

The 2000 Elections And the Mexican Transition

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Mexico's 1997 federal elections and the contest for the mayor's seat in the nation's capital substantially changed our understanding of the democratic transition for many reasons. For example, they were the first truly transparent, by-the-book elections in the country's history, a true milestone in the long, difficult road to democracy in Mexico. But questions immediately arise: Have we already made the transition to democracy? Where are we now? Are there clear, definitive signs that we can now speak of a successful democratic transition? What should we expect from the year 2000 federal elections? Do conditions exist for the political forces to accept alternating in office if the official party loses?

The aim of this article is to generate a few hypotheses about these questions in order to contribute to the much needed debate that the coming federal elections demand of us. It should be

pointed out that the reading I propose derives essentially from reconsidering the theoretical and empirical texts about democratic transitions being produced by political scientists in recent decades. It is important to make this point because, if up to now the use of these analytical frameworks made it impossible to speak of a real democratic transition in Mexico, the 1997 federal elections demand that we at least make a few corrections or adjustments in that characterization.

A SUI GENERIS REGIMEN

A SUI GENERIS TRANSITION

If we limit ourselves to theory, we must agree that Mexico completed its long, difficult road to democracy in 1997. According to specialized texts on the topic, a transition to democracy concludes when the first free, credible—that is equitable, transparent and not top down—elections take place. In addition, the recognition of opposition victories in elections for strategic posts and the new balance

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of the country's most important political forces present the image of a system of competitive political parties and shared or divided local and state governments. Also, the mechanisms and institutions designed to organize and carry out the elections operated effectively and autonomously. The Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) emerged triumphant as the main body responsible for this.



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Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution.

Of course, the 1997 elections did present some irregularities in a few very localized areas like Campeche,¹ examples of the inertia of a system that resists disappearing. Nevertheless, these isolated cases do not cast a major shadow over our impression of the elections as a whole. Only the coming 2000 federal elections, however, will confirm if the previous ones represented the beginning of a new democratic set of norms in Mexico or were just an isolated experience that succumbed under the inertia of authoritarianism and ambitions to power of those who have made official politics their way of life and road to riches.

No matter what happens, it is worth asking ourselves if the celebration of the first free, honest elections in Mexico is both necessary and sufficient reason to be able to say that we have successfully walked the road to democracy. For many different reasons, my first answer is no. If those elections marked the beginning of honest elections, we will have been witness to a *sui generis* transition to democracy, that, as such, leaves much open to ambiguity. Nothing says that these questions cannot be corrected or adapted along the

way due to the very impact of greater equilibrium among the political forces. But, for the time being, they suggest an inconclusive process that combines some democratic practices with others which are still ambiguous and ambivalent.

In the first place, we should not forget that the 1997 federal elections—and presumably those of 2000—are, strictly speaking, the result of a gradual,

prolonged, limited opening of the Mexican political regimen rather than of a real process of democratization. This marks a significant difference between our country and all those that have successfully made the transition to democracy in other

places, whether southern Europe, Latin America or Eastern Europe. In effect, in all the other experiences, democracy was the result of broad, explicit accords or pacts among the main political forces. This lowered the risk of political regression and committed the actors to greater respect for the new democratic norms.

In the case of Mexico, in contrast, the main responsibility in defining timing and forms of opening up the Mexican political regimen has lain with its representatives, the authorities themselves. In this kind of political liberalization, the opposition parties have always been invited to participate, but in the long run, it has been the governing elite that has implemented its own decisions and preferences. We should remember, for example, that in the end, the last political reform (strictly speaking, an electoral reform) implemented in 1996, passed with only the votes of the party in power, overriding several previous multipartisan accords.

The ability to manoeuvre should not be confused, however, with political will. The opening in the Mexican political regimen in recent years has not been the result of the governing elite's will to

change, nor a gracious concession to the opposition parties. Quite to the contrary, it has been the result of the democratic forces' long struggle and the real deterioration and natural wearing down of a political order that refuses to die.

No matter how paradoxical it might seem, then, we are witnessing a democratic transition via political liberalization. At one time, with the gradual opening, the regimen won time and some legitimacy that allowed it to maintain continuity. The elections represented no risk to its survival and it had sufficient legal and extralegal mechanisms to avoid big surprises. As the structural crisis of the political regimen accelerated, however, the elections increasingly became the natural institutional arena for competition and for the eventual transformation of the very regimen that the creation of simply a greater democratic image was originally aimed at preserving. In this way, its ability to manipulate the elections was de facto reduced, and the time came when interfering in the election results actually put the continued existence of the governing class at risk. Because of the very crisis of the regimen, the political cost of manipulating the elections to retain positions became higher than the cost of respecting them.

But in this process, because of its sui generis character, several questions remain. For example, the 1996 political reform did not reflect the convictions of all the parties and the partial way it was passed will continue to weigh in the future. If political will to respect the 1997 election results existed, the will to generate basic agreements should also exist. Apparently, in the those elections, the order of the elements did not change the result: credible elections. But this is only apparent. Sooner or later, new democratic norms will have to be drawn up and then, consensus will be imperative.

In brief, the 1997 elections marked a change from all previous experiences. For the first time Mexico had credible elections and the balloting results were respected without major complications. But, what made this possible then and not before, when the risks were greater?

Without going into an exhaustive explanation, it seems to me that factors like some of the following should be taken into account. In the first place, the Ernesto Zedillo administration inherited an accumulated political crisis that forced him to behave more in line with the discourse of the transition, until then merely rhetorical. For the first time, the magnitude of both the economic and political crisis

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made the cost of not respecting election results higher than the cost of manipulating them, as I have already mentioned. While the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration's economic performance gave it certain legitimacy, allowing it to indefinitely postpone the democratic transition, the current administration enjoyed no such legitimacy, and therefore was forced to seek it in the field of politics.

