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Sendero Luminoso: Case Study in Insurgency

DANIEL W. FITZ-SIMONS

The September 1992 capture of Abimael Guzman (Comrade Gonzalo), the terrorist leader of Peru's mysterious Sendero Luminoso, has received a lot of attention. Yet despite Guzman's capture, Sendero Luminoso, Spanish for "Shining Path," remains Peru's largest and most serious security problem. Sendero has grown from a few hundred cadre in 1980 to at least 15,000 active supporters and is now considered the most ruthless terrorist insurgency in Latin America. The insurgents have been responsible for approximately 24,000 deaths and \$22 billion in damages to Peru's infrastructure.

Originally a rural insurgency founded in the department of Ayacucho ("the corner of the dead"), Sendero began by exploiting the grievances and centuries-old government neglect of impoverished peasant areas.¹ Its ideology is a hybrid of Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, and nihilism, emphasizing indigenous Indian values while rejecting both Hispanic culture and democratic ideals. Sendero's utopia is premised on the spiritual rejuvenation of its chosen people, the Quechua-speaking "cosmic race." This messianic movement seeks to cleanse Peru of its corruption, arbitrary power centers, and foreign dependency. Sendero professes an ideological affinity with the reactionary Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and has adapted its long-term (50-100 year) Maoist strategy to fit Peru's unique circumstances. Moreover, its brutality, fanaticism, and ethnic socialism combine to give it the flavor of Pol Pot's movement transported to the Andes. Sendero's war of attrition is aimed at the total destruction of the existing society, and its tenacity is on par with its viciousness.²

Sendero's founding dates back to 1970, when Manuel Abimael Guzman Reynoso, then a philosophy professor at the University of Huamanga, organized a breakaway faction of Peru's Communist Party. The Jesuit-educated Guzman grew up in Arequipa, where he learned that violence could produce radical change. He was also influenced by the Peruvian Marxist Jose Carlos

Mariategui, who wrote that "Marxism would provide a shining path to victory." Within the movement Guzman is a messiah known as Dr. Puka Inti (Red Sun), and his followers believe that his ideas are "the fourth sword" after the legacy of Marx, Lenin, and Mao.³ On a more practical level, one observer has compared Guzman and his militants to "Charles Manson with an army."

After traveling to China, Guzman spent ten years cultivating his Maoist ideology and developing a unique dogma of Inca communism. Before going underground in 1979, Guzman recruited a small group of university students and instructors from whom he expected fanatical loyalty. This hard core cadre formed clandestine cells and deliberately began to infiltrate key government institutions. The Quechua-speaking top echelon also provided a link with the Indian masses whom Guzman hoped to politicize. At the same time, however, his movement is an ideological enigma because, while it champions Indian culture, most of its victims are Indians. Moreover, Sendero's leadership is typically made up of middle class mestizo intellectuals, not Indian peasants.⁴

Strategy and Tactics

The group's original base was in the southern Sierra, or Andes, region, but the insurgency steadily expanded north and west. Sendero now controls significant portions of the countryside and has links with drug traffickers in the Upper Huallaga Valley, who provide funding and a continuing base of operations. The movement also uses its ties with the narcotraffickers to exact a higher payment to the coca growers, thus expanding its popular support. More recently, Sendero set up fund-raising front groups in Europe and the United States. For the most part, however, the dogmatic, self-reliant movement refuses to consider a united front with the traffickers or other insurgent groups.⁵ Nor does it purchase arms on the international black market; instead, its militants assassinate policemen or soldiers and take their rifles. Dynamite, which is plentiful in rural mining areas, is one of the Sendero's principal weapons. The explosive is hidden in automobiles and detonated in front of banks, or packed on burros and driven toward military

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posts. Sendero guerrilla columns usually consist of 10 to 15 personnel armed with AK-47s, Uzis, and occasionally RPG-7s. However, in the Upper Hualaga Valley, Sendero columns are often of company-size, numbering 60 to 120 insurgents; deals with drug lords have provided them with M-60 machine guns, 81mm mortars, and grenade launchers.⁶

Sendero's strategy has evolved through several stages. After secretly recruiting, training, and organizing party cadre in the remote Andes during its first stage, the movement launched its second stage in 1980. Safe houses and supply networks were created, and the obscure terrorist group soon made its presence known by attacking government officials. Police were driven from rural outposts; judges and locally elected officials were murdered; village

elders, teachers, and agricultural professionals were targeted for assassination. In the third stage, liberated zones were established in which Sendero militants imposed anti-technological, subsistence-level peasant economies by brutal methods. Modern farm equipment and crops were destroyed, regional markets closed, and reluctant supporters tortured and killed.

