



September 2026

Military Meddling at the Polls

Election challenges abroad offer civil-military lessons for the United States.

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September 2026

As the 2026 midterm elections approach, the Trump administration has put forward increasingly improbable claims about the security of election administration in the United States. This escalating rhetoric has led to concern among many observers, including some members of Congress, that the administration may attempt to use national security resources—including the military—to administer or otherwise intercede in the election.¹

These concerns, while troubling, are not simply wild speculation. After losing the 2020 election, US President Donald Trump began to make threats about using the US military to intervene on his behalf—the most prominent of which was the threat to use military forces to take custody of ballots in states where Trump had lost.² Recent reporting suggests that these desires have not abated. At the beginning of 2026, Trump admitted in an interview with *The New York Times* that he regretted not ordering the National Guard to seize voting machines in swing states.³

Indeed, Trump has already demonstrated a willingness to break both norms and precedents in the use of the military in domestic settings during his second term. In June 2025, he federalized the California National Guard against the wishes of California Governor Gavin Newsom. A federal judge ultimately found that the deployment had violated the Posse Comitatus Act because of the troops' support for federal law enforcement.⁴ Later that year, Trump federalized the Illinois National Guard—also over the objections of Illinois Governor JB Pritzker—using a justification that the US Supreme Court ultimately found to be unlawful.⁵ Trump further used his authority in 2025 to deploy National Guard forces from 32 states to the streets of Washington, DC, in an unprecedented and effectively open-ended deployment under the auspices of fighting crime—a case that is still being litigated in the court system.⁶

In another norm-breaking move, the administration has refused to rule out the deployment of military forces (either National Guard or Active Duty) to polling places during the 2026 midterm elections—a move that would be effectively without precedent in the United States.⁷ Other than for the administration of elections during and immediately after the Civil War, federal military forces have played no role in election administration and execution.⁸ This is both intentional and normative: There are a number of laws that prevent military forces from being involved in election administration as well as a well-documented public aversion to having uniformed military forces involved in domestic affairs in the United States.⁹

In August 2026, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Dan Caine replied to a query from Senator Elise Slotkin (D-MI) confirming that the US military had no plans to intervene in the upcoming midterm elections.¹⁰ The reply was reassuring to dedicated election-watchers, yet failed in many ways to realistically account for the ways in which militaries around the world can be and are used to interfere in elections. Indeed, it is precisely because there is so little precedent for domestic military involvement in the United States that many US-based experts are unsure about what election interference may look like. Seizing ballots, after all, would be extreme, and military leaders should recognize an order to do so as unlawful. Yet the president's power over military forces is expansive. It is therefore worth investigating when and how national security resources may be used in the lead-up to and aftermath of elections in the United States.

September 2026

Lessons From Abroad: The Value of a Comparative Analysis

The United States is far from the only country that has faced the prospect of military involvement in its elections. In 2000, Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori used military facilities to produce propaganda and generally integrated the military into his campaign structure. Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez deployed highly politicized military forces to polling stations in 2006 under an election protection plan that was nevertheless decried by opposition candidates as an attempt to intimidate voters. And in 2017, Gambian President Yahya Jammeh ordered military forces to occupy the offices of the Independent Electoral Commission after his December 2016 defeat in an effort to prevent a transfer of power. Military involvement can further become institutionalized: The Turkish military has a long history of intervention in domestic politics, including a threat to intervene in 2007 over the rise of the pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party led by now-President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

The experiences of other nations, therefore, can offer important insights into the variety of ways in which military forces are used to shape the election environment in favor of an incumbent leader or party. Indeed, using military forces to steal an election outright and intimidate voters—as Robert Mugabe did in Zimbabwe after his 2008 election loss—is the exception rather than the rule. Rather, most cases are borderline. Military resources are abused and weaponized against opposition candidates in response to legitimate national security challenges; military officers campaign for political candidates; political leaders generate national security crises in an effort to bolster their standing in the polls.

To develop insights into the scenarios that may play out ahead of the 2026 midterm elections, the Democracy and Security Network at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) convened approximately 15 experts on American and comparative civil-military relations to answer the following two questions: What are the most likely opportunities for intervention in the election? What are the interventions most likely to cause catastrophic harm to civil-military relations in the United States? Experts were asked to perform the analysis for three time periods: the months leading up to an election, the voting period, and the time between the election and when the new Congress is sworn in.

