

## “The Coups d’Etat and the International Context”

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### *Abstract*

This paper endeavours to analysing a phenomenon, that of coups d’état, that is as widespread as it is unstudied, and it attempts to examine the influence of the international context on the internal policy of countries in which events of this nature have taken place and examine their current development. To do so, the first issue tackled shall be the tendency to coups d’état in Latin America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stressing the conditions imposed by the international situation on the political participants, principally the armed forces. Secondly, mention will be made of the coups d’état that, in recent years, have taken place in processes of transition. Finally, the modifications arising from the phenomenon as a consequence of the changes in the international system since the disappearance of the Soviet Union and, therefore, the end of the cold war, shall be analysed.

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### **Introduction**

This paper has two basic objectives: on the one hand it endeavours to contribute to the enormous task of conceptually ordering the always complex political situation by analysing a phenomenon, that of coups d’état, that is as widespread as it is unstudied; and on the other, it attempts to examine the influence of the international context on the internal policy of countries in which events of this nature have taken place and examine their current development. To do so, the first issue tackled shall be the tendency to coups d’état in Latin America throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stressing the conditions imposed by the international situation on the political participants, principally the armed forces. Secondly, mention will be made of the coups d’état that, in recent years, have taken place in processes of transition. Finally, the modifications arising from the phenomenon as a consequence of the changes in the international system since the disappearance of the Soviet Union and, therefore, the end of the cold war, shall be analysed.

### **1. The tendency to coups d’État and the international context in Latin America.**

In recent decades, the tendency to coups d’état has been such a widespread phenomenon in Latin America that an identification is often made between coups d’état in general and those occurring in that part of the world. A certain type of coup, that performed by the military in Latin America in the 1970s, has become the clearest prototype of the phenomenon. This has occurred to such an extent that at the mention of the subject, the mind is immediately filled with images of the bombing of the *Casa de la Moneda* in Chile or the stern Argentine military. Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, etc., the coups and military dictatorships of the 1970s make up an archetypal picture of a government installed by military force that, in addition taking control of the government, aims to eradicate all opposition and proposes to radically transform society. However, not all of the coups that occurred over the last century in Latin America conform to this model. At different times, other types of coup d’état took place that can be grouped together as sharing basic characteristics and responding to certain international contexts. Nevertheless, it

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is true that in no other part of the planet have coups d’etat been used so repeatedly, independent of the objectives sought. Two elements influenced the spread of the phenomenon: the doctrine of government by a strong figure, which, as a form of government under a charismatic leader, requires the use of military force first to gain and then keep hold of power; and, especially after the Second World War, the international context. Most of the time, both factors have been combined, giving rise to charismatic leaders and military dictatorships, or systems with the support of the military, sustained by the United States. On occasion, the doctrine of government by a strong figure has had a more socialising tendency and, although conserving its main characteristics, has confronted US imperialism from a nationalist standpoint. From the primitive form of strong government in the first few decades after independence of Juan Manuel de Rosas in Argentina, José Antonio Páez in Venezuela and Antonio López de Santa Anna in Mexico, including a style of government that emerged in the first half of the century, characterised by that of Marcos Pérez Jiménez in Venezuela and Rafael Leónidas Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, through to the explosion from the 1950s onwards, what is certain is that in Latin America a common system of domination was forged that was the direct cause of the growing tendency to coups d’etat. Alongside the doctrine of government by a strong figure, the international context played a determining role in policies in Latin America, as well as in the ideological orientation of the various regimes and, naturally, the proliferation of the coup d’etat phenomenon. If we had to catalogue the various types of coup d’etat that took place over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it is possible to make a series of temporal divisions that coincide with major world events. The inter-war period, the Second World War and the cold war were to determine the political development of the majority of the Latin American systems.

