

DO MEXICANS *Really Want to Be Governed?*¹

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Governability has been an object of study for many years and has been examined from many different perspectives. Scholars have invested time and personal and collective efforts in this task and have given us interesting—even gripping—studies full of precise observations, shades of meaning and hypotheses of all kinds. However, only rarely does a political leader, even one who is an amateur academic, have the time and, above all, the calm needed to explore the vast amount of literature on this or any other topic. In my case, I should also add that my field is the philosophy of the Middle Ages, which roughly means that when I have an hour free to read, I pick topics related to that time and field. Also, I am a devotee of novels and, when I have a minute to myself, I prefer reading a novel to something about politics.

This means that to talk about governability, or *contrario sensu*, ungovernability, in Mexico, I can only fall back on my experience as the leader of a political party—Mexico's largest opposition party though it is—that has had to involve itself in the different tasks stemming from

the changes my country has gone through in recent years. Undoubtedly, these changes may be called a political transition, that is, a period in which the old antidemocratic

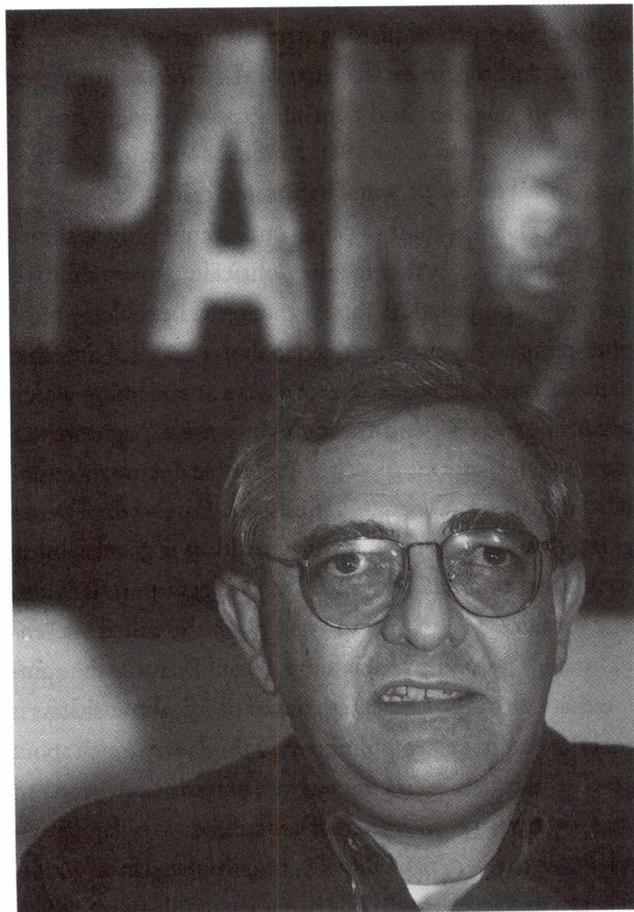


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past has still not completely disappeared and the longed for and desirable democratic future has not yet quite been born. What we have is the past and the future mixed in the present, like in a struggle in which tomorrow, fortunately, is winning ground from yesterday.

EVOKING SAINT AUGUSTINE

A mixture like this is not surprising to anyone familiar, for example, with the philosophy of Saint Augustine. This African Christian thinker who pondered the end of Imperial Rome was sure that time was a succession of instants which bring together “the present of the presents, the present of the pasts and the present of the futures.” This Augustinian view has as its starting point what he considered Man’s three faculties: attention, related to the present; memory, linked to the past; and foresight, concerned with the future. The Augustinian man is compatible with time; this is why Saint Augustine is considered the father of the philosophy of history. And his history is no longer circular and repetitive like that of the Greeks, but rather transition, constant and continual crisis, change. But, in the end, this is no more than a more or less curious reflection, linked to my personal habits and tastes.