In 1982, the fourth stage was initiated. This consisted of hit-and-run guerrilla strikes against government military forces in rural areas. Sendero then gradually moved toward the fifth stage, a people's war in urban areas including the capital.⁷ Sendero is attempting to divide Peru by expanding along the spine of the Sierra mountain range and gradually cutting Lima off from its food supplies. Comparisons with guerrilla strategies around Beirut and Kabul are frequently heard. Sendero also controls vast jungle areas in the Mantaro, Ene, and Perene river valleys, where it has set up training bases and indoctrination centers well away from military bases. The army, short of fuel and equipment, cannot conduct search and destroy missions in these remote regions.⁸

All Sendero combatants are indoctrinated party members, and their highly mobile columns travel from village to village providing a military shield for the political cadres. In addition, communities organized under Sendero undergo savage discipline and puritanical regulations. Bars and houses of prostitution are shut down in villages taken over by the guerrillas, and Sendero prisoners in government jails keep their cells spotless. While Sendero is brutal, it is not indiscriminate in the use of terror, its tactics being calculated rather to set an example or carry symbolic meaning. In carefully chosen sectors, government officials, social workers, missionaries, and foreigners are targeted for assassination. Horrible methods are employed, including hacking up the body or sewing the victim's lips so the soul cannot escape. Spies are everywhere ("the party has a thousand eyes and ears") in Sendero-controlled territory, and local cadres remain clandestine.⁹ A sophisticated infrastructure is established, and agricultural production in Sendero villages is divided in two, with half going to the people and half going to the party apparatus.

Politically, the movement is organized on the national level under a Leninist-model politburo, central committee, and secretariat, which oversee party operations. Rigid operational zones are assigned on the local level. These overt organizations are paralleled by a clandestine party pyramid consisting of cells whose members don't know each other, making it difficult for government intelligence agencies to penetrate the underground network.¹⁰

Much of Sendero's support among the peasants is based on blatant terror as opposed to the Maoist doctrine of winning hearts and minds. For example, in 1991 leftist reformer Elena Moyano was shot dead and her body blown up with dynamite as her children watched. In addition, five priests and two nuns became targets of "annihilation teams" simply because they, like Moyano, were helping the poor. Sendero's policy of decapitating the leadership

of popular organizations to create a vacuum that its cadres can then fill follows an earlier strategy of eliminating the state's presence.¹¹ This campaign of rural terror has gradually spread so that the insurgency now threatens Lima itself, where squatter villages on the capital's outskirts remain fertile grounds for insurgent penetration. The government has made little effort to control these migrant populations, where unemployed newcomers are ripe for Sendero propaganda and intimidation.¹²

In July 1992 residents of Lima's plush Milaflores district were stunned by the explosion of a car bomb loaded with more than 1300 pounds of dynamite. The blast—which killed 25 people, demolished two apartment buildings, and left 500 homeless—signaled a new urban offensive against Lima's middle and upper classes. More bombs exploded around the city, and Sendero commandos rained machine gun fire on police stations as an armed strike was called to paralyze Lima. Just before Abimael Guzman's arrest, Sendero appeared to be tightening the noose around Lima, positioning itself to cut the central highway leading east from the city into the mountains.¹³

Weaknesses

Sendero's gradual rise to prominence has not occurred without difficulty. As events have recently showed, its underground terrorist network is far from invincible, and like any other insurgency it is vulnerable to attack on a number of fronts.¹⁴ Moreover, Sendero successes are largely attributable to a lack of government infrastructure in areas where guerrillas frequently fill politico-military vacuums left by government default. Sendero's rigid doctrine has also made it extremely unpopular among rural populations under its control, and on several occasions Indian peasants using home-made spears or sharpened stakes have revolted and killed Sendero members. Villagers have also been willing to cooperate with counterinsurgency forces and have pleaded with the government for modern weapons to defend themselves against the guerrillas. The ideological support of Sendero-controlled regions is therefore tentative, with some support based solely on terror. Many Indians simply want to be left alone to pursue their traditional living patterns. Large segments of the political left are also opposed to Sendero because they have been targeted by its terrorists or because both are competing for the support of the urban masses. Finally, while Sendero works with drug traffickers, the alliance is strictly a marriage of convenience. Neither the traffickers nor rival Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) insurgents are trusted by Sendero.¹⁵

Starting as a rural guerrilla organization, Sendero is now finding it more difficult to operate in urban areas. Peruvian intelligence has improved with time, and over the last two years high-ranking Sendero members were arrested and their underground newspapers shut down even before Guzman's capture. Another problem for the insurgents is the poor coordination between the

political and military branches (talkers vs. fighters). At times, coordination of guerrilla columns in the field has been lacking. Historically, Latin American guerrilla organizations have had unification problems resulting in break-away splinter groups or rival factions. Moreover, the cult of the person is a strong regional tendency which could cause leadership problems in the future, especially with the capture of Guzman and some of his top party cadre.¹⁶ Thus, as the movement is forced to recruit additional members, the quality and dedication of its membership could decline.¹⁷ On the ideological front, Sendero also must contend with the Catholic Church, its greatest adversary in the competition for allegiance of conservative Indian peasants. Militarily, Sendero does not possess the sophisticated weapons or manpower for a showdown with the armed forces. Even though the insurgents control large segments of the country, they are still unable to confront the military in set-piece conventional combat.

