American Caudillo

Trump and the Latin-Americanization of U.S. Politics

By Omar G. Encarnación, FOREIGN AFFAIRS, May 12, 2016

For those of us who study Latin America, it has been fascinating to watch the gradual but certain Latin-Americanization of U.S. politics. The latest and most compelling sign yet is the rise of Republican presidential contender Donald J. Trump, whose braggadocio, demagoguery, and disdain for the rule of law puts him squarely in the tradition of El Caudillo (loosely translated into English as “the leader” or “the chief”), a mainstay of Latin American politics. Although difficult to define, the phenomenon of caudillismo is easy to trace through Latin American history. During its golden age—the nineteenth century—the typical caudillo was a charismatic man on horseback with a penchant for authoritarianism. Early caudillos such as Argentina’s Juan Manuel de Rosas and Mexico’s Antonio López de Santa Anna ruled their countries by the sheer force of personality as they sought to negotiate the rough-and-tumble world of politics of postcolonial Latin America.

It was the postwar years, however, that produced the most enduring symbols of caudillismo. Dominican dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo, in office from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, came to embody the caudillo as a racist, narcissistic, virility-obsessed, and self-aggrandizing despot. Indeed, Trujillo’s capacity for glorifying himself might make Trump blush. He renamed the capital city of Santo Domingo to Trujillo City, changed the name of the country’s highest mountain from Pico Duarte to Pico Trujillo, and held parades and celebrations for his own commemoration. January 11, for example, was declared “Day of the Benefactor.” Little wonder that Trujillo’s best-known biography bears the title of Little Caesar of the Caribbean.

Another iconic postwar caudillo was General Juan Domingo Perón of Argentina, who reinvented the type by infusing it with a pronounced nationalist-populist streak. During the apotheosis of Peronism, 1946-1955, Perón harnessed nationalist rhetoric to create an intimate connection with the working class while pursuing an economic program intended to realize Argentina’s potential for grandeza (greatness). He also repressed the press and the opposition whenever they criticized his policies, going so far as to send political enemies to prison and shut down the opposition newspaper La Prensa.
Heirs to Perón’s legacy include Argentina’s Carlos Menem, Peru’s Alberto Fujimori, the late Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Chávez’s successor Nicolás Maduro, and Rafael Correa, Ecuador’s current president. Like Perón, all of these leaders struggled to maintain the institutional façade of democracy while dramatically subverting civil and political freedoms. In turn, the latest generation of caudillos has pioneered and mastered the use of social media to bond with the masses and to render conventional means of political organization, especially political parties,
almost obsolete. They have stretched executive power well beyond its limits and shown remarkable ideological fluidity in their economic policies. And they have exploited the anger among the poor toward globalization and neoliberalism. In doing so, these caudillos provide a more appropriate point of reference for understanding the causes and consequences of the Trump phenomenon than the overblown comparisons that have been made to European fascist leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini, and even the populist former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

COMMON CAUSES

There is no academic consensus on the causes of caudillismo. Traditionally, the phenomenon is thought to be a colonial remnant of Iberian machismo. Spain, after all, has produced its share of caudillos, including Generalissimo Francisco Franco, who was officially titled Caudillo of Spain and ruled from the end of the Civil War in 1939 until his death in 1975. In recent years, however, caudillismo has come to be seen as a reaction to social and economic inequality, which underpins and reinforces caudillismo by sowing anger among certain sectors of society, fueling the rise to power of demagogues who rely on emotion and prejudice rather than reason to appeal to the people, and making the electorate susceptible to embracing unrealistic and dangerous policy prescriptions.

There are, of course, many factors that can help explain Trump’s rise, including the frustration of many conservative Americans with the political correctness of the Obama administration (including Obama’s reticence to use the term “Islamic terrorism”) and the appealing bluntness of Trump’s political rhetoric, especially when it comes to diagnosing the United States’ problems (“we don’t win anymore,” is a typical Trumpian trope). But inequality cannot be dismissed as a cause of Trump’s success. It has been on the rise in the United States since the 1970s, helping generate a large segment of the American electorate that feels betrayed, disrespected, and left behind by the political system.

The United States is rapidly closing the inequality gap with Latin America. Data from a variety of studies suggest that the United States is more unequal than any other democracy in the developed world, and that inequality is more acute than at any time since the 1920s. According to one widely cited study from Berkeley economist Emmanuel Saez, the top one percent earn a higher share of the national income today than in any year since 1928. Less remarked is the rapidity with which the United States is closing the inequality gap with Latin America, the world’s undisputed champion of disparity. The Gini index, a matrix the World Bank uses to assess income inequality around the world, shows that in 2014, inequality in the United States stood in the 40-45 range, just below the 45-50 range for Latin America. By contrast, Canada and most Western European countries live comfortably in the 25-30 range.

