

Parties and reforms¹

Rafael Segovia*

The Mexican Revolution created a multitude of parties, now long forgotten. The National Agrarian, Cooperativist and Border Socialist parties —like all those which in one or another way included the adjective “Revolutionary” in their names— went to the great beyond with the birth of the PNR (National Revolutionary Party, predecessor of today’s PRI) and the process of “revolutionary unification,” which gave rise to the “Sonora dynasty” and later to the “great revolutionary family.”

Today we find ourselves unceasingly in the company of the PNR’s grandson, the PRI, and it is worth asking how this party has managed, with a bit of touching-up, to survive and govern alone over the course of two thirds of a

century, while in Mexico other parties —particularly those on the left— have had an ephemeral existence.

I hasten to note that the fact that the PNR was not the result of intellectual, doctrinal or philosophical considerations —and that it was created rapidly, in all likelihood

with no great concern for matters of form— was an advantage for the party, since this corresponded to ongoing features of Mexican society. Faced with the need to resolve the issue of succession after the assassination of Alvaro Obregón, General Plutarco Elías Calles created a political mechanism which would



Imaginatina—Lucio Blanco

* Professor and researcher at the Center for International Studies, El Colegio de México.

¹ Paper read at the Second Colloquium on “Society and Politics —Mexico and the United States,” organized by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, Baja California, on September 22, 1995.

The real winner of the August 21 federal elections was the electorate, not the political parties.

provide a way out of the crisis. This mechanism has existed for 66 years now, with the help of the two great repair jobs carried out in 1938, when Lázaro Cárdenas founded the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), and 1948, when the PNR/PRM was transformed into the PRI under Miguel Alemán.

The realism and practical spirit of the Mexican political class

tion between society and government in Mexico.

The main causes of the nation's current situation cannot—unless we want to commit an intentional mistake—be located only in the immediate past.

Uncontrolled population growth is not only a natural phenomenon but a cultural one as well, and has evident economic and

industrial production or mining. Mexico is now a different country; I would go so far as to say a radically different country from the one that witnessed the creation of the PNR in 1929.

Leaving aside these decisive factors, I will limit myself to the political parties.

In Mexico, the domination or hegemony of a single party over the course of more than half a century created a situation seen only in totalitarian or authoritarian countries. Despite this, it would be incorrect and unjust to compare Mexico to the Soviet Union or Mussolini's Italy. While the idea of creating a democratic system had always been an element in the country's ambiguous revolutionary thinking, it was only with the Miguel Alemán administration that the democratic process began to take shape. Curiously, this was by means of a paradox: the centralization of electoral activity, which Luis Medina called the federalization of elections. The federal government took control of the elections, which until then had been in the hands of the states, and imposed the order which continues to the present day.

For the first time, legislation was enacted covering the parties, and the government's concerns were set forth.

In the first place, the formation of state or regional parties was prevented, while anti-democratic parties (the Communist Party) and those with a religious or racist



Imaginlatina—Renato Ibarra

Political participation has grown over recent years.

led to a lack of rigid principles, a constantly adaptive flexibility and an absence of clear borders. More than a party, the PNR/PRM/PRI has been a movement, a school of thought or, to be more precise, a mentality around and under the domination of which the nation's main political institutions were organized. Until recently, this instrument has been able to generate a process of mutual adapta-

political consequences. The solution, or rather palliative, would require support from the religious organizations and, of course, the political parties. When a country goes from a population of 20 million inhabitants in 1940 to around 90 million in 1995, the very nature of that country is transformed. The same can be said with regard to such specific fields as education, transport, cities,

foundation (the Sinarquistas)² were eliminated. Internal elections were prohibited and assemblies were imposed as the means for selecting candidates; the Law on Parties indicates the type of political system the regime sought to establish.

The Federal Electoral Law, in its first stage, led to a series of reforms (women's suffrage, party deputies, etc.) aimed at perfecting an electoral system which was increasingly open but continued to be defective in terms of the forms of representation.

