

## Adios, Mr. President

“Latin American Presidencies Interrupted” by Arturo Valenzuela, in *Journal of Democracy* (Oct. 2004), 1101 15th St., N.W., Ste. 800, Washington, D.C. 20005.

In Latin America, where dictatorship was the norm not so long ago, elected governments now rule in all but two (Cuba and Haiti) of its 37 countries. That’s the good news, but here’s the bad: Popular enthusiasm for democracy is waning. Many elected presidents have proven ineffectual, and 14 presidencies have ended in impeachment or forced resignation since 1985. Valenzuela, director of the Center for Latin American Studies at Georgetown University, warns that “democracy’s future now hangs in the balance across a huge swath of the Western Hemisphere.”

Four of the presidential departures came under unusual circumstances involving fraud and corruption: Jean-Bertrand Aristide in Haiti (1991 and 2004), Alberto Fujimori in Peru (2000), and Joaquín Balaguer in the Dominican Republic (1996). In the other 10 cases, the early exits came “amid severe economic, political, and social turmoil,” though there still were some positive signs. In Guatemala, for example, the military joined other groups in forcing out Jorge Serrano in 1993 when he began subverting democracy, but then stepped aside to let another democratic leader assume command—a far cry from the bad old days.

In several cases, protests against economic austerity measures were a major factor. In oil-rich Venezuela, which was hard hit by declining oil prices, President Carlos Andrés Pérez

was impeached after he pushed fuel-price increases and other unpopular measures approved by the International Monetary Fund, then imposed martial law to quell the resulting violence. But refusing to grasp the economic nettle can also be fatal: Five “stand pat” presidents were also shown the door.

“Although the citizenry expects a head of state to resolve deep-seated problems,” says Valenzuela, “Latin American democratic presidents are for the most part extraordinarily weak,” with feeble or fragmented parties and, consequently, with little support in the legislatures. In only three of the cases Valenzuela studied did chief executives take office after winning an absolute majority in a single round of voting. Only two commanded legislative majorities. Frustrated presidents face a powerful temptation to attack the legislative branch and bypass it with decrees, and many succumb, giving voters even more reason to become disaffected with democratic politics.

A parliamentary system, in which the prime minister serves at the pleasure of a legislative majority and legislators hold responsible cabinet positions, would do much better, in Valenzuela’s view. Most of Europe’s new democracies have chosen some form of parliamentary government. Unfortunately, most Latin Americans, living in “the continent of presidentialism par excellence,” are plainly opposed to a switch.

## A New Indonesia

“Indonesia’s Quiet Revolution” by Lex Rieffel, in *Foreign Affairs* (Sept.–Oct. 2004), 58 E. 58th St., New York, N.Y. 10021.

Terrorism has drawn the world’s attention to Indonesia in recent years—the 2002 bombing by Muslim extremists that killed 202 people in Bali, and the bombing a year later at the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta that killed 12. Meanwhile, hardly anybody has noticed that the world’s largest Muslim-majority nation (population: 235 million) has also been carrying out a democratic transfor-

mation of the political system: *Reformasi*.

The change began in 1998, when huge protests drove President Suharto from office after more than three decades of iron rule. The next year, a new 550-member national parliament (the DPR) was chosen, in the first openly contested elections since 1955. A central element of *Reformasi* was a constitutional amendment calling for direct election of the