

Demilitarizing Lesotho

Dietrich Fischer (reprinted from Summer 1994)

ECAAR's Global Register, funded by the Ford Foundation, has already provided a useful service. Recently, an Internet message related that a researcher in Lesotho was urgently seeking information about how Costa Rica was able to abolish its military. Carol Reiley Urner, an American working with the Primary Education Project in Maseru, Lesotho said that the army in Lesotho was in mutiny against the government and the people, and that the government would like to abolish the army, but was powerless, because the army had all the fire-arms. She asked how Costa Rica had been able to succeed in eliminating its army.

I contacted Luis Guillermo Solis, the Costa Rican participant in our Latin American workshop for the Global Register, who has since left the Arias foundation to become Costa Rica's Ambassador-at-Large for Latin America. He set out some key points of President Figueres' 1948 strategy to abolish Costa Rica's army which was adopted in the new constitution in 1949.

First, the military was relatively small, which was helpful. Second, the elites who were fearful that the army could rebel against them created a series of institutions to guarantee legitimacy for the civilian administration. Among them were the following five measures:

1. They created a central comptroller's office (Controlaria de la Republica) with monopoly control over all public expenditures. Its head is appointed by 2/3 of the votes in Congress for 8 years at a time. This helps prevent massive corruption.
2. They established a Tribunal of Elections, staffed by High Court Justices appointed for 8 years, essentially a fourth branch of the government, to prevent electoral fraud.
3. The police, responsible for crime prevention and public security, are not under a single command, but divided into two separate ministries: the Ministry of the Interior is responsible for security in rural areas, and the Ministry for Public Security is responsible for urban security. Both ministries are civilian. In this way, no chief of police is able to exert monopoly control and seize state power by force.
4. Police officers hold civilian ranks (such as "Inspector," etc., like in Great Britain) not military ranks (such as lieutenant, captain, colonel, etc.).
5. There are autonomous institutions responsible for electricity, water, telecommunication, banking, not under the central government, in which opposition parties enjoy a certain minimum representation. Political power is widely dispersed. This would also make it harder for any small group to seize illegitimate power.

Finally, Costa Rica relies heavily on the collective security mechanisms of the United Nations for verification and enforcement.

After I sent this information via the Internet to Carol Urner in Lesotho, I received a grateful reply from her a few days later, with more detailed information about the struggle going on there. Carol will share this information at a forthcoming meeting of local NGOs, and hopes they will take up direct contact with Luis Guillermo in Costa Rica, to learn further details.

Once the full register is widely available, it can become a powerful force for peace by making such type of information accessible quickly on a global basis.

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