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Undermining New Democracies

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Worried about a return to the dynasties and caudillos of the past, the **constitution**-writers of Latin America's and Central Europe's new democracies chose parliamentary systems or limited their presidents to a single **term.** Now popular presidents, chafing at those **limits,** are carelessly fiddling with their **constitutions** to allow additional **terms.**

Considering that these regions were recently full of autocratic leaders who simply rigged or canceled elections, it is a sign of progress when presidents seek legislative approval to extend their **terms** through reasonably fair elections. Candidates-for-life are better than presidents-for-life. But the increasingly personal rule of these men is still harmful to the struggling democracies they govern.

Most of these presidents owe their high standings in the polls to their conquest of runaway inflation. But their achievements in modernizing their economies should be matched by efforts to modernize their political systems. Several have already shown a dangerous tendency to control their nations' judiciaries and intelligence services, undercutting the independent, stable institutions democracy needs. Political parties have become their personal vehicles. Their control will tighten, and their nation's institutions weaken, with every extra year they stay in power.

The wave began with President Alberto Fujimori of Peru, elected in 1990. Peru's **Constitution** limited him to one five-year **term,** but Mr. Fujimori, with the approval of his supporters in congress, wrote another that provided for a second **term.**

This is one of several liberties Mr. Fujimori has taken with Peruvian democracy. In 1992 he dissolved Parliament and the courts, allowing himself to rule by decree. Last month his supporters in a reconstituted Parliament passed a dubious law allowing him to run for a third **term** in the year 2000. They got around the two-**term limit** by deciding that because the **Constitution** had been passed while Mr. Fujimori was already in office, his first **term** would not count toward the **limit.**

President Fujimori's actions have been imitated by his counterpart in **Argentina,** Carlos **Menem.** President **Menem's** supporters, who dominate Parliament, rewrote **Argentina's Constitution** to allow him a second **term.** Now they are looking for loopholes that will permit him to run for a third **term** in 1999. Although Brazil's new President, Fernando Cardoso, has not previously revealed an unhealthy taste for power, he is collecting votes in congress to approve a re-election amendment.

President Ion Iliescu of Romania recently announced that he would seek a third **term,** although the country's **Constitution** provides for only two. He uses the same argument as Mr. Fujimori, that because he was already into his first **term when the Constitution** was passed, that **term** does not count.

Democracy requires regular, peaceful transfers of power. These Presidents should resist the temptation to extend their **terms.** Their nations need the good example of leaders prepared to relinquish power to elected successors, especially

when their popularity might have allowed them to stay.

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