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Mexico, the Difficult Transition

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The singular evolution of Mexico's political system has disconcerted insiders and observers alike. Analysts as well as experienced politicians of different persuasions have so far been unable to agree on the nature and meaning of that evolution and take very different and even counterposed positions. Their stances range from those who, on one extreme, refuse to attribute any democratizing significance to the process and see it at best as a series of cosmetic adjustments of an irremediably authoritarian regime, to those on the other extreme, who say that what is happening is that the democracy founded with the 1917 Constitution is being "perfected." In both cases, they consider it inappropriate to speak in terms of Mexico's "transition to democracy," at least in the sense used by Huntington to describe other experiences in what he called "the third democratizing wave."¹

Despite these reservations, the majority of the players in Mexican public life have gradually become convinced that the country is going through a process of democratic transition.

This is particularly true since the important progress of the opposition National Action Party (PAN) and Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the 1997 mid-term federal elections, which led to a federal Chamber of Deputies where no party has an absolute majority. After that, government forces and main opposition leaders alike seemed to recognize that Mexico was going through a period marked by "the beginning of the dissolution of the authoritarian regime and...the establishment of some form of democracy."² However, this consensus breaks down when an attempt is made to determine not only when the transition began, but, above all, the moment and forms of its possible and desirable culmination.

Thus, while some trace the origins of our democratization to the 1968 student-people's movement, others prefer to fix on the 1977-78 political reform. Some say that it was not until the electoral clashes of the 1980s that we can see the beginnings of the transition. And still others would like to situate its inception in 1994, with the emergence of the Zapatista National Liberation Army or even in 1997, with Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas' electoral win in Mexico City. Most of the time pinpointing the

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moment when democratization began has a heavy partisan flavor that tends to identify democracy with specific public personalities or supposedly decisive events as “watersheds,” the radical breaking point between the old authoritarian regime and the birth of Mexican democracy.

However, while there is no agreement about the beginnings of this strange transition, neither is there any about its nature, and —what is more serious— about the end desired.³ In this same sense, partisan polarization has done damage by inducing many analysts and leaders to confuse the configuration of a new democratic regime with the advance and/or victory of this or that party or candidate. Not a few, then, have tried to put an equal-sign between the victory of democracy and the defeat (or even the extinction) of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), without stopping to think that while this would undoubtedly make way for a situation unheard-of in post-revolutionary Mexico, that of parties alternating in office, it would not necessarily be synonymous with the consolidation of a new democratic political regime.

What I will attempt to argue here is that, first, Mexico’s transition to democracy cannot be thought of as analogous to other experiences of democratization; second, that it can only be understood by taking on board the specificity of its starting points, that is, the peculiar nature of the regime that emerged from the Mexican Revolution; third, that these characteristics presuppose understanding the transition as a gradual, non-linear process and not as a break, the product of some specific event; and fourth, for all of the above reasons, the most desirable way of arriving at a full democracy or culminating this very long transition is through a national agreement among our country’s fundamental political and social forces.

The majority of the world’s recent democratic transitions began with authoritarian regimes that were either military or personal dictatorships or totalitarian systems. In the case of dictatorships, what was needed was that the army return to barracks by setting up freely elected civilian governments or filling the vacuum left by the death of the dictator (Franco in Spain and Salazar in Portugal) with a new democratic constitutional pact. In societies dominated by totalitarian systems, in contrast, the problem was to dismantle the logic of the state party, the sovereign party, to the benefit of the plural, competitive expression of civil society until then controlled from the top down. In both cases, the holding of free, competitive elections

was the more or less precarious point to which these transitions arrived, despite the fact that the consolidation of the new democracies is still uncertain.