What is important to point out, even if only as something subjective, is that for the politician, governability is much more a practical than a theoretical problem, most often temporarily circumscribed to short periods of time that demand quick decisions, almost always as something which urgently needs solving through consensuses, agreements, statements, alliances, speeches, collective documents, mobilizations, public stances, actions, etc. Rarely when we are going through a concrete, real transition is governability something politicians can leisurely reflect upon. It is also rare for us to deal with it in what might be called an “enlightened” fashion. What is more, I would venture the opinion that one of the characteristics of political transitions is that they do not allow politicians to think very much about governability because the very nature of transitions in recent years has been a proliferation of concrete, day-to-day, practical problems of governability. Or, contemplated from another angle, they have been a daily battle against ungovernability.

A RECURRING BUT NEW TOPIC

As far as I can recall, in Mexico the topic of governability is relatively new and only began to be discussed when political debate touched on the question of what percentage of over-representation the PRI can or should have as the party with the relative majority in Congress. This was in late 1988, when the PRI lost the 66 percent legislative majority that for many decades allowed it to make as many constitutional changes as it deemed necessary, most of the time arbitrarily.

As you can see, only very recently did governability begin to be an issue, and at that, only in the framework of a PRI executive branch, albeit in a weakened state. It would be even longer before the general question was considered and the hypothesis of another party having a relative majority included. Until very recently, the opposition’s mind-set was the mentality of permanent defeat, just as the PRI’s was one of eternal victory. The result was that we in the other parties aimed only, or almost only, to take power away from the PRI through legislation that would lessen its clout and capabilities.

Then things began to happen that made us all shift our frames of reference. When the PAN won relative majorities in some state congresses, particularly, we realized that if we aspired only to tying the PRI’s hands and did not try to imagine that we might actually be able to win, we would end up by building a cage for ourselves for the day we took office.

Governability has also been talked about in Mexico when the victims of electoral fraud have used more or less aggressive tactics—even though avowedly pacific ones—to demand respect for the vote. Governability has been invoked by those in government as an argument against those who take over city halls and other public buildings, block streets, openly disobey the law or the authorities or carry out spectacular actions against certain regulations to demand changes in governmental decisions, be they about elections, labor relations, wages or retirement.

THE OTHER GOVERNABILITY

Ungovernability comes up in public discussion when there is a feeling that the political authorities, whoever they may



Photo: Javier García / Imagenlatina

Castillo Peraza signalling the start of an automobile marathon during his campaign.

be, are losing or have already lost the ability to make decisions, carry them out or convince society itself that it is good, advantageous or at least simply useful to obey the municipal, state or federal government. Ungovernability also comes up when the authorities are unable to offer ways out for conflict in society or for authorities at loggerheads with social, economic or political groups. In fact, recently, the topic of ungovernability has been brought up in the framework of an either hypothetical or real distancing between the Mexican government and the government party, between the civilian government and the armed forces, between government officials and PRI legislators, etc.

A foreign analogy is usually drawn for every situation in Mexico, whether it be the Philippines of Ferdinand Marcos, the Iran of the Shah, the regimes of the former "Eastern Europe," Spain after Franco, the denouement of Chile's dictatorship or the toppling of the communist regime in the ex-Soviet Union. At the end of the day, however, none of the actual conclusions of those regimes are similar to the

Mexican transition's long, long swan song, which sometimes seems interminable. Those who prophesied imminent ungovernability were wrong, just like the intellectuals who foretold that the 1994 elections would end up in "a train wreck." The predictors of no change whatsoever were also wrong, since the opposition today governs almost 45 percent of the inhabitants of Mexico. And those who assured everyone that there would be many immediate changes, repeating over and over that Mexico was coming to a historic watershed, were also mistaken.

None of the more or less recent calls to armed rebellion or to support those who had opted for violent insurrection have been echoed enough to make it possible to say that Mexico has become ungovernable. What is more, the prolonging of the negotiations between the insurgent groups in Chiapas and the government seems rather to favor governability.

