The Cult of the Caudillo (The Wall Street Journal)

The strongman may be Latin America's most important contribution to political science. The crisis in Honduras has many terrified that power-hungry leaders are making a comeback.

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Tegucigalpa, Honduras

In the tile-roofed presidential palace near downtown Tegucigalpa, a man sits behind a long wooden desk claiming to be the country's president. But in the eyes of the international community, Roberto Micheletti took charge through an old-fashioned coup.

Nearly two weeks ago, on June 28, his predecessor, Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, was roust ed from bed by soldiers and sent out of the country in his pajamas. Mr. Micheletti, next in line for the presidency as head of congress, was sworn in later that day.

Tied to wealthy business interests and brought to power by the military, the provisional government brings back memories of the coup in which Chilean Augusto Pinochet tore down the Socialist project of Salvador Allende in 1973. On the streets of Tegucigalpa nowadays, some protesters have scrawled graffiti that merges the names of Mr. Pinochet and their new, unelected leader: "Pinocheletti."

In Mr. Micheletti's take on events, it was his government who avoided another, slow-motion coup—by Mr. Zelaya himself. Mr. Micheletti's supporters say Mr. Zelaya was a dictator in the making, a modern-day caudillo, or strongman, who wanted to rewrite Honduran law to stay in power, perhaps indefinitely.

To understand what is happening in Honduras today, it helps to know a bit more about Latin America's long love affair with caudillos, how these larger-than-life but power-hungry men damaged their countries, and why so many people are terrified that they are making a comeback.

Some argue that Latin America's single most important—and colorful—contribution to political science is the caudillo. A Spanish word, caudillo is derived from the Latin capitellum or small head, and refers to a military or political leader. Spain's Gen. Francisco Franco, adopted the title Caudillo de España por la Gracia de Dios (by the Grace of God) and ruled the nation from the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939 until his death in 1975.

Caudillismo is so deeply rooted it has spawned its own literary genre. Discerning readers see Fidel Castro as the model for the aging, cow-obsessed strongman in Gabriel García Márquez's "The Autumn of the Patriarch," who wanders alone dragging his outsize testicles over the floors of his presidential palace. Peruvian
writer Mario Vargas Llosa, in his novel "The Feast of the Goat," portrayed the precariousness of life in the Dominican Republic under the rule of the predatory and brutal right-wing caudillo, Rafael Leonidas Trujillo.

The cast of caudillos in Latin American history includes such characters as Antonio López de Santa Anna, who was Mexico’s president on seven separate occasions in the mid-1800s. He signed away Texas’ independence from Mexico after being captured the day after the Battle of San Jacinto in 1836, and once buried a leg he lost in battle with full military honors.

Caudillos come in all ideological stripes. Mr. Pinochet, whose famous photograph in sinister dark glasses was taken soon after his coup, became the iconic image of the right-wing Latin American military dictator. These days, most caudillos are leftist. Mr. Castro, el Comandante or el Caballo (the Horse), has the dubious distinction of being the longest-lived caudillo in Latin American history, owing his record-breaking stretch in power more to caudillismo than Marxismo. He’s passed on the torch to Hugo Chávez, the populist caudillo from Caracas, Venezuela.

Caudillos first arose in the difficult birth of Latin American republics from Spanish colonies. Most were landowners or military men who had their own private armies. Because the wars of independence in the early 19th century destroyed most institutions of Spanish colonial rule, the governments in these new states were too weak to resist takeover. In some cases, young states couldn’t raise enough money for a standing army.

Many of Latin America’s most famous caudillos became dictators. But as Latin American societies evolved and political arenas became more important than military battlegrounds in the mid- to late-1800s, caudillos became politicians. While a dictator usually relies on brute force to keep power, modern caudillos use a combination of personal magnetism, patronage—and sometimes, selective brute force.

In Latin America, the strength of the caudillo weakened the region’s institutions. Political parties centered on caudillos often collapsed after the caudillo’s death and never professionalized. As a result, Latin Americans seem perennially ready to trust their fate to a providential “man on horseback” who comes to their nation’s rescue, rather than on the ability of the nation’s institutions to provide security and prosperity.

