

Mexico After July 6

THE CONTEXT

Almost 70 years of Mexico's practically absolute domination by a single party ended when the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), the public body legally responsible for organizing federal elections, announced the July 6 voting results. Around midnight, the IFE's Program of Preliminary Electoral Results showed a radical transformation of the distribution of political power in Mexico.

For the first time, the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) will not have an absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies. With its 239 deputies, the PRI now becomes the largest minority in the lower house of Congress, where two other minorities—the National Action Party (PAN), with 122 deputies, and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), with 125—emerge as political players with broad national support. Two relatively young parties—the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM), with eight seats, and the Labor Party (PT), with six—are the other forces that won congressional representation.

Another significant development is that the capital, Mexico City's Federal District, whose chief executive had never been elected before, gave the opposition PRD a landslide victory the first time voters had a say in the decision.

The new balance of forces in the Congress and the opposition's victories

in significant gubernatorial races as well as mayoral wins in the majority of the country's most populated and economically important cities will undoubtedly bring changes in decision-making mechanisms, in relations between the different branches of government (particularly the executive and the legislature) and, of course, in people's political culture and behavior.

In a country unaccustomed to productive political debate, where no political forces existed that were really capable of questioning—much less forcing a change in—presidential decisions, the consequences of election results like July 6's will inevitably have an impact on how politics are carried out. For many analysts, the date marks the beginning of a transition to democracy from a *sui generis* form of authoritarianism. For others, it is the end of a process of gradually deepening, steady and irreversible democratization. No matter what classification is used, the important thing is to reflect about the concrete mechanisms for national decision-making which as of now are subject to new rules. The abrupt emergence of real pluralism took many by surprise and caught almost all the polit-

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ical players with little experience of how to behave amidst genuine negotiation and debate. This new situation will require careful consideration and prudence on the part both of the new winners and the new losers. Extreme oppositionist stances vis-à-vis the executive by the former or incomprehension of the changes underway by the latter will affect not only governability but also the possibility of establishing a new "democratic pact" which would have a positive impact on building a country where the opinion its citizens expressed at the polls would have to be taken into account.

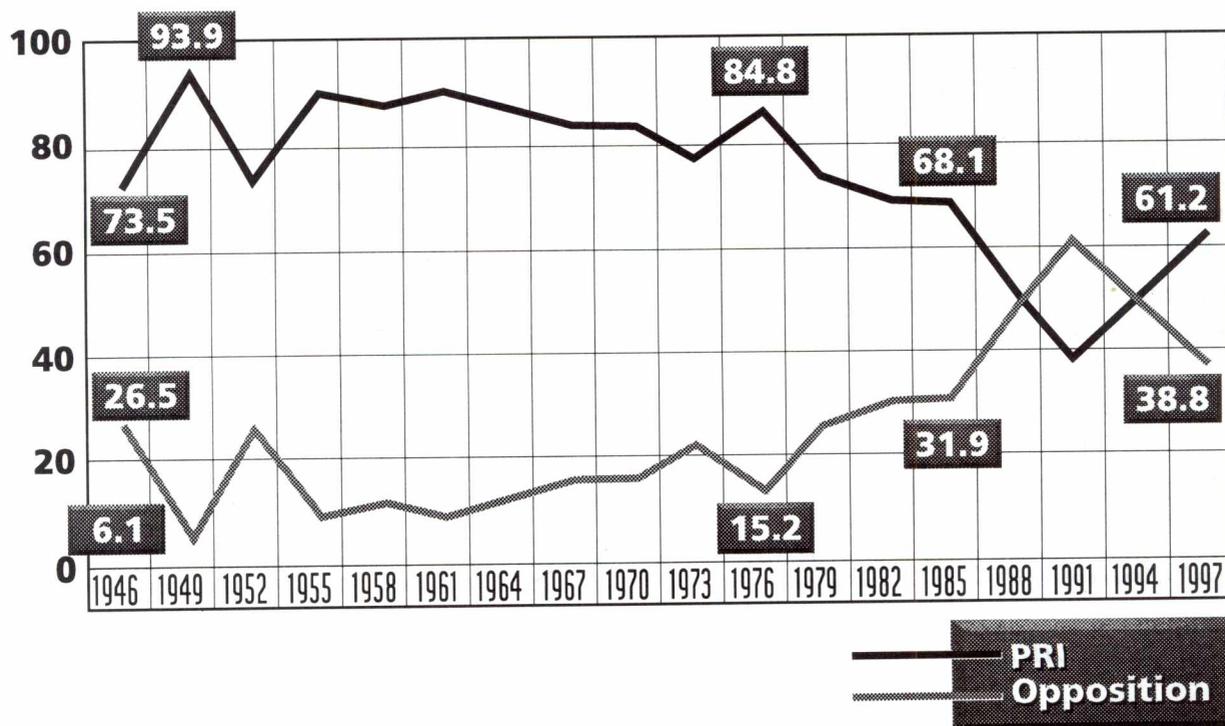
Before the new Chamber of Deputies was formally seated, on the weekend of August 30-31, Mexico was threatened with a constitutional crisis and the possibility of ungovernability loomed. What happened was that both the four opposition congressional caucuses, on the one hand, and the PRI caucus, on the other, attempted to open the congressional session according to their respective interpretations of existing legislation and the way that each side

understood the different congressional bodies and functions should be established in the Chamber of Deputies. Underneath, each side was actually playing for time and posing a test of strength. As a result, Mexico's Fifty-seventh Congress inaugurated its session in accordance with the format proposed by the majority of deputies grouped in the self-styled "opposition block" ("opposition" with regard to the executive). Both the PRI and the president had to concede the point, not without high political costs and once again losing face in public opinion.

