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Shining Path of Peru: Recent Dynamics and
Future Prospects



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Resumen: A pesar de haber sido fuertemente derrotada a los comienzos de la década de 1990, Sendero Luminoso no desapareció. En los últimos cinco años, Sendero Luminoso ha resurgido de una forma sustancialmente diferente con un componente militar y político. La organización, una vez más coordinada por el líder Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, quien se encuentra en prisión, ha dejado de lado los objetivos militares a corto plazo para propiciar una estrategia a largo plazo consistente en reconstruir lentamente el apoyo popular y establecer un partido dentro del sistema político peruano. Para realizar esto, Sendero Luminoso ha mutado de una ideología Maoísta rígida y extrema hacia una posición más pragmática. El apoyo financiero se deriva una vez más de la producción y tráfico de la cocaína en el Valle Alto de Huallaga. Aunque pueda haber algunas excepciones individuales, Sendero Luminoso no es una organización narcoterrorista. Al mismo tiempo, Sendero es todavía una organización muy pequeña, dividida, y de ninguna manera significa una amenaza al Estado peruano. La organización política con base en Lima y el ala militar del Valle Alto de Huallaga continúan siguiendo el liderazgo de Guzmán, mientras que el grupo de los Valles Apurímac-Ene (VRAE) permanece comprometido a la lucha armada. La respuesta militar y civil del gobierno del Perú ha sido inadecuada. Las operaciones militares del VRAE son obstaculizadas por liderazgos pobres, tropas mal entrenadas y una estrategia desactualizada. El desarrollo de los recursos del VRAE ha sido recortado y la larga promesa de un camino “asfaltado” permanece en un estadio de planificación. Sin ajustes significativos del gobierno del Perú, Sendero Luminoso es probable que siga creciendo.

Palabras clave: Perú, Sendero Luminoso, Maoísmo, Política de tráfico de droga, Políticas de contrainsurgencia, América Latina

Abstract: Although soundly defeated in the early mid-1990s, Shining Path did not disappear. Over the past five years, it has reemerged in a substantially different form, with both a military and a political component. The organization, once again coordinated by jailed leader Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, has eschewed shorter-term military objectives in favor of a longer-term strategy of slowly rebuilding popular support and establishing a party within the Peruvian political system. In so doing, it has also moved from extreme Maoist ideological rigidity to a more pragmatic approach. Financial support is derived once again from cocaine production and trafficking in the Upper Huallaga Valley (UHV). Although there may be some individual exceptions, Shining Path is not a narcoterrorist organization. At the same time, Sendero is still very small, in no way a threat to the Peruvian state, and divided. The Lima-based political organization and the military wing in the UHV continue to follow Guzmán’s leadership, while the Apurímac-Ene Valleys (VRAE) group remains committed to the armed struggle. The GOP response to date, both military and civilian, has been inadequate. VRAE military operations are hampered by poor leadership, ill-trained troops, and an outdated strategy. VRAE development resources have been cut, and the long-promised paved road remains in the planning stage. Without significant GOP adjustments, Shining Path is likely to continue to grow.

Keywords: Peru, Shining Path, Maoism, Drug Trafficking Policy, Counterinsurgency Policies, Latin America

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I. Introduction¹

This radical and largely home-grown Maoist guerrilla organization is back. It was the scourge of Peru in the 1980s and early 1990s² before the government adopted a new counterinsurgency approach that successfully overcame the threat. Shining Path (Sendero, Sendero Luminoso, SL) is still a shadow of its former self and in no way represents a threat to the Peruvian state. However, the signs of its renewed presence in some parts of the country are unmistakable and a source of concern.

For some years, it was widely believed that Sendero had, for all intents and purposes, disappeared. After all, SL's maximum leader, Abimael Guzmán Reynoso, was captured in a spectacular raid in September 1992. In addition, the organization had been progressively dismantled through cadre roundups, sympathizer rehabilitation, and rural micro-development programs, among other initiatives.

