

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wendy Hunter. *Eroding Military Influence in Brazil: Politicians Against Soldiers*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997. xiv + 243 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2311-8; \$27.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-4620-9.

Reviewed by Hendrik Kraay (University of British Columbia)
Published on H-LatAm (June, 1997)



Not very many years ago, military regimes were firmly established throughout much of Latin America; men in uniform appeared to have taken out permanent leases on presidential palaces. Volumes analyzing “bureaucratic authoritarianism” or the “new authoritarianism” (as distinct from caudillismo) piled up, often introduced with assurances that, “[f]or the foreseeable future at least,” such regimes would remain prominent features of the political landscape.”[1]

Then the generals resolved, perhaps reluctantly, to turn over the reins of power to civilians, but many expected that such governments would be short-lived or subject to long-term tutelage by officers. Early on in Brazil’s redemocratization, it seemed perfectly reasonable to conclude that “the Armed Forces ... seem likely to continue their prominent role in governing Brazil.”[2] Now, a decade after the generals gave up power, military influence on Brazilian politics has ebbed to lows unimaginable but a few years ago. Wendy Hunter undertakes the task of explaining why in *Eroding Military Influence in Brazil*.

Her answer is engagingly simple: democratic electoral politics unleashes a competitive dynamic in which politicians find it necessary to cater to interests other than the military who, after all, field few votes. As a result, even right-wing politicians pay more attention to workers than to soldiers; military budgets shrink as spending on social programs or patronage grows; environmentalists and Indian-rights activists stymie elaborate plans for border fortifications in the Amazon, leaving officers to fulminate against internationalist conspiracies.

Hunter develops her argument in six chapters and

then, in a long conclusion, applies her model to Argentina, Chile, and Peru. Her focus is on the presidencies of José Sarney, Fernando Collor de Mello, and Itamar Franco (1985-94). Her sources include the principal Brazilian newspapers and newsmagazines and interviews with participants (but there is no indication of how many interviews she was able to conduct).

The extensive prerogatives that the military maintained during the transition to civilian rule constitute the baseline against which Hunter measures subsequent change. In 1985, the military enjoyed six cabinet posts (the three service ministries of army, navy, air force; head of the president’s military household; chief of the armed forces general staff; and the head of the intelligence service), control over the *polícia militar*, a 1979 amnesty for officers involved in torture, and a series of informal understandings with civilian politicians to ensure the upholding of the amnesty and the maintenance of a military role in internal security, among other things.

The following chapter analyzes the military’s failure to protect many of these prerogatives, while subsequent chapters examine the limited ability of officers to use those that remained to impose their policy preferences in three important areas: labor rights, budget allocations, and Amazonian development. Although no civilian ministry of defense was created, the military lost direct control over intelligence and the militarized police; the remaining military ministers became increasingly marginal figures in the cabinet. During the writing of the 1988 constitution, the military failed to win the continuation of extensive restrictions to the right to strike established under the dictatorship. Military budgets have declined steadily since 1985 (although off-budget allocations make

precise calculations difficult). Finally, the military's elaborate Calha Norte program of fortifying and developing Brazil's Amazonian border fell to a combination of greater concern for both the environment and indigenous rights, particularly those of the Yanomami, as well as the continued military budget crisis.

What explains these outcomes? Why did institutional guarantees and prerogatives fail to ensure the military's continuing influence in these fundamental areas? Using a rational choice framework, Hunter argues that institutions were subject to considerable and continual change in the post-1985 environment of competitive electoral politics. The military could not institutionalize or "freeze" their power at its 1985 level. Rational politicians who sought to enhance their individual well-being contested the military and worked to reduce its spheres of influence. They were compelled to make populist appeals to garner votes from the enormous lower-class electorate; needing resources for patronage, they found it necessary to reduce military spending; desiring to implement broad popularity-enhancing programs, they sought to expand their political autonomy. In short, a sort of invisible hand guides competitive electoral politics to produce a desirable outcome of reduced military influence.

In her conclusion, Hunter sounds a note of caution. The fuller institutionalization of civilian control over the military—the establishment of a civilian ministry of defense or effective legislative oversight of defense policy, for instance—poses a "collective action" dilemma for Brazilian politicians. While all civilian politicians might benefit from such policies, the weaknesses of Brazil's political parties and the fractious nature of congress militate against such an outcome. Revisions of electoral rules to strengthen political parties and the establishment of a parliamentary system of government (rejected in the 1993 plebiscite) would, according to Hunter, improve the prospect of long-term stable civilian control over Brazil's military (pp. 141-46).

Finally, Hunter applies her model to Chile, Argentina, and Peru, finding in each case that competitive electoral politics led to a reduction of military influence on politics. In Chile, a more solidly institutionalized military regime faced a stronger political party system in which the center-left engaged in a coordinated strategy of reducing military influence without overly antagonizing the armed forces. The Argentine generals relinquished power from a position of abject weakness, facilitating Rau'l Alfonsi's policy of reducing defense expenditure,

prosecuting officers for human rights abuses, and curtailing the military's political prerogatives, all highly popular measures.

