

Mexican Political Cycles And Complex Cohabitation

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Political rally in early twentieth-century Mexico.

The object of this brief essay is the study of the nature of political change in Mexico and how it has evolved over recent decades. The institutional physiognomy of the political regimen formed after 1917 has gone through profound transformations of varying intensities and dynamics during this century. A historic reconstruction is needed to analyze its evolution, identifying the different cycles of political change in Mexico. With that in mind, four great political cycles can be identified during the twentieth century, with a fifth now emerging.

The first cycle, from 1910 to 1940, was characterized by popular revolt and political instability, as well as economic reconstruction in a context of a “deficit of institutionalization,” in which the caudil-

los, or political strongmen, continued to impose political order. The second cycle, from 1940 to 1977, was characterized by a very stable system of political monopoly founded on consistent economic growth leading to civilian political institutionalization with an exclusionary electoral system and the absence of any significant political opposition. The third cycle, from 1977 to 1988, was a period of economic crisis and political liberalization in the framework of important social confrontations. The fourth cycle, from 1988 to 2000 has been characterized by apparent ungovernability and economic recovery. Today, we can see an emerging fifth cycle, one of “democratic cohabitation.” Political transformation has been at its height in the fourth cycle, which continues today, when institutionalization has withstood the test of alternating in office in a context of the opposition’s organizational growth and the formation of divid-

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ed governments, giving rise to “complex cohabitation.” The inauguration of democratic pluralism is an important fact in the great political and ideological mosaic that represents the Mexican nation at the end of the twentieth century. An examination of these political cycles will shed light on the new processes identifiable in recent years that have changed traditional equilibria in Mexico.

THE FIRST CYCLE: 1910-1940

This period began with a new political order arising out of the end of the continual armed revolts against unstable authorities. With time, institutions began to achieve a political identity of their own, with unified structures for coercion as well as the delimitation of a territory with defined borders and the development of an initial phase of economic growth. The process of consolidation of a modern state in Mexico that occurred between 1876 and 1910 was interrupted by the revolutionary civil war of 1910-1917. The country’s political history in this period was characterized by a long succession of divisions, conflicts and insurrections of different types that reflected the profound political instability of the time, explained to a great degree by the chronic weakness of the state and its institutions. During this first cycle, a new political hegemony emerged under the command of a series of military caudillos who perpetuated their influence through the process of the definitive establishment of the post-revolutionary regimen.

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF POLITICAL MONOPOLY: 1940-1977

If the founding of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) in 1929 can be described as the transition “from fragmentation to unification,” its subsequent corporatist transformation into the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) in 1938 corresponds to

“from caudillos to institutions.” The modern regimen was consolidated in this second political cycle, producing new structures to congregate and represent different interests. The hegemonic party would become the privileged actor on the national scene during this second cycle. In subsequent years, an interconnection would emerge among econom-

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ic benefits, moderate improvement in the quality of life, control of participation and the exclusion of political opposition. This second cycle can be characterized as one of “social peace for economic development and the consolidation of the political regimen at any cost.” The centralization of power that accompanied this moment hinged mainly on the formation of the modern mass party in Mexico.¹ It functioned as a mechanism to control centrifugal tendencies in the governing elite and as an organizational space for the political representation of different sectors of society. The new political hegemony that came with modernization took on board the demand for the application of the social program of the revolution, which would be an important factor in legitimizing the political regimen in ensuing years.

FROM LIBERALIZATION TO POLITICAL CRISIS: 1977-1988

The dynamic of political liberalization begun in the late 1970s made it possible for different forces to alternate in office on a local level, opening up the road to peaceful, agreed-upon political change on a state level by the mid-1980s. The third political cycle is a turning point in the analysis of the nature

of political transformation in Mexico. This cycle is characterized by a constant deterioration of the economy and the resulting negative impact on the legitimacy of the political regimen, as well as by active electoral reformism to guarantee governability. Opposition groups considered these reforms changes in a legal framework within which legally

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recognized parties already acted. The consequences of the lack of political alternatives came to the fore very clearly during the 1976 presidential elections when no legally registered political party except the PRI ran a candidate. For the first time in the history of modern Mexico, the system of political relations could no longer hide what was clear to the majority of the foremost political actors: the lack of competition among the parties and the absolute control over politics of the hegemonic party.

FROM POLITICAL CRISIS TO COMPLEX COHABITATION: 1988-2000

The fourth cycle can be divided into two moments: the years from 1988 to 1996, years of the recomposition of the regimen's legitimacy in a context of trade integration with the United States and Canada, expectations for an improved economy, the emergence of a strategy for renegotiation of the foreign debt, the reprivatization of the public sector and increased emphasis on social policy.

