

# Contexts of Mexican policy

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**F**or decades Mexico stood in strong contrast with other Latin American countries because it succeeded in maintaining an impressive record of authoritarian stability that was a central pillar of economic growth and social change. Political continuity was an essential characteristic of the Mexican experience for most of the second half of the century. This was made possible thanks to a relatively high level of political institutionalization, epitomized by a coherent and strong state, the sustained preeminence of a party closely linked to the state, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), and the regular organization of elections.

Electoral processes were not simply a make-believe exercise destined to provide a democratic facade. They also contributed to stability because they offered an institutional mechanism for elite renewal. This arrangement provided an appropriate context for economic development because it guaranteed a significant degree of predictability in political processes and prevented dramatic swings between authoritarianism and democracy, such as those experienced by other countries in the region.

However, in the 1980s the Mexican political system was subject to the repercussions of a severe financial crisis and economic recession. These difficulties forced a profound reform of the Mexican state's participation in the economy. Inevitably, the reduction of state interventionism weakened political institutions and brought about a loosening of political controls. The counterpart of this process was an unprecedented politicization of Mexican society, that is, a substantial increase of autonomous political activities that induced an upsurge of non-governmental organizations and the expansion of independent electoral participation.

Since the mid-eighties the latter phenomenon led to the strengthened presence of opposition parties, namely the National Action Party (PAN), the long-standing conservative opposition, and the Party of the Democratic

Revolution (PRD), an organization created in 1989 that rallied leftist groups of different shades from former guerrilleros and communists to Priístas opposed to the De la Madrid and Salinas reforms.

Thus, although the central pieces of the traditional political system are still in place, in the last ten years their persistence has not impeded the addition of new elements, for instance, an active and increasingly influential public opinion and autonomous political organizations, whose presence has induced substantial changes in the system. Many specialists and observers see in this evolution a process of democratization. However, this view has proved to be overly optimistic; the PRI'S continued presence in power and the conservative tendencies of large social groups—as expressed in recent elections; for instance, in 1994 the votes for the PRI and PAN amounted to 77% of the vote— suggest that Mexico has undergone a limited experience of political liberalization. This path of change may lead to a democratic regime; nevertheless,

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The economic and political transformations that have been mentioned have had a profound impact on some of the assumptions of the almost legendary predictability of Mexican politics. These were, for instance: sustained economic growth, price and foreign exchange rate stability, political apathy and conformism, the power of the presidency. Predictability and a general, if superficial, political uniformity had been the central characteristics of

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Mexican politics since the Second World War; from 1982 onwards uncertainty and political heterogeneity developed as the dominant traits of that system. It can thus be said that economic discontinuity created conditions for political discontinuity.

However, the crisis of the economic model of import-substitution that prevailed from 1940 to 1982 does not suffice to explain the changing context in which Mexican policy has unfolded in the last decade. A complete picture of the environment in which economic restructuring and political liberalization have taken place requires the addition of two more components: the dramatic transformation of the world order, as an effect

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of the fall of socialism and of the enthronement of pluralist democracy as the only acceptable political regime; and the demands of a complex society, politically aware, mobilized, determined to achieve a modernization that today seems still unattainable, although it has been a permanent goal of the Mexican state since the 1910 Revolution.

Here we will discuss how these two elements, the international context and the transformation of Mexican society in the last quarter century, have determined the changing context of Mexican policy since 1982. In the past their importance was not self-evident. On the one hand the Cold War, and on the other, the social mobility induced by economic development, provided stable terms of reference for continuity. However, as normally happens with fundamentals, their importance for the maintenance of the general balance of the Mexican political system would be properly appreciated only after their disappearance.

#### **The influence of the international environment**

One of the aspects of Mexican nationalism, as it had been shaped by the revolutionary experience, was a certain political or ideological self-sufficiency that sustained proud attitudes with respect to the relative success of what was considered an original political arrangement. This was seen as an ingenious formula that had given the country the stability required by economic development. Certainly, the formula was not democratic but it could always be seen as transitional. Up until the beginning of the 1980s, whenever a political crisis arose Mexicans believed that they only had to turn to the “revolutionary heritage” to find a solution. Moreover, the association of the Mexican political system

—authoritarian as it may have been— with contemporary nationalism was a crucial element of the general consensus regarding political institutions that prevailed in Mexico for over forty years.

The belief that Mexico had found a political formula of its own, effective if peculiar, was translated into a “protectionist” policy in the face of possible external influences or “foreign models.” This attitude also inspired Mexico’s foreign policy during the decades of economic growth and it partially explains the Mexican government’s traditional insistence on self-determination and the reluctance to join other countries in multilateral diplomacy.