In Peru, a dramatic decline in military influence took place under the populist government of Alan Garcí'a, with assumption of civilian control over several formerly military-dominated areas of policy-making, the creation of a Ministry of Defense, punishment for human rights violations in the counter-insurgency campaign, and reductions in military spending. During the profound and protracted crisis that prompted President Alberto Fujimori to stage his own coup against constitutional democracy, however, the military regained much previously lost influence but, as Hunter stresses, this came at the behest of a civilian president (p. 167).

One of this book's strengths is its subtle and nuanced understanding of military influence in politics. Hunter examines the complex dynamics of policy formation in several key areas, identifies military policy preferences, and assesses the extent to which civilian politicians acceded to officers' desires. She has been careful to avoid the tautology of defining democracy as the complete absence of interference by non-elected groups such as military officers (p. 6); rather, her goal is to document the changing level of military influence. For heuristic and comparative purposes, she even reduces all of her evidence for Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and Peru to a line graph (p. 170)!

Hunter's book provides a useful account of Brazilian civil-military relations after 1985; her portrayal of Fernando Collor de Mello is a striking reminder of the hope that Brazilians had invested in the first directly-elected president since 1960 and his early progressive measures: demarcating the Yanomami reservation and evicting gold prospectors from it, starving the Calha Norte program, curtailing the nuclear weapons program by opening the country's facilities to international inspection, and cutting weapons development programs. Collor's electoral mandate and his determination to enact neo-liberal reforms led him to challenge entrenched power groups, including the military as he sought the autonomy necessary to implement his program (p. 128).

That the armed forces stood aside during Collor's impeachment, letting both popular demonstrations and congressional investigations into the massive corruption scandal run their course, marked a significant shift, given officers' predilections for intervening in crises during the 1945-64 period (p. 23). Why this should have been so is unclear. Hunter notes that, in mid-1982, the embat-

tled administration released previously-cut funds to the armed forces (p. 112) but unfortunately does not pursue this historical comparison further.

Where Hunter does look backward, she draws out intriguing precedents to the 1985-94 period, particularly the declining military budget share during 1945-64, which she attributes to the imperatives of electoral politics (pp. 100-102). A more systematic analysis of past crises and tendencies might have resulted in a more durable book. Hunter has ably identified a trend that few foresaw a decade ago, but, as she demonstrates with her Peruvian comparison, such trends can be abruptly reversed. Indeed, short-term perspectives have led to more than a few predictions about militaries in politics suddenly proven wrong, as Alain Rouquie', one of the most thoughtful scholars of Latin American militaries, pointed out long ago.[3]

More important, Hunter's dynamic can only take place in a favorable larger environment. While she certainly acknowledges the importance of the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the radical Left, and the manifest failure of the military's economic project in reshaping the Brazilian political terrain, these may have been necessary prerequisites for the dynamic of electoral politics to reduce military influence.

At the risk of sounding like the obtuse reviewers who take hapless authors to task for not writing a different book, it is nevertheless worth reflecting on some evidence buried in a footnote (p. 179, n. 49). According to a survey conducted in late 1993 and early 1994, not one of 320 members of elite sectors (government, business, union, and political leaders) selected "the threat of military intervention" as an obstacle to democracy; the most common choices: "low educational level of the population" and "high levels of poverty and social inequality." The former and especially the latter existed in Brazil well before the ancestors of some of those elites called a recognizable military into being to defend their interests. Military participation in politics may well have more to

do with class structure and dominant groups' calculations about how best to maintain their position than a dynamic of electoral politics abstracted from the larger social structure. After all, had Lula defeated Collor in the 1989 runoff (a distinct possibility until close to the end of the campaign), could this book even have been written?

Two historical errors should be set straight (p. 32): Both the war (army) minister and the navy minister sat in Brazilian cabinets from the 1820s, not the 1920s. The air force, however, was not separated from the army until 1941, when its first minister (incidentally, a civilian) joined the cabinet.

This book is written in clear, jargon-free prose with convenient chapter summaries. Those considering it for classroom use should, however, be warned of the seventy-seven acronyms that garnish its pages, a serving of alphabet soup to which undergraduates will certainly turn up their noses, as well as the small number of Portuguese words used in the text for which a glossary is not supplied.

Notes:

[1]. James M. Malloy, "Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America: The Modal Pattern," in *Authoritarianism and Corporatism in Latin America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 3.

[2]. Thomas G. Sanders, "Brazil in 1980: The Emerging Political Model," in *Authoritarian Capitalism: Brazil's Contemporary Economic and Political Development*, ed. Thomas C. Bruneau and Philippe Faucher (Boulder: Westview, 1981), p. 217.

[3]. Alain Rouquie', *The Military and the State in Latin America*, trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987 [1982]), p. 3.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Hendrik Kraay. Review of Hunter, Wendy, *Eroding Military Influence in Brazil: Politicians Against Soldiers*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. June, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1046>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.