GMF staff then facilitated a discussion among the experts as they more fully fleshed out the scenarios that represented the intersection of “most likely” and “worst case”. Experts in comparative civil-military relations were asked to draw upon their own backgrounds and academic expertise to inform the discussion, while experts in US civil-military relations added their understanding of the context and norms in which these scenarios may occur. This report outlines the three scenarios that, should the administration decide to use military resources to influence the 2026 midterm elections, the expert convening highlighted as both likely and exceptionally harmful to civil-military relations. It discusses these scenarios in the context of real-world case studies from democracies in which these most-likely/worst-case scenarios have indeed occurred, and concludes with a discussion of lessons learned for political, military, and civil-society leaders in the United States.

September 2026

Before the Election: Using National Security Resources to Tilt the Playing Field

Scenario: Political leaders use the vast resources of the Department of Defense to systematically target and discredit political opponents. Political opposition may be labeled a security threat; embarrassing or compromising information revealed during the security clearance process may be leaked; and political groups may be threatened with investigation and litigation in an effort to tie up resources that would otherwise be used for campaigning.

“Red-Tagging” and the Securitization of Elections in the Philippines

The 2022 Philippine presidential election was widely viewed as a critical test for Philippine democracy. Several factors complicated the information environment at the time. Most importantly, the longstanding conflict between the Philippine government and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) represented a legitimate security threat to national stability. As the elections neared, President Rodrigo Duterte used the security challenge as an excuse to increase the use of “red-tagging”—the practice of accusing political opponents of posing security threats in order to deploy national security resources against their candidacy and otherwise harass them. In this case, red-tagging involved labeling opposition politicians, public figures, and their organizations as associated with or fronts for the insurgent CPP.

The election also took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about media freedom, social-media-driven disinformation, and the Duterte government’s highly controversial war on drugs—all of which combined to create a highly degraded information environment. Disinformation initiatives also targeted the media, the Catholic Church, the Commission on Elections, and other public organizations, using a “firehose of falsehood” approach to sow mistrust in core institutions.¹¹

Two pieces of legislation made red-tagging more effective. In 2018, Duterte issued Executive Order No. 70, which created the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, or NTF-ELCAC. This task force was situated in the Office of the President and formally reframed insurgency as a problem rooted in poverty, social inequality, and historical injustices while also pledging to address the security issues posed by the CPP. In practice, however, the task force became an institutional vehicle for red-tagging.¹² It used social media and official pronouncements to accuse perceived critics of ties to the CPP and their armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA).¹³ Additionally, the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 2020 contained provisions allowing security forces to target and arrest individuals suspected of being connected to its broad definition of terrorism.¹⁴

Candidates and campaigns, especially Duterte’s hand-picked successor Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., used disinformation-for-hire firms and other social-media-savvy operatives to manipulate online narratives. Red-tagging circulated through anonymous and government-linked accounts, starting even before the beginning of the 90-day campaign period, while the government-sponsored NTF-ELCAC helped make the practice official policy.¹⁵ The volume of red-tagging steadily increased during the election cycle and peaked just before the election on May 9, 2022.¹⁶ Leni Robredo, the leading opposition candidate, was by far the most targeted individual. A fact-checking analysis by a collaborative Filipino initiative demonstrated that 96% of disinformation targeting Robredo was negative.¹⁷ The Makabayan bloc, a coalition of three progressive parties, was accused of being a legal front for the CPP/NPA¹⁸ and was the most targeted group in 2022.¹⁹ Other targets included opposition and left-aligned public figures, journalists, and civil society groups.

This case study illustrates how entrenched issues such as Duterte’s war on drugs and the country’s history of communist insurgency were harnessed to create an environment in which citizens were inundated with untrustworthy information as opposition figures and activists were caught in a cycle of escalating threats. Far

September 2026

from simply violating principles of free speech, the threats created a culture of intimidation during a time when the administration's war on drugs had produced thousands of government-sanctioned extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances.²⁰ Further, Duterte's restrictions on freedom of expression and media limited opportunities for civil society actors to contest the widespread disinformation campaign, thus creating a polluted information landscape in which citizens were receptive to fabricated attacks on opposition candidates.

During the Election: Voting Interference Under the Guise of Protection

Scenario: Military forces are mobilized in response to a real or manufactured security threat—most likely one with some history in the public eye so as to be believable. Forces are “coincidentally” disproportionately deployed to highly contested districts where political opposition is expected to successfully challenge ruling party incumbents. These troops serve to intimidate voters and lower turnout in areas where the political opposition is strong.

