

# LATIN AMERICAN GOVERNMENT

*Susan Smith Nash, Ph.D.*

**Overview** Latin American forms of government have been like none others in the world, thanks in large part to the unique religious and cosmological beliefs, and also to the fact that they were considered territories or colonies of Spain, Portugal, France, England and the Netherland. Later, as countries became independent, the governments were influenced by the existing power structures and indigenous beliefs and communities.

## ANCIENT PERIOD

### Preclassical

**Olmec: La Venta (1200 – 400 B.C.E.):** Although not much is known of the Olmecs, who disappeared long before the Aztecs, their complexes at La Venta and other ceremonial centers in the Mexican states of Veracruz and Tabasco, it is clear that their government centered around a small ruling class, which included a priesthood. Their primary ceremonial duties included conducting cave rituals, games in the ball-courts, dances in animal costumes, and above all, regular ritual sacrifice.

### Classical

**Earl Maya (1500 BCE – 250 CE):** The earliest Maya civilizations centered around a few large city-states which were ruled by individuals considered to be a human-god hybrid. Both men and women could rule, and they were required to preside over ceremonies that included ritual self-mutilation and human sacrifice. The ruling elite presided over a realm that had three social classes: upper ruling elite, middle class (owners of production and services), and the working class. The early Maya society was significantly more egalitarian than the later one, based on carved illustrations of society and the size of dwellings.

**Moche (400 – 100 BCE):** The Moche lived in Peru and their capital, Huaca del Sol, includes urban housing, plazas, monuments, workshops, and massive pyramids constructed of adobe brick. The Moche were ruled by a ruling class who were great collectors of elaborate ceramics and also textiles. The kings, queens, and their families were mummified and revered. The ruling class also guarded mausoleums.

**Maya (250 CE – 900 CE):** The Maya began to establish smaller centers, and each city-state had a unique king or queen. The basic organizational structure remained intact. The power of the ruler was maintained by assuring sufficient food and water for all (by placating the gods with human sacrifice). There is evidence that during droughts, there was a dramatic uptick in the number of human sacrifices.

## POSTCLASSICAL

**Aztec:** The Aztec government was ruled by an elite class of priests and shamans. They administered the economy, land rights, and administration of trade and commerce. At the same time, there was a co-existing branch of government organized around the military also entrusted with maintaining commerce. While human sacrifice is often considered a religious activity, in Aztec culture, it was a regular part of the administration of the government, since it both enforced rule of law and demonstrated to the people the effort made to maintain favor of the gods.

**Inca:** The Inca government was organized around the ruling elite, with vast number of administrators throughout the Andes, who communicated through a complex system of knots and strings (quipus). There were 40,000 functionaries who administered a kingdom of 10 million subjects who spoke more than 30 different languages. They practiced diplomacy as well as a strict system of law enforcement. The nations that were conquered found there were many benefits of being a part of the empire. There were state-sponsored public works, roads, banquets, art productions, and religious festivities.

## EARLY MODERN (COLONIAL) PERIOD

**Audiencias / Viceroyalties:** The Spanish monarchy established the Consejo Real y Supremo de las Indias (Royal and Supreme Council of the Indies) in the early years of the Conquest (in 1524), and soon thereafter, began establishing new provinces, which was called an “audiencia” or Viceroyalty. Each Audiencia was staffed by members of the Spanish nobility. Later, the “Viceroy” was established, and it was the direct representative of the king, and was the center of power. The first viceroyalties were of New Spain (1535) and Peru (1543), and later New Granada (1717) and Rio de la Plata (1776).

**Gobernaciones:** Viceroyalties and Audiencias were subdivided into smaller units. They were the “gobernaciones” and each had its own governor who was in charge of collecting taxes, maintaining law and order, and administering the rules of commerce.

**Alcaldias / Corregimientos de indios:** The Gobernaciones were subdivided into “Alcaldias” (counties / mayorships), which were in charge of the cities. They were largely run by creoles (rather than the “peninsulares” from Spain), and they tended to favor family relationships. As a result, they were known for nepotism and general corruption.

**Pirate Strongholds and Outlaw Enclaves:** Because the prevailing economic system of mercantilism, which meant vast amounts of gold and silver shipped across the waters from Latin America to Spain and Portugal, there was a widely dispersed and extremely active underground economy headed by pirates of all kinds and outlaws. They often dominated the culture in certain island and coastal communities, resulting in often anarchic and Bacchanalian cultures. The biggest pirate city was Port Royal, Jamaica, which was destroyed by an earthquake and tsunami in 1692.

## 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Republics:** After Simon Bolivar inspired uprisings throughout Latin America, the newly formed Republics were ruled in a system of government that had a parliament, a president, and ministry of justice. Although there were elections, not everyone had a right to vote (slaves, indigenous, and women could not vote), and so what resulted was a replica of previous domestic power structure, and the same elite families continued to hold the reins of power.

