

The Voted Transition

Part II

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As we saw in the last issue of *Voices of Mexico*, the Mexican transition has not been a compromise between power seeking-elites, but a gradual step-by-step process of small negotiations limited to the electoral arena, all related to the 1996 electoral reforms. Therefore, we could conclude that the Mexican transition was not based on a pact, but rather, was a voted transition. Changes have occurred since

the beginning in the electoral sphere and in the party system, as we explained in the first part of this analysis. Now, we will talk about the overwhelming impact of these changes in the Mexican electoral system: the transition from the hegemony of an almost single party to a party system. In this respect, the following facts stand out:

1. Up until the mid-term elections in 1985, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) always held a greater than two-thirds ma-

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majority in the Chamber of Deputies. In 1988 it lost that majority, and in 1997 it even lost the absolute majority.

2. Up until 1989, only 39 out of the 2,387 municipalities that existed then were ruled by parties other than the PRI: 1.84 percent of the population.¹ By December 2000, that figure had grown to more than 500 municipalities, while the PRI held 1,382 out of 2,427. In terms of population, by the end of 2000, the PRI governed 44.11 percent at the municipal level; the National Action Party (PAN), 37 percent; and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), 15 percent. But we must add that, before the 2000 elections, 63.6 percent of the population had already experienced local government by alternate parties, and if we take into consideration Mexico City, the figure rises to almost eight out of every ten persons.
3. Regarding local legislatures, according to data compiled by Alonso Lujambio, political change has been very similar: if in 1974 the PRI had 97.8 percent of all the seats, at the start of 2000 it held 49.6 percent.² However, another fact must be taken into consideration: in 1974 there were 369 local seats, while at the start of 2000 the figure had increased to 1,108. This means that the PRI lost decision making capabilities, but not seats. In other words, the political class kept its spaces open. So, if at the beginning of the 1970s there were opposition representatives in only four out of 31 local legislatures

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—4 deputies out of 369—, by the end of the 1990s, as we have already said, the PRI no longer held the majority of seats. The aggregate result is that, even though the formerly hegemonic party still gets the most votes, it has lost the absolute majority.

4. On the other hand, so-called “divided governments” —where the executive and the legislative branches hail from different parties— did not exist in Mexico until 1989. But by the end of 2000 there were already 20 cases of divided government. And even before that year’s July elections, 15 states had already had that experience.
5. Regarding the Senate, as we have already explained, in 1993 the electoral system introduced the legal concept of first minority senator for every state: the party that came in in second place would be awarded one seat. But in 1996, with double the number of senators —128 instead of 64— two would be elected by majority vote, one would be allotted to the largest minority, and 32 would be elected from a national proportional representation list. Once again, the electoral system was the door that led to plurality.
6. Finally, on July 2, 2000, for the first time since its birth in 1929, the PRI did not win the presidential elections. So what had

been happening in the periphery —in state legislatures and local governments, bolstered by the principle of proportional representation— became the basis for the competition for the center.

THE NEXT STEP

All this is enough to explain why the Mexican transition toward democracy is not just starting, but has already closed a cycle, even though it has not followed in the steps of other countries. It has followed a pattern based on political liberalization, the salvaging of institutions, and, most evidently, votes. What does seem clear —even though it is always harder to conjecture about the future than to narrate the past— is that democratic consolidation will have to settle the issues it has left unsolved. To go from the electoral and party system —as has been the case up to now— to the political system as a whole implies different problems that can no longer be studied under the same theory of democratic transition. Looking at the same data from the opposite side, at least three problems arise for the consolidation of democracy. First and most notably is the one regarding the decision-making and action capabilities —and even the pertinence— of the presidential regime. The data we have mentioned as evidence of democratization can also be interpreted as a challenge to governability, at least in the short run: the president’s hege-

mony, which used to be the gravitational center of the political system as a whole, no longer exists. The president's party has no majority in any of the federal legislative chambers. He is now compelled to negotiate everything with the opposition. And the PRI has become the strongest opposition party in Mexican history. So, to the negotiations in Congress we must add the federal struggle—which the PRI never had to face during its rule. But if this was not enough, we must still remember that the PAN is not a party of corporations gathered around power. It was not born and did not evolve to be a transmitter of presidential instructions, and it does not include unions, peasant groups or intermediate organizations that pledge their support to the executive. This is in contrast to the way in which the PRI was created—and worked.³ Those groups lost votes and rallying power, but most of them are still affiliated to the PRI. Thus, from the outset, President Vicente Fox's room for maneuver has been much more limited than that of any other president, at least since 1934.

