

Regimen Without a Name

The Parties after the 1997 Elections

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We still have reason to celebrate the July 1997 elections. After so many senseless, faked, uneven elections, incapable of giving government officials unquestioned legitimacy, the last federal elections are undoubtedly an enormous leap forward. Organized by completely autonomous authorities, the fact that the outcome was anything but a foregone conclusion kept motivation high. Perhaps they were not the first truly authentic elections: there was no really serious controversy about either the 1994 or the 1991 federal races. But, the 1997 elections were the first that satisfied the protagonists. And that is, without a doubt, important.

The balloting changed the country's political map. The National Action Party (PAN) did not fulfill its expectations, but it won new executive responsibilities; the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) considerably increased its presence nationally and won Mexico City's Federal District, the country's most important city government. The most striking outcome of the elections was that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost the majority in the Chamber of Deputies, opening up a new era in national politics: a time of shared government, or, as they say in the United States, a divided government. With it, the president has lost the automatic support of the legislature and will be forced to patiently negotiate each piece of legislation he requires to promote his policies. With regard to what is most important to the current administra-

tion, economic policy, the 1997 balloting seriously hindered the executive branch. That is the dimension of the public's decision.

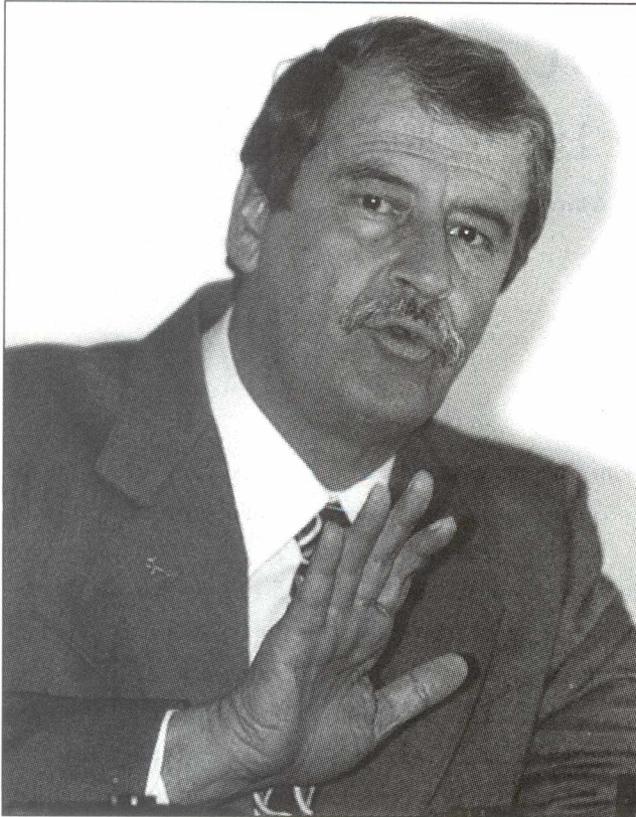
The July elections also finished digging the grave of what Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori dubbed the "system of the hegemonic party." What Sartori characterized as a non-competitive system, in which different parties exist but alternating in office is unthinkable, did not end instantaneously as those who understand the Mexican transition in dramatic terms had hoped for. PRI hegemony was not broken suddenly; it dissolved, unraveled, little by little. The dissolution of the PRI has been a slow but constant process combining two factors: a drop in votes and the disappearance of the structures that maintained the prevalence of the government party. For at least the last 20 years, these two elements have coalesced: electoral strengthening of the alternatives and fortification of the institutions of impartiality.

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hegemonic situation. The vagueness of the prefix "post" is intentional. I know it is overused. "Neo," "post," "meta": all shortcuts that pompously dress up our ignorance. I think, though, that in this case it is admissible precisely because the new (dis)arrangement of the parties has no name. In effect, what we are certain of pertains to the regimen that is gone, the awareness that the arrangement that was, has stopped existing. But there is no clarity yet about the regimen replacing it because it has not yet been established.

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Vicente Fox, one of the PAN hopefuls for the year 2000.

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Cuauthémoc Cárdenas (left) and Andrés Manuel López Obrador (right), two historic leaders of the PRD.

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We should also emphasize that what is posthegemonic is not a system, but a situation. A system of political parties worthy of the name has not yet been consolidated, that is, a stable, solid, institutionalized arrangement. I would like to make use here of the thinking Spanish political scientist Juan Linz did in the early 1970s about the Brazilian political situation. The Brazilian case, said Linz, was an authoritarian "situation" rather than an authoritarian "regime" in that it lacked the institutionalization required to be a regimen.¹

As a situation more than a system, the unstable arrangement prevailing in our political parties' activities means that increasing electoral competition is accompanied by a process of de-institutionalization. A system of parties is composed of the relatively stable interplay among parties. The institutionalization of the system consists of the crystallization of those exchanges. Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, who recently published an important book about the party systems in Latin America, say stable electoral rules are essential for institutionalizing party systems.² With regard to this, we can point out that while the discussion about electoral norms has cooled down a bit and fundamental agreements have been reached on the orga-

nization of elections, it cannot be said that the cardinal rules of the representative system are either stable or permanent.