In classic caudillista fashion, Trump has been quick to exploit the anger of those whose economic livelihoods have been upended by declining incomes, especially the white working class. He has bashed “the establishment” for neglecting “the little guy” and promised to bring back jobs outsourced to China and Mexico by forcing American companies such as Apple to produce their goods at home and by renegotiating international trade agreements. Trump has also displayed a penchant for demagoguery that few caudillos, past and present, could match. Central
to Trump’s plan to “make America great again” is to build a wall from the Pacific Coast to the Gulf of Mexico that would keep “rapists, drug dealers, and criminals” from entering the United States; to impose a moratorium on Muslims entering the United States; to allow torture as a weapon in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS); and to “open up” libel laws that would allow for the prosecution of journalists who criticize public figures such as himself. In pushing for these policies, Trump, like many caudillos, has capitalized upon his status as a political outsider. This status, Trump argues, best allows him to blow up the current political system and to replace it with something that would work for everyone, but especially for those feeling left behind.

A DARK LEGACY

A cursory review of the legacy of caudillismo offers a window into what a Trump presidency might portend for the United States. The picture is decidedly dark; caudillismo rests at the very heart of Latin America’s most serious ills—from political violence, to economic backwardness, to the creeping authoritarianism still found in many of the region’s democracies. Not surprisingly, many Latin Americans have greeted the arrival of what they have termed “Trumpismo” with a mix of knowing and apprehension. “A lot of people in Mexico and Latin America are worried about this,” Jorge Castañeda, Mexico’s former minister of foreign affairs, reported to The Wall Street Journal. “It’s not just the substance of what Trump says, but it’s the style. It’s a familiar and worrisome style to us.”
REPUBLICA DOMINICANA

CORREOS

PRESIDENTE TRUJILLO

TRES CENTAVOS
Stamp issued in 1933 on the occasion of Trujillo’s 42nd birthday.

Virtually all of the Latin American caudillos embraced nationalism with gusto, and in the case of Trujillo, with a xenophobic and racist bent distressingly reminiscent of Trump’s. In 1937, Trujillo implemented a plan for the “Dominicanization” of the Dominican-Haitian border to stop the flow of Haitian immigrants into the Dominican Republic. The plan exploited Dominicans’ fear of “Haitianization,” which was rooted in concerns that arrivals from Haiti, a black majority nation, would darken the gene pool of the Dominican Republic, a predominantly mixed-race nation. Trujillo himself encouraged this fear by whitening his skin to disguise his own mixed-race background and by recruiting to his country immigrants from Europe, especially Jews fleeing fascism and Spaniards driven into exile by the Civil War. Such policies succeeded in creating an environment that made possible a genocidal massacre that resulted in the killing of some 20,000 Haitians. To hide his complicity in the killing, and with the encouragement of the U.S. government, Trujillo imprisoned some of the perpetrators of the violence and paid $750,000 dollars to the Haitian government as compensation for what he referred to as “a border conflict.”

Latin America’s seemingly perpetual state of economic crisis owes much as well to the caudillos’ predilection for a nationalist brand of economic populism that promotes isolationism and protectionism. To be sure, this predilection far exceeds anything demonstrated by Trump so far. Nonetheless, the experience of Argentina, where populism has left the most indelible legacy in Latin America, is especially revealing. Whether directly or indirectly, Argentina’s spectacular economic decline since the Great Depression (by most indicators, including per capita income, the country was once one of the world’s wealthiest), is rooted in Peron’s populist crusade. Variously described as “fascist,” “corporatist,” and “right-wing populist,” Peron’s economic program emphasized nationalizing entire industrial sectors, enhancing economic sovereignty (he purchased outright the British-owned national railway system), protecting local businesses from foreign competition, and limiting the right of unions to strike in exchange for universal health care, free education, and paid vacations. These policies have been held responsible for undermining economic competitiveness, for preventing the emergence of a diverse, export-led economy, and, more generally, for making the state rather than the market the main economic force in society.

Perhaps worst of all, caudillismo has contributed mightily to the blurring of the lines between authoritarianism and democracy that is so pervasive in contemporary Latin American politics and that is broadly echoed in some of Trump’s policy proposals. A testament to the remarkable capacity of caudillismo to survive and even thrive following the wave of democratic transition that swept through Latin America since the mid-1980s, this mixing has resulted in a wave of imperial presidencies that appear to have more in common with monarchical rule than with constitutional government.