Troops at the Polls in Pakistan

Pakistan has long struggled with military intervention in domestic politics. The country has experienced three separate periods of military rule that together spanned over 33 years since independence in 1947. Pakistan's July 2018 general election was therefore a study in contrasts. While it took place after two consecutive terms of civilian rule (and ultimately resulted in just the second democratic transition in Pakistan's history),²¹ the military establishment and the judiciary nevertheless played a critical role in shaping voters' access and behavior during voting. Indeed, the military was accused throughout the election process of backing the opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party and its candidate, Imran Khan; of successfully colluding with the judiciary to dismiss the ruling Pakistan Muslim League–Nawaz (PML-N) leader Nawaz Sharif; and of pressuring candidates to switch parties in an attempt to split the vote.²²

In the weeks leading up to the election, army leaders used legitimate security concerns about terrorism to weaken PML-N, which was viewed by many army leaders as promoting policies that were too soft on India and too critical of the military's support of militant groups.²³ Pakistan has long struggled to ensure internal security, and several terror attacks in the weeks immediately before the election made the security environment particularly conducive to military intervention. A July 13 attack in Balochistan killed 149 people, including the party candidate, while other attacks targeted politicians, polling stations, and voters.²⁴ In response to the threat, the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) authorized the deployment of an astonishing 370,000 armed personnel. Some 450,000 police were deployed nationwide, and nearly 17,000 criminal cases were opened against the PML-N, one of the three main political parties with a strong political base in the Punjab province.²⁵

While army leaders declared the deployments and criminal investigations to be necessary for internal security, the magnitude of the deployments departed significantly from prior election-related security measures and led many international observers to raise concerns about voter intimidation. In contrast to the massive deployment of 2018, the 2013 elections were conducted in the midst of a significantly worse security situation yet saw the deployment of only 70,000 military personnel. The 2018 deployment therefore represented a more than five-fold increase in military presence despite the lower number of attacks and fewer deaths in the four weeks leading up to the election.

Moreover, several unusual steps were taken to lawfully increase the military's influence in the election. The ECP requested military assistance with the transportation and protection of election materials, as well as the presence of army personnel in and around polling stations. In addition, in early July, a separate military reporting channel was established that allowed security officers to report election irregularities. Military officers were then granted

September 2026

the power to arrest and summarily try those accused of election-related offenses such as campaigning at polling stations.²⁶ Armed personnel were ultimately stationed inside polling places—despite an agreement with the major political parties that they would remain strictly outside voting locations—and in many cases took control of a polling station entirely.

Overall, Pakistan's 2018 election cycle saw an increase in the military's geographical reach and its legal powers to counter a legitimate threat of election-related violence. Army leaders, however, used the threat to broadly undermine civilian control of election administration, which led to accusations of voter intimidation and coercion. National security and public safety laws such as the Anti-Terrorism Act were incorrectly invoked to prosecute political candidates as military leaders exaggerated the threat to public safety. Security forces placed senior leaders of the PML-N under house arrest two weeks before the election, forcing the party to cease campaigning in the Punjab stronghold for five full days. Ultimately, the breadth of authority afforded to the military during this election cycle added to a culture of fear and censorship aimed at hollowing out PML-N's influence and support.²⁷

After the Election: Retaining Power

Scenario: Contested elections—fueled by disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories asserting the presence of widespread fraud—spark mass protests. Protests turn sporadically violent as agitators from both sides attempt to instigate riots. Political leaders use the prospect of violence at the protests—aided by propaganda and edited videos—to declare a state of emergency and use military forces to (violently) suppress largely peaceful protesters.

Protest and Violence as an Excuse for Military Action in South Korea

In October 2016, explosive reporting revealed that the conservative president of South Korea, Park Gyeun-hye, had allowed Choi-Tae-min—a close friend of Park's and the daughter of cult leader Choi Tai-min—inappropriate access and influence over domestic affairs. The revelations sparked a months-long political crisis that led to wide-ranging accusations of corruption and abuse of power, inspired months of massive protests, and ultimately led to Park's impeachment by the National Assembly in December of that year. As the March 2017 impeachment trial approached, protests escalated and both supporters and opponents of Park became increasingly agitated.

