



Panama: The military is loyal but how popular is Noriega's stand?

Against The Current

By the time you read this, General Manuel Antonio Noriega, the embattled Panamanian military strongman known as *el MAN* may, or may not, have been forced from power by a combination of US intervention and domestic opposition.

Panama has various special features, which make it a country like no other. First, its existence and identity is built around being a crossroads. The canal which cuts the country in half is vital to international shipping, which also frequently uses the Panamanian flag of convenience. The big money earners have not been industries

but services: offshore banking, insurance, free trade zones. If the allegations against General Noriega are true - and they have been made from many different sources - his involvement with Colombia's Medellin cartel, supplier of around 70% of the cocaine reaching the United States, can be seen as a logical (if illegal) extension of this role: Panama is used as a drug transshipment post.

The second point is the major US strategic interest in Panama. Panama's secession from Colombia in 1903 was organised in Washington to facilitate the building of the Panama Canal on favourable terms. The national currency is effectively the US dollar. There are over 10,000 GIs on permanent station at US southern command in the Canal Zone, Washington's

military eyes and ears in central America. Until the 1977 Carter-Torrijos treaties, the Canal Zone was considered sovereign US territory. Not surprisingly, there is a rich and powerful vein of Panamanian nationalism and anti-US feeling. General Torrijos, a charismatic nationalist who took power in a military coup in 1968, managed to secure a deal recovering sovereignty over the canal. Under its terms, Panama will take control of the installations in the year 2000, although the US will retain the right to intervene if it considers that the neutrality of the canal is at risk.

There are various readings of the Panama crisis. Publicly Washington says it is stepping in to push out a corrupt and dictatorial ruler, just as it helped ease out Marcos in the Philippines or Duvalier

in Haiti. Noriega counters that the charges against him are trumped up; he is the victim of an imperialist plot; the ultimate aim of the *yanquis* is to renege on the canal treaties.

But there are awkward facts on both sides. As long as military rule in Panama seemed to offer stability, Washington was quite happy to live with Noriega. US intelligence knew of the alleged drug link as early as 1972, nor did the evidence of fraud in the 1984 elections cause much loss of sleep; the victim of that fraud was after all a veteran and unpredictable populist leader who could not be trusted to guarantee US interests. Noriega's claim to anti-imperialist credentials can't be taken at face value either, coming from someone who has done deals with Colonel North.

There is nevertheless one remarkable fact about the Panamanian crisis: Noriega's staying power. There is no doubt that he played his cards well. The opposition Civic Crusade movement is a heterogeneous coalition of white middle-class politicians and chambers of commerce. Noriega has been able to present its leaders as stooges for the US, and contrast them with the more popular social ethnic composition of the Defence Forces - black, brown, and white. There is, after all, an element of racism in the opposition's derisive reference to Noriega's pock-marked face: 'pineapple face', they call him.

But here too, generalisations about the class composition of the opposing camps are suspect. Many of the public sector unions have gone over to the opposition camp, particularly since the financial crisis stopped their wage payments. But perhaps the secret to Noriega's longevity is the tight network of loyalties he has built up within the military, particularly since the failure of a US-supported coup attempt. There may be no quick solution to the Panamanian crisis. •

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