This is the case for several reasons. In the first place, both sides constantly talk about their determination to find a



Photo: Javier García / Imagenlatina

The PAN kicks off its campaign for mayor of the Federal District, deputies and senators.

peaceful solution to the conflict and armed confrontations have not recurred. Marcos no longer announces “imminent bloodbaths” and the federal government no longer threatens to use the armed forces. This creates an atmosphere and feeling that disallow violence as a way out. Secondly, maintaining the status quo helps the rebels continue to be both legend and threat (with less and less influence to be sure, but their possibilities would diminish even more if they took off their masks and threw down their guns to become part of Mexico’s political life and competition like any other social or political group). Thirdly, if there is no formal solution to the conflict, it can be just as useful to the government in the 1997 elections as it was in 1994: the government could go to the Mexican people to ask them to “vote for peace” and avoid any risk of ... ungovernability.

THE LEAST GOVERNABLE

By now, we should ask ourselves what the least governable thing in Mexico is. In my view, the most disorderly, unstable and confused entity in Mexico today is the Institution-

al Revolutionary Party (PRI). In only 3 years and 11 months, the PRI has had six national presidents; in other words, on an average, it has changed leader every 7 months and 25 days.² It is worth pointing out that none of these changes have been made through democratic internal functioning, openly, transparently, but, rather, following the unwritten rules that dictate that the president of the country names the new party president. In addition, we Mexicans have witnessed how the PRI has opposed the president only to submit shortly afterward, since it has been subject to changes obviously decided on by the president. Finally, clearly both militants and leaders of the PRI are withdrawing and joining, in the main, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

Why do the most of those who leave the PRI end up in the PRD and not in the PAN despite the fact that the PAN has shown its ability to win more elections against the PRI. It seems to me that this is because the PRD maintains the dis-

² From March 1993 to January 1997, Genaro Borrego Estrada, Fernando Ortiz Arana, Ignacio Pichardo Pagaza, María de los Angeles Moreno, Santiago Oñate Laborde and Humberto Roque Villanueva have all been national presidents of the PRI.

course and political proposals of the statist, populist PRI of the 1960s, the PRI that never lost, and because the PRD recognizes the merits chalked up by militants in the PRI as though they had been earned in the PRD. This means that whoever leaves the PRI because he/she did not win the nomination for an elected position in a democratic meeting, following PRI by-laws, is often given the nomination for the same post with no further democratic ado by the PRD. This is the case of a PRI senator from Campeche, the daughter of one of the country's best known PRI strongmen, who left the official party and was immediately given the PRD nomination for state governor.

If this keeps up, the PRI will be the most hurt by it, both in real terms and in terms of public opinion. However, it should be expected that the PRD will begin to suffer the political congestion that is part of the fabric of the PRI's own internal instability and ungovernability.

Until very recently, the PRI had to distribute candidacies among all its groups and sub-groups, among all the large unions, the party-affiliated professional associations, and even to some of the fake political parties that it has traditionally shorn up. The drop in the number of nominations for shoo-in posts due to incipient democratization and the emergence of groups within the PRI which oppose presidential policy have generated bottlenecks, frustration, irritation and departures which, as the militants flow to the PRD, will transfer to the latter—already faced with difficulties because of the number and contentiousness of its own internal groupings—one of the PRI's gravest problems.

Despite the damage to the PRI's public image that this crisis will do, it could make the most of the moment and clean itself up, close ranks around Mexico's president and thus recover internal stability and governability. It is not likely to become democratic in order to do this because, given that it has no democratic habits or mechanisms, internal democracy would only escalate its conflicts. It could manage it, but only after dealing *undemocratically* with the current tasks of picking its candidates, particularly the nominees for seats as federal deputies, who have to be a group very loyal to the president of Mexico.

In sum, we see problems of internal governability mainly in the PRI and to a lesser, but probably growing, extent,

in the PRD. The PAN could see the emergence of a problem of this kind due to an excess of internal competition for the nominations or if there were clumsiness in dealing with this competition democratically and according to by-laws that work quite well in times of less intense internal competition. Internal democracy is a protective shield for the PAN vis-à-vis a flood of discontented *priistas* or people who only come to the PAN now when it has become the PRI's most important challenger.

