

## Populism and civil - military relations

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## Populism and civil–military relations

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### ABSTRACT

Scholars largely view populism as a democratic game and study it through the lens of civilian mass politics, thereby, dismissing the role of the military elite. Nevertheless, populist mobilization may introduce new dynamics into the political landscape of countries that have a long history of politically active militaries. This article scrutinizes the degree and type of civilian control of the military in populist settings. It primarily contends that incumbent populists tend to limit the veto power of the military. However, civilianization in populist regimes does not occur through a consistent reform agenda geared towards democratic governance of the security sector. Populists instead seek to gain personal control of the military through individual, communal, or ideological ties to civilian leadership. The personal model does not aim to hinder the military's political influence. On the contrary, it politicizes the army and seeks to use it under civilian authority towards shared goals. However, populism operates on shaky ground due to the institutional decay it causes.

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Who guards the guardians in populist regimes? The top five (and seven of the top ten) “populist” countries in the Global Populism Database – Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Turkey, Nicaragua, Peru, and El Salvador, in order – have seen at least one successful coup d'état since 1946.<sup>1</sup> Recognizing this inherent danger posed by a country's own guardians, populist leaders have developed diverse civil–military arrangements. They widely range from the Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, who instituted the military as the nucleus of his populist regime and crafted the doctrine of the civil–military alliance (*una alianza cívica-militar*),<sup>2</sup> to Turkey's Tayyip Erdoğan, who, in the 2000s, utilized the populist mobilization to subdue the military establishment.<sup>3</sup> These countries also differ in their populist experiences. While Peronism, an old example par excellence for populism, still informs Argentinian politics, the term (*prachaniyom*/populism) entered the Thai lexicon only in 2001.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding these wide disparities, this article underlines the prevalence of populism in countries with a long history of politically active militaries and investigates if and how populism affects civil–military arrangements.

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The traditional focus of civil–military relations literature has been on civilian control of the military, which assumes a hierarchical relationship between both spheres and refers to military compliance with civilian authority.<sup>5</sup> Specifically, to examine the populist impact on civilian control of the military, this article first outlines the inherent biases in the study of populism, which, despite the present surge of scholarly interest, have limited and impaired research on its entanglement with the military.<sup>6</sup> Then, it juxtaposes both literatures and generates two theoretically-deduced hypotheses, which are tested against statistical and empirical evidence. While providing a tour d’horizon of populist civil–military arrangements, this article mainly argues that populism correlates with the civilianization of politics by diminishing the military’s veto power. However, a research puzzle arises when looking deeper at each case and exploring the diversity of the practices. Unlike the statistics, the empirical evidence does not fully support a coherent populist progressive agenda to institute civilian control of the military. This article explains the difference via the populist way of doing politics and underlines the populist propensity to anti-institutionalism. Civilianization in populist regimes does not occur via ensuring legislative oversight or a comprehensive restructuring agenda towards democratic governance of the security sector but by other means. Populists instead tend to develop personal control of the military, cultivating direct loyalty to civilian leadership. Tracing the “what and how” questions on the phenomenon, the article finally points out that populism, despite its positive effect on the civilianization of politics, operates on a slippery ground due to the institutional decay it causes.

### **Populism and the military in theoretical perspective**

Given the conceptual haziness of populism, multiple approaches have tried to define and analyse it. Distancing the concept from its structural and economic framings, current political research considers populism a thin ideology (Ideational Approach), a political logic (Discourse-Theoretic Approach), a strategy (Strategic Approach), or a political style (Performative Approach).<sup>7</sup> The comparative study of populism, however, is guided mainly by the Ideational Approach. Accordingly, populism is a thin ideology that considers society in a Manichean struggle between the virtuous people and the corrupt elite (anti-elitism) and maintains that politics should reflect the general will of the people (people-centrism).<sup>8</sup> Though not part of the definition, scholars also agree on its central policy outcome: anti-institutionalism that considers bureaucratic procedures and checks and balances only an impediment to the realization of the popular will.<sup>9</sup> This minimal definition hinders further sophistication; however, a growing body of scholarship has used the concept to comprehend contemporary political affairs and link diverse cases together.<sup>10</sup>

Current scholarship pertains to three inherent biases that limit its study regarding civil–military relations. First, scholars primarily view populism as a democratic game and study it through the lens of civilian mass politics, thereby dismissing the role of the military elite. As a matter of fact, classical cases of populism in Latin America emerged under the authoritarian military regimes of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>11</sup> In the former reverse waves of democratization, democratic breakdowns occurred due to sudden interruptions such as military coups and frequently ended up with closed autocracies. The ongoing third reverse wave, however, primarily consists of instances of populist autocratization, which incrementally deforms democracy while masquerading as legal-electoral.<sup>12</sup> This populist way of politics often passes unrecognized because of

the “fallacy of coup-ism”, which regards the absence of direct military interventions as a sufficient condition for civilian control.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, even with this negative definition of civilian control, it is apparent that coups have not ceased to exist in many parts of the world. Numerous instances – and more frequently the lingering threats – of anti-populist coup plots, on the one hand, and a considerable number of self-coups (*autogolpe*), on the other, underscore the importance of looking beyond the civilian mass politics framework to the civil–military relations in populist settings.<sup>14</sup> The academic literature agrees that “coups breed more coups”.<sup>15</sup> Military interventions leave an indelible mark on that country’s institutional structure, elite pacts, and political culture, providing a fertile, legitimating ground for aspiring generals to insert or sustain their political influence in diverse forms. Hence, any study of populism in military-dominated regimes must consider this background.

Second, scholarly literature considers populism as the politicians’ playfield, expectedly focusing on political parties and their leaders. By and large, the mainstream field of comparative politics long overlooked the military’s role in theories of democracy and democratization.<sup>16</sup> However, the intra-elite power dynamics do not exist just between the government and the opposition. In countries with a history of military contestation, the military establishment appears to be a key power broker capable of altering the political game by allying with or opposing populist leadership. While the military decides on the political fate of the populist leader in so many countries, its role has not made inroads into the theorization of populist configurations of politics.

Third, there is the normative bias to consider. Studies of the current populist wave are overwhelmed by the alarming concern about populism eroding democracy. However, this pessimistic, problem-solving approach distorts the debate by its mere focus on populism as a destructive force. Populism can potentially be both a threat to democracy (by weakening checks and balances) and a remedy (by enhancing representation and democratic accountability) for democracy.<sup>17</sup> This versatility also applies to civilian control of the military – a necessary component of democracy.