In the second moment, from 1997 to 2000, citizenship has been extended to other sectors of society. These are years characterized by greater political liberalization as a plausible response to the

problems stemming from the economic and social crises. Electoral reforms have contributed to guaranteeing individuals and groups the right to politically express and organize themselves autonomously. The fundamental distinguishing factor of this liberalization has been the recognition of a legitimate political opposition, thus favoring the recomposition of the political system. On this basis, citizens' rights have expanded parallel to the evolution of the economic crisis; this has become a distinctive factor of the new democratic political way of life initiated with this last, fourth political cycle. For the first time in contemporary Mexico, the possibility exists of political cohabitation among different political elites and parties that represent both federal and local governments, as well as new relations between the executive branch and the different legislatures. Political cohabitation appears on the scene as an institutional agreement based on the need to come to general commitments to supercede special interests. The problems Mexico faces are of such magnitude that no matter what the ideology or political orientation of the group in power, it cannot assume sole responsibility for creating the democratic normalcy and economic and social viability the country so needs. Mexico's ongoing process of political transformations also requires a new, inclusive political culture that acknowledges the temporary nature of any given administration. Alternating in office is the recognition that many options are competing for power in Mexico at the end of the century and also a reflection of the formation of new —and temporary— majorities and minorities.

FUTURE POLITICAL VARIABLES: 2000-2006

A new political cycle has appeared on the horizon bringing with it risks of ungovernability that should not be underestimated. To conclude, I will sketch out some of the possible scenarios for this fifth cycle. The first could be dubbed one of political

innovation and inclusive democratization, wherein the autonomy of politics would play a preponderant role, above all expressed through the democratization of the political parties and an increased number of agreements and pacts for governability. Democratization would be consolidated, and it would be possible to govern through a renovation of legitimacy. The PRI would recover its political space and lead the way to an inclusive and peaceful change decided by consensus, in which tolerance and respect for diversity would be the norm. Political practices and leadership groups and elites would be overhauled and the political culture would be renewed democratically. This would be a sort of “third road, Mexican style.”

A second scenario could be called one of polarized pluralism and political fragmentation, whose main characteristic would be a political life pulverized due to the clash of major interests. Opposition coalitions would be more frequent, as would new majorities forged through alliances. This variable includes the possible formation of co-governments of many ideological and political currents and groups, co-governments fraught with clashes over the distribution of power. Pragmatism and short-term solutions would proliferate, as well as recurring crises due to the absence of a political class capable of efficiently identifying national priorities and effective decision making.

The third scenario would be one of ungovernability and sharpened contradictions, in which the primacy of “realism in politics” would take the lead. Expressed another way, politics would become more pragmatic and would put immediate interests front and center, leaving to one side principles, proposals and programs. This scenario represents the appearance of a modern “disease of politics,” characterized by a society based on spectacle and political clashes. This would be the harbinger of the emergence of radical actors (like the Zapatista National Liberation Army [EZLN] and other armed groups), second generation populists, whether on the right (like Vicente Fox, the National Action

Party [PAN] presidential candidate) or the left (like Party of the Democratic Revolution [PRD] presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas). These new populist leaderships combine traditional practices, such as religious or historical heritages, and are guided by pragmatism rather than realistic proposals. Ungovernability would derive from the

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political extremism of the new populism. The absence of forward-looking proposals is rooted in the central actors’ communicating with the public through backward-looking, traditional stereotypes. In the era of globalization it can be said that this scenario would project the emergence of two right wings in Mexican politics: an elitist, technocratic one represented by the PAN and a traditionalist, populist one represented by the PRD.

The fourth scenario could be called “All that glitters is not gold,” a scenario of imperfect democratization, whose most important characteristic would be the ineffectiveness of politics. Here, democratic politics loses its moral strength when faced with the challenges of external factors. Despite the democratic normalcy and transparency in electoral processes now accepted by all actors, the continuing existence of social injustice would make Mexican democratization much more vulnerable. The negative effects of globalization may be obstacles to Mexico’s effectively eliminating inequality, which it must do to improve the quality of democratic life. In this scenario social exclusion would continue, as would many vulnerable groups living in extreme poverty, new minorities and political identities that would demand a place in the public sphere.

Which of these scenarios comes into being will depend on how much the parties and different political actors understand that democracy in Mexico, with all its imperfections, is already an irreversible process. ■■■

NOTES

¹ In 1946, the PRM transformed itself into what is currently the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). [Editor's Note.]

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