In any case, in the strictly political sphere, I think that only growing, unsolved strife inside the PRI could generate ungovernability of national dimensions, given the size, complexity and rigidity of PRI networks, which cut across state institutions, the party itself, unions, state-owned companies and some private businesses. In this sense, the most recent PRI discourse shows up the contradiction that culturally and politically splits the party of the Mexican government: on the one hand, its spokesmen send messages threatening that if the PRI loses the 1997 elections, the country will have economic and governability problems; on the other hand, some of its representatives do their best to assure everyone that a PRI defeat in 1997 would not be a disaster.

It is interesting to note how both the Mexican business community and the U.S. ambassador to Mexico subscribe to the latter opinion, shared also by a few well-known PRI members. For me, this is a clear sign of change: in 1994, businessmen thought that an opposition victory would put the country in danger; U.S. political and financial circles shared those fears. They no longer think this way, and that being publicized and more and more broadly expounded contributes to the country's governability. However, at this crucial political juncture, before the July federal elections, the opinion of the U.S. diplomat in Mexico can be considered interventionist, just like in the old days.

DO THEY WANT TO OR NOT?

In my opinion, the Mexican people will only be ungovernable if they begin to believe that it is preferable to have no government or to have such a weak and ineffective or corrupt and negligent government that it would be like hav-

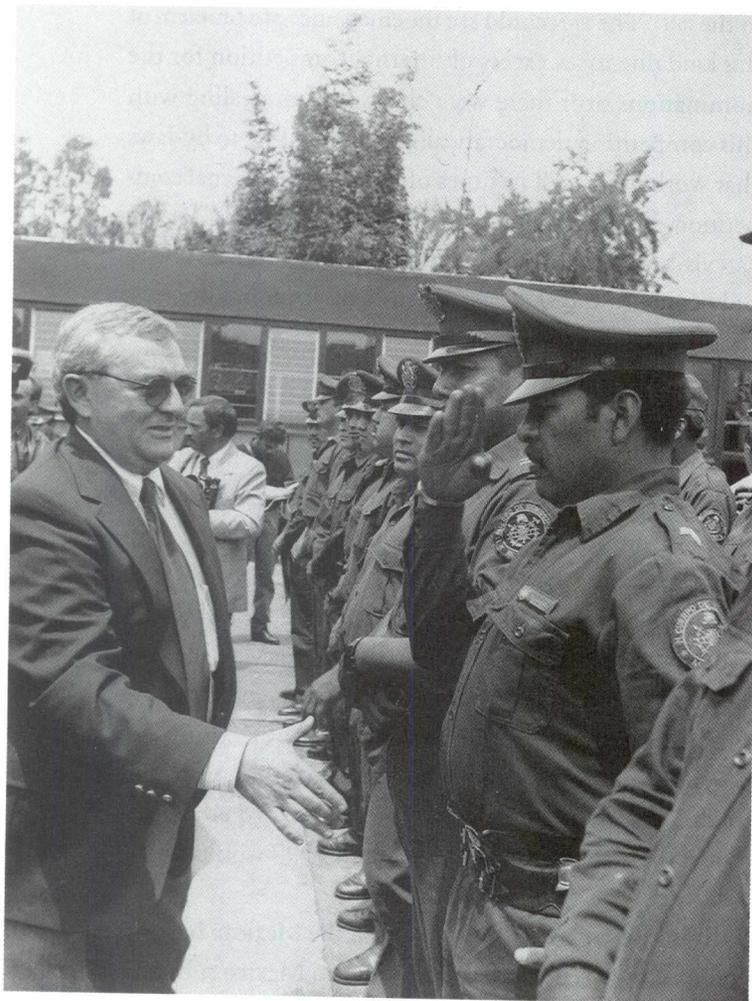


Photo: Javier Garcia / Imagenlatina

Castillo Peraza visits Mexico City's central fire station.

ing no government at all. In other words, ungovernability could only exist if the conviction that no government is preferable to an illegitimate, inefficient, corrupt or ineffective government prevailed culturally and socially. Can this happen?

