

The political systems of the Middle East and Latin America: any useful comparisons?

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Seen from Latin America, the most impressive Middle Eastern political experience, since the Second World War, was that of Nasserism and related regimes, including the Baath experience in Syria and Irak, and the Algerian and Tunisian independence movements. All of these happened in countries with little or no experience of previous liberal institutions, as did exist in Latin America, even if often full of abuses and dictatorial interruptions.

The military in most of the Middle East adopted a “progressive” role (in some version of that much-abused term), leading to what came to be known as “Arab socialism”. This progressive role also had existed in Turkey, a few decades earlier. In some places the pro-independence role was tak-

en by civilian elites, especially in Algeria and Tunis, and also in Syria, but in due time they were transformed (except Turkey) into openly dictatorial regimes with high military participation if not control.

In all cases they created monolithic parties, with high personality cult for heroic initial figures or their successors. They also began with very high popularity, though this was not tested in free, competitive elections. Maybe it would have been anachronistic to try to apply offhand a system which it took centuries to develop in other cultures and economies. It might have been expected that in due time economic and cultural development would have made it possible to adopt democratic institutions. I would argue that this process is what is happening, or will continue to happen, but not peacefully. After all, has it been happening peacefully in the West? Not in most of Europe, at any rate. And the Middle East Spring is strongly reminiscent of the European Spring of 1848, which, mind you, evolved into authoritarian Bonapartism, enjoying a significant popular support (in that case with genuine confirmation at the polls).

In Latin America since independence a couple of centuries ago the military have often been a significant element in the political sphere. But usually they were on the conservative side, supporting the existing privileged elites. This started to change in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century. Middle-ranking nationalist military officers, dissatisfied with oligarchic, only apparently liberal institutions under foreign control, looked for change, eventually espousing an authoritarian structure of govern-

ment as a tool against their elite enemies. This was particularly the case in Brazil, during the twenties, with the so-called “*tenentes*”, who staged two important (but unsuccessful) revolts in that decade. Similar groups came to power in Bolivia and Paraguay, though briefly. In these latter two cases this mentality was a reaction to the “humiliations” suffered in a conflict between the two nations (the Chaco War, 1932-1935), one of the few episodes in which both sides lost (there were powerful oil groups on both sides of the front).

A similar phenomenon reached Argentina in the forties, at a somewhat higher echelon, that of colonels. They formed a secret lodge (Grupo de Oficiales Unidos, GOU) which overturned the corrupt conservative civilian government, to establish a provisional dictatorship from which emerged Col Juan Perón, who legitimated his position through free elections in 1946 and launched a “national popular” regime with mass support, under constitutional forms but increasingly authoritarian policies. The political party he created (Justicialista, or Peronista), after ten years in power was overthrown by another army coup, but it continued alive and active during the following decades of chaotic succession of civilian and military right wing regimes. In the eighties Justicialismo resurfaced, converted to really-existing forms of democracy, becoming the nearest equivalent to the North American Democratic Party, and a permanent feature of the Argentine party system, though often divided.

Of course the middle-ranking military were not the only ones to oppose oligarchic rule in early twentieth cen-

282 tury Latin America. Everywhere there were Socialist, Communist or Anarchist groups, active in trade unions and cultural associations, but they were seldom near power, till the late fifties in Cuba, and then in Nicaragua. Middle-class and intellectual groups were becoming also dissatisfied with the existing system of domination, sometimes coupling regional to social or political issues. In Mexico—which had a long tradition of popular revolts—a moderate group was formed under Northeastern landowner Francisco Madero, who managed, in association with some anarchist groups, to launch a revolt and come to power toppling what appeared to be a very powerful conservative regime. After this initial spark, other dissatisfied groups joined the revolt, especially Indians from partially modernized rural areas, and trade unionists in textile and mining sectors. After a civil war and chaotic events causing a million deaths and lasting about ten years, a new stable regime was born, and after another ten years an official party was created, which remained in power for another seventy, adopting different names in succession, and better known by its last version, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). This typical *national integration*, or *multiclass integrative* party¹ included military figures which, however, were not professional but had risen as leaders in the civil war, who succeeded each other for two decades, with formally free elections but few guarantees for opponents, and

1 For a treatment in full of this concept see my *History of political parties in twentieth-century Latin America*, New Brunswick, Transaction Books, 2004.

some armed conflicts with Catholic and middle-peasant support, a sort of Mexican Vendée. Since 1952 the regime, always through formally free elections, and quite a bit of civic liberties except that of having one's vote counted fairly, started having civilian presidents. The regime was not a paradigm of democracy, but it was far from being a dictatorship, or what has been called "bureaucratic authoritarianism", a concept coined by Guillermo O'Donnell to categorize the military regimes in power in Brazil, Argentina and Chile from the sixties to the eighties.

