

# A NEW CHALLENGE FOR *Mexico's Political System*

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**M**exico is going through an unparalleled moment for two reasons of undoubted importance: the July 6 elections show that the country has achieved democratic normalcy,<sup>1</sup> something demanded for several decades. In addition, new scenarios are opening up nationwide which demand intelligence, tolerance and astuteness on the part of the country's main political players, the political parties.

This article will look at the main challenges Mexico faces in these new conditions. First, we will take a brief look at the political and legal conditions that have made democratization possible; then, we will examine the July 6 elections themselves; and finally, I will put forward a few considerations about some of the challenges arising out of the new balance of forces.

## THE CONDITIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC NORMALCY IN MEXICO

Between December 1946 and November 1996, Mexico held federal elections regularly every three years. In

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<sup>1</sup> The term "democratic normalcy" was coined by President Ernesto Zedillo in referring to Mexico's recent electoral reform having led the way to a democratic system with rules and norms commonly accepted by countries recognized as democracies. [Translator's Note.]

those 50 years four totally different electoral laws were in force, and the legislation was revised and amended 15 times. This means that for 15 different federal elections, the electoral law was either substantially modified or completely replaced 19 times: more changes than elections. And, of course, each of these reforms and amendments gave rise to proposals, debates, negotiations, mutual accusations, conflicts among the political parties at the Ministry of the Interior, which served as mediator, and in the Chamber of Deputies. Democratization has been the most debated, controversial and negotiated topic in all those years, as well as the most fought for. Perhaps that is why when he took office, President Zedillo proposed that a definitive political-electoral reform be forged by the existing political forces. For 23 long months thereafter, Mexico's political parties, parliamentary caucuses in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate and government officials intensely and tirelessly negotiated this electoral reform. The result was that in July 1996, for the first time in history, all the political parties approved the constitutional norms for elections to public office; on that basis amendments to six different pieces of legislation were drafted and passed in November of the same year.

The electoral reform resulted in a substantially strengthened political party system. Public financing for parties increased almost five-fold; for the first time in the history of Mexico, all political parties—not only the PRI— were given the opportunity to become truly



President Zedillo with the presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, Porfirio Muñoz Lerdo (PRD) and Eduardo Andrade (PRI).

national and to improve the quality and coverage of their electoral campaigns. New criteria for equity in media coverage strengthened the parties' public profile; a new, independent electoral justice system was set up; and the Federal Electoral Institute, the body in charge of organizing the elections, became totally independent.