Perhaps. I will try to explain what I mean.

Recent events and attitudes fashionable in the world of high finance have been noticed in Mexico. The most surprising thing has been the discovery that if it is thought that jobs will be more plentiful, the stock market drops. The interesting attitude is that it is demanded of countries like Mexico that they put almost no restrictions on the entry and exit of capital into their money markets, and, at the same time, they must guarantee a highly predictable economy.

With regard to the first question, the conviction is growing that the government will be unable to further job growth, after a certain level of macro-economic successes, given that it is immersed in a worldwide process over which it has no control and never will have either influence or responsibility. With regard to the second question, it is trapped in a contradiction: if it does not regulate, it loses the ability to program and predict and therefore to promise and commit itself in the medium and long terms, which would bring as a result capital flight or just a trickle of foreign capital. If, on the other hand, it does regulate, it becomes able to predict, but it will scare away investors who want deregulation. If, in either case, the authorities cannot guide the economy so as to create believable prospects for just human development, the public will begin to think that it does not need to be governed and that politics, in its deepest sense, is useless.

DEMOCRACY IS NOT THE ENEMY

This could finish off any possible favorable view of politics in the minds of the most numerous members of society: the poor.

To this possibility, we should add another factor: the incessant repetition in circles close to the PRI power elite that Mexico's incipient, timid democratization causes instability and could cause ungovernability. In other words, these peoples' underlying idea is that it is not feasible to democratize Mexico, nor should it be democratized because democracy opens up the whole country to the risk of anarchy and disorder. Obviously, this is tantamount to saying that those who have been in power since the third decade of this century should stay there.

I would like to take this occasion to explore an aspect of governability that I think is worth the analysis and study by academics with the time and the tools to do so. It is related to something I wrote a few paragraphs back, the authorities' ability to propitiate or guarantee decent living conditions for the community they lead.

As a devotee of philosophy, particularly that of Aristotle, I tend to think of things around me in a framework of categories like form and matter. An old and fruitful principle of Aristotelian metaphysics tells us, in Latin,

that *forma educitur e potentia materiae*. This means that the form of a being emerges from what the matter it is to be made of allows for. More clearly, this means that you cannot make an apple with a kilogram of talcum powder, and with a ton of apples, you cannot make a marble statue.

UNGOVERNABLE MATTER?

Taking this into account, we can pose the same question differently, linking it to the term “governable” in a political framework: What is the matter which we think must be governed? or, What is it that we think should be governed?, or, What matter is it that we want to give the form of “governed”? or, What is it that we think should be governable?

There is no room for doubt. What should be “governable” is human beings: people, social by nature, who live in a society; intelligent and free beings, the possessors of rights, subject to obligations, people with dignity. We do not need to repeat here what Anthropology 101 might have to say about human beings. But it bears asking whether the way they are affected by what their government must let happen in the country they live in, makes them desire or seek being governed and, therefore, being governable.

Here, I want to mention two recently published books, one by French politician Philippe Séguin called *En attendant l'emploi* (Waiting for a Job) (Seuil, Paris, 1996), and the other by French writer Viviane Forrester, *L'horreur économique* (The Economic Horror) (Fayard, Paris, 1996). Both look at the problem of job elimination and its repercussions in France and other parts of the world.

Séguin explains how people today are being subjected to the effects of three simultaneous revolutions. One is the rapid internationalization of the economy, the main result of which is the massive transfer of industries to countries where wages are not only low but virtually unalterable because of authoritarian governments. Large Western corporations prefer to invest in these countries than in those with democratic governments. This behavior leads us to suspect that some democrats are uninterested in democracy except in their own countries, and that elsewhere, they prefer stability to democracy. Whatever the case, the fact is that the money that might generate the kind of socioeco-

conomic stability that bolsters on-going democratization processes is going to countries where no such processes are underway. China is the obvious example. What we have just seen in South Korea shows the limits of the experiment and its grave defects.