Now, the regime born of the Mexican Revolution cannot be understood either as a military, personal or state party dictatorship, or as a totalitarian system; rather it is a singular combination of a system with a political constitution defining a federal, representative democracy, and an authoritarian, but inclusive, corporatist system in which municipal, state and national elections have been held systematically since the 1920s. Given this, it would seem clear that the Mexican transition has had to take on very particular forms and goals. In effect, in contrast to other authoritarian systems, Mexico’s never excluded certain respect for the principles and forms of liberal democracy.⁴

The authoritarianism of the Mexican state had two mainstays: an extreme form of presidentialism, constitutionally endowed with “extraordinary and permanent” prerogatives,⁵ and an official, revolutionary party constituted on the basis of the power of the state itself to contain and discipline the postrevolutionary political elites and able to vertically incorporate most of the country’s worker, peasant and community organizations. This party machine was the essential instrument that made it possible for all presidents since Lázaro Cárdenas⁶ to concentrate and centralize practically unlimited power, making the system of checks and balances and federalism itself a mere facade for a vertical logic according to which all relevant public decisions were exclusively in the hands of the chief executive, including the designation of his successor. The biggest limitation on this enormous presidential power, which somehow kept it from becoming dictatorial in the strict sense of the term, was the norm precluding reelection, a norm —a few momentary vacillations notwithstanding— maintained from 1934 until today.

What made this institutional design very solid and turned the presidents into the supreme, unquestioned arbiters of national life was its ability to integrate, articulate and negotiate the interests of the different sectors of society organized according to a series of unwritten, but very effective, rules. Under what was called “stabilizing development”⁷ an economic model was established that was protectionist and centered on the state and promoted economic growth, charged with “watching over” the interests of the poorer classes. The agrarian reform (meted out in doses and manipulating peasant demands), labor legislation

(regulating and watching out for the demands of private and public sector employees) and the social security systems were able to function as mechanisms to ensure “revolutionary” hegemony and legitimacy, thus promoting a passive but strong consensus around the governments that “arose out of the Revolution.”

By controlling the immense majority of the country’s mass organizations, regulating economic growth through public expenditure and using protectionism to discipline and subject the business communities, this system could allow itself the luxury of regularly holding elections on all levels without its monopoly on public posts being threatened by the weak opposition parties. And, if by some happenstance a candidate did emerge who might be able to break that monopoly, the system also completely controlled the organization of the elections and vote count, and thus could change or camouflage any unfavorable results. In practice, then, the elections operated more to validate the “revolutionary” legitimacy (that of the supposed heirs of the Revolution) than as a real possibility for the public to decide with their ballots who should govern. This explains the indifference and apathy with which the immense majority of Mexicans regarded elections, as well as the quasi “Soviet” election results. As if that were not enough, the government gave itself the right to “register,” or recognize the legality of, the opposition parties and therefore, to admit only those useful to it, to keep up the “democratic” facade.

The first signs that this authoritarian arrangement was wearing out came with the 1968 student mobilization and its tragic end, the massacre of Tlatelolco. Paradoxically, the urban middle classes, in fact privileged because of unequal economic development, were the first to protest against the repressive authoritarianism of the PRI governments, demanding respect for the basic freedoms of assembly, expression and demonstration. In a show of its worst authoritarian reflexes, incapable of responding in a civilized manner through dialogue and negotiation, the Gustavo Díaz Ordaz government⁸ resorted to the ruthless use of force, enraging the illustrated sectors of the urban middle class.⁹



Today, the Federal Electoral Institute is completely autonomous.

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From then on, later administrations would try to close that wound, but, whether because of the very nature of the system or because of authoritarian stubbornness and ineptitude, they always ended up outraging broader and broader sectors of the public. As part of its efforts to recover legitimacy, the José López Portillo administration¹⁰ promoted a decisive political

electoral reform in 1977 that, though limited and limiting, would put elections at the center of the majority of subsequent political conflicts. To top it all off, the state-centered development model, the real basis for the quasi-single-party system, also began to show signs of severe exhaustion despite the discovery of immense oil deposits and the prodigious earnings they brought in.

The 1982 financial crisis and subsequent nationalization of the banks were the swan song of the old authoritarian regime.¹¹ After the government had promised “the administration of abundance,” devaluations and inflation would make enormous inroads into the standard of living. This, together with the damage to the business community, would make for new interest in local elections in the 1980s; a large part of the public would express its discontent and frustration by casting its ballot for the National Action Party (PAN), making it truly competitive thanks to the support of important sectors of the middle class and business community. Despite initial promises to respect the vote of the citizenry, the government of Miguel de la Madrid¹² would soon go back on its word, making use of all kinds of tricks and fraudulent manipulation to make sure the PAN did not sit in the governor’s seat in the border state of Chihuahua.