It was a man of genius, Jesús Reyes Heróles, who worked out a new law on the basis of new principles, which were, however, questioned from the very beginning. The proportional distribution of votes was not part of the Mexican political tradition. This method has been demanded by the leftist parties, whose electoral results are always diminished for social and geographical reasons.

The 1977 electoral reform was the result of an agreement between Reyes Heróles and the left, but it was the right that capitalized on it. The great winner and beneficiary of this law was the National Action Party (PAN). Mexico has had a different political history since the "Law on Political Parties and Electoral Processes" was enacted.

² The Sinarquistas were an ultra-right clericalist movement with a traditional base in some rural areas. (Translator's note.)

One should take note of a fact—in my view a crucial one—in Mexican political life: the decisive actor and author in all these changes is the state, through its acting arm, the government. This confirms a phenomenon which is typical of our political behavior, or more precisely of our political system: unlike what happens in the majority of countries, in whose political systems the government and state must defend themselves against the onslaughts and demands of the parties, in Mexico the government has been the most important promoter of the formation and consolidation of a system of parties. Since the revolutionary legitimacy upon which the state based itself began to weaken, a new basis for the state had to be sought. The only one available (because it was the only one existing) was electoral legitimacy. After having based itself on arms and the Revolution, and later on History, there was a return to—or for the first time, a search for, depending on one's interpretation—the ballot box and popular choice.

But the indispensable instrument for preparing elections was not found all at once. No matter how hard one looked, political parties were conspicuous by their absence; they were either embryonic or in ruins, and only the PRI offered the appearance of being at least a consistent political organization. The consequence was the multiplication of a series of pseudo-parties which muddied the

country's electoral waters. It is important to note that the law favored this proliferation. Its measures had been imposed against what could have been big parties. On the right the field was clear; the PAN saw only the decomposed remains of the Sinarquista movement lying at its feet. On the left it was impossible to arrive at fundamental guidelines for an organizational schema.

The reform planned and carried out by Jesús Reyes Heróles was cut short due to a president's whim. There was a return to intransigence and fear; precious time was lost in the attempt to wall oneself into the old, now indefensible structures.

A change, a political transformation, was indispensable. The country followed its own path and drew away from those parties which were alien to change and suffered from unresolved problems which economic and social crises merely exacerbated. The political situation went beyond any sort of traditional political control.

Carlos Salinas had to go through the most complicated elections that Mexico experienced since the Revolution, involving a split PRI, a poorly planned election campaign, a new leftist front and a PAN which was undergoing recomposition. Only his political ability and an unflinching will to govern saved his administration and allowed him to overcome post-electoral conflicts. Necessity, and perhaps cold rational calcula-

tion, led him to make an informal governmental pact with the PAN, which the latter ably seized on in order to develop its political apparatus and broaden its influence, which had been reduced to a few areas where historically it had more vegetated than existed. It was the PAN that harvested the best fruit of Reyes Heróles' electoral reform. The same cannot be said of the left.

The political history, in particular the electoral history of the left, can be summed up in one word: failure. Many different causes came together to produce this unfortunate result.

In Mexico, despite limited industrial development, there has been the basis for a workers movement which the left never managed to conquer. For decades the PRI's greatest triumph, the so-called organized labor movement, succeeded in imposing a populist policy which was ruinous for the state but provided sustenance to the governments of the Revolution. The left took refuge in the public universities, with an inevitable middle-class intellectual leadership more attentive to doctrinal purity and ideological debate than to conquering the masses. This leadership never had direct and sustained contact with the people. The fact that it was constantly fracturing into tendencies, groups and mini-groups meant that it was completely ineffective.

The rise of the Party of the

Democratic Revolution (PRD), based on the neo-Cardenistas' penetration of an electorate that until then had remained faithful to the PRI, revealed the contradictions boiling within the PRI, which culminated in the split of the Democratic Current.³ The essential weakness of the left, its tendency to division and factionalism, seemed to have been overcome, although a colder and closer look would allow one to see the fragility of the new leftist coalition. The union of the former Communist Party, which declared itself dissolved, with the left-wing split-off of the PRI—together with a multitude of parties lacking electoral registration, money and members, filled with ideologies and insuperable resentments as well as the unjustified yet deep-rooted ambitions of unknown minor leaders—was practically unsustainable. Its history is one of rivalries dominated by the major conflict between Porfirio Muñoz Ledo and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas.