One of the central discussions in the second round of democratic reforms will be the possibility of the reelection of legislators. This amendment would strengthen the chain of representation, professionalize the Congress, lay the foundations for the autonomy of the legislative branch and firmly establish the ritual of accountability. It would by no means be a minor change. Quite to the contrary: the possibility of a real parliamentary career would significantly change the composition of legislatures, the political dynamic inside the parties, the meaning of their loyalties and the local or national thrust of political organizations.

The norms defining the framework of the party system are still unstable. But the most important de-institutionalizing factor is uncertainty about the future of the party that used to be the axis of the system. The question mark hanging over the cohesion and electoral chances of the PRI have a definitive impact on the instability of the overall party arrangement. The PRI, still the party with the most votes nationwide, is the most unstable organization of the three main parties. Its crisis could not be more severe: I think we can now say that it is a party



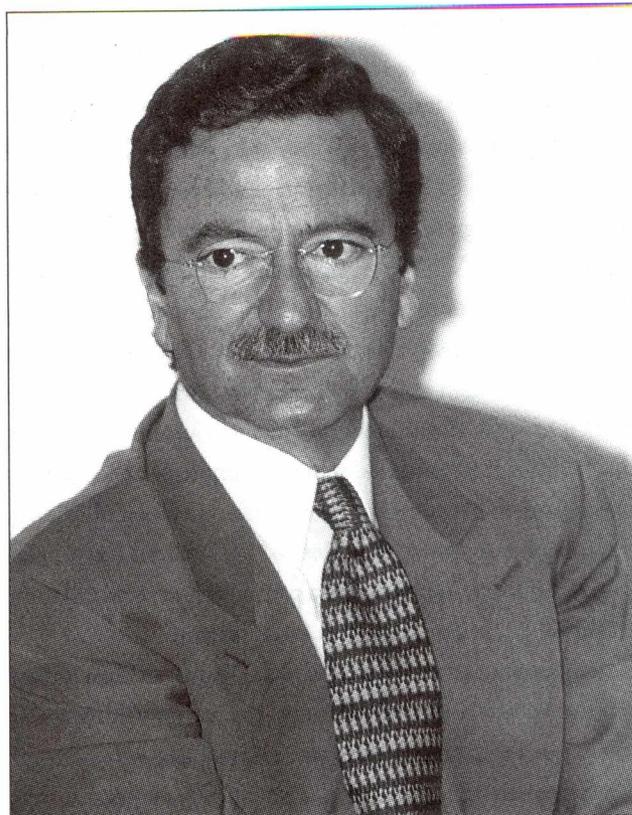
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A PRI campaign rally in the race for the governorship of the state of Veracruz, next August 2.

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fighting for survival. The ties that kept it united have been severed. First of all, the guarantee of victory has disappeared. Party discipline was linked to the certainty of victory, to the lack of alternatives. Today, perseverance no longer guarantees access to power at all. The second strand that maintained unity that has been broken is ideological. The PRI can no longer make the government discourse its own, and it seeks programmatic refuge in the past, in the "revolutionary nationalism" that it has once again taken up as a banner in its documents of doctrine. Finally, the last broken tie is arbitration. The presidency—which during the entire existence of the PRI has been the cement holding the party together—is today its main source of discord.

The PRI's future is unclear. It is not even clear that it has a future. What in my judgment is unquestionable is that the heterogeneous mix of interests that came together inside the PRI will only with great difficulty be able to survive intact in the new environment of competition and uncertainty. The absence of strong reformist leaderships in the PRI make it difficult, perhaps impossible, to build a modern, cohesive party. This is seemingly the PRI's last chance for maintaining cohesion at a moment when, for the first time, it is the country's largest minority and



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PRI national leader Mariano Palacios Alcocer.

it is also beginning the battle around the presidential nomination. Whatever the outcome, it is clear that the PRI's future will be the determining factor in the recomposition of the Mexican party system.

The sources of uncertainty are many: its ability to manage institutionally, let alone democratically, the internal process of candidate selection for the presidency when Mexico's president has sent his party such mixed signals; the possibility of maintaining internal cohesion when the traditional *priista* program is now what the PRD—a kind of refounded PRI—is offering; the repercussions of a defeat in the presidential race three years from now.

