

They just keep us hangin' on. But why?

New studies shed light on that age-old delusion of leaders: Irreplaceability

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Whether they realize it or not, all leaders have a sell-by date beyond which they start squandering the good will that once enveloped them.

But some don't go. They *won't* go. The rules and conventions apply to them? Surely not. They're right, their critics are wrong.

"Time's Up Mr. Musharraf," blared the cover of *The Economist* (and multiplying observers) last week, but President Pervez Musharraf, in power since 1999, believes he is indispensable to Pakistan's cohesion, fraying as it may be, and refuses to let go.

Power is addictive, to be sure, and few surrender it without pressure. But sooner or later, they become an embarrassment to the people who put them in office, or keep them there — and the messy spectacle of getting them out does commence.

Why *do* certain leaders cling on?

Richard Nixon, for example, held fast to the presidency even when the overwhelming majority of Americans longed for him to be gone. Only with impeachment imminent did he agree to depart, and even then reluctantly, because his reading of the situation had skewed into a personal morality play.

As he told his closest associates at the time: "How can you support a quitter? I have never quit before in my life. Maybe that is what none of you has understood this whole time. You don't quit."

Nixon saw resigning as an abdication of duty, rather than its final fulfilment.

In a recent article on reluctant political exits in the journal *Political Psychology*, two European scholars, Fredrik Bynander and Paul 't Hart, say

that few leaders depart of their own free will. The most tenacious, regarding themselves as irreplaceable, loosen their grip on power only when forced to; by election defeat, a constitutional time limit, internal party machinations — or the unstoppable rise of an ambitious rival.

As the two write: "The once grand but now shrunk leader relies on forms of wishful thinking to sustain a kind of Faustian hope that he will be given more time and that during this extra time he will be able to turn the political tables in his favour. Leaders with this type of mental make-up are almost impossible to persuade that their time to depart has come."

Who, after all, wants to suggest to the likes of a Winston Churchill or Charles de Gaulle, that it's time to take the final bow and exit the stage?

Though tossed out by the British in the postwar Labour landslide, Churchill insisted on returning to politics at age 76 and won re-election in 1951. He suffered a stroke two years later (kept secret from parliament and public), but doggedly hung on until 1955.

Then cabinet minister Harold Macmillan wrote of Churchill at the time in his diary: "All of us, who really have loved as well as admired him, are being slowly driven into something like hatred."

By 1990, UK leader Margaret Thatcher had grown so out of touch with voters and her own party that a plot to oust her from office caught her off-guard. Hours before the inevitable end, in apparently rabid denial, she announced: "I fight on, I fight to win."

A study done by American political scientist Bruce Bueno de Mesquita found that virtually no democratic leaders last longer than eight years; in fact, their shelf-life averages less than three. Autocrats last about seven years on average; a quarter of them longer.

"Democratic leaders provide better policies to improve their chances of surviving in office," says de Mesquita, but "because competition is over policy ideas, they are more easily turned out of office." It sounds like a contradiction, but according to him, high leader turnover rates are good for democracies.

The average number of heads of states in the world's "most democratic" nations since 1961 is 12. Autocracies have far fewer, he reports, with China, for example, having had only five leaders since the 1949 revolution.

U.S. presidents have a built-in sell-by date of eight years, or two terms. That was the tradition since Independence, but not the law until Franklin Roosevelt was allowed, because of the war, to serve an unprecedented

third term in 1940, then begin a fourth in 1944 before dying a year later.

Fearing that multiple terms could one day produce a "benevolent dictator," congress in 1951 passed the 22nd amendment. It bars anyone from being president more than twice, even if the terms are separated by time.

Ekos Research president Frank Graves thinks term limits are fine when American voters want rid of a president, oh, a George W. Bush, say. But they're flatly undemocratic when the public is happy with the incumbent.

Even with the Monica Lewinsky scandal at the end of Bill Clinton's presidency, "all the polls showed that he would have won a third term if he could have had it," says Graves. "It's undemocratic to restrict voters' choice."

Businesses wouldn't do it, he says: "Can you see a CEO with eight years' experience and the company awash in profit being told, 'Your time is up?'"

Still, term limits do prevent leaders from using the benefits of office to retain power. Parliamentary leaders can fall at the drop of a no-confidence vote, but can also stay on indefinitely if the party sticks by them. Before finally retiring in 1998, Germany's Helmut Kohl, in power 16 years, ended up being known as "the eternal chancellor."

Analysts argue that a key responsibility of good political leaders is to make themselves redundant, have successors lined up who will sustain their policies. It's why India's Gandhi appointed Nehru as his successor.

But even that scenario doesn't always run smoothly. Jean Chr tien kept heir apparent Paul Martin hyperventilating in the wings for two years. Britain's Tony Blair kept Gordon Brown prowling impatiently for longer than that. (His former press guru, Alastair Campbell, has noted how often Blair would state his positions on this issue and others with, "I know I am right on this.")

Yet both leaders opted for protracted, begrudging departures that left tension in their wake.

The growing trend of African leaders to remain in office ad infinitum has been bluntly criticized by the South African newspaper, *Business Day* : "Most tend to use their time in government to prepare for a comfortable retirement...As a result, new ways are found to prolong their stay in power. Elections are unnecessarily delayed or the constitution is changed to allow another term."

Robert Mugabe has been Zimbabwe's president/dictator since 1980. Until

the early 1990s and the freeing of Nelson Mandela, it was he who was the shining star of post-colonial Africa.

But he has been running the country into the ground ever since. Despite unrelenting global condemnation, Mugabe at 83 still retains a vice-like grip on the office and has already announced he'll run again next year, the constitution having been suitably tweaked.

A former cabinet minister has described how Mugabe went into a ferocious sulk last year after it was suggested he resign. For days, he refused to meet any of his ministers and broke his silence only after his priest intervened.

Denial? Contempt? Or both?

Not that he or Musharraf likely would care, but former British PM James Callaghan once was asked how long it took for a leader to lose touch with what was happening around him. A few months, a year?

"A few days," he replied.