In the second place, in the long run, the very process of opening up the electoral arena, even though slowly, gradually, in a controlled fashion and with enormous irregularities, generated a dynamic of competition and participation that cannot be underestimated. While the elections were never equitable or credible, at least two opposition parties were able to use this opportunity the regimen opened up to become viable, recognized political options. Today, multipartisan politics is an inescapable reality. We have a more mature electorate, plural in its partisan affinities.

In the third place, we should not forget that the external factor had some weight in the 1997 elections. While in the past—concretely in 1988—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) received

the “backing” of the United States, which despite the process’ enormous irregularities, was one of the first governments in the world to recognize its victory, things were different in 1997. To get the investment and economic backing of the United States and the European Union, the Zedillo administration had to show a decided commitment to democracy. Among the many things at

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stake in those elections, foreign economic backing occupied a central spot.

Nevertheless, all this is not enough to enable us to say that the democratic transition in Mexico has concluded satisfactorily. On the contrary, enormous suspicions still exist due to a great extent to the very ambivalence of the regimen and the sui generis nature of the Mexican transition. Therefore, at the same time that we have the first credible elections, we also can see broad areas of impunity and despotism, repression and the violation of the most elemental human rights, the militarization of the country, crude practices of the patronage system, corruption on a grand scale, etc.

On the other hand, since it is the product of a gradual, top-down opening, it is deficient in several areas. Therefore, the celebration of honest elections is not a sufficient or necessary reason to declare its finalization and/or the entry of the country into a new “democratic normalcy,” as the authorities would like. As I already pointed out, broad agreement is still lacking, not only on a consensus about electoral norms, but also about the entire edifice of norms for the democracy we aspire to, that is, the design of a new constitution.

Up to here, I have analyzed the meaning of the 1997 elections in the more general context of the democratic transition. It remains only to advance a few scenarios for the 2000 federal elections suggested by the new conditions.

THE NEW SCENARIOS

For many reasons, the 2000 federal elections will be historic. Today, the gaps among the parties have narrowed visibly, both in terms of their ability to get out the vote and their real positions of power nationwide. In addition, the deterioration of the Mexican political regimen has reached dramatic proportions. Suffice it to mention the low profile of the current administration, whose performance in office has been systematically censured by the public and is perceived as one of the greyest, most mediocre in the country’s recent history.

As if that were not enough, the coming federal elections will take place in the context of an economic recession that has not been reversed since this administration took office, despite attempts to use official figures to prove the contrary. The context is also marked by the continued existence of several armed movements, presaging a spiral of instability and increased repression, factors that also feed the non-credibility of the regimen and the elections themselves. What can be expected, then, from the 2000 elections?

Generally speaking, the enormous expectations that have existed for some time about this year’s elections are due in great part to the fact that, for the first time, there is a real possibility that the governing party’s presidential candidate may not come out the victor and that the PRI could even lose its congressional majority. Obviously, these are extreme eventualities that would be of historic consequences: the end of an era for our country.

In addition to the possible outcome, equally novel is the fact that the July 2 elections present

broad areas of uncertainty. Today, in contrast to the recent past, no one can predict with certainty which party or candidate will come out the winner, in itself a democratic advance not to be scoffed at. Theoretically, electoral uncertainty, that is, the results of electoral competition not being a foregone conclusion, is inherent to any democracy; in that sense, any party running has the formal possibility of winning the elections.

But staying on this level of analysis would be limited. It is not enough that there be a good degree of electoral uncertainty to suppose that this year's elections will be fully credible, that is, clean

and unobjectionable. A second condition must be fulfilled for that to be the case: there must be full guarantees so all the competing players accept and recognize the party favored by the balloting. That is, there must also be a degree of institutional certainty so that no matter what the outcome, the elections will not be challenged or repudiated by the contenders.

Obviously, it is here where our transition to democracy is still mired down, and there is good reason to suppose that the 2000 elections will not be a qualitative advance in this respect. It is here, precisely, where the factors of the political moment described initially allow us to support this affirmation.

In the first place, uncertainty as a condition for elections and institutional certainty with regard to the results presuppose a tacit arrangement among all the parties about the rules of competition. As we know, this was disregarded in the negotiations for the 1996 reform when the government and the party in power decided to unilaterally pass the new Federal Code of Electoral Institutions and Procedures without the backing of all the parties. This

leaves open the possibility that the elections be challenged for complying to norms that continue to be biased in favor of the governing party.

In the second place, to adhere to democratic principles, electoral uncertainty must refer only to the outcome and in no way to the reactions of the political actors. The 2000 elections do not live up to this condition either. What is more, everything



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points to a close presidential race encouraging expressions of discontent and challenges on the part of the losing candidates and parties, which would create high risks for the country's political stability.

Evidently, the fact that this kind of uncertainty still exists for the 2000 elections speaks badly of our "transition." Actually, it reveals that the political opening has not been accompanied by an effective agreement among all the actors that guarantees confidence in the process. As long as no real democratic pact exists to commit and hold all political actors for the democratic change, its success is by no means guaranteed. In brief, it is no use saying that electoral uncertainty exists if the basis has not been established for electoral institutional certainty, an endeavor almost completely yet to be undertaken. **NM**

NOTES

¹ The author is referring to the 1997 Campeche gubernatorial elections which were not held under the aegis of the IFE, but of the State Electoral Institute. [Editor's Note.]