The PRI's fragility puts the entire party arrangement in question. The fate of the old hegemonic party will mark the future of the party system. It will decide, in the first place, the very components of the system. If today we can see that its basic structure is like an unstable tripod, a precarious tri-partisan regimen that includes a couple of minor parties,³ the decomposition of the PRI would stimulate the creation of new political organizations. We can say that, despite all the efforts of the large national parties to avoid the formation of new political organizations, the map of political parties is still incomplete.

The *posthegemonic situation* we are experiencing is also marked by an identity crisis in all the political parties. The incursion into the terrain of competition prevents these organizations from continuing as they were before. The PRI will have to get used to being a part of the whole, not its synthesis. The PAN is going through a not-very-hidden war for the soul of the party. With a very heterodox candidate already openly campaigning for the presidency of the nation,⁴ the thinking of PAN national leader Felipe Calderón Hinojosa, becomes more relevant than ever: win the election without losing the party. The political withdrawal of its most lucid ideologue left this traditional organization somewhat unprepared.⁵ The PRD, for its part, will have to process the responsibilities of victory: exercising the government in Mexico City's Federal District and in the Chamber of Deputies. For a party which has emerged from a "victim" tradition, the leap is extraordinary.

It is important to emphasize that despite all their differences of vocabularies and traditions, the parties that form this tripod aim for the center: they all have programs with ambiguous formulations but aims that are essentially centrist. A clear spirit of moderation is perceivable in all three large national parties. In the case of the PAN, this goal was the express slogan of its national leader when he made the bid to head up the party: a march toward the center. Responsibility in holding public office is smoothing the anti-system thorns of the PRD. The growing competitiveness of our electoral system is pushing the parties toward pragmatism, some might say cynicism. And they may be right. In any case, the parties are abandoning the extremes of the spectrum and are making the center their ideal home.

This magnet at the center of the political spectrum turns our *posthegemonic situation* into a situation of moderate pluralism: three important parties that need to come to an agreement to make the legislature function. It is a moderate pluralism in which, if the dynamic of polarization can be overcome, it is possible to conceive of a strategy of ad hoc legislative agreements or flexible alliances based on each piece of legislation.

But, beyond the extinction of extremism in Mexico's party organizations, we can also see an important division with regard to the degree of institutionalization of this *posthegemonic situation*. Many efforts have been made to classify the parties and party systems: cadre parties and mass parties; ideological and pragmatic parties; parties of the left, center and right; bipartisan and multipartisan systems; competitive and non-competitive sys-

tems; polarized and moderate systems. The political map now being drawn in Mexico shows two clearly differentiated territories: the area of institutionalized parties and that of non-institutionalized parties.

In the first area we find a relatively institutionalized threesome: the PRI, the PAN, the PRD. The other area is occupied by parties which lack the most elemental foundations of institutionality. We can all level many criticisms at the three large parties. It is, in fact, one of our favorite sports. However, clearly we are dealing with national institutions, structures with relative organizational solidity and a certain ideological coherence. But, the other area is filled with a band of parties that—with no intention to insult—we could call banana-republic parties. They are personalist organizations with wobbly, gelatinous structures, unable to sink roots in Mexican society, built around either doctrine carved in stone or an ideology that changes with the wind. The success of the Green Party (PVEM), an organization that in the last federal election ran a despicable campaign,⁶ a front group with an infantile political program and an organization built around nepotism, is proof that in the times of video-politics, unfortunately, these banana-republic parties have a future.

Finally, it is clear that the future of the party system, the nature of its future institutionalization, are key elements for the quality of the democratic system, and in particular for the possibilities of pluralist governability. The ability to govern in presidential systems depends to a great extent on their party structure. In that sense, it should be noted that the splintering of the vote would minimize the possibilities of having an effective government. The future of this constitutional arrangement, then, depends to a large degree on the party system. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Juan J. Linz, "The Future of an Authoritarian Situation or the Institutionalization of an Authoritarian Regime," in Alfred Stepan, *Authoritarian Brazil. Origins, Policies and Future* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

² Scott Mainwaring and Timothy Scully, *Building Democratic Institutions. Party Systems in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

³ The two minor parties are the Labor Party (PT) and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM). [Editor's Note.]

⁴ The author refers to Vicente Fox, current governor of the state of Guanajuato, a politician whose unconventional image has made him very popular, who began campaigning for the nomination without first getting the agreement of his national leadership. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ The author refers to Carlos Castillo Peraza, the losing 1997 PAN candidate for the mayor's seat in Mexico City, who recently resigned from the party "to go back into academic life," actually because his defeat weakened his influence in the party. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ The PVEM campaign, based on the slogan "Don't vote for a politician; vote for an ecologist," netted them almost 7 percent of the vote in Mexico City. [Editor's Note.]