

# Coda: The Imperial Presidency Gone and All But Forgotten

DAVID A. ANDELMAN



AP PHOTO/RIA-NOVOSTI, ALEXEI DRUZHININ, GOVERNMENT PRESS SERVICE

There was a time, in the not-too-distant past, when the Office of the President carried with it all but unprecedented powers. Not unlike the great emperors of old, a president could launch wars, proclaim peace, even change the course of history. In a democracy or an oligarchy, in political systems far removed in every other respect from the traditional dictatorship, presidents still wielded all but unfettered power. No longer.

Where once France's imperial and imperious Charles de Gaulle could launch wars in Algeria and Indochina with barely a gesture to the National Assembly that met, regularly and futilely, across the Seine from the Elysées Palace where he presided, today François Hollande must turn to a deeply fractured parliament for approval on every major and most minor political decisions. In London, where Winston Churchill and his War Cabinet could join his American allies in defense of the Empire, with barely a nod to the House of Commons just down the block, today his successor David Cameron bows meekly as the same body spends seven hours shouting down his efforts to join the same American military in Syria, a Middle Eastern state with few clear ties to the British Commonwealth.

Rarely in modern history have chiefs of state or government been so handcuffed as they are today—hostage to the power of the electorate, barely able to keep a single unblinkered eye on how history might treat them.

At the start of this year, I pledged to devote each of my four Codas to examining a different branch of government that directly impacts the people it rules.

Thus far, I've taken on the judiciary, the bureaucracy or permanent government, and the legislature. Now it's time to examine the very top—in theory where all power flows, downward to the rest of the government and at the same time, in the best of circumstances, upward from the people. But all too often in one direction. And this failing, beyond all others of government, is most central to our understanding of how rulers rule and how people are governed.

#### POWER TO THE PEOPLE

In March 1983, there was panic across a stretch of Africa. Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi was contemplating an invasion of its neighbor to the south—Chad, a country straddling the desert and jungle. Libyan forces had a clear and direct shot across the Sahara and into the heart of Chad. The French, who for a century or more controlled this part of Africa, still maintained close economic, political, and cultural ties with their former colony. So it was hardly surprising that a detachment of the French Foreign Legion would find its way to the capital, N'Djamena, as a show of force. At the same time, though, the imperious ruler of Chad put somewhat more faith in a neighboring dictator—Mobutu Sese Seko—president, at least in name, of the Democratic Republic of Congo. And if ever there was an Imperial President, it was Mobutu. For 32 years, Mobutu presided, all but unchallenged, as ruler of the deeply impoverished nation he renamed Zaire, amassing a vast personal fortune, which, at its peak in 1984, was estimated at \$5 billion (\$11 billion today). He was

---

*David A. Andelman is editor of World Policy Journal.*

known to charter a supersonic Concorde jet for shopping trips to Paris. His power at home and across broad stretches of the African continent was all but unfettered. It was at this peak of his power that I first stumbled across him.

Hissène Habré, president of beleaguered Chad was an aspiring Mobutu character. Cut from the same bolt of cloth, he was born in the town of Faya-Largeau, an oasis deep in the central Sahara where daytime temperatures are so high that, unshaded, they would boil away the emulsions of photographic film. Habré had come to power in a coup the year before I arrived, and quickly moved to cement his hold as president (self-proclaimed, of course), using a feared secret police organization he created—the Documentation and Security Directorate, whose methods included spraying gas into the eyes, ears, and noses of opponents, forcing detainees' mouths onto the exhaust pipes of running cars, and a primitive technique of water boarding that few survived. Now, however, Habré was anticipating the arrival of Qaddafi's tanks, which seemed likely to follow a route straight through his birthplace in the desert. So it was hardly surprising that Chad's recently-arrived and hardly democratically-elected president, might want to hedge his bets and seek some backup from a national leader whose views of governance might be somewhat more congruent than those of France's Socialist President François Mitterrand 3,000 miles away. Cue Mobutu.