In 1988 there was a repetition of the traditional, albeit sporadic, schema of Mexican electoral conjunctures. An active part of the electorate showed a desire for change, albeit in equivocal and diffuse

³ The Democratic Current was the tendency within the PRI led by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo. Its withdrawal from the PRI led to the 1988 Cárdenas presidential campaign, and subsequently the formation of the Party of the Democratic Revolution. (Translator's note.)

ways. The opposition parties, encouraged by what they considered to be clear signs that the electorate was breaking from the PRI, responded to this desire by entrenching their internal quarrels, which in turn led the voting masses to pull away from these parties in a striking fashion. The popularity of the opposition candidates—the PAN's Manuel Clouthier and the National Democratic Front's Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—was not enough to withstand the offensive of the well organized PRI machine, which responded to the Cárdenas split more quickly than expected.

The 1988 elections seemed to have a clear consequence: the country entered a classic tripartite system with a left, center and right. This meant the inevitable struggle over the center, in which all parties would have to contain their radical wings, which were driven by politicized intellectuals anxious to exert influence over party leaders.

The political equilibrium devised by Carlos Salinas allowed him to go from extreme weakness when he took over the presidency to enjoying real popularity in December 1993. His *sexenio* (six-year term) actually consisted not of six years but of five years plus one: from the standpoint of the president's popularity, 1994 has little to do with the previous years. José Antonio Crespo, an analyst not characterized by sympathy for Salinas, wrote that his administration gained its legitimacy not at the polls but through the exer-

cise of power. His image at this time is a different kettle of fish.

Carlos Salinas' capacity for maneuver was really quite surprising. After many negotiations he succeeded in sealing a pact with the PAN—one should say with a renovated PAN—and in cornering Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who lost himself in his own political inexperience and self-worship, as he dragged behind him his own party, which he never understood since he was unaware of the role parties play in the world of politics.

The Salinas-PAN rapprochement had a cost, and it was a large one: *concertaciones*.⁴ The state of Guanajuato went to the PAN in a shady, unconstitutional and poorly carried out operation, which provoked scarcely contained rage within the PRI. The PAN won Chihuahua and Baja California fair and square, giving rise to exaggerated speculation as well as panic in the PRD, which deepened its own differences to the point that they produced a split among the party's tops. When the presidential succession of 1994 was posed, the parties' internal situation bore little resemblance to that of 1988.

Never has a president prepared his succession more carefully than Salinas. Luis Donaldo Colosio was a candidate built step by step, without the slightest error

⁴ This neologism, coined to characterize the PRI/PAN relationship, means roughly "concessions which result from a process of coming to terms." (Translator's note.)

being committed and with close attention even to those details which seemed most insignificant. His *résumé* seemed more like an ideal schema than the reflection of a politician's life. Such beauty was not possible.

If the election of Salinas was a problem for Salinas himself, the 1994 vote was a major stumbling block for the political system and

pying second place with 31 percent of the vote in 1988, the PRD went to third place with only 17.09 percent in 1994. The PAN, despite some minor complaints, celebrated the fact that it took second place with 26.69 percent of the votes for president. Even though they lost to Zedillo, the 9,224,697 Mexican citizens who voted for PAN candidate Fernán-



Victor Reyes

Despite losing to Zedillo, the PAN's voting base has grown markedly.

the parties, but a success for the electorate.

The protests raised by the PRD, or more exactly by Cárdenas and his closest advisors—who charged that a 10-million-vote fraud had been perpetrated—could not stand up in the face of 81,620 election observers, the vast majority of whom were opposed to the PRI. Based on imaginary figures, the Cardenista protest sought to blot out a terrible fact for the candidate and the PRD: from occu-

dez de Cevallos gained a historic victory.