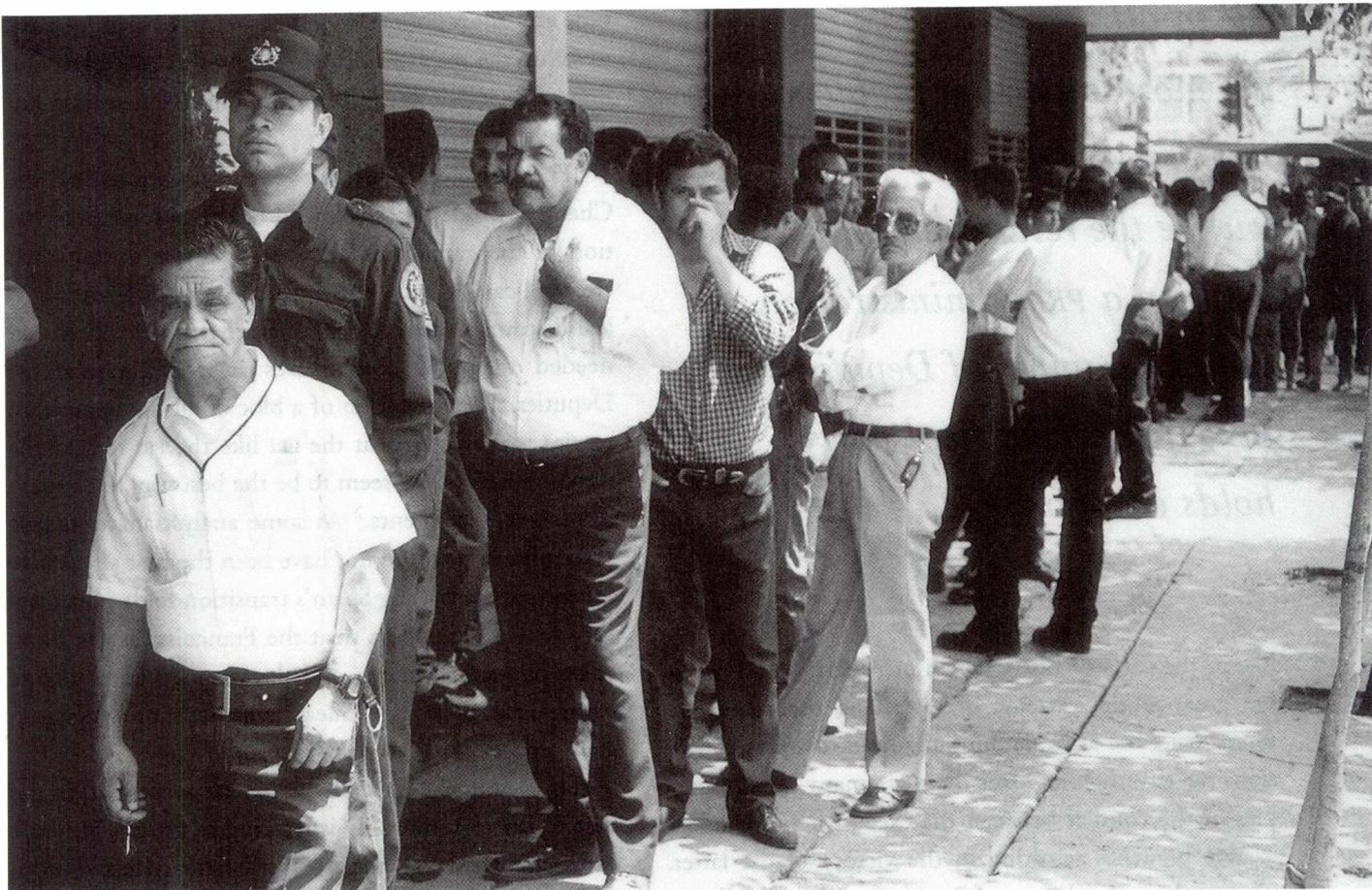
Two other aspects of the reform clearly became very important: a) the democratization of Mexico City's

Federal District, where for the first time the head of government would be elected; and b) the new way of establishing political representation, whereby no party could be over-represented by more than 8 percent. This stipulated that there could not be a difference of more than 8 percent between the number of ballots cast in favor of a particular party and its proportion of seats in the Chamber of Deputies.

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#### THE JULY 6 ELECTIONS

Last July's elections were characterized by political players and electoral observers paying greater attention than ever to the ballot results and not to real or imagined irregularities on election day. Both the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the National Action Party



Waiting to vote, Mexico City, July 6.

(PAN) had representatives in all the country's 104,000 polling stations and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) had representatives in 99.6 percent of them. Twenty-eight thousand Mexican electoral observers and nearly one thousand foreign ones participated, and almost no cases of irregularities grave enough to endanger the elections were observed or reported. The only case of any importance was in District III in Ocosingo, Chiapas, where groups of alleged Zapatistas disrupted the voting by burning polling booths and stealing ballot boxes.

Both federal and local returns began pouring in the very night of election day, after the last polling stations closed. The PRI lost the gubernatorial races in the states of Nuevo León and Querétaro, and, significantly, the PRD won an undeniable victory in Mexico City's Federal District.

#### NEW REALITIES, NEW CHALLENGES

The balloting in the congressional elections, however, give rise to an unprecedented and delicate political scenario. For the first time since the 1930s, the PRI will not completely control the congress. Of the 500 Chamber of Deputies seats, the PRI won 239, thus losing its absolute majority.