Despite the many parallels that can be drawn between Trump and the caudillos, it does not follow that a Trump presidency will automatically bring about the worst excesses of caudillismo. Menem, president of Argentina from 1989 to 1999, consciously styled himself as an old-fashioned Argentine caudillo, down to the sideburns, claims of sexual prowess, and fondness for gaucho culture, and behaved just like one. In 1994, he called a constitutional convention to change the term limits of the presidency in the Argentine constitution so that he could run for
reelection. Menem wore down the opposition and won that battle decisively. After his second term ended, in 1999, Menem attempted unsuccessfully to amend the constitution yet again to allow himself to run for a third term. This tinkering with the constitutional order has contributed to the weakness of the rule of law in Argentina, itself a hindrance to ridding the nation of its authoritarian tendencies.

Fujimori, who came into the presidency of Peru in 1990 as the ultimate political outsider (he had no prior political experience and stood apart from the vast majority of Peruvians because of his Japanese background), had no qualms about executing a “self-coup” in 1992 that temporarily shut down the Peruvian congress as a pretext for sending the military after the leftist organization Túpac Amaru and the Maoist Shining Path, a terrorist group. Fujimori crushed the insurgencies but at the cost of imposing a reign of terror that resulted in the deaths of thousands of innocent civilians (many of them indigenous peoples) and left civil, political, and human rights in tatters. Fujimori was held accountable for the so-called Dirty War, a major step in advancing human rights and the rule of law in Peru. In 2008, Fujimori was successfully prosecuted on crimes against humanity, the first in Latin America for a democratically elected leader.

Trump’s success so far signals a bright future for caudillo-like presidential contenders. Among the many casualties of Chávezismo, meanwhile, is freedom of the press. Chávez was famous for launching Twitter rants against the media, for referring to journalists as lowlifes and pigs, and for creating newsprint paper shortages intended to silence Venezuela’s non-state newspapers. Chávez’s handpicked successor, Maduro, has kept up the attacks on freedom of expression by going after social media, almost the only outlet left for Venezuelans to criticize the government. He has threatened journalists with jail time for criticizing him on Twitter. These tactics, however, pale in comparison to those adopted by Ecuador’s Correa in his ongoing war against the press. In 2011, Correa availed himself of a new law to prosecute the opposition newspaper El Universo for libel after one of the paper’s columnists referred to Correa as “a dictator.” The paper’s editor and three of its executives received three-year sentences and the paper was fined $40 million, all but ensuring the journalists’ and the paper’s ruin.

TWILIGHT OF THE CAUDILLOS?

Despite the many parallels that can be drawn between Trump and the caudillos, it does not follow that a Trump presidency will automatically bring about the worst excesses of caudillismo. The United States’ strong constitutional tradition and expansive landscape of civil rights protections would likely serve as a bulwark against the political mayhem that the caudillos have unleashed throughout Latin America. For example, it is difficult to see how Trump would arrange for the deportation of some 11 million of undocumented immigrants without running afoul of many civil rights provisions at the state and federal levels, to say nothing of stiff opposition from liberal cities and towns. It is likewise unclear what legal authority Trump could use to prevent U.S. businesses from moving production overseas or to compel U.S. soldiers to commit war crimes in the battle against ISIS. Banning Muslims from entering the United States is discriminatory, unworkable, and almost certainly illegal, since it would most likely entail some kind of violation of the U.S. Constitution’s ban on promoting an official religion.
Venezuela's president-elect Hugo Chavez waves to crowds in downtown Bogota, December 18, 1998.

All of this said, Trump’s success so far signals a bright future for caudillo-like presidential contenders. After Trump, it is no longer disqualifying for someone aspiring to the presidency to denigrate the competition; to traffic in bigotry, misogyny, and xenophobia; and to propose policies that have no basis in reality and that cross the line of what a civilized society should tolerate. More worrisome is the manner in which structural conditions such as inequality are greasing the wheels of candidacies like Trump’s. These conditions promise to make U.S. politics more bitter and dysfunctional, and hence more prone to making the electorate receptive to demagoguery and even authoritarianism. The mere fact that the millions of Americans who
support Trump do not seem bothered by how his extreme and often bizarre policies are antithetical to the country’s institutions and values is evidence of how vulnerable these institutions and values actually are.

Oddly enough, even as Americans appear to have fallen under the spell of a caudillo-like figure, the Latin Americans are showing signs that they have had enough of them. Last December, for the first time, a conservative politician and former mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri, defeated the Peronist movement by cobbling together a coalition of those disaffected by El Kirchnerismo (the populist regime of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, in place from 2003-2015). Macri has pledged to undo decades of populist policies and to improve relations with Washington, and has called on other Latin American leaders to stand against the abuses of power being perpetrated in Venezuela and Ecuador. Time will tell whether he will succeed. Either way, his rise offers some hope that the reign of the caudillos might at least be ending somewhere.