Such a view, however understandable, has proven to be premature. SL has in fact slowly regrouped over the past five years as the result of government indifference and incompetence, as well as due to revamped approaches by Sendero militant remnants and supporters of the group (Partlow 2008; Bryce 2009; Mendoza 2010). Terrorist actions have averaged over 100 per year during this period, and casualties among military, police, militants, and citizens have exceeded 300 (DIRCOTE 2010). In addition, the recently created political wing of SL, the Amnesty and Fundamental Rights Movement (MOVADEF), gathered over 150,000 signatures in an attempt to gain recognition as a political party for the 2010 local elections (Pérez 2010).

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² Death and destruction figures during these years are sobering – 69,000 killed, 650,000 displaced, over one million emigrants, and some \$24 billion in damaged infrastructure and productive capacity. The literature on this period is extensive; important analyses include Gorriti (1990), Degregori (1990), Tapia (1997), Coronel (1996), McClintock (1998), Palmer (1994), and Stern (1998). The definitive treatment is the nine-volume study of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR 2003).



II. Explaining Sendero's Return

The return of Sendero as a force to be reckoned with can be explained by considering several factors. A number of them relate to the guerrilla organization itself.

One is the group's return to its original Maoist-inspired goal of achieving power through an extended, long-term peoples' war. In the aftermath of defeat, Guzmán and other surviving members of the leadership belatedly recognized that they were mistaken in concluding that they could achieve military victory quickly in the early 1990s. In spite of "objective conditions" favorable to the insurgents at the time, given a deep and extended economic decline and a severely weakened and discredited national government, Sendero leaders overlooked their own limitations as well as the shift in military and police counterinsurgency strategy then taking place (Palmer 2007: 208-213).

A second is a shift in tactics to avoid some of the most serious mistakes of the past. Sendero Luminoso appears to have eschewed its earlier ideological rigidity. Over the course of the 1980s, such unwavering certainty led to an imposed organizational orthodoxy and repression on the presumptive beneficiaries of its radical Maoist-inspired revolution, the indigenous peasants themselves. It has turned instead to building constructive relationships with those local populations where it has a presence, as in the Apurímac-Ene (VRAE) and Upper Huallaga valleys where Víctor Quispe Palomino's (aka José) "Proseguir" faction is operating³. Members now work the fields with peasants there, pay for needed supplies, and visit peasant communities to acknowledge past errors and to promise not to repeat them. They appear to have succeeded in rebranding themselves as a "kinder, gentler group...at least tacitly accepted by rural communities and by the very self-defense committees that played a pivotal role in the original SL's defeat" (U.S. Embassy 2009a; Aronés 2010).

Other militants are also present among potential allies, especially in some Lima and provincial universities (such as the University of San Marcos and the University of Callao in

³ For additional details on this Proseguir faction, see the reports by London-based Peruvian journalist Fernando Lucena in the on-line publication *IDL Reporteros* (2011), which are based on interviews in the VRAE with faction spokesperson "Raúl" (Jorge Quispe Palomino) and others.

the capital, and the University of San Cristóbal de Huamanga – UNSCH, in Ayacucho, where Sendero originated in the 1960s) and in regional defense fronts (Bolívar, 2010; García Blásquez, 2010). These latter groups were originally set up by local organizations, usually leftist in orientation, to advance their interests and to pressure regional and municipal governments through protest marches and occasional attacks on government buildings to secure responses to their demands.

A third is the return to past practices which had proved to be successful, such as the organization and expansion of armed cadre for selective attacks on government forces in areas where Sendero holds the advantage of intimate knowledge of local terrain, particularly in its jungle redoubts in the Apurímac-Ene (VRAE) and Upper Huallaga river valleys. A related component that builds on past successes is a return to the generation of resources through drug production and trafficking, including guarding “mules” transporting cocaine from the jungle across the sierra to coastal gathering points for shipment. These resources, as in the late 1980s, provide the means to obtain weapons, to pay for supplies, and to support cadres and their operations⁴ (Romero 2009; Whalen 2010; INFOREGIÓN 2011).

A fourth factor in the regeneration of some level of organizational capacity and central direction is the ability in recent years of Sendero’s jailed chief, Abimael Guzmán, to communicate with supporters in the field. This enables the organization’s founder to provide ideological, strategic, and tactical guidance and to reestablish a sense of organizational coherence, at least among those who continue to see him as their maximum leader.