This new political situation has given rise to two different interpretations of Mexico's immediate future. The first, pessimistic and negative, emphasizes that in political systems with hierarchical, disciplined political parties, in which the administration is held by one party and the legislature by another or by no one at all, the tension between the two branches of government can increase to a practically catastrophic degree. Where the executive branch is strong and enjoys great legitimacy,

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like in the cases of Boris Yeltsin or Alberto Fujimori, it has gone to the extreme of dissolving parliament by force, using the army, arguing the need to create conditions for governability. But there are many more examples of the conflict between the executive and the legislative branches resulting in the victory of the latter. This explains the defeats of Presidents Salvador Allende in Chile, Carlos Andrés Pérez in Venezuela or Fernando Collor de Mello in Brazil.

At the other end of the spectrum, some analysts are betting on prudence, the historical intelligence and responsibility of the players, first in forging an agreement among the political parties in the Chamber of Deputies and then in establishing a rational equilibrium with the federal executive branch.

The negotiations between the PRI and the different opposition caucuses in the Chamber of Deputies have been particularly difficult for two reasons. The first is the PRD's tradition of being in the opposition. In the last three years, 141 bills were presented to the Chamber of Deputies, 135 of which were sent by the executive branch. In 139 cases, the PRD voted against the bills, and only twice voted in favor: in the vote on the peace process in Chiapas and in the case of the constitutional amendments agreed on for elections. It will not be a simple matter for the PRD leadership to change its atti-

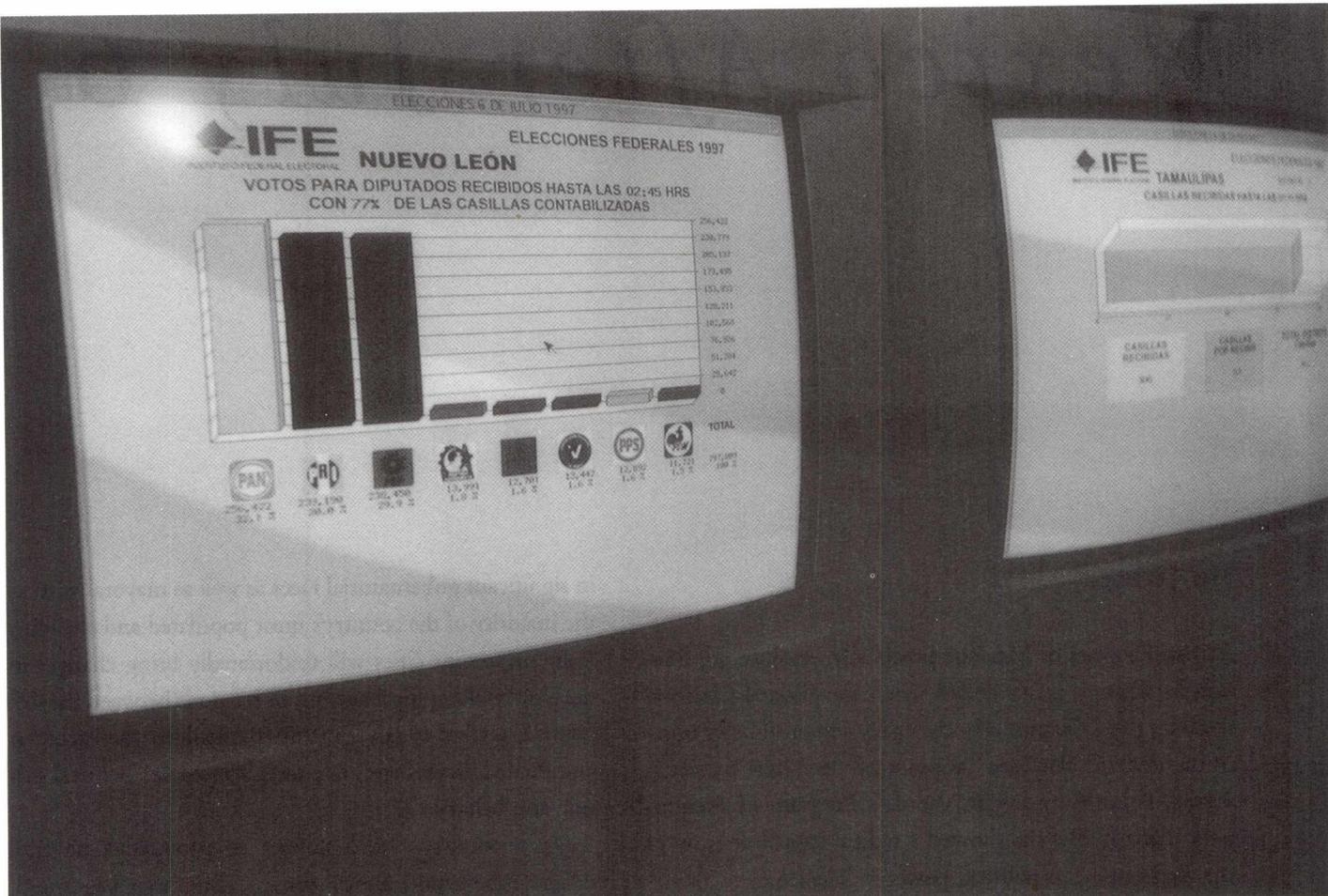
tude and allow politics to actually operate, that is to say, to set up the mechanisms whereby real negotiations and mutual concessions can be made. This is a necessary but difficult process.