Geographically, recent studies have increasingly considered the Global South,<sup>18</sup> but the uneven focus on populism in European countries with relatively established practices of civilian control of the military undermines the significance of the populism–military nexus in many other settings. In fact, Latin America has been the epicentre of pioneering works in both populism and civil–military relations. Reflecting the intricate relationship between populism and the military in the region, both literatures were quite intertwined until the third wave of democratization in the 1980s.<sup>19</sup> At the time, the concept of “military populism” was frequently used to refer to the rule of General Juan Velasco Alvarado in Peru or Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, who blended authoritarian politics and populist economics.<sup>20</sup> Thus, the trap here is not the ascendancy of a Eurocentric view, as in the overall critique of populism studies, but a deliberate descent into Latin American parochialism. A global perspective on populism and the military then requires the analysis of non-regional cases such as Turkey and Thailand, too.

Though minimal, the definition of populism can still serve as a springboard for further theorization.<sup>21</sup> Juxtaposing the literatures on populism and civil–military relations, this article postulates two hypotheses to explore the if and how questions:

*H1 – Populism is conducive to the civilianization of politics:* Civilianization pertains to the process of consolidating the civilian control of the military. It is the gradual empowerment of civilians to exercise independent decision-making authority, with little interference from the military, in policy domains such as “elite recruitment,

public policy, internal security, national defence, and military organization”.<sup>22</sup> Populism fosters the process of civilianization of politics firstly because the people-centrism in populism dictates that nothing should restrain the will of the people. By hallowing the ballot box, populist incumbents assert their legitimacy as the *vox populi*, adopt a plebiscitary view of democracy, and undercut any norms, procedures, and institutions that could constrain the elected executive power. The notion of “the people as sovereign” and the ensuing populist agenda of reclaiming sovereignty for the people require that ultimate political authority be vested in the people and their elected representatives, not in the appointed bodies.<sup>23</sup> In militarized polities, populist leaders curb the armed forces’ ability and desire to intervene in politics, keeping them subordinate to the executive. Secondly, the incumbent’s strong popular support is a formidable social deterrent for the armed forces.<sup>24</sup> Populism broadens political representation by incorporating and rallying the formerly excluded groups under the banner of the people and gives voice to the “silent majority”. A robust populist mobilization around the incumbent leader will hinder the likelihood of military intervention and strip such plots from any political and social legitimacy.

*H2 – Populism generates personal control of the military:* Populist civil–military arrangements are informed by the anti-institutionalist predisposition of populism and the ensuing personalization of executive power. Populist leaders claim to embody the will of the people and consider checks and balances mere hindrances to the realization of that will.<sup>25</sup> In the lack of political stability and institutional infrastructure, incumbent populists tend to personalize their power as a survival strategy.<sup>26</sup> The populist tendency towards the personalistic, centralized, rule-eroding, and politicized decision-making has been studied in several policy fields.<sup>27</sup> In civil–military relations, such populist personalization of the regime paves the way to the personal control of the military. In Huntington’s normative prescription for achieving civilian supremacy, the objective control of the military requires civil oversight mechanisms and, most importantly, a strict delineation of military responsibilities and the separation of authorities between the military and political actors. Yet, it is not the only way of ensuring that. Many political leaders draw the military into the civilian area for co-optation – envisaging shared values and objectives between the two and mostly politicizing the military in the mirror image of the political elite.<sup>28</sup> While the populist disregard for liberal norms and institutions may encourage the military establishment to oppose the political leadership more freely,<sup>29</sup> the populist leader may opt for establishing personal ties or indoctrination to ensure military compliance.

## The methodology

To examine the populist impact on civil–military relations, this article employs statistical data and then expands on the obtained results by focusing on specific cases. In the quantitative part of the study, the key independent variable is the populism score offered by the Global Populism Database (2000–2018) via the hand-coding of 215 chief executives in 66 countries.<sup>30</sup> Prepared in line with the Ideational Approach, this is the most comprehensive database on populism.<sup>31</sup> The scores range from 0 to 2, 2 being “very populist” according to the overall evaluation of the speeches. The dependent variable is civilian control of the military, to be measured broadly by the military veto power. Military veto power is an annual measure taken from the Political

Roles of the Military database.<sup>32</sup> It is a dichotomous measure, with 0 referring to military not identified as veto-player and 1 referring to military identified as veto-player.

The analysis considers a series of control variables that may be confounding factors in the relationship between populism and the civilian control of the military. First, it accounts for the regime's left- or right-wing credentials that are represented by the ideological orientation of the chief executive, taken from the Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project.<sup>33</sup> It is a categorical indicator, with  $-1$  referring to being leftist, 0 referring to being centrist, and 1 referring to being rightist. Since the higher values refer to being more rightist, the variable is named "rightist". The second control variable is the vote share of the largest government party. It is obtained from the Database of Political Institutions.<sup>34</sup> The data was originally compiled by the Development Research Group of the World Bank. The models also control for the existence of executive power over military force. The variable is from the Institutions and Elections Project.<sup>35</sup> It is a dummy variable measuring whether or not the executive has the power to use military force abroad without legislative approval. Finally, the models control for the GDP per capita in 2010 US Dollars (World Development Index), democracy level (POLITY IV), and whether or not a country experienced a coup in the past.<sup>36</sup> The independent variables in the multivariate analyses are lagged for a year to account for a causal relation. The data ranges from 1999 to 2016. It includes 48 countries coded in terms of the dependent variables and the key independent variable (Table 1).