According to Séguin, the technological revolution, especially pertinent in telecommunications, is second. In some cases, production processes, for example in publishing, can be transferred every eight hours to a different country and go around the world with stops in the places with the lowest costs. However, the determining factor in these technological advances is that they make it possible to move great sums of money electronically to different financial markets at the touch of a keyboard.

The third revolution is the rapid transformation of international finance into a freer and freer, more and more autonomous instrument vis-à-vis the other segments of the economy and social and political activity. The effectiveness of this change is magnified by the new communications media, as I already pointed out.

Until today, none of these three revolutions or any of their effects are guided by any authority or norm approved, accepted and in force worldwide. Neither do any rules exist for monetary operations, since until now it has been impossible to design a real substitute for the Bretton Woods Accords.

These three revolutions have resulted in millions of victims worldwide, Séguin says, and even more in countries like Mexico where we have seen our efforts go wrong again and again and are becoming less and less able to make sacrifices in the name of some promised future. This makes us intransigent “here-and-now-ists” and, consequently, not very governable since governing and doing politics is betting on the future.

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The problem becomes even more difficult when we realize that the best imaginable national government can do little by itself to deal with the on-going revolutions and their effects. I have seen figures that support the suspicion that previous revolutions created more jobs than they destroyed, while the current revolutions do not. Or perhaps they will be able to, but far in the future, which leaves people with no prospects given that they know how very brief their lives are. In any case, poor Mexicans today—the topic under discussion—feel they are increasingly expendable for those in government, too expendable to give them back the hope, the future for which it would be worthwhile sacrificing themselves today. They seem to say, “We are sick of macro-economic data; we demand a micro-economic promise.”

Is matter which only believes in the present, matter which has been taught not to bet on the future, governable? Can there be governability, can policy be made, if people can no longer be convinced that individual sacrifices must be accepted today for the general good of the future? My question is not merely an exercise in imagination or a practically literary provocation; I have seen a community which demands general, abstract public goods divide into small groups to condemn the construction of particular, concrete public goods. No one is against building a subway or a marketplace, but everybody bands together to make sure they are not built in their neighborhood.

THE THROWAWAYS

Viviane Forrester's book goes even further. I would say that her conclusions are terrifying: for the first time in history,

“The mass of humanity is no longer materially necessary for those with [economic] power.” Political authorities, then, are seemingly condemned to making those who are economically unnecessary, politically unnecessary as well, since they are the source of unending turbulence. What is more, those governments which guarantee social, union, wage and political control seem to desire and even organize to do this. They are the same governments which ensure investors tiny production costs, slave labor, absolute flexibility to the detriment of sick or old workers....Is it true or not that in the Latin American part of the hemisphere there has been economic growth without job growth for ten years? If it is, how is the next generation to be convinced that it must keep waiting? How much will the probability of being able to govern decrease if those to be governed are hopeless? And how much if, in addition, the authorities lack democratic legitimacy?

If the political changes favoring democratization and democracy culminate in governments and public policies that make the same people foot the bill for economic adjustment as those who paid for the material effects of dictatorships during authoritarian or totalitarian periods, who will want to run the risks of changing to democracy? Or, even worse, who will think it reasonable to even fight for a democratic government and, in the worst of cases, to have a government at all? Who will want to be governed and therefore be governable?

My fear is that what is happening in the world today with no controls whatsoever is creating the conditions to make it impossible for human beings, especially those who live in the poorest parts of the globe, to think that it is a good thing to be governed. Many Mexicans have felt ourselves forced again and again to think that we have no future, to doubt—with good reason—that there is any hope for a better future, and perhaps this is making us less governable.

This is a cultural phenomenon which is only just beginning to manifest itself in expressions of opposition to politics and politicians. These feelings are probably the basis for the burst of initial sympathy for the discourse of the Chiapas insurgents. This is something that I think we should be sensitive to because, when politics disappears, what rears its ugly head is war. ❧