On Saturday morning, August 20, 1983, Mobutu's presidential jet touched

down at N'Djamena airport. As both presidents had anticipated, the world press turned out. This would be a real spectacle—just the ticket, they both hoped, to show Qaddafi and his forces just what they would be up against. Or at least provide quite a nice diversion to distract the locals from their manifold problems of the moment. And a spectacle it was. Habre's advance team had turned out a respectable rent-a-crowd, thousands lining the route from the airport to downtown and in clearly a festive mood. Then, the plane's door opened and out stepped Mobutu. Clad in his signature long leopard-skin toga, a leopard cap perched on his head, and enormous mirrored sunglasses, he strode confidently down the steps, mounted a colossal, customized jeep with tires higher than his shoulders, stood magisterially in the back, grasped a tall ebony staff with gold figurehead, and signaled the vehicle to move slowly down the path. Running ahead of it, a host of native-clad escorts beat loudly on jungle drums as the crowd chanted "Mo-

BU-tu, Mo-BU-tu, Mo-BU-tu." It was awe-inspiring, brilliant jungle theater and as consummate a demonstration of presidential power as I have ever witnessed. Qaddafi, incidentally, never invaded.

Such dictators in presidents' clothing still exist, of course, in many corners of the world. Since independence in 1994, the former Soviet republic of Belarus has never known any president but the thoroughly Stalinist Alexander Lukashenko who has maintained an iron-fisted control over the nation, not to mention influence over its major industries, in-

---

MITTERAND  
HAD IN SO MANY  
RESPECTS PERFECT  
PITCH WHEN  
IT CAME TO HIS  
SENSE OF HOW  
A PRESIDENT  
SHOULD RULE.

cluding finance, media, and every other aspect of life in what is effectively a latter-day gulag sandwiched between Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. In the tiny Indian Ocean island nation of the Maldives, its president, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, hung onto office for some 30 years, and appears still to be pulling strings as his nation seeks to lurch toward a semblance of democracy. Gayoom has accumulated little wealth on the scale of Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who's served as president of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea since August 1979 and is said to have amassed a personal net worth in excess of \$600 million. These and a host of other world leaders, while bearing the title of president, maintain many of the trappings of hereditary monarchs that still proliferate across the Persian Gulf littoral and assorted Asian kingdoms. Each rules as he wills, with barely a nod to those he holds in his sway. Lukashenko, for instance, warns he is all that stands between his people and utter instability, broad poverty that has enslaved vast stretches of the former Soviet Union, and the depredations of powerful Russian mafia crime families.

#### SUBLIME TO THE RIDICULOUS

If these serve as one extreme of the Presidency, today's France is perhaps the other. François Hollande is a far cry from the nation's last Socialist president, his imperial and imperious namesake, François Mitterrand—a leader in control of every word spoken by any in his administration, every act and action that flowed from the Elysées Palace.

Mitterrand had in so many respects perfect pitch when it came to his sense of how a president should rule, where to pull every lever to achieve maximum impact. Even as the power of his office was slipping away from the vast hold exerted by Charles de Gaulle, Mitterrand did his level best to slow the progress.

One late afternoon, Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson had concluded a particularly sensitive diplomatic negotiation at

the Quai d'Orsay and was exiting the foreign ministry in haste, running the gauntlet of a scrum of French and western journalists. I thrust my CBS microphone in front of him and asked him a question in English, to which Cheysson replied, reflexively in his impeccable English, then disappeared into his black Citroen before my French homologue could

interrogate him in French. Each evening at the Elysées, Mitterrand would convene a group of his ministers and counselors to watch the "Journal de 20 Heures," the eight o'clock national evening news. That particular evening, French TV was compelled to use my sound bite in English of Cheysson, subtitled in French. "What an embarrassment," an appalled Mitterrand sniffed. "A French minister speaking in English on French television." Trust me, it never happened again. After that, it became all but impossible to obtain an English sound bite from a single member of the French government.

But it was not simply cosmetics. It was every aspect of politics, society, and economics that Mitterrand and his small band of counselors controlled for 14 years—the longest any French president

---

PRESIDENTIAL  
LEADERSHIP,  
INDEED  
LEADERSHIP OF  
ANY STRIPE,  
HAS BECOME  
SERIOUSLY  
DILUTED.



will ever again rule. In 2000, the constitution was amended to provide a maximum of two five-year terms. Three presidents later, however, much more has changed. François Hollande finds himself in a pickle that is deeply reflective of many of his fellow presidents—but with far less room for maneuver.