Besides statistical evidence, the article looks into specific cases, which may reveal significant variations unnoticed in broader comparative analysis. It focuses on countries with a history of a politically active military ruled by a populist leader ever since 2000. In the academic literature, the empirical evidence for the legacy of past coups is robust, and the use of a previous coup as a control variable is an established practice.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, cases are selected from the countries with populist leaders – as coded in the Global Populism Database – which have seen at least one successful coup since 1946. Meeting these two criteria, the article draws on evidence from these 13 countries and their populist leaders: Argentina (Eduardo Duhalde, 2002–2003), Bolivia (Evo Morales, 2006–2019), Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro, 2019–2022), Ecuador (Lucio Gutiérrez, 2003–2005; Rafael Correa, 2007–2017), El Salvador (Nayib Bukele, 2019–present), Greece (Alexis Tsipras, 2015–2019), Honduras (Manuel Zelaya, 2006–2009; Juan Orlando Hernández, 2014–2022), Nicaragua (Daniel Ortega, 2007–present), Paraguay (Nicanor Duarte 2003–2008), Peru (Alan García, 2006–2011; Ollanta Humala 2011–2016), Thailand (Thaksin Shinawatra,

**Table 1.** Summary statistics.

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
Military veto power	678	0.083	0.275	0	0	0	1
Populism score	630	0.419	0.468	0.000	0.038	0.625	1.917
Rightist	630	0.063	0.853	-1.000	-1.000	1.000	1.000
Vote share	453	36.092	15.744	0.000	25.430	45.980	88.410
Executive power <sup>1</sup>	489	0.640	0.480	0.000	0.000	1.000	1.000
GDPCC <sup>2</sup>	620	7278.594	5123.596	388.217	2941.366	10726.470	25447.430
Polity IV	621	6.665	4.390	-7.000	7.000	9.000	10.000
Coup dummy	678	0.448	0.498	0	0	1	1

<sup>1</sup>Executive Power: Does an executive have the power to use military force abroad without legislative approval?

<sup>2</sup>GDPCC: GDPCC Constant 2010 US dollar.

2005–2006; Yingluck Shinawatra, 2011–2014); Turkey (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 2007–present), and Venezuela (Hugo Chávez, 2000–2013; Nicolás Maduro, 2013–present). The database covers only the period between 2000 and 2018, so the later cases of Brazil and El Salvador are added. The qualitative case studies, expected to offer rich empirical evidence, are employed here only to the extent they contribute to formulating some generalizable implications. They utilize local and international media coverage, reports, and secondary academic sources.

## The populist civilianization of politics

Evidence supports the expectation that an increase in the populism score is associated with a change in the number of military privileges. The first model in Table 2 illustrates that countries led by more populist leaders are less likely to have a military, which can be classified as a major veto player. The same statistical relationship holds when the analysis uses a generalized linear mixed effects model (see Model 2) rather than the logit model (see Model 1). Figure 1 depicts this relationship visually: as the level of populism increases, the predicted probability of having a military as a veto player decreases. The dashed lines demonstrate the 95% confidence intervals. The levels of democracy and development are other statistically significant variables in these two models. Less democratic and wealthier countries are more likely to have militaries with veto power.

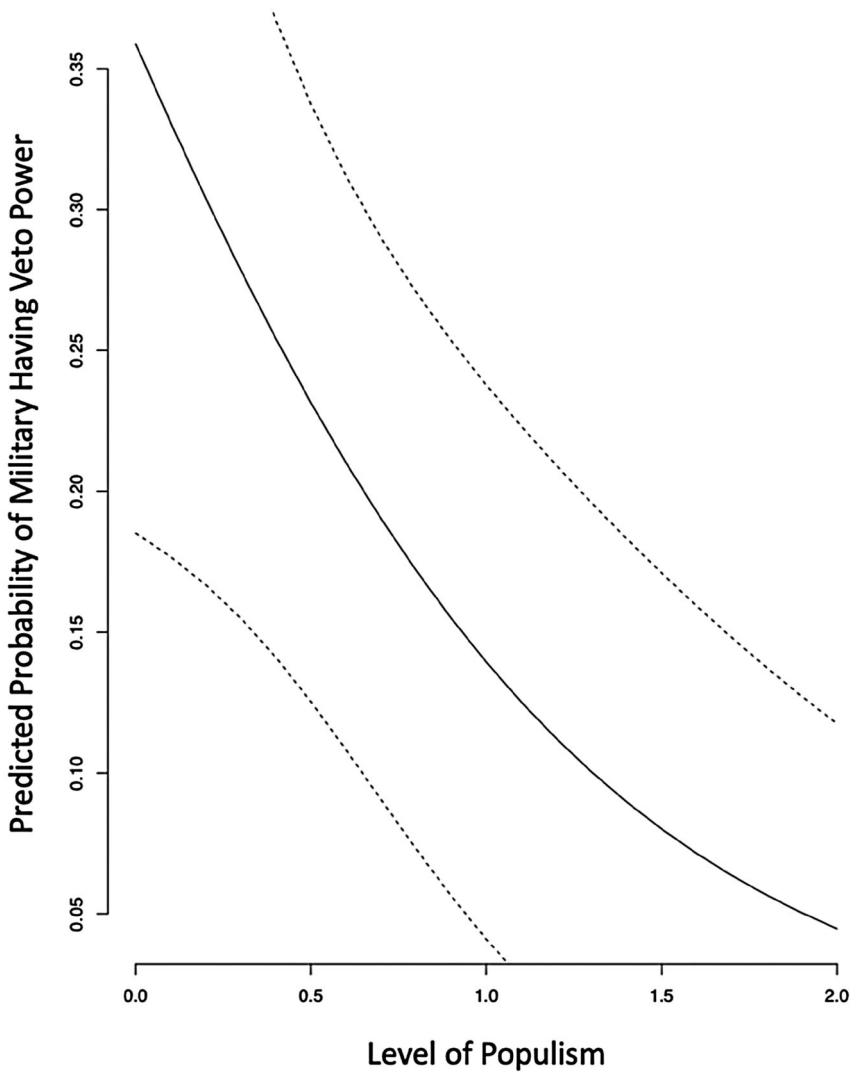
**Table 2.** Multivariate analysis results.

	Military veto		Dependent variable:
	Logit		Generalized linear
	(1)	(2)	mixed-effects
Populism score	−1.241** (0.526)		−3.471** (1.537)
Rightist	0.029 (0.323)		−0.849 (0.677)
Vote share	−0.007 (0.019)		0.028 (0.029)
Executive power <sup>1</sup>	−0.276 (0.590)		2.296 (1.455)
Coup dummy	27.327 (1,248.828)		
Polity IV	−0.823*** (0.223)		−1.470*** (0.523)
GDPPC <sup>2</sup>	0.0004*** (0.0001)		
Constant	−24.966 (1,248.825)		6.229 (4.140)
Observations	382		168
R <sup>2</sup>			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>			
Log likelihood	−54.037		−56.682
Akaike Inf. Crit.	124.074		127.365
Bayesian Inf. Crit.			149.233
Residual Std. Error			
F Statistic			
Note:	* $p < 0.1$ ; ** $p < 0.05$ ; *** $p < 0.01$		

<sup>1</sup>Executive power: Does an executive have the power to use military force abroad without legislative approval?

<sup>2</sup>GDPPC: GDPPC Constant 2010 US dollar.