**Military Dictatorship:** Latin America saw the rise of a unique kind of isolationism that expressed itself through military dictatorships. One of the most celebrated was that of Solano Lopez of Paraguay, the protagonist of “Yo, El Supremo” (I am the Supreme One) by Agosto Roa Bastos (the Gabriel Garcia Marquez of Paraguay). The military dictatorships were isolationist and nationalistic, and they often plunged into suicidal wars rather than compromise.

**Utopian Settlements:** Elizabeth Nietzsche, the sister of Friedrich Nietzsche, was one of several utopian thinkers who decided to leave what they considered to be a “degraded” Europe, and to establishments in Latin America that would allow them to maintain their vision of purity (of race, religion, or odd belief system). Elizabeth Nietzsche’s dream of an all-white utopia in Bolivia ended in disaster. On the other hand, the Mennonites in the Chaco and in Mexico survived and in some cases, thrived.

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

**Democracies:** The 20<sup>th</sup> century was a time of revolutions as the ruling elites were viewed as corrupt and oppressive, and also did not allow land ownership, voting rights, or open commerce. The revolutions were struggles over economic control as well as for freedom of expression. The first in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Mexican Revolution. The democratic form of government that resulted centered on a detailed constitution and a separation of church and state.

**Military Dictatorships (Juntas):** The revolutions that shook the young countries in Latin America often resulted in a uniquely Latin American military dictatorship. The military dictatorships of Argentina, Bolivia, Paraguay (Stroessner), Chile (Pinochet), differed from the military dictatorships of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 20<sup>th</sup>-century military dictatorships were able to garner outside support by playing into Cold War politics, and they utilized brutal techniques to maintain control. Argentina was not the only country where many thousands of youth “disappeared”

never to be seen again. They were tortured and then murdered. Military dictatorships were stunningly long-lived, which demonstrates the level of complicit favoritism on all levels of society.

**Communist Dictatorships:** There was little difference between a Communist dictator and a military dictatorship, except for ideology and the ownership of the countries means of production and land. In a Communist government, the government seized all assets, thereby making all land, equipment, and means of production chattels of the state, and in theory, owned communally by everyone. In practice, the ruling elite controlled the assets of the land, which looked strangely feudal rather than communal. Communist dictatorships were in place in Chile (Allende), Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Nicaragua, and famously, Cuba.

**Doomsday Cult:** An echo of the utopian experiments in the nineteenth century, cults took advantage of the fragile (and easily corruptible) legal systems to set up communities that were often nominally religious, but more often about the twisted vision of a charismatic leader who obtained funds through his followers, whom he entrapped both physically and psychologically. The best-known was Jim Jones's The People's Temple in Guayana, which ended tragically with the mass suicide of all its followers.

### Discussion/Questions

1. The cosmology and religious beliefs of the Olmecs resulted in a human sacrifice-based government. It was, as far as we can tell, perhaps the first one in Mesoamerica, and served as a pattern for those that followed. Describe how and why human sacrifice might have been not only tolerated, but encouraged by the people of the Olmec civilization and those that went later.
2. Extensive confederations of far-flung city-states requires extremely effective care, coordination, and administration. It also requires a kind of "lingua franca" for the member states. The Inca Empire extended throughout the Andes, and incorporated more than 30 languages. Describe how their system of quipus, as well as other actions helped maintain control and unity.
3. When Spain formed "New Spain" and the other Viceroyalties and "Audiencias," they installed loyal members of the Spanish aristocracy. Maintaining connections with the Spanish monarchy was considered vital. Describe how the other divisions and subdivisions of the Spanish-controlled monarchy both helped maintain a relationship that was beneficial to Spain, but yet at the same time, resulted in nepotism, cronyism, and corruption.
4. The new republics forged by Simon Bolivar and his followers were portrayed as something absolutely new. However, there were many aspects of the government that were not new at all, and the ruling elites, the creoles, continued to be in power. Describe the pros and cons of keeping the ruling elite in power.
5. Independence from Spain did not mean that all groups had a voice in the government. In fact, it simply reinforced the fact that the indigenous peoples, women, and slaves had no voice at all. Finally, however, times changed. Revolution meant that dreams of inclusion could become a reality. Describe some of the ways in which revolution meant more participation for the previously disenfranchised groups.

### Reading

Altman, Ida, Sarah Cline, and Juan Javier Pescador. (2002) *The Early History of Greater Mexico*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Bethell, Leslie. (1985). *The Cambridge History of Latin America, Volume 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Maolain, Ciaran O., ed. (1985) *Latin American Political Movements*. Harlow: Longman.

Rossi, Ernest, and Jack C. Plano. (1980) *Latin American Political Dictionary*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-Clío.

Sharer, Robert J. and Loa P. Traxler (2006) *The Ancient Maya* Palo Alto, CA: Stanford UP.