Despite South Korea's successful transition to democracy in 1987, its military leaders remain predominantly aligned with the conservative party. South Korea's legacy of military rule continues to cast a long shadow over the military's relationships with political leaders, and military leaders tend to exercise enormous political influence—particularly under conservative governments. The military and some security institutions retain broad internal security and intelligence powers.²⁸ The most striking example of this was the power and breadth of responsibility held by the Defense Security Command (DSC), which housed both military counterintelligence and internal security commands. Though formally subordinate to the defense minister, the DSC commander historically had direct access to the president, with critics accusing it of engaging in political surveillance and interference.²⁹

Park's impeachment, and the likely transition to liberal leader Moon Jae-in with the next election, posed a threat to military influence and interests, prompting most military leaders to support Park in her appeal against the decision. In early 2017, as the trial neared, Defense Minister Han Min-koo ordered DSC leaders to draft a plan to declare martial law in the event that rallies turned violent after the Constitutional Court ruling on President Park's impeachment.³⁰ The plan was premised on a no-win scenario in which anti-Park protestors would call for "revolution" if the case were dismissed, and pro-Park supporters would consider a successful impeachment a "rebellion". Plans were proposed to deploy a large number of armored vehicles, soldiers, and paratroopers to key

September 2026

locations in Seoul and impose control over the press, the intelligence services, and perhaps most significantly, the National Assembly.³¹ While Article 77 of South Korea's constitution includes a provision that the National Assembly can lift martial law with a majority vote, the DSC's plan would have made holding such a vote difficult, if not impossible. Preventing a vote would override constitutional protections designed to prevent abuses of power and effectively allow Park to remain in office without popular consent. There is little doubt that DSC leaders understood the antidemocratic implications of their actions: The plan noted that the declaration would be unpopular with the South Korean public and favored only by certain conservative political figures.

Ultimately, the plan was not enacted in 2017. The unanimous decision of the South Korean Supreme Court to uphold Park's impeachment largely quelled protests both against and in favor of Park, thus depriving administration and military leaders of the excuses necessary to declare martial law. Snap elections were held in May 2017, and Moon Jae-in won overwhelmingly. When the plan was revealed in 2018 by a member of the new ruling party, it prompted significant legislative reform and an increased focus on civilian control of the military, including the dissolution and replacement of the DSC. The new organization, initially called Defense Security Support Command³² then subsequently changed to the Defense Counterintelligence Command (DCC),³³ was to function under stricter rules of political neutrality. In August 2026, the DCC was dissolved in order to further reduce its political influence. Many observers see the episode as an important near miss that ultimately strengthened civilian control.

Yet the legislative reform after 2018 was not enough. Six years later, conservative president Yoon Seuk Yool and his top military commanders would declare martial law using the same playbook that the DSC had developed during the political crisis around Park's impeachment. While the action ultimately failed—Yoon was impeached, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison for invoking an insurrection—the plan developed in 2017 nevertheless provided the foundation for Yoon's attempt to dissolve South Korean democracy.

Learning from Abroad: Themes and Lessons for the United States

While the scenarios and events described above may seem on the surface to be very different, several common themes emerge. These commonalities can be translated into lessons for civil-society and political leaders interested in maintaining the military's neutrality and detachment during elections in the United States.

Intervention succeeds when it is tied to a plausible security threat.

Even when leaders intend to undermine democracy—or in the case of the coup attempt in South Korea in 2024, eliminate it entirely—they almost always feel the need to justify their actions on the grounds of a legitimate national security threat. In the Philippines, Duterte used the very real and long-term threat posed by communist insurgents—coupled with his well-established “war on drugs”—to red-tag political opponents, while Pakistani officials used the threat of internal terrorist violence to deploy hundreds of thousands of soldiers to the polls. In South Korea, the army's martial law plan was not enacted in 2017 due to the lack of violent protests, but was enacted in 2024 when Yoon accused his political opponents, including those in the National Assembly, of being agents of the North Korean state. Ultimately, the South Korean attempts failed precisely because the security threats were not well-established and were too obviously pretexts for anti-democratic behavior.

Military intervention in elections most often occurs when a legitimate security threat opens an opportunity for

September 2026

political leaders to abuse their power over the military and subsequently securitize elections. Bad actors can inflate the threat from terrorist groups, accuse political opponents of being sympathizers, and deem protestors enemies of the state only when there is a preexisting threat to build on. As the South Korea case demonstrates, efforts to capitalize on threats that are widely perceived to be self-serving, baseless, or extreme are unlikely to succeed, either because military service members recognize the orders as unjustified or because civil society is able to mobilize effectively against the intervention effort. Media, civil society, and political leaders should therefore pay close attention to rhetoric that portrays election security as a national security issue, particularly if and when it involves foreign actors. These real security challenges often provide the pretext for threat inflation and abuses of power, and pro-democracy actors can reduce the likelihood of intervention by both discrediting the inflated claims ahead of time and clearly outlining what types of orders should be considered unlawful.