His “dilemma is terrible,” writes Françoise Fressoz, the brilliant editorialist of the leading French daily *Le Monde*, “because recognizing his strategic errors while in office in turn undermines still further his presidential credibility, but continues to sap his ability to function. François Hollande may well have all presidential powers but is powerless to assert himself as

a leader.” The immediate context is France’s growing economic

crisis—Fressoz writing the morning after Standard & Poor’s dropped the nation’s credit rating to AA from AA+, and this just a year after it lost its AAA sovereign rating. Hollande has found it as impossible to drag his nation out of it slough of despair as had his right-wing predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy. Indeed, in November, his popularity plummeted to a pathetic 20 percent—the lowest since de Gaulle formed the Fifth Republic in 1958, when polling first began in France.

In part, this sapping of the Imperial Presidency is a question of atmospherics, and is by no means confined to France.

In this multi-polar world, where populations are bombarded by a host of stimuli and a broad range of voices clamoring to be heard, each offering apparently appealing solutions, presidential leadership, indeed leadership of any stripe, has become seriously diluted.

In 1980, when I arrived in Paris for the debut of Mitterrand's presidency, and even when I returned to the United States seven years later, there was no Internet. Each evening, there was a national news broadcast on each of the two state-owned television networks that presented the inner workings of the government and its ministers, along with some leavening of sensational murders, the doings of film or fashion stars and, of course, sports and weather. The next morning, a half dozen newspapers catered to various political persuasions—from the far-left *L'Humanite*, owned by the French Communist Party, through liberal *Libération* to the centrist *Le Monde* and winding up with the conservative *Le Figaro*. But it was the president who was the lodestone of government, finance, society—*la patrie*, the homeland. Today, that is no longer the case. France, along with much of the civilized world, has been barraged by forces competing for attention and allegiance.

France's decision to trim the terms of its presidents was only an outward manifestation of a deeper transformation of the presidency across the globe. Sharply circumscribed term limits are now the rule rather than the exception. Indeed, only the profoundly dysfunctional and dictatorial leaders of Belarus and Uganda boast no term limits for their heads of state. Serbia and Venezuela offer an unlimited number of terms for their presidents, respectively five and six years at a stretch. Tajikistan lets its president, Emomali Rahmonov,

hang around for seven years, with a maximum of three terms—in theory. In practice, he's held office since 1994 and shows no signs of fading into retirement. The same open-ended tenure holds true, incidentally, for the president of Italy, but that's largely a ceremonial post, and the incumbent serves pretty much at the will of parliament anyway. The presidents of the Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, Senegal, Uzbekistan, and Ireland (another largely ceremonial post) are each allowed two seven-year terms.

#### TRANSFORMATIVE POWER

This list demonstrates that today, few truly democratically elected presidents have the same power and reach as their predecessors. The only remaining Imperial Presidents are those who have largely usurped their authority and retain the office in name only. But this shift in the power balance, this diffusion of power, has led to some profound disconnects on the world stage and the ability to conclude any transformative initiatives.

This past summer, when Iran elected a new and somewhat freethinking president, Iranians rejoiced. Hassan Rouhani was at first blush a truly fresh breeze compared with his knuckle-headed predecessor. He quickly acknowledged that millions of Jews might indeed have been incinerated in a Nazi Holocaust that was not historical fiction. He was prepared to take President Obama's phone call in Teheran and chat amiably for some minutes (though a handshake at the United Nations may have been a bit of a stretch at the moment). His negotiators returned quickly to the bargaining table with the five permanent members of the Security Council plus Germany in an effort to broker some progress that could put a hold on his nation's

nuclear ambitions, while at the same time lifting the collection of sanctions that was strangling the Iranian economy.

But here again, the sharply circumscribed powers of the presidency, on both sides of the table, reasserted themselves. On the Iranian side, neither the president nor his foreign minister had much control over such an existential issue. The ruler of a nearby Middle Eastern nation suggested as much to me as the first round of these talks was getting underway. "Rouhani may be able to do a lot internally," this monarch observed. "He has a wide margin of maneuver on the economy, but when it comes to foreign and strategic affairs, there's only one individual who's pulling all the strings." And that's the Supreme Leader, the Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Of course, on the other side of the table, the issue was not dissimilar. There may be no grand ayatollah or other religious figure behind the curtains, but the ability of the presidents of the United States, France, Russia, China, the British prime minister, even the chancellor of Germany are equally constrained when it comes to arriving at a bargain on as transformative an initiative as an Iranian nuclear weapons program. President Obama has problems with a broad swath of Congress that favors tightening sanctions rather than loosening them and would prefer Iran return to the era of hand-cranked telephones and candles. The presidents of Russia and China have far more margin of maneuver, but their hands are tied by their previously enunciated commitments to supporting Iranian aspirations that would appear to lead in a direction less in tune

with much of the civilized world. In short, do Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping really want their nations to be perceived by much of the world as pariahs?