Guzmán has been able to do so as the result of prison policy changes instituted by the Valentín Paniagua transitional government (2000-2001) and his successor, Alejandro Toledo (2001-2006), changes that have continued under President Alan García Pérez (2006-2011). These shifts responded to pressures by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission (IAHRC) to institute a more humane approach to the incarcerated as well as a

⁴ There is a view, subscribed to by some Peruvian and other analysts and many Peruvian government officials, that Shining Path has become a narcoterrorist organization, similar to the FARC in Colombia, which has lost its ideological orientation and is now little more than a drug trafficking organization. The authors do not believe this characterization accurately reflects current Sendero operations.

desire by these successive elected governments to demonstrate their democratic bona fides after the increasingly authoritarian policies of the Alberto Fujimori government (1990-2000) (Bolívar 2002; Potestá 2002; Gonzales 2003; EFE 2003; Jiménez 2003).

Shining Path's expanding presence and growing capacity also relate to the generally ineffective government policies in recent years. Once the imminent threat posed by Sendero had passed with the defeat and disarticulation of the organization and most of its leadership either dead or in jail, successive administrations have moved on to other concerns.

The specialized police group (GEIN) that tracked guerrilla leaders and was responsible for their capture was disbanded and absorbed into the National Intelligence Service (SIN). DINCOTE, now DIRCOTE, charged with gathering information on internal threats, entered into reorganization between 1992 and 1994 and no longer has the operational capacity of earlier years (*El Comercio* 1994).

In addition, the extremely successful rural micro-development programs established by the now discredited Fujimori government in the early 1990s were either ended or changed in ways that no longer responded to specific articulated local needs⁵. These programs were targeted at the 200 poorest districts of the country, often in areas where Shining Path had been most active. Between 1993 and 1998, they significantly reduced poverty with small-scale programs selected and overseen by elected members of the community while simultaneously establishing an effective government presence (Palmer 2001).

An economic initiative to provide resources for access road paving and development of the river valleys and adjacent areas of the VRAE has languished. This is in spite of the fact that the region is both a major source of coca production and a haven for many of the remaining armed SL militants. Although declared to be a high priority by successive

⁵ For example, in 2007-2008 President Alan García Pérez reduced the budget, centralized operations, and changed the mission of one of the most successful of the microdevelopment organizations, the Fondo Nacional de Cooperación de Desarrollo Social (FONCODES) to provide larger rural development programs without local input.

governments, the road has still not been paved to enable local farmers to export their legal crops⁶. In a quite inexplicable decision the García administration actually reduced by over 15 percent Fiscal Year 2011 funding for the VRAE development initiative (ANDINA 2009; *La Voz de Huamanga* 2010; *El Comercio* 2011).

Furthermore, when the military responded to increased Shining Path activity in the area in 2009 with a major initiative (Operación Excelencia), it repeated mistakes of the 1980s by emphasizing military operations over a “hearts and minds” civic action campaign and lost two helicopters and over 50 troops, mostly conscripts. In spite of a lack of success, military forces continue to operate in close proximity to fixed bases and do not mingle or work with local civilian populations. Conscripts rather than Special Forces continue to comprise the troops in the VRAE, and a general sent to command the military there in 2009 had no prior experience in counterinsurgency operations (Bolívar 2009).

Such a set of continuing ineffective, even counterproductive official responses suggest that central government has once again underestimated Sendero’s modest but growing operational capacity. What might explain a policy of giving a low priority to a reemerging problem that at one point in the early 1990s threatened to overwhelm the state itself?

⁶ There is a parallel here to what U.S. officials in Afghanistan realize is needed to improve their non-military efforts against insurgents. “You can drill a well in a day, and build a school in a month... but it takes a long, long time to build a road. When you start a road, you send a message that it isn’t a month-long partnership – it is for the long haul.” (Di Giovanni 2009)

III. Explaining Government's Ineffective Responses

One part of the answer might lie, as during much of the 1980s, with the absence of any perceived threat to Lima, Peru's capital, residence of one-third of the country's population and well over half of its economic activity. Most analysts believe that it was Guzmán's decision to take the people's war to Lima in the late 1980s that galvanized government and the military to finally make the major changes in their counterinsurgency strategy which eventually produced success against the guerrilla forces. Violence at that time peaked in 1992 with over 60 car bombs. With the last such attack occurring in Lima almost eight years ago⁷, the sense of urgency, even desperation, so pervasive in the capital in the early 1990s is absent today.

