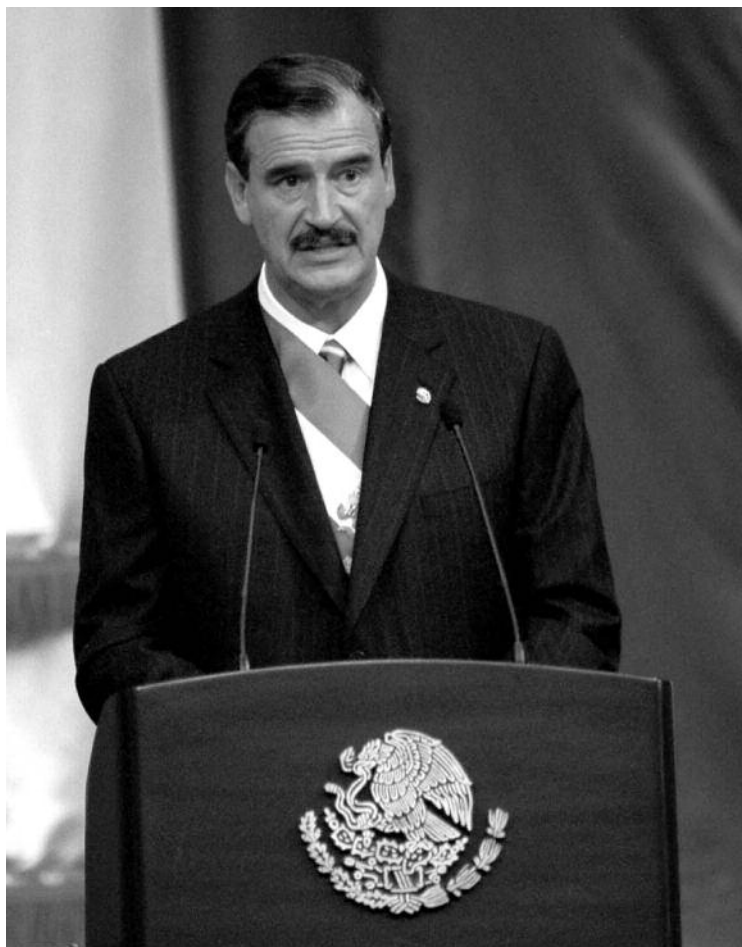


The First Year Of the Fox Administration

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President Fox making his first yearly address to Congress and the nation.

The administration's central initiatives are bogged down; its agenda has been held up and it cannot find its way out. These are the political facts that defined Mexican President Fox's first yearly address to Congress.

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Many things are working, but the fundamental changes, the transformations promised, continue somewhere in the future. The indigenous law approved by Congress was one the president did not want and that the Zapatistas reject. The fiscal reform is in the air, amidst an uncertain mass of contradictory, disconnected proposals; and

the proposed changes in the electricity sector have not been carried out, let alone the reform of the state and the much-made-over, pompous new Constitution. The president's relations with the main opposition party (the Institutional Revolutionary Party- PRI) are bad; his relations with Congress as a whole are not good either; and he does not

even get along with his own party. All of these conditions tend to lead to problems with the ability to govern. The question we must ask ourselves is: How did we get here?

Everything started December 5 of last year. Vicente Fox, the president of the epoch-making alternation in office, the one who defeated the PRI after

the PAN. Then, in a race against the clock, Fox sent Congress his tax reform bill, “The New Public Finances,” a difficult proposal in itself, laced with polemical points (applying value added tax to medicine and foodstuffs and income tax cuts for Mexico’s rich). A problematic package, full of social and political problems, that had to be dealt

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70 years in power, picked Chiapas as the scene for his first great political operation. He wanted to show that his administration—overconfident because of its democratic stamp of approval—could quickly solve what the PRI was unable to in seven years. For that reason he sent Congress a bill developed by a commission of deputies from the previous legislature (the Cocopa). First mistake: the party that had most vigorously opposed the bill was his own, the National Action Party. (Why he sent it continues to be a mystery.) Then, he tried to overcome the resistance in Congress through a campaign before the public that was noisy but, in the end, ineffective. In the end, Fox pleased no one: not legislators, not the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN), not indigenous organizations and not the public.

Four months wasted in showing his friendship with the personage from the Lacandon Jungle and...nothing. Instead, he won the enmity of many important deputies and senators from the two biggest caucuses: the PRI and

with in 23 days! Once more, he tried to overcome resistance inside Congress from without, through a media campaign, but (fortunately) he did not manage it. His great reform, the one that was to bring definitive tranquility to “the markets,” was postponed.