The First World War had a decisive influence on Latin America, not so much because of the greater or lesser sympathy that the contesting countries were able to generate, but because it brought with it a period of economic growth with increased sales of raw materials and manufactured goods. The North American hegemony in the region had just been consolidated and democratic systems enjoyed reasonable stability. However, the direct consequences of the war affected the apparent harmony of the continent. Just as occurred in Europe, the economic crisis unleashed by ‘Black Thursday’ on Wall Street on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, 1929, made clear the

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inability of liberal states to guarantee development, as well as the need for them to revise their non-interventionist principles. If the immediate effect in Europe was the emergence of several fascist groups, movements and parties, in Latin America, controlled by the hegemonic power of the US, the consequence was the destabilisation of democracy and the emergence of numerous dictatorial regimes following a wave of coups d’état. At the end of the 1920s, the panorama was dominated by democratic systems; at the beginning of the 1930s the situation changed completely. In 1930 and 1931 alone, coups d’état took place in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, El Salvador, Peru and Venezuela, among others.

The Second World War ushered in new period of coups, in this case of lesser duration and intensity. As an immediate consequence, the Allied victory brought with it the disappearance of numerous dictatorships, such as those in Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Venezuela and Peru. This time, coups d’état were used not as a route to dictatorship but the reverse, as was the case in Brazil in 1945 or in Venezuela, where a military coup took place supported by the *Acción Democrática* (Democratic Action) social democrat party, in the same year. In Guatemala, the dictator Jorge Ubico, who had been in power since 1931, was forced to step down in 1944. As the new Junta that took over did not take the necessary steps to democratise the system, a military coup in October of the same year enabled free elections to be held. The new president, Juan José Arévalo, brought with him a period of hitherto unheard-of democracy in the country that, as a result of the suspicion aroused by his social policies and the support received from the communists, suffered over thirty attempted coups. In Latin America as a whole, once the initial period of optimism had passed and the new international dynamic was established, the situation changed substantially.

The repercussions of the cold war, the third period identified in this paper, brought constant pressure from the US. This was exercised with the aim of controlling each and every one of the Governments on the continent, a phenomenon that although nothing new, would be applied more directly and with greater intensity. The geopolitical conflict between the two powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, was often hidden beneath apparent internal struggles in peripheral states or in their respective areas of influence. In reality, the participants,

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elites or coalitions, were either conditioned by the hegemonic struggle that was taking place on a global scale, reproducing the same inside their own states, or the confrontation was used to serve the interests of the same. This latent struggle between the two superpowers took the form in many countries of civil wars, coups d’état or direct military intervention of various types: providing economic support for certain groups, training political or military executives, supplying arms to guerrillas and armies or, in the case of interventions, directly occupying the ‘rebel’ country and replacing one set of rulers with another.

With regard to the conflicts that arose from the friction generated by the cold war, it is naturally possible to make certain distinctions between them. Once the euphoria of democratisation had passed and the new rules of play had been established, the Latin American elites went back to defending their positions, which were better protected from socialising influences under a form of dictatorship. Coups d’état were the means used to gain power, this time for the purpose of establishing authoritarian systems, by General Odría, in Peru, in 1948; General Delgado, in Venezuela, in 1948; General Rojas, in Colombia, in 1953; Colonel Castillo, in Guatemala, in 1954; and General Lonardi, in Argentina, in 1955. As a way of defending the interests of both the local oligarchies and those of the US, dictatorships were easier to control than democracies. Thus, their rise and protection were assured. However, a fundamental event was to condition the system established by the cold war: the Cuban revolution. After several years of fighting the regime of Fulgencio Batista, the revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro managed to win popular support and gain control of the island, forcing the dictator to flee on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December, 1958. Rapprochement between the Cuban regime and the Soviet Union over the next few years set alarm bells ringing in the US and was a source of hope across the rest of the continent. The immediate response took the form of a new wave of coups. Between 1962 and 1964, coinciding with the period of greatest contact between Cuba and the Soviet Union, coups occurred in Peru, Guatemala, Ecuador, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Brazil and Bolivia. Naturally, the international context cannot be held liable for all of the intentions of the participants in the military coups, which were much more complex and attuned to internal dynamics than would appear at first glance, but it should be pointed out that, in this case, fear of widespread revolution did have an enormous influence.