A second part of the explanation can be found in the now outdated counterinsurgency approach that continues to be based on the military strategy developed in 1989 rather than a new plan that adopts tactics more responsive to the changes Sendero has made in the course of its reemergence since 2006⁸. According to SL analyst Rubén Vargas, the government has forgotten that to defeat the guerrillas in the VRAE it must first focus on a counter-narcotics strategy, since the VRAE is where most of Peru's cocaine is now produced, and then deal with the insurgents themselves. For such an approach, the military must have the local population and local authorities as allies and must send personnel who both know the local combat scenario and have experience in irregular warfare (Pérez 2010). A coherent plan that takes these issues into account would replace the mostly young and inexperienced troops now being sent with older veterans and experienced commanding officers. It would also emphasize military and civilian civic action activities in close consultation with the local populations. In addition, a much higher priority would be given to infrastructure development in the VRAE, including roads, schools, and health clinics.

⁷ This was a car bomb that was set off in the El Polo mall, one block from the U.S. Embassy in Lima, on March 20, 2002, just two days before President George W. Bush's arrival in Lima. Eleven people were killed.

⁸ DIRCOTE (Dirección Contra el Terrorismo) figures on the number of "terrorist actions" carried out by Shining Path in its three areas of operations, the VRAE, Upper Huallaga, and Lima, show 175 in 2006, 72 in 2007, 76 in 2008, 102 in 2009, and 136 in 2010. From charts provided by DIRCOTE to Alberto Bolívar, March 4, 2011.

A third element relates to human rights issues in a number of different ways. Military personnel in the field report that they feel hamstrung by fears that any operations they carry out will be criticized by human rights groups, so they respond by limiting their activities and keeping their patrols close to their bases (Bolívar 2010). Such a response in the field certainly affects the ability of troops to succeed with their assigned mission, although, as noted just above, the lack of an effective and coherent strategy at present also seems to be part of the problem.

At the same time, the expressed concerns over human rights issues related to current army operations in the VRAE, whether justified or not, have a historical basis in abuses committed by both sides during the government's struggle to overcome the ravages of Sendero's people's war between 1982 and the early 1990s. The Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2002-2004) documented over 2000 mass graves in Ayacucho alone. (Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación – CVR 2003) Subsequently, forensic teams, government prosecutors, and non-governmental groups have uncovered evidence of military massacres and mass burials in Ayacucho in the 1980s in such indigenous communities as Putis and within the walls of the Cabitos army base (Palmer 2008).

These efforts to address the consequences of the insurgency and to find ways to help local survivors to come to terms with their family members' deaths have run up against a less than enthusiastic response by central government. This includes restrictions on forensic teams, replacement of government prosecutors seen as "overly aggressive" in pursuing human rights abuses, and court cases moved to Lima from Ayacucho. It is also the case that very few individual reparations payments have been made by the government as yet even though the law requires such payments to survivors of war victims as a key element of the reconciliation process. In a most welcome if overdue development, the government did distribute \$5,000,000 in 2010 in one-time \$50,000 payments to peasant communities affected by the violence throughout the sierra. However, the limitations imposed on uncovering forensic evidence and on the judicial process have impeded progress on some 14,000 to 15,000 individual claims (Coronel 2010).

One explanation offered for such a halfhearted approach, either to full application of the reconciliation legislation or to an effective response to renewed Shining Path activity, is

President García's fears of possible prosecution for actions that occurred during his first presidency (1985-1990). Like ex-President Fujimori before him, who was extradited from Chile, tried, and convicted during his current mandate, the view is that García worries that he, too, might be held accountable for human rights abuses during his first term. Several of the mass killings in the sierra, as well as the death of almost 300 Sendero prisoners at the hands of the Republican Guards after an uprising in the El Frontón prison in 1986, are potential swords of Damocles hanging over his head. Such considerations may well be affecting his decisions on such issues (Coronel: 2010).

Finally, similar concerns are expressed over the progressive release from prison since 2000 of almost 4,000 convicted insurgents who have completed their sentences, without any follow-up tracking policy. Official denials notwithstanding, there is ample evidence that some of those freed have returned to participate in Shining Path activities⁹.