Which brings us to the next set of constraints on the power of today's Imperial Presidency—international image. In earlier times, it was possible for a national leader to conclude a pact with little reference to forces outside his immediate entourage.

At the Paris peace conference that led to the Treaty of Versailles ending World War I, the leaders of Britain, France, and Italy dictated the terms of peace to a vanquished Germany, Austria-Hungary, and already enfeebled Ottoman Empire. America's Woodrow Wilson largely went along as a means of achieving his principal goal—creation of a League of Nations—though his failure to consult with Congress led ultimately to an ignominious end to that entire exercise. But of particular interest in this context were the delegations of Japan and China—headed respectively by the shadowy figures of Prince Saionji Kimochi, last of the great genros, member of an ancient royal family from the imperial city of Kyoto; and an equally venerable Lou Tseng-Tsiang. Neither was ever seen in public. Each confined himself to pulling strings from behind his respective curtain, allowing his diplomats and politicians to mime in public the words they had so carefully crafted.

COMMITMENTS  
Today, though, no such tricks of power have much impact. The stakes are much

---

FOR RUSSIA, THE  
ALL POWERFUL  
PRESIDENCY IS  
CRUMBLING AS  
RAPIDLY AS IN  
ANY WESTERN  
DEMOCRACY.

higher and far more nuanced. Every day, business and financial interests must make commitments. Such choices may have profound effects on the course of a nation's economic development and vitality—where to manufacture that next generation electronic device, where to build that dam or power project, where to prospect for oil, coal, or precious minerals. Such decisions are based on a complex calculus of country risk, reliability, and confidence in leadership at the top, and of consistency, honesty, and continuity.

Russia, with its leader heading into his third decade of all but unchallenged power, is falling rapidly behind on almost every score. Putin is ostensibly the most powerful of any elected president today—the closest in form and function to the leaders of Soviet Russia, a true heir to the tsars a millennium or more before him. Who else among the leaders of major nations in today's world has been able to leave, then return to office, while never for a moment ceding control over his nation? Yet Putin is as hobbled as any of his western counterparts by forces within his own borders that are every bit as pernicious as those nibbling at the foundations of Obama, Hollande, or Cameron. For Russia—a self-styled democracy, though effectively and functionally an oligarchy—the all powerful presidency is crumbling as rapidly as in any western democracy. For Putin to maintain his all but unchallenged power, he must pay off those who helped him rise to the top and who now keep him there—the oligarchs, or kleptocrats, of

the Russian establishment. But Russia's principal currency, oil, is fading in value and desirability. While Russia may have passed Saudi Arabia as the world's largest oil producer, the value of that commodity rises and, lately falls, with the ebb and flow of international crises, especially in the Middle East oil belt. But even such events are of diminishing value as a

determinant of oil demand. The United States, the world's leading oil consumer, is now approaching self-sufficiency, while the number three consumer, China, makes its own side deals in far corners of the globe. So what is an oil-poor oligarch like Putin to do? No longer a superpower, Russia has been reduced to at most a regional bully and at worst

a very occasional spoiler in global affairs. But above all, a bad bet when it comes to long-term, capital-intensive investment.

In this vital respect, the only good president in today's context is one who can be counted on to maintain a certain modicum of consistency and intelligence in the use or distribution of power—over the judiciary, legislature, and bureaucracies that we've observed in this space earlier this year. In a so-called pure democracy, of course, there is the concept of checks and balances—designed by America's Founding Fathers to restrain the powers they were preparing to bestow on a single leader, the president. Indeed, there is one paramount difference between the president and the other components of a democratic government we've been examining. His (or hers) is the only branch whose powers are controlled by a single individual. In a sense,

---

NOW POWER  
RESTS ON THE  
GOOD WILL OF  
CORPORATE  
TITANS WHO ARE  
THE PRESIDENTS  
OF THE NEW  
EMPIRES.



we've arrived at the crux of the modern presidency. As Louis XIV was so fond of saying, "*l'état, c'est moi*," (the state, it is I). For a president in today's world, that is no less true. The problem, of course, is that in the ensuing centuries, forces within and outside the government have been chipping away at these unitary powers. But particularly on the economic front, where power ultimately resides.