Outsize personality—and outright megalomania—is a common characteristic of caudillos. In the 18th century, José Gaspar Rodriguez de Francia, who ruled Paraguay for a quarter-century, shut the country off from the outside world, appointing himself head of the country’s Catholic Church and taking the title of El Supremo, providing material for yet another great Latin American novel, Augusto Roa Bastos’s “Yo, el Supremo.”
In the 20th century, few had bigger egos than Rafael Trujillo, who ruled the Dominican Republic from 1930 to 1961. Known as El Jefe, Mr. Trujillo took power at age 38, wearing a sash with the motto Dios y Trujillo, or “God and Trujillo.” Even churches were forced to emblazon the motto. A few years later, the capital, Santo Domingo, was renamed Ciudad Trujillo. Fond of wearing comic-opera military uniforms with 18th-century-style plumed hats, Mr. Trujillo was as brutal as he was outlandish, murdering thousands of Haitian immigrants as well as torturing and killing political opponents; he fed some of them to the sharks.

While arms made the man in the 19th century, in the 20th, most caudillos have been careful to present themselves as champions of the people, wrapped either in the mantle of revolution—like Fidel Castro—or in that of democracy. Argentina’s Juan Domingo Perón used populism to endear himself to the nation’s poor, known as descamisados, or “shirtless ones.”

Even today, Perónismo, the movement created by Mr. Perón and his wife Eva—who combined glamour and handouts to the poor to become a secular saint venerated by Argentines—is still the dominant political current in Argentina. The legacy of Mr. Perón’s free-spending populist philosophy has led Argentina into periodic economic crises. When prices for Argentine exports like beef are high, for instance, Peronist governments have spent the windfall like a drunken sailor, leading to a cash crunch when prices eventually head south.

Mr. Perón, like many other caudillos, sought additional legitimacy by preserving the forms of democracy, if only on paper. He won presidential elections, but his regime was hardly democratic: Perónists controlled the legislature, the courts, the bureaucracy, labor unions and the media. Anyone who got too far out of line faced arbitrary arrest.

Even the Dominican Republic’s brutal Mr. Trujillo made a big show of not running for re-election in 1938 to observe democratic principles, although he continued to be the country’s de facto leader and later returned to win two more elections, in 1942 and 1947. In 1952, he stepped aside in favor of his brother and again continued to call the shots until his assassination in 1961.

The March of Strongmen

On June 28, the Honduran president was forced out of the country in his pajamas, after he pushed for a referendum that would amend the constitution to allow him to run for re-election.

The Honduran head of congress was sworn in as Mr. Zelaya’s replacement immediately after Mr. Zelaya’s ouster. He has vowed to hold already scheduled elections in November and to hand over power in January.
The Bolivian president, a former leader of a militant coca leaf growers’ union, won a referendum that allowed him to rewrite the constitution, overturning a ban on re-election. As far as the U.S. was concerned, the cause of democracy in Latin America often took a back seat to fighting Communism during the Cold War. For years, the U.S. either looked the other way or supported coups with the aim of preventing the spread of Communism in the hemisphere. Military coups became almost ritual. In the 1970s, Honduras endured so many coups that the capital was jokingly called Tegucigolpe, for the Spanish word golpe, or coup.

The end of the Cold War radically changed politics in Latin America. As civil wars and guerrilla insurrections in Central America ran out of steam, pampered military establishments suffered deep budget cuts. The U.S. and the rest of the world made it clear that coups would not be tolerated anymore. The Organization of American States, which represents 34 countries throughout the hemisphere, adopted a democracy clause in its charter in 2001. By that point, Cuba remained as the only non-democracy.

While democracy has spread throughout Latin America, caudillos never vanish, they just adapt to changing times. Gone is the old-fashioned military coup, replaced with a new strategy for power that could be called “coup by stealth,” or “coup by democratic means.”

The primary architect of this new blueprint is Mr. Chávez, a strongman with one foot grounded in the past and the other firmly placed in the future of caudillismo. In 1992, Mr. Chávez, then a lieutenant colonel with a mish-mash of leftist, nationalist and fascist ideas, led an old-fashioned coup in an attempt to overthrow the government of Carlos Andrés Pérez. It failed, and Mr. Chávez was jailed.

Upon release, he was persuaded to forgo the bullet for the ballot box. In 1998, he was elected president, riding a wave of popular disgust against the deep corruption of the country’s existing political parties and institutions. In a nation where institutions never developed because of caudillos, another “man on horseback” had come to save the country. Once in power, he moved to insure he would never leave.