⁹ Periodic newspaper accounts relate apprehensions in Lima and several provinces of convicted SL militants who have been involved in local organizing and armed attacks.

IV. Explaining Sendero's Limitations

In spite of such discouraging signs of ineffectiveness in the government's response to the newly energized activities of Shining Path, the Upper Huallaga valley, where the police are in charge of eliminating the guerrilla threat, does show signs of progress. Here Florindo Flores Hala (aka Artemio), the lone member of Shining Path's Central Committee still at large, is in charge of operations designed to reestablish support among local peasants, largely coca growers, while at the same time gathering revenues from the production and trafficking of cocaine to support Sendero operations. Over the past year or so, the same police who successfully tracked and captured Guzmán in 1992 have headed operations in the valley and have rounded up or killed several of the key subordinates of Artemio. In fact, they have also come very close to bringing in Artemio himself. These police-directed operations in the Upper Huallaga demonstrate that it is indeed possible to pursue a successful counterinsurgency strategy against the armed remnants of Shining Path. In so doing, they place into sharp relief the contrasting failed efforts of the military to do the same in the VRAE (Gorriti 2010).

Beyond Shining Path's current challenges in the Upper Huallaga, there are other issues in play that limit its ability to pursue the once more long-term objective of eventual accession to power through the people's war. The organization, while more coordinated than it has been in some years by the ability of Abimael Guzmán to communicate with militants in the field, is itself divided. These divisions go back more than fifteen years, to 1993, when Guzmán acknowledged military defeat and asked for a peace agreement. This decision produced a break between militants who accepted his conclusion and those who vowed to continue the armed struggle unabated. This tension between Sendero remnants has continued over the years. With increased activity by militants and sympathizers, however, it is now more visible to the outsider.

At this time, there are three distinct groups of Shining Path supporters. The Lima contingent is led by chief spokesperson Alfredo Crespo, Guzmán's lead lawyer, along with legal colleague Manuel Fajardo, and engages in efforts to free militants still in jail, a general amnesty campaign, and expanding networks of supporters in universities and unions. The

Upper Huallaga group is led by Artemio, and includes “Rubén” and a number of others known only by their aliases. The VRAE organization is led by José, with other principal figures including Orlando Alejandro Borda Casafranca, aka Alipio, Jorge Quispe Palomino, aka Raúl (José’s brother), Rolando Cabezas Figueroa, aka Guillermo, and several more also known only by their aliases.

The first two continue to accept Guzmán’s leadership and guidance in emphasizing a political solution in the shorter term, including a general amnesty. However, the guerrillas in the VRAE reject his leadership in favor of a military solution in the context of the ongoing armed struggle, and have demonstrated their disdain by sentencing Guzmán to death (VRAE Facción 2008). Recent evidence of what might have started out as efforts to bridge the gap between the two armed wings (estimated together to total about 450 armed militants), with leaders who worked closely together at one time but are now antagonists, indicates that these efforts failed completely. When José sent Félix Huachaca Tincopa, aka Roberto, to the Upper Huallaga in February 2010 to make contact with Artemio and coordinate actions, his offer was refused. José then instructed Roberto to kill Artemio, but he was captured by police (in December 2010) before he could do so (*Peru.21* 2010).

V. Legal Recognition: A New Path for Sendero?

The Lima-based Shining Path supporters, following a very different course in their peaceful pursuit of a set of citizen front organizations, have had some success in regenerating relationships with sympathizers in several Lima and sierra universities, unions, and regional defense groups. They have also organized marches and protests in favor of granting a general amnesty which would include both Guzmán and, ironically, Fujimori and military offenders as well. The concomitant efforts of their lawyers' organization to register a political party sympathetic to the group's causes have failed, however, at least for now.

The hope was to gain legal recognition for the Amnesty and Fundamental Rights Movement (MOVADEF) to be able to participate in the April 2011 elections. Although organizers gathered more than the requisite 150,000 signatures, these were deemed to have been submitted too close to the registration deadline for verification. Even so, the group's ability to garner that number of citizens at least willing to let a Shining Path-sympathizing party appear on the ballot (assuming most of the signatures are genuine) may suggest that the non-violent approach is gaining traction.