Adding to the unhappiness created by the 1982 crisis, the De la Madrid administration’s efforts to apply structural adjustment policies to change Mexico’s development model (implemented as emergency measures for an economy in danger of collapsing and, therefore, without the least discussion with any relevant sectors of society) generated new and even more widespread outrage, not only among the public at large, but also among the very cadre of the official party itself, the PRI. The Democratic Current, founded by important members of the PRI like

States That Will Hold Local Elections in 1998

	Governor	Deputies	Municipalities	Election Date
Yucatán		25	106	May 24
Baja California		25	5	June 28
Chihuahua	1	33	67	July 5
Durango	1	25	39	July 5
Zacatecas	1	30	56	July 5
Aguascalientes	1	27	11	August 2
Oaxaca	1	42	570	August 2, Oct. 4
Veracruz	1	45		August 2
Chiapas		40	111	October 4
Tamaulipas	1	32	43	October 25
Sinaloa	1	40	18	November 8
Michoacán		30	113	November 8
Tlaxcala	1	32	60	November 8
Puebla	1	39	217	November 8
TOTAL	10	465	1416	

Source: Federal Electoral Institute, February 1998.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, began to question both the PRI's internal rules and official economic policy. Met with intolerance and hostility, the Democratic Current finally split from the PRI and ran Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (son of President Lázaro Cárdenas, perhaps the country's most popular president since the Revolution) for president on the ticket of old satellite parties of the PRI.

Together with other events that had exposed the increasing incapability of the government and the system itself to satisfy the demands and interests of society (above all the terrible earthquake that laid waste to Mexico City in 1985 and its aftermath, or the 1986-87 student movement),¹³ everything seemed to point to the 1988 federal elections being the moment of a true anti-government civic insurrection expressed in a landslide vote for the candidate who symbolized many of the outrages suffered by the populace: Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the candidate of the National Democratic Front (FDN).¹⁴ For the first time in postrevolutionary Mexico, the government candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, would receive only 51 percent of the vote according to official figures, while, with much smaller resources, Cárdenas would garner 33 percent. Worse still, shaken by unexpected results, the government-controlled electoral system would lose all credibility due to its efforts to doctor the results, to the extent that many people thought it was obvious that the real winner had been Cárdenas.¹⁵

The new Salinas government did recover the lead, however, thanks to a series of spectacular initiatives and to a long,

obscure and costly alliance with the PAN. However, the development model itself would strike at the basis for the PRI corporatist system, which operated on the premise that economic reform took priority over political reform. Attempts were still made to adjust electoral rules through two legislative reforms agreed upon with the PAN, which undoubtedly did permit some steps forward in terms of greater transparency and credibility in counting the votes. However, it would be the unexpected appearance of the Zapatista National Liberation Army in January 1994 that would force a third legislative reform, this time agreed upon by the country's three main political parties, the PRI, PAN and PRD.¹⁶

The assassination of PRI presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio in March 1994 created an extremely charged pre-electoral political atmosphere. But, despite apocalyptic prophecies about imminent political crises, the 1994 elections, the most transparent and well-documented in our history until then, would give a relatively easy victory to the new PRI candidate, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León. Only a few days after the new president took office, a new and painful economic crisis exploded, forcing the new government to make an unprecedented break with its predecessor and to approve an urgent political electoral reform aimed at creating more equal conditions for party campaigns and making the body that organizes elections and counts the votes completely autonomous.

The new legislation and institutional framework agreed upon after intricate negotiations fraught with tension over different conflicts¹⁷ brilliantly passed the test of the 1997 federal

congressional elections. The organization and the voting results seemed to have left behind the usual controversies about the quality and credibility of Mexican elections. The make-up of the new Chamber of Deputies, the Cárdenas win in Mexico City, as well as the victories of non-PRI candidates in several states, confirmed that pluralist competition had come to stay in Mexico and that laws and institutions existed that were capable of appropriately processing that pluralism.