Using the tools of democracy—referendums and elections—Mr. Chávez has subverted democracy and become a new, modern caudillo. He has won referendums over the years that have allowed him to rewrite the constitution, twice, to his specifications, including ending constitutional restrictions on term limits, thus allowing him to run for re-election indefinitely. He has gutted the courts, shut down and gagged the media and purged the army; he exercises total control over the congress. Venezuela still holds elections, but it is far from a full democracy.

Honduras Military Stands Alone in Coup

Mr. Chávez shares with old caudillos a military background, a populist bent and a cult of personality. He is a mixture of messianic preacher, traditional authoritarian
Latin American military man and utopian dreamer with notions of “21st-Century Socialism.” Even after a decade in power marked by rampant spending, corruption and crime, Mr. Chávez maintains a strong, almost mystical bond with many of Venezuela’s poor, who see in him a reflection of themselves.

Mr. Chavez has publicly said he plans to stay in power until 2019, 2021 or 2030.

The Chávez blueprint for power is now being imitated by other caudillos in the making. Bolivian President Evo Morales, a former leader of a militant coca leaf growers’ union who led street riots that helped topple two Bolivian leaders, also won a referendum that allowed him to rewrite the constitution. One change: overturning a ban on re-election. Ecuador’s Rafael Correa has used a constitutional rewrite to get term limits lifted, too. Both men used populism and disappointment with existing political parties to cast themselves as their nation’s saviors.

When democracy took root in Latin America in the 1980s and ’90s, nearly every country opted to bar re-election as a way to ensure caudillos would never return. These restrictions have been chipped away, by right-wing leaders, too. In Colombia, conservative president Álvaro Uribe has already changed the constitution once to get re-elected and is mulling a third term now.

Honduras, weary of a parade of generals who overstayed their welcome, was among the Latin nations that barred re-election when it ended military dictatorships and became a democracy in 1981. Since then, nearly every sitting president has toyed with the idea of re-election. None has pushed the idea more openly than Mr. Zelaya.

The son of a conservative rancher, Mr. Zelaya took power four years ago as a centrist. In the past two years, the Stetson-hat-wearing, ballad-singing president has hewn increasingly to the left, finding a soulmate in Mr. Chávez. The Venezuelan president began shipping Honduras cut-rate oil, and Honduras responded by joining Mr. Chávez’s regional trade and political pact, which also includes Venezuela, Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador and Nicaragua.

He then took another page from the Chávez blueprint, pushing for a referendum and constitutional rewrite on re-election. The country’s courts, congress and other institutions lined up against Mr. Zelaya, but he vowed to challenge them all, with the people at his back. Shortly before his ouster, when the army refused to take part in the election, the president led a mob to a nearby base to seize the ballots.

Did all this make Mr. Zelaya a caudillo in the making? The world may never know because the Honduran power brokers decided not to take any chances. In booting out Mr. Zelaya at gunpoint, they showed what little faith they had in the country’s institutions to check Mr. Zelaya’s ambitions.

Some argue they acted rashly. “The Pinochets of the world supported the type of people who sent Zelaya out in his pajamas,” says Peter Kornbluh, an analyst at the
National Security Archive, a Washington nonprofit, and author of books on dictators including Messrs. Pinochet and Castro. In ousting a democratically elected leader, the Honduran establishment strayed further from democracy than Mr. Zelaya did in attempting to stay, he says.

A supporter of ousted Honduran President Manuel Zelaya holds a national flag outside Toncontin international Airport in Tegucigalpa. Mr. Zelaya was forced out of the country on June 28.

While the provisional president, Mr. Micheletti, has taken power in an undemocratic fashion, few Hondurans worry that he will want to stay on. Mr. Micheletti has vowed to hold already-scheduled elections in November, hand over power in January and limit his own presidential aspirations to six months in power.

Angel Nuñez, a 30-year-old Tegucigalpa taxi driver, thinks Mr. Micheletti did the right thing. “Zelaya wanted this place to be Cuba, he wanted absolute power in this country,” he says. Pushing the ex-president aside was the only way to stop “a man who got to thinking he was above the law.”

Domingo Díaz, a 63-year-old social worker, says he’s lived through so many Central American takeovers he’s lost both his count and his interest in them. “No one respected the law,” he said on a recent rainy day. “History will repeat itself,” he says, “but this time I don’t fear it.”