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Despite greater US control, international changes also favoured the resurgence of a certain type of leftwing military coup. The tense confrontational atmosphere between the US and the Soviet Union relaxed at the end of the 1960s and this détente came to define the new international context. Moreover, the fact that the United States had other fronts to deal with, such as Vietnam, distracted its attention. The revolutionary flame sparked by Cuba started to spread, although in a much more moderate manner. Thus, several countries constituted military regimes with a leftwing tendency: Peru, in 1968; Panama, in the same year; Bolivia, in 1969; Ecuador, in 1972; etc. To these should be added the governments with leftwing tendencies that came to power via the ballot box, as was the case, for example, in Chile. However, these new systems were fairly short-lived. The regime of General Velasco Alvarado, in Peru, did not last seven years. In Bolivia, two years later, a rightwing military coup, led by Hugo Bánzer, put an end to the nationalising and reforming tendencies of the new regime. In this way, another type of military coup came to the fore, directed by the armed forces but containing a significant leftwing component, which responded to greater social concern and used nationalist anti-US sentiments in its defence. In the end, its set-up was little different from that of the right’s doctrine of government under a strong figure. However, the policies unveiled did have a greater amount of egalitarian content and, occasionally, they openly confronted the strategic interests of the American superpower. There had been a precursor in the 1930s: the Government arising from the coup d’état in Brazil by Vargas, who, afterwards in 1937, set up a nationalist dictatorship. At the end of the 1960s the main exponents of this form of government were Velasco Alvarado in Peru, who after ousting Belaúnde Terry in 1968 formed a revolutionary Government<sup>1</sup>, and Torrijos in

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1 This coup ended the presidency of Fernando Belaúnde Terry in October, 1968. On this occasion, the military did not act under the direction of any particular military leader but under the institution as a whole. The natural tensions that built up within it led to a tendency towards the hard line personified by Velasco Alvarado. One of the points of conflict was created by the way power itself was organised, as each commander general was immediately made minister of State. The seeds of conflict for promotion were thus sown. Once Velasco Alvarado took control, he opened the way for a revolutionary regime tinted by populism and with clear modernising pretensions.

2 The second example of a leftwing coup is the one carried out in Panama in 1968. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of October, the Panamanian *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) carried out a coup d’état, known as the *Movimiento de Restauración de la República* (Movement to Restore the Republic) that put an end to the Government of President Arnulfo Arias and brought about a Provisional Junta presided over by Colonel José Manuel Pinilla. However, the strong figure of the regime would be Omar Torrijos, who the new national assembly would proclaim supreme leader

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Panama, who after taking part in the 1968 coup, gained power and started a regime characterised by its anti-imperialism<sup>2</sup>. Despite appearing to display a more relaxed attitude, US opposition to this type of regime was made clear by the fact that they were overthrown, generally through new coups d’état. In 1945 the army was behind the fall of Vargas. In 1977, another military coup removed Velasco from power and in 1981 Torrijos died in a plane accident in somewhat unclear circumstances, having resisted a coup by pro-US military personnel in 1969.

In direct relation to certain leftwing forms of strong government, the importance of populism should not be ignored. This influenced a type of regime that arose from the convergence of the economic and political interests of the new nationalist industrialised bourgeoisie, wide sectors of the middle class and the masses of urban workers, and was characterised by identification with the nation and the people. Coups d’état, which in principal are politically neutral, were also used to install populist regimes or, on the contrary, to overthrow them. In the case of both populism and leftwing strong-figure regimes, when Latin American coups have been analysed there has occasionally been a tendency to fall into the trap of assessing them positively, justifying them as being promoters of political and economic modernisation in the countries where they took place. Interpretations of this type, in vogue in the 1960s, were based on the numerous military coups that, principally in the third world, gained power with the intention of making sweeping structural reforms, although, with the benefit of an historical perspective, their results did not meet expectations.

