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Comparative Politics in a Regional Perspective

Thomas M. Magstadt

Military Regimes

Only where military rule has been institutionalized can we say that a military regime exists. In this type of authoritarian government, there is typically a general who is "first among equals" because someone must personify or put a face on the regime as well as perform the ceremonial and symbolic functions of a chief executive. Nonetheless, military rule of this kind is collegial—meaning rule by committee, council, or cabal—rather than personal.

Where military rule is institutionalized there is seldom a charismatic or popular leader. The powers of the chief executive are apportioned among several high-ranking military officers who form a **junta** or ruling **oligarchy**. Military juntas have a long history, particularly (though by no means exclusively) in Latin America, where military intervention in domestic politics is a tradition.

Countries in which the army is dominant or frequently intervenes in politics are sometimes called **praetorian states**.[12] Military regimes typically come to power via a coup d'état. In some parts of the world, coups have occurred with astonishing frequency. One scholar counted eighty-eight military coups in fifty-two countries between 1958 and 1969.[13] In the 1970s, the military intervened in every Latin American country except Mexico and Costa Rica, according to Eric Nordlinger, who goes on to point out that military intervention became a fixture of Third World politics after World War II:

The World's Worst Dictators in 2009

BOX 2.3

Rank (starting with the worst of the worst):

1. Robert Mugabe, Zimbabwe; age 85; in power since 1980
2. Omar Al Bashir, Sudan; age 65; in power since 1989
3. Kim Jong-Il, North Korea; age 67; in power since 1994
4. Than Shwe, Burma (Myanmar); age 76; in power since 1992
5. King Abdullah, Saudi Arabia; age 85; in power since 1995
6. Hu Jintao, China; age 66; in power since 2002
7. Sayyid Ali Khamenei, Iran; age 69; in power since 1989
8. Isayas Afewerki, Eritrea; age 63; in power since 1991
9. Gurbanguly Berdymuhammedov, Turkmenistan; age 51; in power since 2006
10. Muammar al-Qaddafi, Libya; age 66; in power since 1969

Source: David Wallechinsky, "The World's 10 Worst Dictators," *Parade Magazine*, March 22, 2009, pp. 4–5. "Rankings are based on the dictators' human-rights violations, the suffering [they] have caused, and the amount of absolute power they wield."

> Between 1945 and 1976, soldiers carried out successful coups in half of the eighteen Asian states. By 1976 the soldiers had made at least one successful or unsuccessful attempt to seize power in two-thirds of the Middle Eastern and North African states. They established military regimes in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, the Sudan, Libya, and Algeria. . . . By 1976 coups had occurred in more than half of the African countries, and in that year the military occupied the seat of government in half of them.[14]

According to Nordlinger, the study of military regimes "is the study of one of the most common, and thus characteristic, aspects of non-Western politics."

Why military rule was so common (and still is not uncommon) is a complicated question, but the short answer is that in developing countries there are often few if any well-established institutions and many sources of civil strife, such as ethnic or religious differences. In these circumstances, the army is often the only cohesive institution with the capacity to maintain or restore order. And generals no less than civilian politicians become addicted to power. As Lord Acton, a wise observer of politics and history, once said, "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely."

In Latin American (and to a lesser degree in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa), the picture has changed. Until the 1980s, Latin America was the most coup-prone region in the world. Military juntas were the rule, representative democracies the exception. Only in Mexico, Costa Rica, Venezuela, and Colombia were democratic institutions a part of the political tradition. One by one South America's military rulers relinquished power to popularly elected civilian politicians—in Ecuador (1979), Peru (1980), Bolivia (1982), Argentina (1983), Uruguay (1985), and Brazil (1985). Despite regional tensions arising from civil wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua, several Central American states that were previously under military sway also moved toward civilian rule in the 1990s.

Even so, authoritarianism is deeply rooted in the Latin America's political history and culture. One stark reminder: Venezuela, South America's showcase democracy since the presidency of Romulo Betancourt in the 1950s, is now ruled by a left-wing president, Hugo Chavez, who, as a military offi cer, once led an attempt to oust an elected civilian president—Carlos Andres Perez—by an old-fashioned coup d'état. The coup attempt failed, and Chavez ended up in prison. Released from prison after two years by a presidential pardon, Chavez burst back onto the political scene in 1998 as a candidate for the presidency, winning in a landslide. He promptly wrote a new constitution and submitted it to the voters in a referendum, which won popular approval. Highly controversial both at home and abroad, the fl amboyant Chavez was temporarily forced from offi ce in 2002 in an attempted coup d'état. He survived and was reelected in 2006.

Military rule appeared to be on the decline at the end of the twentieth century, but in one region of the world another form of authoritarianism—even more anachronistic in the twenty-fi rst century—displayed a surprising resilience. Dynastic regimes col-lapsed in Europe after World War I and nearly everywhere else after World War II. However, in the Arab Middle East a number of ruling dynasties have been able to hang on.