

Mexico's Political Parties in 2001 Between Dispersion and Recomposition

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Courtesy of the President of Mexico's Press Office

The president with Congressional and party leaders at the signing of the Political Agreement for National Development.

Democracies can only function if they have a consolidated system of competitive parties. The PRI, PAN and PRD made possible that feat of political engineering, the electoral legality and institutionality currently in place, thanks to which electoral processes in Mexico are essentially trustworthy. The transition from a system of a hegemonic party to one of a competitive, pluralist, tripartite or moderate party system was achieved thanks to these parties.

In a recent study about the party system during the 2000 federal elections, I pointed out one of the central problems for Mexico's budding democracy: the fragility of the party system.¹ After recognizing the determinant importance of the three main political parties (the Institutional Revolutionary Party [PRI], the National Action Party [PAN] and the Party of the Democratic Revolution [PRD]) in making the 1996 constitutional electoral reform possible, I showed how this transcendental change in the legal set-up was designed to fit these three parties' momentary interests, thus explaining its limitations. Without underestimating its undeniable merits,² one of the reform's central thrusts was to forbid access to "interlopers." Whether by political calculation or pure coincidence, in 2000 only the "big three" counted, but with devastating consequences: the cost was their own identity.³

The groundwork for this was laid before the 2000 federal elections, which put Alliance for Mexico candidate Vicente Fox in the president's seat, inaugurating alternation in office. The decisive moment came when the presidential candidates were chosen, when—to put it bluntly—the parties were placed at the mercy of their prominent figures. The PAN, until then the most solid of the entire party system, could not deal with the offensive by the network of sympathizers of the then-aspiring presidential candidate, Vicente Fox, a group known as "The Friends of Fox." The PRD, which has been defined by both its insoluble internal conflict among groups and the strong moral leadership

of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, aligned itself once more behind his decision to bid for the presidency. The PRI, torn and divided after an internal process for picking its candidate, expected to be rescued in the traditional manner and swept to victory by then-President Ernesto Zedillo; that victory never came. Our parties went to the polls and came out of the electoral process seriously damaged with both their ability to express themselves and to moderate the personalist propensities of their respective candidates curtailed.⁴

The president is faced with an extremely complicated political panorama that has resulted from different concurrent phenomena: he is the first

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president in modern history to be elected with under 50 percent of the vote; he does not have a majority in either of the chambers of Congress; an immense majority of the governors, municipal governments and local congresses are in the hands of parties opposed to the coalition that put him into office; and the country is crisscrossed with enormous social inequalities and in the midst of an economic recession.⁵

Under these circumstances, on February 5, 2001, President Fox proposed reviewing the Constitution with an eye to bringing it into line with a new historic stage. He maintains that on July 2, 2000, Mexico entered a new

period which is the culmination of a long history of hopes and sacrifices and marks the beginning of a historic task: concretizing the political transition in a profound reform of the state that would bring the country's legal instruments up to date, legal instruments that were designed for a political situation that has now been superceded. To begin work, the president's office commissioned the Ministry of the Interior and in particular the Institute for Studies of the Mexican Revolution. The aim was to create the mechanisms that would make it possible to hear the different opinions and proposals for reforming the Constitution, proposals and opinions to later be sent to Congress.

Mexican presidents began to talk about a reform of the state and take it on as a commitment in the beginning of the 1980s. The idea began with Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), but was most elaborate under Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) who proposed it in the framework of a National Accord for Broadening Our Democracy. Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), for his part, came to a consensus with the country's political forces on an Agenda for the Political Reform of the State, which, just like those before it, failed to achieve its objective, the reform of the state. With the alternation of parties in the presidency (2000), the issue resurfaced,

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but now with the explicit objective of bringing the constitutional framework up to date.

Like at the beginning of the 1980s, we are again faced with a presidential proposal to redefine the general guidelines currently in operation that make sense out of the exercise of political power. A line of continuity can be drawn between President Fox's call and that of the three previous presidents. But there are also differences: the first calls were less explicit and more limited. Fox proposed fostering a profound reform of the state that would be concretized in bringing the Constitution up to date.

Vicente Fox is faced with an extremely complicated political panorama: he is the first president in modern history to be elected with under 50 percent of the vote, and he does not have a majority in either of the chambers of Congress.

There has been a basic—if not necessarily explicit—consensus about the need to carry out a political reform of the state to bring the structure of power into line with the country's political and social pluralism. In this context, issues such as the functions of the state and its social commitments, the relationship between the executive and legislative branches and their respective attributes, the justice system, federalism and forms of public participation continue to motivate debates among the different political actors.

The alternation in the presidency that came out of July 2, 2000, was accompanied by the idea of change, and in particular, the idea of fostering what

on February 2, 2001 President Fox called “a profound reform of the state that would update the legal framework conceived for a political situation that was very different from the one that exists in Mexico today.” The idea is to create a legal framework for the country's new political situation and overcome legislative deficiencies: political structure and functioning and the power relations vis-à-vis society have to change, he said. According to his analysis, we have a democratic society with many authoritarian institutions, a contradiction that can only be resolved with an updated legal system. To this end, he called on all political actors,

currents of public opinion and branches of government to rebuild national consensus around a refurbished Constitution, around a shared view of the country's constitutional architecture and the great aims of the Mexican nation.