The establishment of leftwing governments in countries such as Peru, Bolivia and Chile, the increase in internal conflicts, the popular anti-capitalist struggle and the emergence of new revolutionary processes such as those in Nicaragua and El Salvador, mobilised the Latin American armed forces to carry out coups d’état that would enable them to put an end to subversion and any kind of leftwing activity. Throughout this period the support and presence of the US was once again evident, going so far as to spend years training officers from various countries in coup techniques. At centres belonging to the US armed forces, such as Fort Benning,

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of the Panamanian revolution in 1972, conferring him full power.

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in Georgia, or Fort Gulick, in the part of the Panama Canal belonging to the US, several members of the military in Latin America who would later take control of their states through military coups were trained. Among them were Hugo Bánzer (Bolivia), Augusto Pinochet (Chile), Ernesto Geisel (Brazil), Alfredo Stroessner (Paraguay) and Jorge Videla (Argentina). The communism containment policy meant that the main objective of US foreign policy was to create and maintain an environment in tune with its interests, independent of the type of regime and the human and social cost involved. An identical observation may also be made, of course, about Soviet foreign policy in its respective domain. Furthermore, in the years preceding the wave of coups, an approach developed that, later, would be present in some of the more significant coups, such as the one in Argentina in 1976<sup>3</sup> and that in Chile in 1973<sup>4</sup>. Among its characteristics, following Prudencio García, it is possible to pick out intensive anti-communist indoctrination leading to radical rightwing sentiments, a growing shift from the idea of defence

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3 If we look at things on a case-by-case basis, there are few countries better than Argentina in which to observe the continual presence of the coup d’etat as a mechanism used by political and military elites to gain power. It has come to constitute another means or possible option alongside others of a constitutional nature. Once the coup by Uriburu opened up this course of action, coups d’etat have occurred constantly. Among the main ones it is worth highlighting the following: the coup of September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1955, self-qualified as the *Revolucion Libertadora* (Liberating Revolution), which ended the Perón regime; that of June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1966 that gave way to the self-proclaimed *Revolución Argentina* (Argentine Revolution), the successive relief of military governments; and the coup of March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1976, which opened the way for the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional* (Process of National Reorganisation) and was no more than a rigid military dictatorship with tragic consequences for the country. In the first, the armed forces put an end to Perón’s populist regime in the name of the fight against authoritarianism, with unrest in the army and Catholic Church in the background. The political shift that was initiated on the death of Eva Perón translated as a greater degree of centralisation and authoritarianism, leading finally to military intervention in an international context that was not favourable to the participation of the masses in politics or the simple presence of democratic forms. A few months after his election, Lonardi was replaced by General Aramburu. In the coup of 1966, the military took control once again after the constitutional period initiated with the victory of Arturo Frondizi in the elections of February 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1958. On this occasion, the objectives of the coup were nothing more than to set up what was known as the Argentine Revolution, which gave way to a system that, later, would be qualified as an authoritarian bureaucracy. Having toppled President Illia, the Junta of Commanders took over the Government, with Onganía assuming the presidency. The last coup ended, once again, with a period of democracy that included the return of Perón, his death and the presidency of his second wife, María Estela Martínez de Perón. In March 1976, the military intervened, unsurprisingly, in Argentine political life to start what they called the Process of National Reorganisation. This time the term revolution was not used, as had been the case in 1955 and 1966. The coup had been announced on numerous occasions and was expected by several sections of the population. It brought about a number of military governments that left a balance of thirty thousand dead and disappeared and provoked a war, in the Falklands, with the United Kingdom, defeat in which led to the end to the dictatorship in 1983.