It was the electorate as a whole that asserted itself; 77.75 percent of registered voters went to the polls—a total of 35,557,095 men and women. Never in Mexico's history had a vote approached these figures. Thus Mexicans seem to be closer to modernity than their parties are, since not only did eighty thousand observers participate, but during the elections of August 21, 1994, more than 700,000 cit-

izens mobilized themselves and worked for the verification of the election results.

Despite this considerable movement and this expression of civic consciousness, there continue to be inexplicable paradoxes.

Contact between the parties and the citizenry continues to be of minuscule dimensions. The rejection of parties is a universal phenomenon, but in Mexico it is an alarming one. Not only are the real, uninflated membership figures unknown, but the payment of dues to the various parties is non-existent. This is a serious phenomenon, since, instead of living from the contributions of rank-and-file men and women, the parties must seek donations from businesses and thereby find themselves subordinated to decisions made outside the given party itself.

The population's alienation from parties reduces party life to

an internal relationship between leaders and cadres —where the latter exist— with the inevitable distortion of public interests this implies. This discussion, which in principle should be carried out with all levels of society, always occurs through the mass media, which highlight, filter and frequently distort the parties' message and, even more seriously, speak in the name of the *public*, despite the fact that they are always, or almost always, private companies. This poses the question: How and when does a private company represent the public at large?

As opposed to the communications media's claim to be the authentic representatives of the people, this same people —according to opinion surveys carried out in Mexico— expects more from the state and the government, and has more confidence in them, than it does in companies and businessmen. In this rapid, incomplete and

certainly somewhat arbitrary overview, one detects the isolation of the citizen and the secondary role that parties fulfill.

It is not enough to say that a universal trend is involved when we note the personalization of elections and of politics in general, the decline of parties, the rise of individualism and the abandonment of social solidarity in favor of group interests. It is possible that parties, which were necessary in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, no longer have a function to fulfill, and that social and even international organization will be taken over by the great international companies. But in Mexico, given this country's special conditions, parties remain indispensable as mediators between the citizenry and the governmental power. The problem resides in the parties' own confusion regarding this necessity. Asking the state to help maintain a three-party set-up, as the PRD has done, indicates how absurd the current system is. Once again, without wishing to, the state becomes an arbiter among parties, while the latter call for a political reform in which they subsequently refuse to participate given that they have failed to find a solution to their own internal quarrels.

The formation of an effective system of parties is a fundamental political goal of Mexico's governments, as part of the need to find dependable interlocutors able to respond to government programs and to serve as an instrument for



The PRI's new president Santiago Oñate Laborde.

disseminating governmental decisions. This has led to the Mexican state's desire to act as an organizer, extending its field of action not only to the political terrain but to civil society itself.

Historically, all kinds of parties were created in order to assist in the formation of governmental power. In the case of Mexico during the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary periods, government power was the architect of the parties and of their relations to government agencies. Under the present circumstances, particularly over the past two decades, the state has made special efforts to achieve a system of parties which could serve as a liaison between the branches of government and social groups or classes, giving the parties priority over other types of organization such as the so-called non-governmental organizations.

Jesús Reyes Heróles' electoral reforms, approved in 1977, were the origin of today's electoral legislation and forms of counting and distributing votes as well as seats in Chamber of Deputies and Senate. The mixed majority and proportional system was doubtless the basis on which one could have built a system of ongoing, nationwide and well-defined parties with the ability to orient voters. One cannot assume an unchallenged consolidation of Mexico's three main parties; while the existence of the PRI and PAN would seem to be secure, the same cannot be said of the PRD.

Two elections—those of 1988 and 1994—may be considered definitive steps, albeit for diametrically opposed reasons, in the contemporary history of the nation's political life. While the 1988 vote was debated and questioned throughout the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, this did not really succeed in eroding that government's basis of legitimacy. The 1994 elections were met with a level of domestic and international acceptance unknown since the election of Francisco I. Madero (at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution). The protests raised by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and a minority wing of the PRD did not for a moment alter the general acceptance of the results obtained on August 21, 1994.