Drug Trafficking

In many cases, Sendero has allied itself with the narcotraffickers to gain needed financial support. Peruvian narcotraffickers are estimated to net an annual profit of about \$700 million. Sendero also plays off both sides in the cocaine trade by charging the traffickers for protection and shipment rights, and mediating higher prices for the coca growers. Thus, the insurgents are able to gain the loyalty of the 500,000 to 600,000 peasants in the Huallaga Valley who cultivate coca.¹⁸

On the counternarcotics side, rivalries between the army and national police are a serious problem. With the exception of a few elite units, the politicized police are abysmally paid, and many Peruvians regard them as just another group of armed thugs. The army controls all areas of operations and on several occasions has harassed or forbidden police anti-drug patrols from entering its area of operations. The army high command also considers the drug issue a distraction from its real enemies, Sendero and the MRTA. In addition, some army commanders are fearful that counternarcotics operations will drive peasants into the ranks of the guerrillas, while others use coca growers as an intelligence source against Sendero. Corruption within the army is a constant problem, with the average soldier being paid the US equivalent of only \$12 a month. Some officers compete for commands in the Upper Huallaga Valley because payoffs from coca growers are so lucrative.¹⁹

The Human Rights Issue

Sendero activities in some regions have been crushed by ruthless army counteroffensives, frequently by resort to mass murder, torture, and unexplained disappearances. These army tactics proved to be strategic failures, however, because the peasants were alienated and the guerrillas simply moved elsewhere.

Moreover, the human rights group Americas Watch accused the Peruvian government of having the worst human rights record in Latin America and of using Indian patrols as cannon fodder in its war against Sendero.

Peru's human rights record also has damaged US-Peruvian relations, with Washington refusing to send military aid to Peru.²⁰ In addition, some Peruvian officers continue to view Argentina's counterinsurgency doctrine favorably in spite of the so-called "Dirty War" during the 1970s in which thousands of Argentines were executed by the military on suspicion of terrorist sympathies. Human rights concerns were heightened by Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori's promotion of General Jose Valdivia to Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, since Valdivia had been implicated in a peasant massacre.²¹ Nevertheless, the army has taken measures to change its image as a brutal occupation force, and soldiers are now encouraged to protect Indians against corrupt judges and police as well as against guerrillas. This strategy appears to be working in provinces like Junin, where the insurgents are losing the support of local inhabitants. Moreover, while most civilian casualties in the early 1980s were caused by the army, most deaths now are attributed to Sendero.²²

The Armed Forces

While Peru is one of the dominant military powers in South America, its military remains organized, trained, and equipped for conventional war against Chile and Ecuador rather than for counterinsurgency operations. Only about 13 percent of the military's staff college curriculum concentrates on operations other than war, and the army is still planning to purchase more tanks and fighter planes.²³ Even more important, approximately half of the armed forces are garrisoned along Peru's borders, away from the centers of guerrilla activity. Peru's officer corps is plagued by personnel problems, and there is some feeling that the high command is largely composed of incompetent Fujimori yes-men who rarely remain in their areas of expertise more than a year.²⁴

Fujimori's policy of basing promotions on loyalty as opposed to ability is causing resentment among the officer corps; a semi-clandestine group—COMACAS (Commanders, Majors, and Captains)—aims at restoring professionalism to the armed forces. To guard against a coup, Fujimori has appointed Vladimiro Montesinos, a cashiered captain once accused of selling information to the CIA, as his intelligence czar. Montesinos is tasked to keep files on all of Peru's senior military officers. In November 1992, several retired high-ranking officers were accused of plotting a coup against Fujimori, and the controversial Commander-in-Chief, General Valdivia, was sacked for alleged complicity in the coup. However, many Peruvians remain skeptical about the accusations, viewing the incident as a move by Fujimori to purge the military.²⁵

In the rural areas of Peru, fighting has taken on the aura of classic guerrilla warfare, and analogies to Vietnam are frequently made. While government troops are usually better armed than the guerrillas, the insurgents have the advantages of terrain, ambush, and interior lines of communication. As with most guerrilla conflicts, the war is particularly vicious, and the majority of casualties are civilians who get in the way during fire-fights between government forces and guerrillas.²⁶ Also characteristically, some civilian deaths are deliberate. It is not unusual to see decapitated bodies of women and children floating down a river in contested areas. Buses and trucks are frequently held up or hijacked, the rivers are devoid of boat traffic, and light planes are considered "aluminum coffins" because they make easy targets for guerrilla snipers. Complicating the problem, many communities in mountainous areas are widely scattered, making them difficult to protect.