4 The coup d’etat in Chile in 1973 became a symbol of the entire phenomenon. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of September, 1973, the Chilean armed forces attacked the *La Moneda* presidential palace, ending the Government and killing Salvador Allende. The Military Junta composed of the commanders-in-chief and presided over by General Augusto Pinochet, signalled the end of the democratic regime and marked the beginning of one of the cruellest dictatorships of the entire century.

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towards the notion of *the enemy within*, the introduction of what was known as the “Doctrine of National Security”, exclusive self-attribution by the armed forces of the notions of the mother country and patriotism, as well as of exclusive representation of the nation, the progressive shift of the armed forces towards policing functions, a serious relaxing of the idea of military ethics and backing by the armed forces of models with a strong oligarchic base and extensive social inequality. It is not necessary to insist on the consequences of applying these principles. When these countries joined the democratic movement that spread through Latin America in the 1980s, systematic violation of human rights by the military governments, their persistence in historical memory and a complex and incomplete resolution to the problem presented significant obstacles to the articulation of fully democratic systems.

### **2. Political transitions and coups d’état**

In 1974, following the coup d’état in Portugal on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, a period of political change commenced in which numerous countries underwent the transition to democracy. The democratising wave translated as the spread of democracy to areas in which, at the time, it had been absent. It started in Southern Europe (Portugal, Greece and Spain) in the mid-1970s, crossing over to Latin America in the 1980s and reaching its spectacular culmination at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. These were delicate times and, with instability and internal struggles in each of the states, the temptation among certain participants and political groups to turn to a technique such as a coup d’état to impose their criteria or gain power without yielding to the claims of their opponents was a constant factor. In short, given that in every coup violence or threat of it is utilised, the participants with greatest opportunity to make use of a coup to settle conflicts and impose their will were the armed forces or those groups ideologically in tune with them. However, the need to adapt the tactics of a coup to the historical moment was not always taken into account and many of the attempted coups ended in failure. On occasion, such as the coup that inaugurated the period of transition, the participants that made use of it did so to speed up the transformation of the system. The case of the Portuguese military coup is a clear example of the initial political

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neutrality of these actions as, in this case, it was not used a shield against the changes taking place, but as a means of driving them through. Nevertheless, the majority of the coups seen in this period were of a conservative nature and endeavoured to maintain the political, economic and social structures of the old systems or simply attempted to defend reactionary sections of the nation from the threats arising from the changes.

Among the coups of this period, it is worth highlighting three due to their particular importance and significance: the Portuguese coup of 1975, the Spanish one of 1981 and the Soviet coup of 1991. The coup d’état by the progressive Portuguese military, which united around the *Movimiento de las Fuerzas Armadas* (Armed Forces’ Movement) carried out a technically impeccable coup d’état, overthrew Caetano’s dictatorship and marked the beginning, as we have already mentioned, of the period of the transitions.

The frustrated coup of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of February, 1981 attempted, by transforming the basis of consolidation of the newly created system constituted in 1978, to alter the outcome of the Spanish transition. The political change undergone by Spain following the death of General Franco has so far been considered to be a model example and, in fact, it was taken as a reference in several transitions that took place afterwards. Despite its unique and unrepeatable character, it has been a source of permanent admiration for both those countries undertaking similar processes and scholars of politics. Nevertheless, the passing of time has smoothed the rough edges off a process that was in no way simple nor free from difficulties. Moreover, it is only possible to present it as a rose-strewn path by juggling the facts in such a way that makes them difficult to reconcile with history. Right from the start, the changes sought were clearly opposed by groups belonging to the old regime and the apparatus of the state that saw their position of privilege under threat. In the difficult quest for a balance agreed by consensus and majority between the various parties, a degree of moderation was reached that did not satisfy the extremes of the political spectrum of the time. One of the events that best reflects the difficulties of the process was the coup of 1981, in which threats by proponents of a coup, in conjunction with conspiracies and all manner of plots present throughout the transition, came together at a single point.