**Figure 1.** Relationship between populism and the probability of having military veto power.

What explains the populist civilianization of politics?<sup>38</sup> Firstly, populist leaders in military-dominated countries are expected to antagonize the military establishment as an elite force and generate a strong anti-military sentiment within their respective populations. Yet, this is the case only in Turkey (2007–2013) and Thailand (2005–2006, 2011–2014).<sup>39</sup> In both, the military has traditionally assumed the role of the guardian of Kemalist secularism and the kingdom, respectively. Again, in both countries, anti-militarist populisms flourished in response to direct or indirect military threats. In Turkey, the EU-backed liberal agenda of ending the military influence in politics, or in the then-popular parlance, the “military tutelage” (*askeri vesayet*), provided a safe haven for Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP), whose predecessor had only been removed from office a few years ago

by the 1997 military intervention.<sup>40</sup> Under the banner of “the people”, it also gathered diverse actors alienated by the military-dominated regime, including Islamists, Kurds, and liberals. With this electoral support and the EU-induced progressive reform wind, the AKP survived the 2007 e-memorandum, when the military reminded the AKP of its role as the guardian of the secular, unitary regime.<sup>41</sup> The ruling party eventually subdued the civil–military Kemalist bureaucracy after a series of coup trials (2008–2014) and a constitutional referendum in 2010.<sup>42</sup> Only then did it feel compelled to shift the referent of the “elite” and descend into anti-Western populism. In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra appeared to be pushed to build a populist discourse by the direct military threat. However, Thaksin’s manoeuvre did not prevent the coup of 19 September 2006 – a royalist intervention supported by the disgruntled urban middle-class opposition to Thaksin’s rural-backed populist rule. As a result, Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai Party (TRT) party were banned. However, the ouster of Thaksin sparked the formation of the Red Shirts. This anti-military mass movement continued to support Thaksin-associated parties and saw his return as a return to democracy.<sup>43</sup>

Even when there are no such immediate threats from the military, genuine or imagined, the fear of a coup has been exploited to rally “the people” around the leader. For instance, in Venezuela, both Chávez and Maduro spread conspiracy theories about external plots to topple and assassinate them or saw widespread anti-government protests as the US coup attempts.<sup>44</sup> Following the failed coup attempt in 2016, Turkish populism again frequently leveraged similar anxieties to consolidate its base, which had become bewildered by the post-2018 currency and economic crisis.<sup>45</sup>

Secondly, populist leaders may gain some leverage over a powerful, coup-making army by expanding and mobilizing their base. After seizing power, the military rulers face “a dual legitimacy crisis: they must justify not only why they should rule but also how they came to power”.<sup>46</sup> Hence, a solid social base for the democratically elected leader can work as a deterrent for aspiring generals. Beyond rhetoric, maverick populists leave an indelible mark on their countries’ domestic politics, reconfiguring the populist impetus in their own personalistic fashion, ranging from Thaksina-prachaniyom to Chavismo. Yet, they all aim to empower traditionally disadvantaged groups by increasing their democratic representation or access to social services. For example, Evo Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, prioritized the needs of the poor and built an inclusive democratic platform to embrace the long-excluded indigenous people. Likewise, Zelaya adopted the motto “Gobierno del Poder Ciudadano” (Citizen’s Power Government) and, following a 2006 referendum, implemented the Ley de Participación Ciudadana (Citizen’s Participation Law), which extended direct channels for political participation.<sup>47</sup> Massive populist mobilization, facilitated by an unmediated bond between the people and their leader, provides the latter with a significant boost in power to curb the military’s political influence. Populism does not offer a bulletproof shield against ambitious generals, but incumbent populists might dare to do things that were previously unthinkable due to the military’s untouchable standing. Bukele, for instance, surprised many human rights activists on the day of his inauguration when he ordered the military to remove Colonel Domingo Monterrosa’s name from military barracks. Monterrosa was one of the commanders involved in the 1981 el Mozote massacre.<sup>48</sup> Turkey’s Erdoğan, too, expunged the names of the generals implicated in previous coups d’état, but he also launched the Ergenekon (2008) and Sledgehammer (2010) trials against alleged coup-plotters, thereby diminishing the military’s political capacity. The exception that proves the

rule is Nicolas Maduro, Chávez's handpicked successor, who lacked his predecessor's personal charisma (and soaring oil revenues) and could maintain his position only by sharing it with the established elites and the military.<sup>49</sup>

The strategic calculations behind any kind of military intervention depend on several factors, such as the level and scope of the organizational support for the political leader. However, parallel to the global trend, populist countries have seen a precipitous decrease in traditional coups d'état.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the first wave of populism, when populist governments ranging from Peron in Argentina to Menderes in Turkey were deposed in open-ended coups in 1955 and 1960, the 2000s saw a shift towards new forms of intervention. These include "promissory coups", in which the military intervenes temporarily to restore democracy,<sup>51</sup> and "postmodern coups" – the ouster of the government with military pressure but not directly.<sup>52</sup> As an example of promissory coups, Thailand's military seized power in 2006 to oust Thaksin Shinawatra's elected government after the Constitutional Court promptly annulled the election results the same year. Nonetheless, the army let Thaksin's allies run in the 2007 free elections. His successor Samak Sundaravej managed to win the elections and form a government, but the Constitutional Court dissolved the parliament on charges of electoral fraud. Unable to contain the thriving populist movement that won every election since 2001, the military intervened once more in 2014, this time overthrowing Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra with no promise of immediate elections.