Usually the PRI had a comfortable electoral majority, with a smallish conservative, Catholic and business-oriented opposition on its right (Partido de Acción Nacional, PAN), and an even smaller one of various Marxist parties on its left. As time wore on, the country changed, with important progress in education, in economic development and in civil society organization. And finally, surprise, surprise!, in the year 2000 the PRI, after cleaning up a bit its practices, lost the presidential contest. What had happened was that the entrepreneurial, and quite dynamic bourgeoisie created by the PRI had forgotten its origins, sending their children to get MBA's in the USA and their daughters to Catholic schools, and that was the end of PRI hegemony. The bourgeoisie, and the upper middle class, slipped into their natural expression, a center-right party, capable of course of incorporating some members of what the English used to call "working class Tories". The PRI also lost some of its more left-oriented members, who joined with the Marxist parties to form the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). After twelve years of conservative

business-oriented rule (2000-2012), another miracle! The PRI, now in a center position, managed to come back to Los Pinos (the presidential palace) this time in a clean election. But it doesn't have a majority in Congress, so it will have to indulge in some form of coalition strategy.²

Transformed, bureaucratized "Nasserism": still kicking?

Let us now go back to the Middle East. If I may be allowed a personal anecdote, early in 2012 I was in Beirut participating in a seminar on the same subject as I treat in this paper. The first free presidential elections in Egypt were soon to be held. Most people expected a big "Islamic" victory. I was doubtful, and risking the contempt if not the anger of my local colleagues, I argued that the heirs of Nasser and his close companion Sadat, as well of his more bureaucratic successor Mubarak, would retain quite a bit of support, precisely as Mexican PRI-like heirs of Nasser, having received a lot of benefits from that regime, including land and some respect. My interlocutors, almost amused at this pretentious ignorant foreigner, answered that Mubarak and his team were not seen as heirs of Nasser but as "a gang of thieves." Maybe they were, but there do exist popular thieves. The result of the elections was nearer to

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2 The changes undergone by the Mexican bourgeoisie—daughter of the Revolution—are similar to those experienced by the bureaucracy in the Soviet Union: after a few generations of privilege they deemed it safer to drop revolutionary phraseology and consolidate their status through private property. Gorbachof's was a "superstructural" event, important and admirable no doubt, but the undercurrents were stronger than his plans.

my forecast than to theirs. The Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammed Morsi, won by a very small margin over Ahmed Shafik, Mubarak's last prime minister (52% against 48% in the runoff, while in the first round they had also arrived almost equal, at a bit less than 25% each).

I would say that in other Arab countries something similar might happen, *mutatis mutandis* and *ceteris paribus*. After all also in Mexico many people, including quite a few academics, did not spare harsh names for the PRI. And certainly the inheritance from the founding fathers was slight and deformed, but often historical memories last more than one might expect.

In Algeria the nationalist and quite corrupt party, governing since independence, decided in 1991 to hold some-
what free elections, facing an Islamic popular force. It paid
its price (as did the PRI in 2000) but decided to annul the
elections, remaining in power up to the present, after a fa-
vorable army take-over and a bitter civil war.³ Quite pos-
sibly a majority would still today support an oppositional,
welfare oriented Islamic party, but this does not mean that
the heirs of Ben Bella are out of the picture. If the Arab
Spring catches them, they may yet pass through a period
out of power, as in Egypt (for the moment not foreseen), but
even in that case I wouldn't brand them as finished or lack-
ing roots in an important sector of the population.

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3 Soon after independence the first leaders of the revolution were replaced through armed coups, but the new men of power continued to be, basically, inheritors of the independence movement and of the party created by it.