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The coup of February 1981 was the moment in which military expression achieved its critical point, putting the survival of the recently inaugurated democratic system itself at stake. The Franco-supporting army, which had propped the dictatorship up, was destined, once the political change initiated by the death of Franco was underway, to play the role of defender of his ideology (conservative, catholic, and corporate in nature) and his interests. The role reserved for the armed forces was fairly clear, this being, in fact, the pressure group that articulated opposition to the transition with greatest determination. Throughout the period, there were frequent military conspiracies and pressure, but without civilian participation beyond the natural support of certain extreme-right groups and former leaders under the Franco regime. In general, the coup d’état represented several different military intrigues and conspiracies that, with varying degrees of polish, a number of military heads attempted to articulate. The resignation of President Suárez in January 1981, and the vote of confidence in Calvo Sotelo, in February, meant that plans were brought forward, precipitating a coup riddled with holes as regards the participants’ following, organisation and programme. Moreover, the participants’ confidence in the propagation of the rebellion was, as was to be proved, somewhat naïve. In conjunction with the second vote of confidence (the first took place on the 19<sup>th</sup>), Lieutenant-Colonel of the *Guardia Civil* (Civil Guard) Antonio Tejero took control of the Government and Parliament. He was supported by the Field Marshal of Valencia, Jaime Miláns del Bosch, who sent troops out onto the street in the hope of that other military leaders would follow, forcing the formation of a government presided over by General Alfonso Armada. As the hours passed, it became clear that the coup had failed, especially after a television appearance by the King defending constitutional order.

As regards the coup d’état of August 1991 in the former Soviet Union, with which certain sections of the KGB and the Communist Party attempted to put the brake on the changes begun by Gorbachov a few years earlier, it is worth highlighting the enormous consequences of its failure. The principal one was the disappearance of the Soviet Union itself and the regime that for seven decades had ruled the destinies of a considerable part of the planet. The signing of the Treaty for the Union, planned for the 20<sup>th</sup> of August, with which it was intended to create a new territorial structure for the USSR, ceding a great deal of sovereignty to each republic whilst

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conserving a federal system and a central body with substantial powers, was perceived as an irreversible attack on national unity. A simple review of the leading participants in the coup (who made up the self-denominated State Committee for the State of Emergency; GKChP in Russian) and their particular political trajectories enables us to observe, nevertheless, that the events were not played out by the most reactionary and immovable sections of the regime nor by those in favour of accelerating reform, but by a sector of the CPSU and the Government itself that simply wished to prevent the dissolution of the Party and the system, paralysing the situation and putting off the resolution of the pressing problems. In light of the absence of a solid political group that would back his policy, Gorbachov based his Government on the shifting support of various political sectors united around interest groups, each one different from the other and with differing opinions about the reforms. In the autumn of 1990, with its refusal to accept the economic programme agreed on with the Russian Republic, the worsening of the existing conflicts and the repressive hardening of the Government, he took a step towards the policy desired by the alliance made up of members of the CPSU, the military-industrial complex and the chiefs-of-staff. The later modification of this policy, in the spring of 1991, made the affected groups predisposed to carry out a mild coup, far from the posture of more reactionary sectors. It is not necessary to stress that the members of the Emergency Committee had been nominated by Gorbachov in the preceding months, or that the power and influence that they wielded, derived from the positions that they held, were enormous. The Committee included the Vice President of the USSR, the Prime Minister, the ministers of Defence and the Interior, the head of the KGB, the Vice President of the Defence Council (under whose charge fell the military-industrial complex) and the representatives of the rural workers and the state-owned companies. In other words, practically the entire Government and, without a doubt, its leading members.