If the election of Carlos Salinas was a problem for him and for his party, Ernesto Zedillo's was not just a personal triumph; it posed a redistribution of political forces and opened the way for a review of the situation of all the parties.

The presence of nine parties in the Chamber of Deputies did not correspond to the political trends which were dominant in Mexico. Reyes Heróles came up with a procedure which would make it possible to take into account those votes which did not find a place in the big parties or the major currents of public opinion, and even devised a means of accommodating that portion of the political class which found itself excluded from the authentically national

political parties, which rightly complained that votes that really belonged to them were being scattered to the four winds. Whether or not one accepts this idea, the 1994 elections solved the problem: with the exception of the Labor Party (PT), which obtained 2.85 percent in the senatorial elections, none of the other minor parties (PPS, PFCRN, PARM, PDM-UNO, PVEM)⁵ won the 2.5 percent required by the law in order to achieve representation; thus the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate include representatives of just four parties. This is a first step which clears the political playing field and reduces the discussion between parties to manageable proportions.

The parties continue to face problems which are difficult to solve. The most important of these, from the standpoint of the opposition, is the election by consensus of the president of the Federal Electoral Institute, without the nature of this consensus—obviously alien to the principle of majority rule—having been cleared up. For the moment, there does not appear to be a short-term solution acceptable to the three major yet unequal parties of the day.

⁵ These initials stand for: People's Socialist Party, Party of the Cardenista Front of National Reconstruction, Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution, Mexican Democratic Party-National Opposition Union and Green Ecologist Party of Mexico. (Translator's note.)



Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the leader of the PRD.

In August the PRI changed the president of its National Executive Committee; this post is now held by Santiago Oñate, who is known for his ability, intelligence and authority. It is Oñate who will convoke the party's 17th assembly, although it remains to be seen what the agenda will be and what "philosophy" will be followed with regard to the relationship between the PRI and the government, as well as whether candidates for public office will be nominated there. For the time being, a range of tendencies continue to manifest themselves in the legislature, fueled by events such as the investigation into Colosio's assassination; some of these tendencies mask personal or group interests which are ill-disposed towards the internal reform of the PRI. It is impossible to know what kind of measures may be taken against factionalism and the policy of factions—whether they will be tolerated or eliminated. The

recent movements undertaken by the governors of Tabasco, Yucatán and Puebla point towards a hardening of the hegemonic line within the party. The line followed until now is seen as a set of concessions to the opposition, which, in reality, dictates the orientation of national policy without taking on the risks and costs of governing.

After its national and local successes, the National Action Party has encountered the first obstacles in its upward and seemingly unstoppable path. After obtaining 26.69 percent of the votes for president last year, it won the gubernatorial elections in Jalisco, Guanajuato and Baja California Norte. It ran into bigger obstacles in Yucatán, as well as in the renewal of the local legislature and municipal governments in Chihuahua. These stumbling blocks might be considered insignificant were it not for the internal conflicts fanned by these defeats. These will exacerbate the existing differences be-

tween PAN governors and the party's national leadership, behind which there unfortunately lie very long-term ambitions, such as those involving the presidential race of the year 2000 as well as the 1997 legislative elections. Thus, the PAN is beginning to experience the real problems of power faced by any party. For the time being, these problems have put doctrinal debates on the back burner. A final point, which remains to be dealt with and resolved, is the weakness of the "hard-core vote," that is, the authentically pro-party, resolute, doctrinal "PANista" vote, which is often hereditary and is less prevalent than most people believe it to be.

To speak of the PRD inevitably means referring to the intractable conflict pitting party president Porfirio Muñoz Ledo against Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, "moral" chief of the party and of the trend which remains linked to him. After the PRD's fall from an impressive second place in 1988 to a weak third with only 17.09 percent of the vote in 1994, mutual antipathies and accusations have been exacerbated, leading to the brink of a split which was only avoided at the last minute.

The most frightening fact, not only for the parties themselves but for all organizations of the citizenry, is the absolute indifference—or rather abstentionism—which many voters display in each election where the government's very mandate and authority are not put in question. \bar{M}