Latin American populism, or “national popular” parties and regimes

Apart from the working-class socialists and some sectors of the military, also the middle classes and intellectuals were stirring, not only in Mexico in the early twentieth-century. In Argentina and Chile they formed moderate *Radical* parties (or *Colorados* in Uruguay). This was typical of the three more developed, educated and urbanized countries of Latin America. In poorer regions, like Peru, a more radical variety of those reformist parties was formed by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre (a downwardly mobile intellectual from the provincial aristocracy). This was the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana, APRA, partly inspired in his experience of the Mexican process, combining it with elements of social democracy he absorbed in Great Britain, adding a good dose of continental nationalism. Based on the support of provincial middle classes and unionized workers in sugar estates and mines, his party was for decades the main popular organization in the country, at loggerheads with the conservative forces and their military guardians. The APRA had also some Marxist roots, but no sympathy for Communism, and much less for Fascism or military dictatorship, however revolutionary this might be. The APRA did have, as many popular Arab parties, a personality cult and hierarchical (“*verticalista*”) organization around its leader, and did not shun eventual appeals to violence in the road to power (as theoretically also did the Socialists in many countries, also in Europe,

when they talked about “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a transitory stage).

Similar phenomena took place in other parts of the continent, with a majority of rural population: Acción Democrática in Venezuela, Liberación Nacional in Costa Rica, Movimiento Nacionalista Revolucionario, MNR, in Bolivia, and others in Guatemala and the Dominican Republic. All of these were based on an alliance between impoverished middle classes (their main organized basis of support), intellectuals, and unionized workers, plus some peasant and Indian backing.

In Cuba there had been an early experience of military populism under Sergeant Fulgencio Batista in the thirties, the result of a social phenomenon not too different from that of the Brazilian *tenentes*. He came to power as a result of a barracks revolt against oligarchic domination in 1933, and was freely elected in 1940, to inaugurate the first government in Latin America to incorporate Communists in its cabinet (1940-1944). But later, after a Radical-type interlude, he staged a coup and established an increasingly repressive and bloody dictatorship (1952-1959), which ended with the Fidel Castro revolution.

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The Castro political movement seemed, at the beginning, a radicalized version of Aprismo, but given the North American intolerance of innovations in its backyard, and the presence of an available source of support in the Soviet Union, became increasingly oriented to a Communist pattern of society, which with quite bad economic results but

successful educational and sanitary exploits, lasts up to today. What may happen to it in the future is open to anybody's imagination. Mine is that it will take ideas from the Chinese model of a mixed economy, following the Mexican path to slow liberalization.

Argentina and Brazil: Perón and Vargas, parallel lives

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4 It also happened, later on, in Iran, where the accelerated modernization attempts of the Shah generated resentment about the muslim clergy, turning it, from its secular conservative position, into a revolutionary elite capable of mobilizing a non autonomously organized mass, in need of strong paternalist leadership.

Leaving aside the details of the coming to power of both leaders, the result was the creation of highly heterogeneous political phenomena, with massive popular following, but including among the leadership and the activists some elements from the ideological right to the left, often extreme versions of them, united by the existence of powerful enemies (the landed oligarchy, the imperialist influence, the inefficient liberal and left-of-center politicians). Both regimes, quite authoritarian at some point of their careers, were toppled by military coups, which did involve some of their earlier supporters, especially the Army and the Church. In Brazil the military dictatorship, lasting from 1964 till 1985, managed to have a sizeable support among the better-off sectors of the population, and was highly successful in industrializing the country and in establishing a moderate new constitutional regime, which, though with quite a few abuses, served to prepare the democratic transition in 1985.

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In Argentina the situation was radically different. The military regimes were always rent by internal divisions and coups, unable to consolidate themselves, and leading to a series of alternations between dictatorship and occasional reversions to civilian rule, though maintaining the Peronistas out of power, barred from participating in the short-lived civilian interludes. This time of troubles lasted from 1955 to 1983, damaging the economy of what had been the most prosperous country in Latin America.⁵

⁵ In 1950 Brazil had four times Argentina's population, and about the same national product. Today its product has shot to over three times

Soon after the end of those dictatorial regimes (1983 in Argentina and 1985 in Brazil) it became apparent that the “populist” Varguista party had practically disappeared, replaced in its social support by a socialist, working-class based party (Partido dos Trabalhadores, PT), which eventually came to power with president Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva and then Dilma Rousseff. In Argentina, instead, the traditional, “populist” party remained at the center of the scene, despite the death of its creator in 1974, an event which is often considered lethal for a party of this type, which depends so much on the charisma of its leader and founder. Peronismo, after some internal evolutions, had renovated itself, becoming the nearest approximation to the Democratic Party of the United States, shorn of its authoritarian and rightist components (as its North American equivalent has with its reactionary allies in the South).