As far as the Soviet coup is concerned, it is clear from the results that it was an ill-conceived and poorly organised coup that suffered a notable lack of co-ordination and did not have a clear objective. The mild nature of the coup is explained by the lack of ambition of its final objectives and the lack of foresight regarding the behaviour of both the opposition leaders and that of the population itself. These factors were possibly the source of the significant faults that prevented its success. A reactionary coup of this type that, with objectives that went beyond

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the simple rectification of policy or an attempt to discipline the country, had intended to re-establish the Soviet system (the impossibility of this apart) could not have brought about its fall with such timid measures and considerable errors. The leaders who at the time called themselves democrats, with Yeltsin at the head, were not detained or isolated, the centre of the city was not shut off, the control of the media was to all intents and purposes unsuccessful and the measures taken at the time of the events were continually overtaken by the same. The main consequences, perhaps the greatest ever of any coup d’état, were the disappearance of the Soviet state, its break-up into fifteen new ones and the collapse, as a result, of its political system, including the fall of the party on which it was sustained. More detailed analysis may enable us to observe that the dismembering of the Soviet Union was not so much a consequence of the failure of the coup as the natural result of the resurgence of nationalism and the tensions existing between the elites of the various republics. The failure of the coup was due to the acceleration of a process that reached, in just a few weeks, vertiginous speed. Gorbachov’s attempts, before the coup, to resolve the national problem (the Treaty for the Union and the “Law of Secession”) in reality was intended to ensure the continuity of the USSR. After the events of August, the dissolution of the same was inevitable and swift: in December the Community of Independent States was constituted. Gorbachov was left with no option but to resign, which happened a few days later. Yeltsin, as president of the Russia that was heir to the Soviet empire, took up his position at the head of the country.

### **3. Coups d’Etat and the *New World Order*.**

It was in November 1990 that the US President George Bush I made his proclamation regarding the establishment of what he would call the *New World Order*. The transformation undergone by the Soviet Union, the dismembering of the Eastern Bloc and the Warsaw Pact, the changes in the global economy and the evident US victory in the cold war, demonstrated in the Gulf War, confirmed the arrival of an order different to the previous one with its own particular characteristics. With the self-elimination of one of the two superpowers there has been a shift, as affirmed by Francisco Peñas, to a unipolar system characterised, among other matters, by the

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predominance of instability compared with the stable and predictable framework of the preceding period; by the changes in the nature and distribution of power, given that, with the loss of the hegemony of military power, this has diversified into others of an economic, technological, etc. nature; by the end of the primacy of geopolitics with the end of the struggle for areas of influence; and by the oblivion into which the peripheral countries have fallen. As a consequence of these changes, however, coups d’état have not disappeared, rather they have undergone a series of changes derived from the new international context. In some cases, as they have lost the control function that at certain times they fulfilled, certain types of coup, such as, for example, the classic Latin American coup, have disappeared; in other cases they have gained new strength as an element in resolving conflicts and confrontations in the struggle for the state between the various national elites, as has happened in the African coups; in yet others, they have appeared in places where they never previously existed in response to a struggle between regional powers to impose their influence, associated with confrontations of a cultural nature, as has been occurring in several ex-Soviet republics.

The control exercised by the superpowers over various countries has disappeared to make way for the self-control demanded by the new economic order. Economic globalisation, the homogeneity of the market and the lack of alternatives oblige states to avoid diverging from established economic patterns. In this way, two noteworthy aspects have emerged - the elimination of rigid control with the changeover from military control to economic self-control, and the oblivion of the periphery, given that, with the disappearance of protected areas of influence, those countries that lack strategic interest are no longer useful to the rest. The impossibility of distancing themselves from the new economic orthodoxy limits the actions of the elites who, aware of the risk, avoid independent policies as these would mean their own political suicide. In Latin America, for example, containment of economic policy and the spread of the democratic movement have had a great deal to do with this situation. Egalitarian policies with a large social component, the nationalisation of companies and natural resources or trade restrictions do not, nowadays, represent incentives for the United States to back reactionary elements or finance costly coups d’état. They directly lead to economic marginalisation by the rest of the system. In the bipolar world there was the danger that countries would opt for one

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alternative or the other. In a unipolar system, there is no risk of divergence, as this would bring about self-destruction. Therefore, the old adherence incentives and controls are no longer necessary and have been replaced by others that are subtler and more efficient, which in turn have enabled democracy to become widespread at the same time as granting the old conflicts autonomy.