Further, civil society and political leaders can work to both deny political leaders the excuse of an internal security threat and ensure that the public has confidence in the administration of elections. Leaders, candidates, and organizers must go to great lengths to ensure that protests, rallies, and events remain peaceful, and highlight the security of election processes in their states and districts. Because the executive branch often receives extreme deference from the public on issues related to national security, federal, state, and local leaders must work together to ensure that any and all security threats are addressed with the appropriate authorities (for example, civilian law enforcement). Federal intervention is most highly supported when the public believes there is a gap in capabilities. Governors and local leaders can effectively communicate action (and thus, the unnecessary nature of military intervention) by practicing radical transparency about their efforts to ensure election safety and protect the public from domestic threats.

Secrecy and misinformation are critical to election intervention.

Relatedly, the cases reveal that secrecy and misinformation are essential components of election interference. Military involvement in elections is generally unpopular with the public, so political leaders interested in tilting the playing field will intentionally mislead the public in order to evade public scrutiny and accountability. In the Philippines, this manifested as a disinformation campaign that was a coordinated part of the red-tagging effort. In Pakistan, election officials obfuscated the purpose of the army deployments, refusing to answer questions about the security threat, and allowed soldiers to significantly exceed the authorities agreed upon by the political parties. In South Korea, military leaders' plans were kept entirely secret until revealed by a lawmaker more than a year after the crisis had passed; yet even after the legislature had enacted reforms, the army secretly kept the plan and attempted to execute it in 2024.

Military intervention therefore is most likely to be successful when there is a degraded information environment and when the public is not fully informed of election-related military activities. Political leaders may promote conspiracy theories, distribute outright false information, refuse to answer questions about military activities, or simply keep their plans hidden from public view. Demands for transparency, however, can call attention to the lack of information and signal to the public that there are potentially inappropriate activities occurring. Civil society and political leaders can therefore use their positions—either from a bully pulpit or via oversight authority—to shine a light on administration activities and ensure that the public is fully informed of military activity in the lead-up to and aftermath of the election. Finally, lawyers and the legal profession have a critical role to play in the event that lines are indeed crossed: The transparency required by the legal system—including but not limited to depositions and document subpoenas—can serve as a powerful after-the-fact accountability and transparency exercise.

September 2026

Intervention requires not just military compliance, but enthusiastic participation.

The final theme that emerges from the case studies is that successful military intervention in elections requires the active and enthusiastic participation of military leaders and their subordinates. In each extreme case of election intervention, military leaders' participation in the process was not simply limited to complying with explicit orders but rather entailed deliberate and zealous participation in the process. In the Philippines, security forces including the military were instrumental in executing extrajudicial killings in Duterte's war on drugs. When the election approached, they were also critical to the success of red-tagging efforts and the extensive disinformation campaign that permeated the election environment. In a particularly egregious example of military overreach, the Election Commission in Pakistan ordered the military to deploy in a way that actually disadvantaged the incumbent party. In South Korea, senior military officers took a leading role in developing the martial law plan that was ultimately attempted in 2024.

While military leaders have an obligation to obey orders, they nevertheless maintain broad discretion in how those orders are implemented. This is largely because of asymmetries in expertise and information. Military leaders are the only ones truly equipped to know which units are available, what training is necessary, where deployments will be most effective, and how specific rules of engagement will impact the mission. Professional military leaders will, by definition, seek to minimize the military's role in domestic politics while nevertheless complying with lawful orders. But when military leaders have been politicized, they are more likely to disregard professional norms in favor of keeping the ruling party in power. Professional military leaders should therefore pay close attention to how they might shape domestic military operations in ways that minimize damage to public confidence and civil-military relations, if they were to be deployed in the midst of an election.

Conclusion

The upcoming midterm elections will likely constitute an important stress test for political, military, and civil-society leaders across the United States. Indeed, throughout its 250-year history, the country has boasted a military that is powerful but does not threaten its democratic system. It is in the interest of leaders across the United States to continue that proud tradition. And while the cases discussed in this report vary by geography, political context, historical precedent, and outcomes, they nevertheless offer key insights into some of the most problematic potential scenarios that Americans may face. Leaders across government and society would do well to learn from them.

September 2026

Endnotes

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