While it is true that the effectiveness of the Mexican political arrangement was in itself a support of that same arrangement, it is also true that the Cold War offered a solid international framework for the maintenance of “special formulas,” “uncommon democracies,” even “third ways,” as long as these solutions did not alter the balance of power between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The tolerance of Western democracies for political regimes of the Third World that were not-so-democratic was in itself a stabilizing factor for these regimes. However, the debt crisis of the 1980s pushed this tolerance to a point of exhaustion because governments and investors in Europe and the United States and international financial institutions were then forced to recognize the economic costs of undemocratic regimes that were dominated by corrupt political elites unaccountable to the citizenry.

At the same time, the rise of the cause of human rights in the eighties became instrumental in the battle of the Reagan administration against communism and the Soviet Union. Inevitably, this battle had repercussions in other countries, whose regimes had been allies of the West in spite of very poor records in human rights matters.

In this context, authoritarian regimes had become a cumbersome associate for Western governments. The disintegration of the Soviet bloc, the fall of communist regimes, the transformations undertaken by Mikhail Gorbachev preceding the demise of the Soviet Union, completed the shakeup of the post-World War II international order.

The importance of the international environment of Mexican policy since the 1981-1982 financial crisis has been widely stated and analyzed. Nevertheless, whereas the economic consequences of this factor have been emphasized, the political effects are rarely mentioned, although they were decisive.

During the De la Madrid years, at the height of the debt crisis, the Mexican political system came under close scrutiny from international investors, the media, the U.S. Congress and Washington authorities. Their concern was not so much the expression of a deeply felt democratic conviction as the manifestation of a sudden awareness of



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the traditional political system that had been created to accommodate the political expressions of a preeminently rural society, parochial and inward-oriented, seemed to lag far behind the urbanized society of the end of the 20th century, a society aware of and in contact with the outside world, eager to participate in the advantages of technological change and diversity. This Mexican society had overcome the apathy and conformism that for decades stood behind the non-participatory attitudes that were also a support of authoritarianism.

In order to understand the recent evolution of Mexican society it is necessary to remember that the years 1970-1982 were a period of high rates of economic growth, thanks, first, to international credit and, then, to the oil boom. However, this period of prosperity was followed by twelve more years of inflation (reaching 160% in 1987), recession and adjustment policies.

The rise of anti-authoritarianism among a number of social groups from 1983 onwards has to be understood in the light of the increased participation of the middle classes in the benefits of the economic development of the seventies and the improvement of their relative position within the class structure.

Others—for instance urban, low-income groups, not to mention the rural population that still represented over 34% of the total population—did not benefit as much from prosperity. Nevertheless, they were also touched by some of its effects, namely the expansion of education, the intense development of the media in that period, and the access to information from the outside world that came with the internationalization of Mexico.

This means that events in other Latin American countries, elections in Nicaragua, for instance, or even the fall of the Berlin Wall, were a frame of reference not only for the government but also for large social groups for whom radio or television became in those years a crucial agent of socialization, much more important than more traditional agents such as the schools, the Church or the family.

The Indian peasant uprising in the southern state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994 has been interpreted as a rejection of modernity by groups who want to retain their traditional identity, threatened by NAFTA, land property reform and the integration of Mexico into international economic and political currents. However, this movement

can also be understood as the extreme reaction of those who were being left behind in the modernization process, who felt marginalized from the prosperity and well-being ideally associated with social change.

In this perspective their rebellion does not appear as inspired by change itself, but rather by a type of change from which they felt excluded. Thus, this movement shares a common ground with the demands for effective political participation of the modernized middle-class and urban low-income groups that in the eighties were activated by different phenomena: the 1981-1982 crisis, the 1985 earthquake, the development of the media, the recession, the upsurge of Cardenismo in 1988, the dismantling of mechanisms of political control, the increased competitiveness of elections or a simple desire for change and new faces in the government.

The effects of social change on the Mexican political system have not been minor. Among them the most noteworthy has been the appearance and increased importance of public opinion as a central element of political balances, a phenomenon that derives from the new characteristics of Mexican society. It has also had a strong impact on the traditional institutional arrangement, built on the assumption that the only limits to governmental authority were self-imposed, but this impact has not yet found a solid institutional response.

The process of political change in Mexico has been plagued by contradictions and equivocal signals. The reaction of the governmental elite to demands for political change has been subordinated to the completion of a project of economic modernization that has had very high social costs. Paradoxically, many of these contradictions derive not so much from resistance to change but from difficulties in responding to the diverse demands of a society that has more political complexities than can be absorbed by the authorities in power or existing institutions.

Since the De la Madrid government, policy-makers and politicians are more responsive to a heterogeneous public opinion. This phenomenon has found expression in the politicization of the media, an impressive upsurge of non-governmental organizations, independent electoral participation and, generally speaking, increased autonomous political participation.

However, governmental responsiveness has not entailed a predictable pattern of change because it is not subject to a clear political design. Rather, it has been dominated by short-term reactions calculated on the basis of the priority of economic reform. Thus, the uncertainty that has apparently become a permanent feature of political dynamics in Mexico is not only related to the intensification of party competitiveness, but also to an institutional weakness that has to be resolved according to a plan of political modernization that has become Mexico's top priority 