Once the Soviet threat had been eliminated and the risk of regression of a socialist nature had disappeared, the Latin American military was no longer useful to the interests of the United States, which has facilitated civil control of the armed forces and has allowed democracy to consolidate as a political system with US backing. This, however, has not meant the disappearance of the interventionist US policies that already existed before the emergence of the bipolar order. In fact, it could be considered that the anti-Soviet policy of the last few decades has been yet another version of the never-abandoned Munroe doctrine that, in recent years, has been replaced by the fight against drug-trafficking. Thus, coups d’état, once the possibility of intervention by the army had diminished, have taken place generally in the civil sphere, in the upper echelons of the administration and as a consequence of the struggle for power. The ‘self-coup’ instigated by President Alberto Fujimori in 1992, in Peru, or the failed attempt by the Guatemalan president Jorge Serrano Elías, in 1993, form part of this dynamic. In the cases in which the armed forces attempted to put an end to democracy, foreign and domestic opposition was stronger. The failure of the Argentine *carapintadas* (Painted Faces) in December 1990, or that of the Venezuelan paratroopers, in February 1992, was inevitable as their coups belonged to another era. When in 1991 the Haitian armed forces toppled President Bertrand Aristide it was necessary for the US to intervene to reinstate him in his post, something inconceivable just a few years earlier when the same forces represented a guarantee against communism. In fact, the most recent interventions by Latin American armies have not had a clear intention to gain power but have been a show of force, pressure or uprisings aimed at achieving improvements in their situation or to protest against certain issues. The revolt by the Guatemalan military in February 1997 was described by Colonel Otto Noack, the spokesman for the army, as a simple protest: “it is not a mutiny. It is a simple demonstration of discontent to which every Guatemalan has a right. There is no danger”. In Honduras, internal disputes in the armed forces in 1990 brought about the

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removal of their chief-of-staff, General Arnulfo Cantarero; in July 1996 Cuba’s political leadership foiled a plot against the, since then, new chief-of-staff, Mario Hung. Nothing could be further from the typical extremist coups d’etat that the continent suffered in previous decades. In Paraguay, in April 1996, the coup by General Lino César Oviedo once again brought the spectre of traditional military coups to the fore. However, the stream of events provoked by the incident, which ended with Oviedo in exile following the assassination of the Vice President Luis María Argaña in 1999, has demonstrated that he only sought personal benefit in his particular struggle for power. The failure of another attempted coup in Paraguay, in May 2000, instigated by Oviedo, makes clear the difficulties faced by military coups in Latin America.

In the new international situation, former coup participants and former dictators, if they wish to come to power, have no other option but to approach the electoral arena. The re-emergence via the ballot boxes of veteran dictators or participants in coups such as Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Hugo Bánzer in Bolivia or Ríos Montt in Guatemala, demonstrates that even they themselves have rejected the armed course of action, as they are aware that they have little future. Chávez had directed, in February 1992, an attempted coup that ended in failure; in December 1998 he won the presidential elections, taking 56% of the votes and ending four decades of a two-party system. Bánzer took part in the armed uprising of August 1971, becoming, until 1978, another of the all-powerful dictators backed by the United States. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June, 1997, he won the presidential elections and was named, once again, head of State and Government. Following a coup d’etat, Ríos Montt governed between 1982 and 1983 and was accused of genocide. His party won the elections in December 1999 and his appointed successor, Alfonso Portillo, was made president. Whenever the ambition of these figures has been, and continues to be, to gain power, they have adapted to the conditions of the time, in this case to what could be defined as authoritarian neo-populism.

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