THE AGENDA

That incident was only an example of the difficult political and congressional relationships on the horizon. The topics slated for discussion by the legislature are myriad, and some of them are just a bit more transcendental and will have more impact on developing public policy than

PRI and Opposition Parties' Vote for the Chamber Of Deputies (1946-1997)



Source: *Reforma* (Mexico City), 15 July 1997.

**Current Political Division
Of the Chamber of Deputies**

Party	Seats
PAN	122
PRI	239
PRD	125
PVEM	8
PT	6

Source: Federal Electoral Institute.

**Current Political Division
Of the Senate**

Party	Seats
PAN	33
PRI	77
PRD	16
PVEM	1
PT	1

Source: Federal Electoral Institute.

decisions about the internal functioning of the Chamber of Deputies. Among the national issues to be debated that will very probably presuppose significant negotiations and consensus-building efforts are: 1) economic policy; 2) the bill on federal public spending, presented yearly; 3) fiscal policy; and 4) the detailed monitoring of public spending.

All these issues have immediate, decisive effects in people's daily lives. For example, one issue up for discussion is the possible reduction of Mexico's value-added tax (VAT), or sales tax, a political plank of all the opposition parties in their campaign platforms in the recent elections. Government expenditure policies could also change, with more or less emphasis on social spending or, by contrast, the continuation of a policy to strengthen the market and create a healthy financial environment. In other words, the continuity of the administration's economic program is at stake.

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A change in the current distribution of public monies is also probable given the new balance of forces. Greater apportionments to state and municipal government budgets and a reduction of federal spending has historically been part of the opposition's agenda, particularly the PAN's.

Among the most important topics on the agenda are peace in Chiapas, public safety, the elimination from the budget of a secret discretionary presidential account, transparent use of monies allotted to the fight against extreme poverty, renewed discussion about additional amendments to the electoral legislation not resolved in last year's debate (such as, among others, the establishment of the referendum, the plebiscite and the citizen's initiative as procedures for consulting the populace; or making it possible for alliances and coalitions as such to be put on the ballot at election time), the fight against corruption and the conclusion of the reform of the state (a whole series of agreements and definitions are pending regarding how government should mete out information to the public and its relationship with the media, the administration of justice, police investigations, the autonomy of indigenous peoples, etc.). How the political actors deal with these points will put their political mettle to the test, particularly the ability of the different parties and the legislative and the executive branches to relate to each other in the way mandated by the July 6 election results.

THE SCENARIOS

An effort to move toward policy-making that includes negotiations, forging consensus and lobbying by special interest groups of congressional commissions and administration agencies will be fundamental, first of all, to avoid conflicts that could threaten government functioning itself and therefore create a scenario of ungovernability. That kind of policy-making presupposes a whole new political culture, a new way of doing things. It would have to, as a matter of course, both accept and put into practice new forms of behavior; these would flow from a form of government in which different majorities may be forged by issue, and alliances made not only around strategic questions, but above all to deal with concrete topics on the public agenda. However, this will probably not be possible if the institutions are not redesigned to fit with the new requirements in political practices, government institutions and laws dictated by the new political situation.

Mexico's political and governmental institutions were not prepared for a presidential democracy. Accepting it implies a national effort with the aim of establishing a new national pact to define the ground rules for political activity in which all players with influence are able to intervene. It could also imply a much deeper and far-reaching reform of the state than has been proposed so far. In other words, government, political parties, bankers, the business community, peasant and workers organizations, political groups, non-governmental organizations, the most important civic groups—like renters, debtors and pensioners groups—, academics, intellectuals and the media will have to create a mechanism for analysis and deliberation, a great national forum, for example, to look at the important national issues and, above all, putting aside vested interests, to deal without prejudice with the need to recreate the nation's democratic practices. That would be the most useful meaning of the transition.

This is perhaps why President Ernesto Zedillo and September's President of the Chamber of Deputies Steering Committee, PRD Deputy Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, both touched on this point in, respectively, the State of the Nation

Official 1997 Results for Mayor Of Mexico City's Federal District

Party	Votes	%
PAN	602,466	15.58
PRI	990,306	25.60
PRD	1,859,866	48.09
PVEM	266,223	6.88

Source: Federal Electoral Institute.

speech and the response traditionally given by the head of the chamber, last September 1. President Zedillo called for creating an economic policy "of the state," which presupposes joint work by the two branches involved in its design. Muñoz Ledo explicitly invited representatives of the different sectors of the economy to participate in the discussion. Making this new national pact different from the many pacts signed during previous administrations, without succumbing to revengeful or authoritarian temptations, is the great challenge to everyone's political imagination in today's emerging pluralism.

The other scenario, the scenario of confrontation, intolerance and a pragmatic zeal by all players for capitalizing on their own political strength—whether it be newly or previously acquired— would probably only result in polarizing positions and therefore plunging Mexico into the institutional crisis over which it has been hovering for a long period. On July 6, the voters clearly demanded great efforts in the opposite direction. The democratic change in the country is irreversible and brings with it a new public awareness, the product of a democratic political culture which in some senses was ahead of the government's and the main political players' ability to react. That is why the public will not permit any other road to be traveled but the road of transition. **W**

Diego Bugada Bernal
Coordinator of Publications, CISAN