Postmodern military interventions, which rely heavily on the potential threat of a genuine coup d'état as leverage, provide the military with a less violent and cost-effective option, particularly in the face of strong populist mobilization. The most common form is the legislative branch's constitutional impeachment process, during which the military appears to be the behind-the-scenes player pressuring the government to cede power.<sup>53</sup> For example, the Honduran leader Manuel Zelaya was deposed in June 2009 by a military intervention under the order of the Supreme Court. Zelaya's decision to call a referendum on establishing a constituent assembly à la Chávez sparked a constitutional crisis, during which both Zelaya and his opponents sought the support of the military. Eventually, the armed forces took a side and detained and exiled Zelaya, instantly handing power over to the civilian interim government. Following a record of seven consecutive democratic elections, it was also the first successful intervention in the region since the 1991 Haitian coup d'état.<sup>54</sup> Again, in Bolivia, the military refused Morales' order to suppress massive protests against alleged electoral fraud in the contentious 2019 elections and instead "suggested" that he resign in the country's best interests. When Morales' removal in November 2019 sparked a new wave of rallies in his support, the military, in contrast to its prior refusal, interfered disproportionately this time under the interim president's decree order.<sup>55</sup> In Ecuador, the path to Lucio Gutiérrez's 2005 removal began with spurring mass rallies, which escalated on the condition of the military defection. As a result, the joint command withdrew its support for the government and opposed the proclamation of the state of emergency, while the chief of police forces resigned. Finally, Congress voted to impeach the president and swore in Vice President Alfredo Palacio.<sup>56</sup> Postmodern coups rest on legal orders or popular uprisings to legitimize themselves against the power of populist mobilization. In their absence, the military may even cultivate its own popular base, as was the case with the large anti-government Republic Rallies on the eve of Turkey's 2007 e-memorandum.<sup>57</sup>

Apart from the shift towards less costly forms of military contestation,<sup>58</sup> populist mobilization appears to be a game changer in several instances. In April 2002, Chavez escaped a coup attempt, as did Erdoğan in July 2016. In both cases, the military actors, who remained loyal to the political leader, managed to suppress the attempts. Nonetheless, populist mobilization played a significant role in thwarting both conspiracies. Chavez is Latin America's first leftist president, having been restored to power after a military coup attempt.<sup>59</sup> Erdoğan too was quick to mobilize his followers when confronted with a military plot on the night of 15 July 2016. To keep that vigilant spirit alive, he organized massive rallies called "Democracy Watch" in urban centres.

Even if anti-populist coups succeed in temporarily seizing power, they fail to eradicate populist mobilization in the long run.<sup>60</sup> In Thailand, both the military and the populist base were firmer. The army deposed Thaksin in 2006, and then the new-elected pro-Thaksin government was ousted by the judiciary in 2008. The Red Shirts' rallies in 2009 and 2010 were ruthlessly suppressed; nonetheless, this did not prevent Thaksin's sister Yingluck Shinawatra from assuming power following her 2011 political victory. In the face of growing political polarization, the military intervened again in 2014 to "fix" Thai democracy for good.<sup>61</sup> Obviously, the different trajectories in Venezuela, Turkey, and Thailand show that populist mobilization alone does not suffice to eliminate the military threat. Several other factors, such as the mobilization capacity of the populist leader/party and the present elite pacts, influence the outcome. Counter to the objective of these interventions, however, populist leaders such as Chávez, Thaksin, or Erdoğan, emerged from coup attempts with a cult of personality, cementing the emotional connection between the leader and his "people".<sup>62</sup> Chávez became the Commandor (el Comandante), and Erdoğan was hailed as the Chief (*Reis*).

### ***Is there a populist progressive reform agenda of civilianization?***

Despite the anti-militarist rhetoric in non-Latin American cases, it is still hard to conclude that populism tends to establish the civilianization of politics. The populist-military alliance is the more typical pattern in Latin America.<sup>63</sup> Several prominent populist leaders such as Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, Lucio Gutiérrez of Ecuador, and Jose Bolsonaro of Brazil literally have a military career background. Before their populist ascent into power, both Chávez and Gutiérrez themselves made coup attempts in 1992 and 2000, respectively. Such an alliance is more likely when the "elite" is primarily identified as an international actor or associated with a foreign element so as to adopt an anti-imperialist discourse opposing the US unilateral and interventionist foreign policies. This explains the Turkish leader's increasingly militaristic politics in the wake of the 2013 Gezi Protests, which allowed Erdoğan to shift from anti-military to anti-Western populism with relative ease. In a Manichean frame, he now fights the "mastermind", a nefarious imperialist force bent on dividing and conquering Turkey, and the military has become a crucial pillar of his anti-Western, autonomy-seeking foreign policy.<sup>64</sup> The populist-military alliance, however, is most visibly manifested in self-coups, in which the military backs the populist usurper. Notable examples include Venezuela, where the pro-Maduro Supreme Tribunal of Justice took over the legislative powers of the National Assembly in 2017, and el Salvador, where "millennial dictator" Nayib Bukele occupied the opposition-controlled legislature with armed troops in 2020 – a first in the postwar period.<sup>65</sup>

Overall, populism does not appear to dictate a deliberate coherent reform agenda to curb the military's political influence. Rafael Correa (2007–2017) in Ecuador and Nicanor Duarte (2003–2008) in Paraguay are symbolically the first presidents since the transition to democracy to have a Minister of Defence without military career background. Ecuador's 2008 constitution took aim at military impunity by abolishing separate courts for security forces and civilian courts to hear cases involving the military. Subsequent referendums in 2009 and 2011 further empowered the civilian courts and non-governmental organizations in these cases. However, even when the military brass went to the National Court of Justice in 2015 to “watch” the hearings on past military abuses, this institutional show of force failed to have any impact. In general, the military justice reform resulted in a decrease in the number of civilians killed by security forces.<sup>66</sup> In Paraguay, however, the release of former Chief of Staff Lino Oviedo and some perpetrators of the 1999 Paraguayan March killings symbolically bolstered the military impunity, laying the path for the remilitarization of politics under his successor Fernando Lugo's administration.<sup>67</sup>

Turkey is another country having zigzags. With its anti-military zeal, which stemmed from being a suspect in the eyes of a secular military, the AKP government repealed the EMASYA protocol (The Protocol on Security, Public Order and Assistance Units) in 2010, which provided the legal framework for the 1997 intervention, granting the military a legal shield and a commanding position over all the security forces engaged in the war on terror to re-establish public order in the country. In the wake of the coup attempt, Erdoğan, however, resurrected the EMASYA in July 2016 and promulgated Law No. 6722, which grants the security forces blanket impunity for any damage or violation of human rights committed during the curfew. Again, the 2010 constitutional referendum restricted the jurisdiction of military tribunals (Article 145) and repealed the amnesty article (Article 15) that shielded the military from prosecution for its past military interventions. Later in 2016 and 2017, however, Erdoğan issued Article 37 of Law No. 6755 and Article 121 of Decree No. 696, which granted sweeping immunity to state employees and civilians, respectively, in the suppression of the 2016 coup attempt and ensuing terror acts. With a broad stipulation of terrorism and yet without a time limit, these amendments exempted the military and paramilitary bodies from abuses of power.<sup>68</sup>

At the other end of the spectrum, far from commencing military justice reform, Bukele opposed the Supreme Court's order prohibiting the military and police from arbitrarily detaining anyone for failing to adhere to the Covid-19 quarantine measures.<sup>69</sup> Yet, the quintessential example is Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution, in which he, through the 1999 Constitution, deliberately destroyed the non-partisan, professional character of the Venezuelan army and repurposed it for his revolutionary project. This includes several measures, from granting the military the right to vote for the first time in the country's history to enabling the concurrent exercise of the military and civilian authorities (with many military officers assuming positions in the public administration).<sup>70</sup>

In total, there is no coherent reform agenda of civilianization envisaged by populism, but then how can one talk about the populist civilianization of politics that the statistical evidence suggests? This question leads us to the subsequent debate about how populists seek to control the military.