This problem leads, in the second place, to the need to exercise government conforming to the letter of formal institutionalism: to the letter of the law and constitutional political institutions. But, again, good news must be interpreted also as the main challenge: these institutions, particularly those of local governments, changed during the transition in order to open growing spaces for plurality. None

can be governed effectively without an agreement between two or more parties. Furthermore, it is an institutionalism that was created mainly while the authoritarian regime was in place. This means that the habit of social participation by citizens or of an institutionalism meant to allow for public debate, transparent negotiations, and efficiency, all at the same time, does not exist in the local or the federal governments. Institutions were created with government-by-one-person in mind, not by many reaching agreements. That is the reason why, besides the general challenge that adapting to democracy implies, political institutions have to adjust to pluralism. Thus, the key to a stable government is not to be found in intermediate organizations, or even in the media, but in the prudence and responsibility of the leaders of the different parties. This is the strongest point made by those who claim that the transition has just begun: indeed, with the exception of the electoral system, political institutions in Mexico were not designed by a democratic regime, and the windows they provide for citizens' participation are still very few.⁴

And finally, clearly connected with this, we must add the contradictions embedded in Mexican political culture which, at least for some time—while democracy educates—will continue to combine traits that belong to an authoritarian logic with others that are already part of democratic life. In this

respect, the results of a December 1999 Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) poll are telling:⁵

1. Forty-eight percent of respondents said that they were not very interested in politics, and 24 percent said they were not interested at all. This is complemented by the fact that 76 percent said they preferred a strong leader. In other words, people believe in voting (over 80 percent), but it is clear that they want to use their votes to elect leaders who can solve all public matters, as if this space were not their business also. They want a strong president; an elected, but very strong one.
2. Regarding the rule of law, 44 percent said that laws should be obeyed always. But at the same time, 29 percent said that laws should be changed, while 24 percent claimed a right to disobey them "if they deem them unfair."
3. Finally, 41 percent of those surveyed believe that in order to build "a great nation," all citizens must share the same ideas and values. This is in tune with these other facts: 66 percent said they would not coexist with homosexuals; 57 percent would not accept living with someone with AIDS; 56 percent with someone of a different race; and worse yet, 51 percent would not live with someone who had different political views. But is that not what democracy is all about?

In short, the three traits that set the Mexican transition apart from others are at the same time the hardest chal-

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lenges that democratic consolidation faces. A cycle in the transition process has already been closed. It has led Mexico to plurality and a new party system, but democracy itself is indeed only just beginning. It seems rather evident that democracy cannot be regarded as a destination, but as the means to channel political conflicts and, at the same time, paraphrasing the Constitution, as a way to process public life, that is, not as a checkered flag but as a means to solve public affairs. Norberto Bobbio has offered one of the simplest, and at the same time, one of the most complex descriptions to implement democracy: make public matters public.

It is clear that this requires a building and maintenance process that cannot be subjected to a timetable. Rather, it implies a constant challenge based on clearly established rules and guided by the three values that at some point must be shared by the main political forces of the country and by the vast majority of the citizens: responsibility and/or shared responsibility of each and every participant; tolerance, which allows coexistence with adversaries who embrace different points of view, and solidarity among all, based on an unwavering commitment to uphold the rule of law. On these bare foundations a political process that is something more than a sort of end-cause can be effectively built.

For today's democratic Mexico, the most important debate should be about institutions, which are generally marginalized, in order to put temporary solutions to temporary problems in their right dimension. Institutionalism, supported by the strength of the rule of law and by the respect of every actor, is what can alleviate, even if only in part, pessimistic sentiments.

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And what are those concerns? There are at least five delicate matters: first, the tendency of political parties to make a priority of electoral matters, and not always those of an institutional nature, which are national, shared and tolerant.

A second issue has to do with the way in which Mexican society is told about changes. In this respect, the media have historic opportunities and responsibilities, since the way in which it gathers and reports the news turns it into the channel between citizens and institutions. One of the central conditions for democratic consolidation is a well informed citizenry.

In the third place come those powers that are only known because of their perverse effects: drug-trafficking, organized crime and public and private corruption. The strength of responsible political institutions that are willing to defend the rule of law could gradually undermine those hidden powers.

Another important issue has to do with those forces that because of pessimism or ideological convictions have decided not to cooperate with institutional development and have opted to stay outside the process. The best example of this is the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), whose causes have rattled the national conscience, but whose methods have not enabled them to be partners in the democratic consolidation process, simply because violence, in any of its forms, has never been the road that leads to

building a democracy anywhere in the world.

Finally, as long as economic frailty is not completely averted, political institutions will obviously be at risk. However, if an institutional vision assumes its share of responsibility for national solvency, in every sense, and not only because of specific or, even worse, circumstantial interests, economic vulnerability, and even the sum of the five points we have mentioned can be successfully overcome.

The necessary condition is an enormous capacity to educate and increase awareness. To think that democracy is the sole responsibility of political parties or even their leaders is one of the worst mistakes that Mexico can make at this or at any other time. ■■■

NOTES

¹ Alonso Lujambio, *El poder compartido. Un ensayo sobre la democratización mexicana* (Mexico City: Océano, 2000), p. 78.

² *Ibid.*, p. 43 on.

³ Luis Javier Garrido, *El Partido de la Revolución Institucionalizada* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 1995).

⁴ Again, it is in local government where this is beginning to change, albeit slowly. See Mauricio Merino, comp., *En busca de la democracia local* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1995); and Martha Scheingart and Emilio Duhau, comps., *Transición política y democracia municipal en México y Colombia* (Mexico City: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2001).

⁵ *Plan trienal de educación cívica 2001-2003* (Mexico City: IFE, 1999).