However, it is much too soon to say that our very prolonged democratic transition is over. Many factors continue to indicate that simply holding credible elections with real competition does not complete the checklist of items needed for building a complete democracy: it is not enough for each vote to be counted and counted honestly, nor is it enough that the public freely

express its political preferences. In the last analysis, democracy is not only a method for authorizing governments: it must also be a method that conditions the exercise of government. In that sense, both parties and government have recognized the need to go on to a political reform of the state which will make it possible to generate a new governability to substitute for the old authoritarian, arbitrary way of governing.¹⁸ This means something which I can only make mention of here: in contrast with the Spanish transition, which began with a pact (the Moncloa Pact) and ended with the elections that put the Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE) into office, Mexico's complicated transition, which began some time ago with agreements to make elections more and more competitive and equitable, will hopefully end with a new pact of governability. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *La tercera ola* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1992).

² Guillermo O'Donnell and Phillippe C. Schmitter, *Transiciones desde un gobierno autoritario, conclusiones tentativas sobre las democracias inciertas*, vol. 4 (Barcelona: Paidós, 1988), p. 19.

³ On a visit to Mexico, the well known Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori said in a television interview that he had encountered a great deal of enthusiasm for the democratization underway, but few ideas about its institutional goals.

⁴ This respect stems from two sources: the origins of the Mexican Revolution, whose leader Francisco I. Madero's main banner was "effective suffrage and no reelection," and Mexico's geopolitical situation, which, like it or not, made it impossible to consolidate a "revolutionary dictatorship."

⁵ As Arnaldo Córdova has emphasized in his analysis. See, for example *La Revolución y el Estado en México* (Mexico City: ERA, 1989).

⁶ President from 1934 to 1940, elected on the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) ticket, which he later reorganized and renamed as Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) in 1938, the direct predecessor of the PRI. [Editor's Note.]

⁷ Under the one-party system "stabilizing development" was understood as the period between 1954 and 1970 in which the state guided the economy; the official party was, without exception, the only road to power and for satisfying any and all private interests; a corporatist model in which all social actors accepted the rules of the political game as delineated within the party in exchange for quotas of power, and the party was consolidated using the argument that it was the ideal instrument for guaranteeing social peace. [Editor's Note.]

⁸ Gustavo Díaz Ordaz was president of Mexico from 1964 to 1970. On October 2, ten days before the inauguration of the Mexico 1968 Olympic Games, Díaz Ordaz ordered the repression of a student rally at Tlatelolco Plaza in Mexico City, which resulted in a large number of dead and wounded, as well as the arrest of many who spent long years in jail as political prisoners. The exact number of dead and wounded has never been revealed. The official version is that there were no more than 30; other sources talk of hundreds of dead. [Editor's Note.]

⁹ It is only now that the Chamber of Deputies has approved setting up a commission that will supposedly try to investigate and get at "the truth" about what happened.

¹⁰ President of Mexico from 1976 to 1982. [Editor's Note.]

¹¹ Until then, nationalizations had been a symbol and expression of the redeeming strength of the state born of the Revolution. The nationalization of the banks, however, did not awaken much popular support.

¹² President from 1982 to 1988. [Editor's Note.]

¹³ In 1985, the government, slow in responding to the earthquake that claimed more than 4,000 lives according to official figures, was bypassed by the civilian population, which took rescue work and solidarity into its own hands during the first few days of the emergency. The 1986-87 student movement arose in opposition to a university reform that, among other things, aimed to eliminate the right to free education in the country's main public institution of higher learning, the National Autonomous University of Mexico. The government reacted intolerantly and was clearly incapable at the negotiating table. As a result, and given the enormous strength of the student movement, the reforms had to be thrown out. [Editor's Note.]

¹⁴ The FDN was formed by the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PAREM), the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), the Party of the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction (PFCRN) and, later on, the Mexican Socialist Party (PMS), in addition to other, marginal groups.

¹⁵ One of the foundational myths of the PRD is precisely that Cárdenas had won the election and was cheated of his victory. Like all myths, it is just as impossible to demonstrate as to refute.

¹⁶ This reform created the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), presided over, however, by the Minister of the Interior just as previous federal electoral bodies had been.

¹⁷ The amendments to the Constitution passed with an unprecedented unanimous vote. For reasons of the moment, the PRI voted the accompanying legislation into law by itself, despite having negotiated its terms with the other two parties.

¹⁸ Unfortunately, once this agenda has been set, everyone seems to have found good reasons for postponing any substantive debate or negotiations.