Such support is suggested by MOVADEF's first congress, organized in November 2010 to begin the process of collecting sufficient signatures to register as a political party. The gathering was attended by more than 200 delegates from several Lima lower class districts, including Villa El Salvador, San Juan de Miraflores, San Juan de Lurigancho, Independencia, and Comas. There were also representatives from the departments of Puno, Ancash, Arequipa, Ayacucho, Apurímac, Junín, Tumbes, and Piura, as well as from the public universities of San Marcos and Callao (Pérez 2010: 5).

MOVADEF has also carried out a number of legal initiatives in what has turned out to be a successful effort to free from jail several hundred former cadres of Sendero and the now defunct Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA) (Yovera 2009). DIRCOTE sources have registered their concerns that those freed failed to pay the civil reparations required under the law, thereby demoralizing Peruvian police forces (Yovera 2009).

The armed faction of Shining Path based in the coca-rich Upper Huallaga valley (UHV), whose leader Artemio continues to adhere to “Gonzalo (i.e., Guzmán) thought” and to accept his prison-based guidance, is under constant harassment by police forces. Several important Sendero lieutenants in the valley have been rounded up in recent months, though Artemio continues to elude capture.

Even so, there is evidence of some level of continuing support for the group by local farmers, one of its prime objectives, as well as of resources for the organization generated by revenues from drug production and trafficking. These resources are crucial to Shining Path’s continued efforts to rebuild both the armed and popular support generating components of the organization. There is no question that police operations in the UHV threaten the finances that currently undergird the pro-Guzmán segments of Sendero; their continued success in the valley, whether they capture Artemio or not, would be a major blow to the organization.

The segment of Shining Path based in the VRAE, which is roundly opposed to the strategic assessment and tactical line pursued by its once dominant head, is at this moment in a much better position to advance the approach the militants have been following for at least the past five years. This includes close collaboration with the local population by some members (U.S. Embassy 2009b). At the same time, others, making up the armed cadre, attack army patrols and bases and protect carriers of cocaine on roads and trails out of the valleys over the sierra to the coast (Libón 2011).

The difficult jungle terrain is one major handicap for government forces, while limitations of leadership and the counterinsurgency approach adopted, as well as the lack of central authority priority further limit their success. At the same time, the Sendero cadre in the VRAE, while still ascendant there, do not appear at this juncture to be moving very far beyond the valleys to expand their operations or influence with other local rural communities.

VI. Conclusions

Our assessment of the future dynamics of Shining Path is that the organization, or more correctly, the organizations, is at a crossroads. Both the dissident branch continuing the armed struggle in the VRAE and the group based in Lima that is focusing on gaining popular support and filling political space on the left are slowly gaining momentum. This ideological and tactical split certainly weakens Sendero's overall ability to advance. In addition, the capacity of the Guzmán- supporting armed wing of SL in the UHV is declining, and the dissident Proseguir faction in the VRAE still seems to be limited in its range of operations beyond the jungle valleys. One possibility that could emerge from these current dynamics, given the advances made by MOVAREF in trying to enter the national, regional, and local political arenas, is a slowly progressing Shining Path mutation that in time finds a legitimate place within Peru's national political system.

As our analysis has suggested, government's response is a key consideration in any assessment of Shining Path's future. So far, its actions have indicated that it is not yet prepared to provide the necessary overall response that would eliminate the latent threat the group poses, so it could easily continue to grow. At the same time, Sendero's repressive history among the very peasant groups it is now trying to work with to regain support is likely to limit any expansion, especially in the central-south sierra in and around Ayacucho.

For the government, its successes in the UHV demonstrate that the guerrilla threat can be reduced. Even so central government authorities are not yet willing to refine their response to an emerging within-system Shining Path presence and cannot yet see the potential benefits that allowing the organization to operate as a political party might bring. Public opinion is also overwhelmingly opposed to any legalization of Sendero's political front. Even though the national SL party possibility is off the table for the 2011 national elections, it is very likely that Sendero-sympathizing political groups or alliances will be involved in local and regional elections and will have some success. As far as the military side of SL is concerned, the continuation of low level and regionally delimited insurgency is the most likely short- to medium-term scenario. In conclusion, our overall assessment at

this time is that Shining Path will continue a slow expansion of its political wing but is unlikely to reemerge as a significant military threat at any point in the foreseeable future.

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