## The personal control of the military

Though celebrated, for instance, as a “quiet revolution” (“*Sessiz Devrim*”) in Turkey or “citizen’s revolution” (“*La Revolución Ciudadana*”) in Ecuador, the more common form of populist democratic backsliding is the executive aggrandizement, at which checks on executive power are eliminated one by one in legal terms.<sup>71</sup> The constitutions crafted by Chávez, Morales, and Correa all envisaged a new polity buttressing the executive, centralizing the power in the presidency, and eroding checks and balances. Other populists adopted plebiscitary methods like Erdoğan’s 2017 referendum on the transition to the presidential system.<sup>72</sup> Apart from the intimidation of opponents or subversion of horizontal accountability, populist self-aggrandizement may even take the shape of a self-coup, suspending the constitution to fully amass power.<sup>73</sup> Specifically, in Latin America, they reinvigorate the tradition of caudillismo,<sup>74</sup> concentrating power in their hands and turning official bodies into rubber-stamp institutions. In the third wave of populism in Latin America, leaders such as Morales, Gutiérrez, and Correa sought to follow Chavez’s textbook by packing the judiciary with loyalists or attempting to establish a constituent assembly. In Turkey, Erdoğan utilized the 2016 abortive coup for his extraordinary measures to overhaul the state apparatus, purge the opponents, and initiate his long-held dream of hyper-presidentialism. In general, with their blatant disregard for the separation of powers and perception of the constitutional constraints as an impediment to the general will, populist leaders tend to personalize the executive power in their anti-institutionalist fervour as a common precursor to autocratic reversion.

In this context, the populist anti-institutionalization and personalization of power are not conducive to the objective civilian control of the military based on military professionalism and civilian oversight mechanisms. So, there is no wonder about the lack of a reform agenda towards instituting civilian control of the military as expected in liberal democracies. The populist model used here is one in which the military’s loyalty is won by leadership’s strict control of the entry and exit processes, appointments, and promotions in the army. Only those open or potential sympathizers with the leaders’ political views, or better still, those actively engaged in partisan acts in line with the ethos of the ruling class, are recruited to the new loyal army structure. Moreover, the populist leader establishes personal links with the military commanders and tends to control them usually through patron-client networks rather than through legislative oversight.

The personal model does not aim to hinder the military’s political influence. On the contrary, it politicizes the army and seeks to use it under civilian authority towards shared goals. Populist leaders break the walls between the civilian and military spheres by politicizing and shaping the armed forces in the mirror image of political power. Personalization seeks to constrain the capacity of the regime elites to credibly threaten to oust the leader. The primary way of establishing this type of civilian control of the military is to develop individual, ideological, or communal (ethnic/religious/kin-based) ties as embodied in the populist leader. Compared to the overall carrot-and-stick approach of the populists, the latter two are more like a long-term investment but with double benefits: it does not only seek to protect the elected bodies from the military’s potential wrath but also grant a formidable support base against other elites, popular uprisings, or foreign interventions.

To shape the military in their mirror image, populist leaders aim to hold a grip over military promotions. In Venezuela, the 1999 Constitution eliminated the parliamentary control over the promotion of high-ranking military officers, and the president, as the Commander in Chief, assumed sole responsibility for approving the military promotions.<sup>75</sup> The direct interference with promotions and retirement fell far from meritocratic recruitment or competence-based promotions but was based on loyalty to the leader. Maduro utilized this authority even in promoting thousands of middle and lower-ranking officers who demonstrated personal loyalty to him.<sup>76</sup> Breaking the conventions of democratic civil–military relations, the politicization of recruitment in the hands of the populist leader boosts the power of the loyalists and marginalizes the less reliable ones, tying the fate of the generals to the populist leadership.

In Thailand, Thaksin sought to personalize his control over the police and military forces by advantaging communities of trust and wed their interests to his, overriding professional norms in military recruitment. While Thaksin promoted his former classmates – Armed Forces Academies Preparatory School Class 10 graduates – to significant positions, he also made his cousin General Chaisit Shinawatra Army Commander in 2002. Thaksin also appointed as Defence Minister General Chavalit Yongchaiyudh – the former prime minister, whose party was merged with Thaksin’s TRT in 2002. Chavalit’s close aide General Yuthasak Sasiprapha became his deputy, and Yuthasak’s brother-in-law General Somdhat Attanand was promoted as Army Commander. Thaksin aimed to establish his loyal clique within the army until he was ousted in 2006.<sup>77</sup>

As an example of communal favouritism, Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, aimed to reduce the civil–military gap and make the army more inclusive of large indigenous groups through an “Equal Opportunity Program” and “advancement programs”, expediting the promotion of indigenous conscripts.<sup>78</sup> Supported by indigenous groups, Correa, too, multiplied the number of indigenous-only units and changed the admission requirements to military schools to increase the share of indigenous officers.<sup>79</sup> The aim here is to expand the groups within the military that may be more loyal to the political leader via ethnic or religious ties. Turkey epitomizes a somewhat reverse tide through the alleged removal of Alevi officers, who are widely believed to form the backbone of the Kemalist secular army.<sup>80</sup>

Another common practice is to assimilate the military’s political identity within the regime’s ideology and cultivate its allegiance. The best example comes from Chavez, who strived to transform the Venezuelan armed forces into a revolutionary army that has gradually slid from protecting the state and its citizens to defending the Chavista regime. In reference to Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution, the 2008 law defined the army as anti-imperialist, revolutionary, and Bolivarian. Chavez demanded the military members declare their commitment to “Fatherland, Socialism or Death” (*Patria, socialismo o muerte*) and ensured that the top officers maintained an ideological affinity with the regime.<sup>81</sup> In Ecuador and Bolivia, Correa and Morales also exploited the military’s historical tradition and affinity with leftist anti-imperialist politics to build a shared ideological ground.<sup>82</sup> In Turkey, Erdoğan used the 2016 abortive coup to overhaul the military education system. The military high schools, known for their Kemalist indoctrination, were closed, and the war colleges were replaced by the National Defence University, now entirely under the AKP’s control.<sup>83</sup> However, this ideological indoctrination does not counter the personalistic character of the populist civilian



control of the military, as the ideology is closely attached to the cult of the populist leader.<sup>84</sup>

