struggle to install and implement. Despite pro-military views and reform on intelligence agencies, corruption and lack of interest by disengaged leaders affect security reform. Clarissa N. Forner discusses the role played by the US Southern Command in leading foreign policy for the region reliant on "military missions other than war," including non-military functions such as the provision of humanitarian assistance, law enforcement, and the management of security assistance programs aimed to dismantle drug trafficking networks. Forner argues that the overreliance on security and military means reflects the militarized character of U.S. influence in the region. Jorge Eduardo Delgado and María Emilia Lleras Ronderos address Colombia's post-peace agreement between the Colombian state and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) insurgency distilling the country's social discontent on the outcomes of the peace agreement. Most notably, the authors present how recent pro-military narratives have portrayed the armed forces as victims of a betrayal by the civilian leadership and revamped the idea of a militarized national security approach.

The Special Issue concludes with a review section. In a first piece, Javier Pérez Sandoval and Daniel Barker Flores provide a discussion of the literature on policing, militarization, and security based on the recent work of scholars Guillermo Trejo, Sandra Ley, Brian Fonseca, and Yanilda María González. In their review essay, the authors carve out the contributions that some of the latest scholarship makes on how the region reflect of socialized and politicized patterns of amplified militarism and violence, enduring the state militarization and provoking equally violent responses from armed criminal actors. In his review of a recent book by Furtado Henrique Tavares, Luis Gouveia Junior sheds light on Brazil's ongoing search for transitional justice under growing militarism and militarization in the country, which has impacted heavily on national reconciliation over the crimes committed during the 1964–1985 dictatorship.

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