Because the spaces for representation of society have broadened out, giving rise to a diversified mosaic of parties in existing institutions, and because this diversity means that no political party has a majority by itself, a greater understanding between the executive and legislative branches becomes indispensable. On this basis, the federal executive and the national political parties decided to sign the Political Agreement

for National Development (APDN) to foster advances on the social, economic, political and international levels. Its 34-point agenda includes immediate actions and procedures for reaching its goals. Although this is not the place to reproduce the entire agenda or the immediate actions, I should say something about the procedure laid out in the accord, which commits the federal executive and party leaders to invite the presidents of both chambers and the party caucuses of the 58th Congress to sign the accord. The agenda is not limited and is open to the possibility that the legislature, the executive and political parties encourage proposals different from those already enumerated.⁶

But for both PRI and PRD members, the accord was stillborn. In the first place, neither Dulce María Sauri (PRI) nor Amalia García (PRD) had the backing of their organizations. Secondly, leaders and legislators of both parties disavowed the signing of the accord as an act of presidential spotlight-seeking and the agenda as a “catalogue of good intentions” in the best of cases.⁷

As organizations specialized in expressing opinions and allowing citizen participation in public affairs and decisions, the political parties came out of the electoral process more fragile than when they went in. With the advent of a new team in the president's office, our parties now face the enormous challenge of redefining their places in the political concert. The PRI lost its “natural leader,” the president: the point of cohesion, creator of programs and the most fervent defender of the interests of the many groups that make it up. The PRD, the most harshly treated by voters, has not been able to respond to the call of its “moral leader” to rebuild

the party. The PAN, flushed with success, is in just as difficult a position as the losers: it has strategic support from the victorious presidential candidate, but does not want to repeat the PRI's history of subordination of the party to the president, and yet it is not an opposition party. Therefore, in the future, the PRI must turn itself into an authentic political party; the PRD needs to get past the factions, groups and leaders that are strangling it; and the PAN will have to learn to be a governing party, express solidarity with the president's actions and be capable of representing the desires of society at the same time that it monitors the actions of the executive branch.

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From my point of view, the greatest problem under these circumstances stems from the fragility of our political parties which do not seem to be in any condition to carry out the functions of being counterweights to, regulate or provide balance for the actions of the president. However, at the same time, the president is compelled to in-

teract with disperse, divided, conflictive actors who contribute very little to making democratic functioning a routine matter.

If, as most theoreticians agree, regular functioning of democratic political systems is based on the solidity of their parties and, therefore, on their party systems, it is probable that Mexico after the 2000 electoral process—that is this system of fragile parties—is far from being the necessary—in- dispensable, I would say— vector of the oft-postponed, unrealized reform of the state. It is truly difficult to recognize in our parties, and particularly in their leaderships—the sole bodies responsible, by the way, for the enormous deficiencies in their organizations' functioning— merits that they do not have: subjected to the rule of strong individual public figures during the elections, the question is how they can walk point for Mexican democracy. For democracy to become a routine way of behaving for both those who govern and the governed, parties with a minimum degree of cohesion among its leading group and a certain institutional strength, as well as an original project (whether it is realizable in practice or not) are needed. Our “big three” are far from displaying these qualities. As necessary as they are, they begin to seem superfluous in the eyes of the public. This is a terrible blow to an incipient democracy and the notion of governing in pluralism. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Ricardo Espinoza Toledo, “Un intento fallido de reconfiguración del sistema de parti-

dos,” Y. Meyenberg, comp., *El dos de julio. Reflexiones posteriores* (Mexico City: Flacso/IS/UAM-I, 2001).

² This reform, the first in modern political history agreed on by the “big three” political parties, crowned the cycle of adjustments in electoral legislation with, among other things, full autonomy for the Federal Electoral Institute and the creation of the Electoral Tribunal of the Federal Judiciary.

³ Jesús Rodríguez Z., “Alternancia presidencial y crisis partidista,” Y. Meyenberg, op. cit.

⁴ For some thinking on this matter, I remit the reader to my article, “Los partidos y la selección de los candidatos presidenciales,” Luis Salazar, comp., México 2000. *Alternancia y transición a la democracia* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 2001).

⁵ He also lacks a cabinet or group of collaborators who share a common horizon and are able to form a real governing team.

⁶ The APDN was signed October 7, 2001, by President Vicente Fox Quesada; Luis Felipe Bravo Mena, for the PAN; Senator Dulce María Sauri, for the PRI; Amalia García, for the PRD; Deputy Alberto Anaya for the Labor Party (PT); Jorge González, for the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM); Dante Delgado, for the Convergence for Democracy (CD); Deputy Gustavo Riojas, for the Party of the Nationalist Society (PSN); and Guillermo Calderón, for the Party of the Social Alliance (PAS).

⁷ See Mexico's national press after October 8, 2001.

⁸ I take the concept of hegemonic party from Giovanni Sartori.

⁹ The PAN, the party that swept Vicente Fox into the president's seat, is the second minority in Congress, with 207 deputies out of 500 and 45 senators out of 128, and in the country. The largest minority is the PRI, with 211 deputies and 60 senators.