Why this difference? The answer is simple: today’s Brazil, after the successful full-blown industrialization of the sixties and seventies, is a completely different country from the one that saw the leadership of Vargas. Argentina, due to the lack of success of the military regimes, and the chaos generated by its stop-go alternatives, is very similar in cultural development, internal communications and urbanization to what it was half a century ago, and thus retains a historical memory and the party loyalties of those days. An Argentinean urban dweller of today is likely to have heard her uncle or grandfather narrating their emo-

Argentina’s, and similar figures apply to urbanization figures.

tion when seeing Evita in the Casa Rosada balcony. Not so in Brazil, where older family members were likely to have lived in the deep rural interior and maybe hadn't even heard about Vargas.

The democracy of the undemocratic

In practically all Latin American countries (except, up to now, Cuba) a democratic regime has been established, though occasionally with some blemishes (but not as serious as those of the United States in the times of Roosevelt). It so happens that given the cultural traditions, and the level of development, as well as the enormous social differences existing despite the efforts of progressive governments, a drama unfolds with the following steps:

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1. Many if not most Latin Americans have strong authoritarian traits, and at the same time they are highly organized (except in the less developed areas).
2. Therefore, pressure groups are likely to be powerful, authoritarian in their internal structure, and intolerant towards others.
3. Organized interests include the working class and sectors of the peasantry (both the better-off sectors, and the more destitute, like the *Sem Terra* in Brazil).
4. Often industrial and trade-union groups have been based on State support and shun economic competition or freer associationist forms, relying excessively on bureaucratization, caudillismo, and clientelism. Particularly where economic development

has been less successful, they harbor a strong resentment against the entrepreneurial interests.

5. Pressure groups are capable of resisting and vetoing each other's hegemonic attempts, but unable to establish their own.

292 There are of course many variations within this pattern, and some countries may be heading towards overcoming the syndrome. But for a considerable time it will be necessary to undergo a situation of confrontation between political formations, on the right or left, which have strong doubts about the unchallengeable nature of really-existing liberal bourgeois democracy, which is now the only game in town. And despite their traditional, still-existing authoritarian tendencies, both the right and the left (socialist or populist) are necessary for the consolidation of a regime of civil liberties, because without the legitimated representation in the political arena of the bourgeoisie and of the popular classes a well-functioning democracy is not realistically to be expected. It is particularly important to keep this in mind regarding the popular parties, because in all known experiences their incorporation into the system is essential, though always opposed by the vested interests.

On the other hand, it is not possible to replicate the Japanese, Taiwanese or Korean types of development, in which the State-fed privileges of some groups, however arbitrary and irrational, became in time the basis for a portentous surge of capital accumulation and technological progress, turning rentiers or State profiteers into Zaibat-

su. Worker and middle class organizations are too powerful for that to be tolerated peacefully.

Modern pluralist democracy has been shown to consist, to a large extent, on an unwritten pact of coexistence between “neocorporative interests.” Political parties do not act according to the ideal model of citizen representation, but rather provide a channel for the expression of pressure group interests. Admittedly, they are something more than just that, but they are also, and to a large extent, that. Pluralist democracy, then, is based on an *empate social* (social draw) between “neocorporative groups,” which wield a large amount of veto power and make changes difficult.

Latin America is on the verge of consensual pluralism, and since the downfall of the military regimes great strides have been made in that direction. Populism, despite its transformations, continues to be seen as menacing by both the entrepreneurial and many intellectual sectors of our societies. And, in a mirror image, the surge of a strong conservative party would be felt as menacing by the left or the populist leaders. It is not an easy situation to live in, but it is a necessary stage in our becoming cohesive, democratic and prosperous societies. But for this path to be taken successfully it is necessary to accept that for quite some time the ingredients of democracy will include on the right the heirs of the national-integration parties of yesterday and on the left the populists or the Islamists, despite their wavering acceptance of the pluralist regimes.