What were the results of all this? A tense relationship with his own party; a rocky relationship with Congress and the political parties; and the most serious effect: a stymied administration agenda. He could do no more; it no longer made sense to try to continue with the agenda. The other bills dealing with great structural matters were held up: the reform to the energy sector (Pemex, the government oil company, and the Federal Electricity Commission); the revision of the Constitution; and the reform of the state. Lack of experience and clear priorities led to a carefree waste of the administration’s immense legitimacy, its seal of democracy, in an erratic and sometimes willful excursion into governing.

All this is due to what seems to be the essential error of Foxism (equally on

the part of the president himself, his ministers and his advisors): not recognizing that the exercise of constitutional government has changed radically precisely because there is now democracy. This means that the presidential ship is more compact; it has fewer leverage points; it has fewer political resources to promote its bills precisely because democratic change translated immediately into a real distribution of power. Let us look at this in more detail.

The arithmetic of the 500-member Mexican Chamber of Deputies could not be more complex: the PAN has 206 deputies; its ex-ally, the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM) has 17 (the PVEM announced its break-off with Fox the same day as Fox’s address to Congress). If they reestablished their alliance, they would total 223 deputies, that is, less than the majority needed to pass laws. Now, let us suppose that all the small parties in the Chamber of Deputies are suddenly invaded by an inclination for the administration: they would come to a total of 232 deputies. Again, they would not have a majority.

So, the president must seek out his most decided adversaries, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the PRI, parties interested in demonstrating that Foxism is not viable and who are working to make things difficult for his administration. But Fox needs them desperately: to be able to govern he must convince some of the 50 PRD deputies or some of the 211 PRI deputies.

The PRD has already said it sees itself as a party that is resisting a right-wing government and demands almost everything as a pre-condition for negotiations, including an overall change of the economic model. The PRI, which

was defeated by Fox and harbors a historic resentment of him, is, however, a much more pragmatic animal and more willing to negotiate. Everything seems to indicate that the president will do battle on two fronts: in his own party (which is going through a very complicated period, but that is a matter for another article) and with the PRI.

Fox has no escape. In the first half of the year, his administration sought media short-cuts and failed. He thought that the congressional opposition majority could be defeated by a vast operation before public opinion and that led to his first big reversal. The lesson is clear: either he dives into lobbying in the hallways and meeting rooms in Congress or his administration will fail again.

We should take note of a change at this point: Fox is a different kind of president, hemmed in and truly limited by the new balance of forces that democracy has left him. Even if he wants to, he cannot govern according to the old canons of presidentialism. We should underline that the ship he is steering has changed drastically because of the new, real distribution of power.

All this brings us face to face with a decisive factor that had remained hidden for decades: according to our Constitution, most political leverage and government decisions are not in the hands of the president, but in those of Congress. Our admirable presidentialism is suddenly revealed as one of the weakest and most complicated of Latin America.

Just compare the constitutional prerogatives that Congress has: almost 50, from the creation of new states to monitoring public spending, from the designation of Supreme Court jus-



PRI Deputy Beatriz Paredes, left, made the official congressional response to Fox's address.

tics to approving the budget or ratifying nominees for attorney general. The president's constitutional prerogatives are more modest: there are a few more than 20 and many of them must first go through the filter (and therefore depend on the mood) of the legislature.

Under these conditions, governing Mexico means creating an expeditious, fluid relationship between the executive and Congress. Building a majority legislative coalition is an essential condition for governing.

The urgent calls by the Minister of the Interior about the need for a national pact point to this: either a programmatic understanding is achieved among the branches of government, or alternation in office could be a failure.

This enterprise demands very delicate use of the available building blocks, real agreements that go beyond the short term among the administration, the PAN and —how ironic!— the PRI. The playing field on which they will have to come to these agreements is mined because the fourth player, the

PRD, will do everything possible to denounce any possible pacts, pointing out their defects, consequences and the inevitable costs that the measures President Fox proposes will have.

So, Mexico's first president who represents alternation in office could do no more than bring bad news to the nation about the first nine months of his administration. He may continue to enjoy a high popularity rating in the polls; he may be a star in certain foreign media; but that is good for little to a country that urgently needs changes and political leadership. As was clear in the tone and content of his speech before Congress, the honeymoon is nearing its end. After nine months of the new administration, the main lesson is that the president has to make policy, build agreements with his party and others and forge an explicit coalition based on a handful of strategic bills sent to Congress (not against Congress). It has taken nine months to learn that the president must be something more, much more, than the nation's great inspiration. **MM**