In some instances the war has taken on genocidal aspects. Sendero openly boasts of its extermination campaign against the fiercely independent Ashaninka Indians, who have violently resisted efforts to subdue them. The Ashaninka speak no Spanish and communicate outside their ranks only with Catholic missionaries. The war took an even more complex turn when the Ashaninka decided to help the army drive MRTA guerrillas out of their valley but in the process clashed with another tribe, the Yaneshas, starting a brutal inter-tribal conflict.²⁷

The armed forces generally lack mobility to operate against insurgents in the highlands and jungles, and government units are seldom at full strength. Moreover, Peru's mixed weapons inventory makes it difficult to substitute repair parts, and many vehicles are inoperable because of cannibalization. Ammunition and fuel supplies are often depleted by either high costs or corruption, thus limiting training. In addition, rank-and-file troops often lack boots and rifles that fire properly. As Peru obtains more sophisticated helicopters and armored personnel carriers, standard foot patrols, an essential part of counterinsurgency conflict tactics, may be eliminated.

The army improved its force structure in 1990 by trading in aging Soviet Mi-8 transport helicopters for new Mi-17s. The Mi-17s carry more than 30 troops and can be used by rapid response units. The army also hopes to purchase more scout helicopters capable of flying over the Andes without their engines overheating. These light helicopters could be fitted with machine guns and rocket pods to provide fire support for ground forces. Both the army and navy have special commando units (modeled on the British Special Air Service) which were reportedly trained by ex-Israeli army officers. These elite units operate in the Mantaro Valley near Lima, where guerrillas continue to cut power lines.²⁸

Until 1990, army patrols were usually sent out only in response to terrorist attacks or deployed guerrilla columns. Such patrols routinely sustained

heavy ambush casualties because they were transported by trucks over major roads. Since then, however, a change in tactics employing helicopter gunships and airmobile troop carriers has proven more successful. The army has also deployed more troops to guerrilla areas, especially elite special forces and marines who are well trained and highly motivated. In Lima, the army is challenging urban terrorist attacks by selectively combing shanty towns (so-called red zones).

Another positive aspect of this new anti-guerrilla strategy has been the formation of armed militias, which were originally organized to defend remote Indian villages from Sendero attacks. In many cases poorly armed militias bravely stood up to guerrillas, driving them out of their valleys. Until recently, the army was reluctant to arm the militias with sophisticated weapons, so that civilian patrols were forced to go up against guerrilla machine guns with only a few shotguns and hand grenades. Nevertheless, the militia forces have grown from 14,000 to 50,000, covering huge tracts of rural hinterlands, and the Ministry of Defense is planning to provide them with modern automatic weapons. In still another positive development, army detachments now patrol jointly with Indians, incorporating them into counterinsurgency operations as scouts, translators, and intelligence collectors.²⁹

Conclusion

Abimael Guzman was captured in Surco, a middle-class Lima neighborhood, along with seven other Sendero leaders. Others arrested included the movement's number two leader, Elvia Iparraguirre, and members of the policymaking central committee. According to General Antonio Vidal, leader of the government's elite anti-guerrilla police unit, the arrest was an important political victory. It followed a three-month intelligence campaign to locate Guzman, who was forced to move to Lima because he had developed a skin problem while hiding out in the high altitudes of the Andes.³⁰ Previous arrests of Sendero cadre had already caused an organizational crisis and may have been responsible for the switch in Sendero's strategy from rural to urban guerrilla warfare.³¹

Guzman's arrest, coming less than three months after the capture of MRTA leader Victor Polay, was part of a government intelligence strategy targeting both Sendero and MRTA political cadres. However, Sendero's guerrilla infrastructure is still largely in place, and the capture of Guzman could precipitate even more terrorist vengeance against the government. Sendero activities usually have been meticulously planned, and a contingency operation previously drawn up for use in the event of Guzman's capture could already be in motion.³² As long as Guzman remains in jail, there is a very real danger that Sendero will stage a spectacular hostage-taking or terrorist scenario to free him.

While small numbers of Sendero guerrillas have voluntarily surrendered to government authorities, it remains to be seen if a demoralized Sendero will collapse as a result of Guzman's capture. One thing is certain, however: if President Fujimori and the newly elected Peruvian legislature fail to alleviate the country's massive socioeconomic problems, stability in Peru will remain extremely tenuous.

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