Today, this is the principal presidential currency. Where once the power of presidents rose and fell as a function of geopolitical empires, the maintenance of sea lanes or communications between colonies in far corners of the globe (remember the days when the sun never set on the British Empire?), now power rests on the good will of corporate titans who are the presidents of the new empires. Where Mercedes or Fiat, Ford or General Motors will build their new assembly plants; where Apple or Samsung will assemble their newest smart phone; where BP or BHP will prospect for oil or nickel or rare earths, underwriting the rail links and pipelines to bring these commodities to market—are the currency of power for today's presidents.

Elsewhere in this issue of our magazine, we examine the contrasts of India and China—the former with a real and apparently functioning democracy, the latter with a centrally planned government, but both led by presidents. Many Chinese, while lusting after some form of democracy in which they might play a role in putting their president in power, sniff at the true democracy of India as a cacophony of competing interests—tied hopelessly in bureaucratic knots, living in confusion and filth, with little opportunity to accumulate any real wealth. Indians, by contrast, revel in their ability to speak and act freely, choose their own leaders, and rely

on their family unit rather than the state to guarantee their well-being. In the end, however, international business has beaten a path to China's door with major investments, contracts, and commerce that mark a nation and its leader as a success in the modern world. China remains one of the rare major nations with a president who can today truly be considered imperial in the classic pre-modern sense. Perhaps we need to reflect carefully on the value of such power—wielded wisely and honestly and in the interests of the many rather than a few. Oligarchies and autocracies cannot truly build foundations of transparency and openness. And yet, at the same time, there is an unclaimed neutral ground where wise rulers may exercise a broader range of authority and creativity.

#### TOOTHLESS MONARCHS

So where do we go from here? How a president may reclaim his or her power, reassert a claim on history, and shape the nature of the global dialogue are all very much open to question in these days of diminishing Imperial Power. Appearances would suggest that the Imperial Presidency is on a permanent downward slope. Still, all is not lost, and for a reason very peculiar to the core of the power of today's modern president presiding in any form of a democracy.

A president, no matter how narrowly victorious in a free and fair election, arrives in office with a substantial reservoir of good will. Let's use the analogy of a large barrel, filled to the brim with fresh water that represents power, reach, and influence. It is accompanied by a ladle. For each initiative, each crisis, each real or perceived opportunity, the president dips into the barrel, removing a tiny dollop, or a brimming ladle. On occasion, the president

may believe that circumstances dictate far more than a ladle-full, and the barrel itself is tipped over, quantities flowing out. All too often, the novice, eager to demonstrate a quick, though often Pyrrhic victory, dips too frequently or too deeply into this barrel. How judiciously our president uses this reservoir suggests directly the nature and course of power and reach. But there is one ineluctable constant. Once that barrel is empty, it can be replenished only by returning to the electorate for a new mandate whenever the constitution of that nation may provide. In times of existential crises—the two world wars of the last century, the Cuban Missile Crisis, 9/11, in the case of Israel, the Yom Kippur and Six Day wars—such a paradigm may be suspended as all cluster around this barrel and replenish whatever may be necessary to empower the leader in question with all the trappings of Imperial Presidents of old.

Of course, giants do still walk the earth—if not in the form of mere mortals, then in the form of the systems they represent. Never before in history have so many people lived under forms of government that could be seen to represent what they desire, what is most in line with their hopes and dreams for a rich and meaningful life. At the same time, Imperial Presidents are no longer able, with a stroke of a pen, to dispense half of Europe to a communist dictator, as did Roosevelt at Yalta, or enslave vast regions under colonial servitude, as the Western powers decreed at the debut of the 20th century. Today's reins on the Imperial Presidency may produce fewer unilateral, certainly less dramatic transitions, but it is incumbent on each of us to choose wisely in designating whose hand should be allowed to wield the ladle as it dips into the drum of power and influence. ●