The second hindrance to negotiations in the Chamber of Deputies is linked to the extreme polarization of the candidates and other players during their electoral campaigns. At first glance, their different political discourses seem to be the exact opposite of what is needed to build consensus in the Chamber of Deputies. The formation of a bloc of all the opposition parties that would treat the PRI like the PRI treated the opposition does not seem to be the best way to come to reasonable agreements.<sup>2</sup> As some analysts have already pointed out, it would not have been the best alternative for the parties leading Spain's transition to democracy if they had attempted to treat the Francoists as the Francoists had treated them, and the same could be said of extreme cases like the Chilean, Argentine or Uruguayan transitions.

Of course, these problems can be overcome. In the case of the PRD, not only is it going to govern Mexico's most important city, but it will also have a decisive influence in forging federal public policy because it has the second largest caucus in the Chamber of Deputies. With regard to the extreme opposition discourses and the opposition front made up of the PAN, PRD, the Labor Party (PT) and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM), a reasonable time has to go by for the different players to shift gears and change from what is demanded of them in electoral campaigns to the discourse of a day-to-day exercise of government. In other words, with time, the overwhelming passions that frequently characterize electoral campaigns give way to a more serene, reasonable negotiating discourse needed in times of administrative and political normalcy.

All in all, the most important problem in the next few years will be the relationship between a PRI admin-

<sup>2</sup> The author is referring to a bloc formed by the PAN, PRD, Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) and the Labor Party (PT) to influence the functioning of the Chamber of Deputies; the bloc also presented an eight-point plan for negotiating with the PRI. [Editor's Note.]



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istration and a Chamber of Deputies in which no political party holds a majority. We Mexicans are going to have to learn to deal with the sharp and inevitable tensions between both branches of government. We should point out here that it is a prerogative of the Chamber of Deputies to approve government spending and that it is within its power to block legislation on government revenues.<sup>3</sup> In these and other items, we face situations that could put the country's economic recovery in check. Unfortunately, presidentialist systems like Mexico's lack a tradition of inter-party coalitions that could ensure that bills presented by the administration prosper in the legislature. We are now facing the enormous challenge

<sup>3</sup> In other words, the opposition could seek to influence economic policy for the next three years. [Editor's Note.]

of overcoming that uncertainty through political agreements, even if we have no historically proven bases or experiences of this kind.

Finally, our politicians are well acquainted with the difficulties our country has faced in attempting to overcome one of the most severe economic crises of this century. They are also perfectly cognizant that they have received a popular mandate for pluralism and democracy, that is to say, tolerance and negotiation, understanding and responsibility. It would be unthinkable for the expectations of economic improvement and the consolidation of democracy to be thwarted because our party elites were unable to act politically. I am inclined to believe that all parties will have the political determination and the good sense to meet the new challenge and consolidate democratic normalcy. **W**