



Presenting his credentials to Secretary-General Kofi Annan, February 2002.

## Adolfo Aguilar Zinser And Mexican Politics

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The political biography of Adolfo Aguilar Zinser has to be situated in two dimensions: his activism, that of a generation that has transformed Mexico, and, on the other hand, his academic and journalistic work, which turned him into a representative of the “public intellectual”.

In Mexico, the long battle against authoritarianism gave birth to a large, heterogeneous *generation of the transition* that transcends ideologies or partisan affiliations, that goes beyond gender, age or state of origin, made up of Christians and people who eat priests for breakfast, of intellectuals, combative

social leaders and journalists, of businessmen, officials and politicians. This generation is a spider web, a network that envelops the entire country and is constantly expressing itself in public, although in the private sphere it also pushes and resists, transforms and brakes.

The *generation of the transition*, of which Adolfo was part, is a sociological category and a historic reality that lacks formal structure, but where social climbers have difficulty gaining admittance because the prerequisites for entry are hard to fulfill. Only those who demonstrate an authentic, long-term commitment to peaceful change, democracy and human dignity can belong to it. Like Samuel del Villar and Jaime González Graff —just to mention a couple of other members of

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this group who have already passed away—for more than three decades, Adolfo demonstrated the firmness of his commitment.

With his social origins, his family relations, his intelligence and education, Adolfo could have comfortably installed himself in the Olympus of economic or political power. Instead of that, he voluntarily opted for the arid pathways of the reformer. That was how he became involved in the political, civic and intellectual struggles that slowly but surely eroded Mexican authoritarianism. In addition, Adolfo observed elections and was part of the San Ángel Group and the Agreement for Democracy (Acude). He always donated his time and work when called upon by civic organizations.

One of the most recurring criticisms aimed at Adolfo was of his institution hopping. He did hop. First he collaborated with former President Luis Echeverría in the Third World Social and Economic Studies Center. Then he was an active and close collaborator in one of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's presidential campaigns, a deputy for the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and a senator for the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico. Finally, he was very close to presidential candidate Vicente Fox and held a couple of important posts in his administration. I would like to point to some nuances about these facts.

Adolfo never sought or held those posts for any economic gain or to polish his ego. His life was characterized by a search for the spaces that would allow him to contribute to the country's democratic transformation. That was what he was really interested in. Therefore, he was willing to run risks and be criticized. He did it, always providing a reasoned explanation of his motivations of why he began or ended each one of these stages. He wrote a plain-spoken book about his experience in the Cárdenas campaign which won him the repudiation of part of the PRD. His journey through the Fox ranks ended with a public resignation which brought to a halt his open, valiant opposition in the UN Security Council to the United States' aggressive unilateralism in Iraq.

He was criticized in public and in private as “too individualistic.” It is true that he was very independent, but the other side of that coin is the limitations parties impose by monopolizing participation in public life. The “party-ocracy” has led to a paralysis of politics, controlled by bureaucracies deter-

mined to preserve the established order that avails them of enormous budgets and privileges. Those institutions ruthlessly reject independents.

During the long night of authoritarianism, the majority of intellectuals were confined to an ivory tower. However, the transformations fed off a handful of academics who decided to leave their cubicles to face up to the regime's obscurantism in public, with ideas and words. After he received his education in the Mexican College, Adolfo chose the path of the “public intellectual” already legitimized by, among others, Pablo González Casanova and Daniel Cosío Villegas.

Being a “public intellectual” meant—and means—doing research into difficult, polemical and current themes without abandoning the rigorousness imposed by the social sciences. It demands a willingness to experiment with style because that is the only way you can move from specialized publications to the mass media. It requires preparing yourself to meet

with the irritation of the powerful and to overcome misunderstandings because until relatively recently, the “public intellectual” was dimly viewed in some academic circles that considered that kind of interaction with those in power unworthy and polluting. Adolfo did it and he did it well, and he wrote about the relationship between civilians and the military, national security, the Central American wars and the southern border. And, partially for that reason, he was hound-

ed and persecuted.

It should be remembered that the battles for the transition always had an international dimension, and Adolfo defended the Central American revolutions and the refugees seeking asylum in Mexico. At the same time, he studied U.S. foreign policy and as an academic and a diplomat, faced down U.S. conservatives.

In short, Adolfo deserves to be remembered for the firmness of his principles, because he was a splendid public intellectual and because he was uncommonly politically congruent. He wrote thousands of pages full of passion and intelligence, of principles and the sophistication of the intellectual familiar with the methods and techniques of the social sciences. That *generation of the transition* has achieved a great deal but it still has an eternity to go before it makes the Mexican democracy and equity for which Adolfo Aguilar Zinser lived a reality. ■■■

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