Another empirical indication of personalization is the military purge. It not only seeks to punish the disloyal or less reliable officers but also to intimidate other aspirants and remind them who is in power. Correa, Morales, Duarte, Chávez, Maduro, and Erdoğan used the military purge and rotations, mostly in multiple rounds, as a deterrent and coup-proofing measure. Ecuadorian President Correa frequently dismissed the military command, sometimes twice a year. The purges were based on various allegations, from corruption to the infiltration of US intelligence.<sup>85</sup> The strong electoral power is a daring force, which, in addition to the favourable international context, enabled Erdoğan to challenge the untouchable status of the military and pursue the active and retired military officers in 2008 Ergenekon and 2010 Sledgehammer trials for alleged coup plots. As an ironic reflection of the high-level personalization in Turkey's military purges, Erdoğan first dismissed the secular Kemalist officers and promoted his religious Gülenist allies in this process. Still, after 2014 he disowned these trials and assigned many of the Kemalist officers back to the army as a counterbalance to the now-growing Gülenist presence. After the 2016 abortive coup, which Erdoğan blamed this religious community for, he purged all the Gülen-affiliates. Half of the generals and admirals were jailed, and over 23,000 officers were dismissed.<sup>86</sup> Then having consolidated his power via the 2018 transition to the presidential system, he began re-eliminating the Kemalists within the military. All these rotations of the purges eventually depended on the contingent power dynamics to establish his own army.

### The populist civil–military arrangements on slippery ground

In countries where military interventions are the norm, not the exception, the populist power grabs present a delicate balancing game. Both populisms and military interventions arise on already crumbling party systems and growing social and political discontent. The context is volatile, occasionally pushing the populists to collaborate even with the elites they used to fight against. Examples include Morales' realignment with the Santa Cruz elite or Erdoğan's with his Kemalist archenemies. In such a turbulent environment, how the populists approach the military, the key power broker, is crucial. As Kuehn and Trinkunas indicated, there is no all-explanatory variable to scrutinize the military contestation or its lack in populist regimes.<sup>87</sup> Nonetheless, populism has directly or indirectly shaped the trajectory of civil–military relations. Incumbent populists appear to be limiting the veto power of the military. Along with the populist institutional decay, however, this article empirically shows that the typical pattern is the personal control of the military based on individual, communal, or ideological ties between the leader and the armed forces. Populist civilianization of politics does not mean democratization.

Among the cases of anti-militarist populism, Thaksin and Erdoğan exemplify two possible ends: the former was deposed by the military establishment, while the latter subjugated its enemy. Yet, even in the latter's case, initial efforts to establish civilian oversight mechanisms as part of EU-mandated reform packages gradually waned and were replaced by the deliberate institution of a personal model that saw the military as a mere extension of political authority in "New Turkey". In its more typical manifestation, the military-friendly populisms seem to prove successful in establishing civilian control, as seen by Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. However, apart from



ideological penetration, military loyalty relies heavily on the material spoils offered by the populist leadership. This model of civilian control may be jeopardized, as populism is statistically associated with a notable decline in real GDP per capita.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, in the more volatile cases, coup-proofing tactics may backfire, as the academic literature suggests. Zelaya, for instance, despite establishing good terms with the armed forces and lavishing them with material benefits, was unable to avert the interventions that ousted them.

Notwithstanding this, a mere focus on political agency leaves the picture incomplete. For instance, diverse organizational forms ranging from electoral populism to partisan or labour populism may tilt the civil–military power balance in different ways.<sup>89</sup> In addition, this article studies populist–military relations via the lens of internal dynamics; however, the regional and international dynamics can be equally significant. The US assistance to militaries in several Latin American countries such as Honduras, Nicaragua, or el Salvador,<sup>90</sup> or the EU pressure on Turkey in the 2000s to restructure the civil–military relations significantly impacted the power ambitions and positions of both the populists and the military. Likewise, the military influence does not manifest itself only as direct interventions, but also takes multiple forms that need to be studied in relation to populism. Notwithstanding the diversity of cases and factors, the global resurgence of populism still requires a more holistic approach to study its policy consequences.

## Notes

1. Lewis et al., “Revealed: The Rise and Rise of Populist Rhetoric.”
2. Strønen, “A Civil–Military Alliance.”
3. Gürsoy, “The 15 July 2016 Failed Coup”.
4. Phongpaichit and Baker, “Thaksin’s Populism,” 65.
5. For a definitional discussion, see Croissant et al., “Beyond the Fallacy of Coup-ism.”
6. There is a growing interest in civil–military relations within the recent wave of populism studies. See Baykan et al., “Anti-Populist Coups d’état in the Twenty-First Century”; Frič and Pernica, “Civil–Military Relations”; Hunter and Vega, “Populism and the Military”; Kuehn and Trinkunas, “Conditions of Military Contestation in Populist Latin America”; and, Yilmaz and Ali Salem, “Military and Populism.”
7. Rovira Kaltwasser et al, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*; Hawkins et al, *The Ideational Approach*; Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; Moffitt, *The Global Rise of Populism*; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*; Weyland, “Populism and Authoritarianism.”
8. Mudde, “Populism”; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*.
9. Skenderovic, “Populism.”
10. Rovira Kaltwasser et al, *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*.
11. Weyland, “Populism and authoritarianism,” 321.
12. Lührmann and Lindberg, “A Third Wave of Autocratization is Here.”
13. Croissant et al., “Beyond the Fallacy of coup-ism”.
14. Boese and Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2022*.
15. Arbatli, “Armies in Politics,” 5.
16. Almeda, “Escape from Huntington’s Labyrinth,” 63–65.
17. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism in Europe and the Americas*.
18. de la Torre, *The Routledge Handbook of Global Populism*.
19. Baykan et al., “Anti-Populist Coups d’état in the Twenty-First Century”; Kuehn and Trinkunas, “Conditions of Military Contestation in Populist Latin America”.
20. Grayson Jr., “Peru’s Military Populism.” For its application to the African context, see Bienen, “Populist Military Regimes in West Africa.”
21. Hawkins and Rovira Kaltwasser, “The Ideational Approach to Populism.”
22. Croissant et al., “Beyond the Fallacy of Coup-ism.”

23. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 83.
24. Arbatli, "Armies in Politics," 3.
25. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 62.
26. Oztig and Donduran, "Failed Coups," 4.
27. Destradi and Plagemann, "Populism and International Relations"; Rodrik, "Is Populism."
28. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 80–97. According to Huntington, the concept of civilian control can be examined in two categories: objective and subjective. Despite the lucidity in the delineation of objective control, Huntington does not seem to have offered a distinct framework for the other category. In practice, subjective control comprises anything that cannot be characterized as objective control. Undoubtedly, personal control of the military lies under the subjective category. Nevertheless, it places a great deal of emphasis on the personalist dimension, given that subjective control need not be personalistic and can also manifest in a bureaucratic manner, as observed in the Soviet Union.
29. Aydogan, "The Future of Civil-Military Relations."
30. Hawkins et al., *Global Populism Database*.
31. The Global Populism Database has been faced intermittent criticisms about its reliance on text-based methodology, its specific results on some countries, or its limited usability for doing in-depth populism research. See, for instance, Meijers and Zaslove, "Measuring Populism." However, the relative comprehensiveness of the database allows researchers to conduct large-n studies.
32. Croissant et al., "Militaries' Roles in Political Regimes."
33. Kitschelt, *Democratic Accountability and Linkages Project*.
34. Scartascini et al., *Database of Political Institutions Codebook 2017*.
35. Wig et al., "Updated Data on Institutions and Elections 1960–2012."
36. Powell and Thyne, "Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010."
37. Arbatli, "Armies in Politics," 5.
38. The concept of civilianization should not be regarded as a direct antithesis to militarization. The process of civilianization in a country can occur concurrently even with the enhancement of its military power. The crucial aspect of civilianization is in the extent to which civilian leaders possess the predominant influence in policy-making.
39. Compared to Turkey and Thailand, the militaries largely lacked their old strong political presence in Latin America after the widespread efforts to make them accountable for their past atrocities. Only recently, with their success in combating gang violence and the covid-19 pandemic, the militaries found the opportunity to restore their image.
40. Cizre and Çınar, "Turkey 2002."
41. Cevik and Tas, "In Between Democracy and Secularism."
42. Gürsoy, "The 15 July 2016 Failed Coup."
43. Phongpaichit and Baker, "Thaksin's Populism," 78.
44. Oner, "Nicolas Maduro."
45. Taş, "The 15 July Abortive Coup".
46. Grewal and Kureshi, "How to Sell a Coup: Elections as Coup Legitimation."
47. Rodrigez, "Populism v. Neoliberalism."
48. Wolf, "A Populist President Tests El Salvador's Democracy."
49. Oner, "Nicolas Maduro."
50. Bermeo, "On Democratic Backsliding."
51. *Ibid.*, 10.
52. The term of postmodern coup, a broader category than the legislative coup, was first used for Turkey's 1997 military intervention. Aydogan, "The Future of Civil-Military Relations."
53. Because the postmodern coups without the blatant use of military force do not follow the traditional patterns of coup d'état, they bring conceptual confusion about what counts as a coup or mere legal procedure of impeachment. For this paper, the use of postmodern military interventions will cover any military threat to overthrow the elected leader or government as an explicit military action. For discussion, see Rittinger, "Coup-Proofing Vulnerable Presidencies in Latin America."
54. Ruhl, "Trouble in Central America."
55. Pion-Berlin and Acacio, "Explaining Military Responses."
56. Jaskoski, "Ecuador."

57. Cevik and Tas, “In Between Democracy and Secularism.”
58. Beside the promissory or postmodern coups, another form of military contestation is resignation. In 2011, Turkey’s top generals resigned in defiance to Erdoğan’s policies to reengineer the armed forces via the legal trials and eliminate the Kemalist military officers. Similarly, in 2021, the top military brass in Brazil resigned in reaction to Bolsanaro’s policies politicizing the armed forces.
59. On this background, later in October 2002, when a group of senior military officers, known as *Los Generales de Plaza Altamira* (The Generals of Plaza Altamira), sparked a protest asking the government to step down, it soon died out too. Strønen, “A Civil-Military Alliance.”
60. Baykan et al., “Anti-Populist Coups d’état in the Twenty-First Century.”
61. Chambers, “Unruly Boots.”
62. Selçuk, “Strong Presidents and Weak Institutions,” 579.
63. Scharpf (2020).
64. Taş, “The 15 July Abortive Coup,” 8.
65. Melendez-Sanchez, “Latin America Erupts.”
66. Pion-Berlin and Acacio, “Explaining Military Responses.”
67. Carvalho, “Demilitarisation and Remilitarisation.”
68. Taş, “The New Turkey.”
69. Banerjee and Laudadio, “Praetorians in the time of Pandemic.”
70. Hernández, “The Civil-Military Relations.”
71. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 10–11.
72. Weyland, “Populism and Authoritarianism,” 322.
73. Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” 7.
74. Despite their prevalence, “strongmen” are not an inherent component of populism. Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 152.
75. Hernández, “The Civil-Military Relations.”
76. Rittinger, “Coup-Proofing Vulnerable Presidencies in Latin America,” 8.
77. Chambers, “Unruly Boots.”
78. Rittinger, “Coup-Proofing Vulnerable Presidencies in Latin America,” 415.
79. Pion-Berlin and Acacio, “Explaining Military Responses,” 242–243.
80. Yalçın, “Mezhep virüsü.”
81. Norden, “Venezuela,” 15.
82. Rittinger, “Coup-Proofing Vulnerable Presidencies in Latin America,” 9.
83. Gürsoy, “The 15 July 2016 Failed Coup,” 292.
84. For Chavez’s unmediated personal control of the military along with the high level of political indoctrination, see Trinkunas, “The Reemergence of the Venezuelan Armed Forces.”
85. Romero, “Ecuador’s Leader Purges Military.”
86. Gürsoy, “The 15 July 2016 Failed Coup”; Taş, “The 15 July Abortive Coup.”
87. Kuehn and Trinkunas, “Conditions of Military Contestation in Populist Latin America,” 860.
88. Funke et al., “Populist Leaders and the Economy.”
89. Roberts, “Populism, Political Conflict.”
90. Ruhl, “Trouble in Central America.”

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