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Democratization of the PRI: Mission Impossible?

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The presidential elections of July 6, 1988 represent a watershed in the political history of postrevolutionary Mexico. They opened the door to a difficult transition, from stale authoritarianism to democracy. It is too early to say whether this transition will succeed. No one really knows what public life would be like in a democratic Mexico, but the country cannot simply return to the prior state of affairs if the attempt to create a truly open and plural political system fails. Such a failure could well mark the beginning of a political regression, leading to either more overt and repressive authoritarianism than before, or political disintegration and ungovernability.

Positive development of the Mexican political system requires, among other things, a transformation of the political party whose candidates have monopolized the so-called popularly elected positions since 1929: the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Such a transformation demands that this party democratize internally and externally. Internal democratization is necessary if the PRI is to gain life and power of its own, to cease being a mere tool of the president, and to construct an authentic social base of its own. External democratization is needed for true interparty competition. If the PRI and the government persist in refusing to recognize opposition electoral triumphs, the currently peaceful opposition will have no recourse but to find other ways to make its presence felt. This would inevitably lead to abandoning the stability that up to now has distinguished Mexico from other Latin American countries. The future of the party is not all that is at stake in

the democratization of the PRI. So, too, is the political future of Mexico as a nation.

THE GENERAL PROBLEM

In July 1988, according to official figures, the state party was on the verge of failing to win a majority popular vote for the first time since its founding in 1929.[1] Ultimately, the official candidate won with 50.3 percent of validated votes. This was an unusually slim margin—slim in terms of Mexican electoral history, where victory with a minimum of 70 percent of the vote had been the rule. Moreover, well-founded suspicion indicates that the election results had been manipulated by the federal authorities responsible for overseeing the electoral process.[2]

Shortly after the shock of the July elections, and as a direct result thereof, the PRI made some important internal changes in its upper-echelon leadership. The president of the party kept his position, but real authority was transferred to the National Executive Committee's new general secretary, Manuel Camacho Solís, up to that moment a cabinet minister and member of the president-elect's inner circle. Camacho's nomination was seen as the beginning of an effort to revitalize the party leadership and, above all, its procedures and structures. As declared by the party's own candidate for president, the goal was for the PRI to relinquish its role as virtually the only party and to adopt the slightly more humble role of dominant party, primus inter pares within a truly competitive multiparty system.[3] Expressed thus, the new leadership's task was not just reformist but frankly revolutionary in that it implied making the PRI into something it had never been: a true political party. To bring this project to fruition the PRI must shed its identity as the electoral arm of the government and transform itself into an apparatus capable of competing with other parties and earning its mandate at the polls. This proposed change is so overwhelming that those who advanced it immediately ran up against the resistance of

[1]If the total number of ballots cast is considered—including invalid ballots—the proportion of votes that led to the victory of the PRI candidate was slightly less than 50 percent.

[2]Francisco Báez Rodríguez (1988) did a statistical study of the possible magnitude of vote fraud. The study utilizes available figures for votes per polling place (29,999 polling places, out of a total of 55,000) starting with a random sample of 300 polls and substituting those where the votes cast are unanimous, or nearly so, in favor of one candidate—thereby raising suspicions of fraud—for the nearest polling place with a vote count similar to the average for the entire zone. The study concludes that actual support for the PRI varies between a maximum of 41.3 percent and a minimum of 38.8 percent of all votes cast.

[3]Carlos Salinas made the proposal to the members of his party, that they accept the end of the "virtually only party" era and initiate the era of the dominant party, at PRI national headquarters on 7 July 1988.

powerful vested interests. According to the public statements of one of the reformers, these included the entire political system's most central institution—the presidency, still occupied by outgoing president Miguel de la Madrid.[4]

The transformation of the PRI responds to the relative loss of power of the party and the regime as a whole, and also to a larger, international context. Until very recently, the Keynesian economic model established in the wake of the Great Depression served as the economic and social base of the consensus that gave stability to fundamentally inclusive systems such Mexico's. As the eighties draw to a close, the failure of Keynesian economics has put extraordinary pressure on the survival of populist political structures like the PRI.

The central political problem which the Mexican regime faced after 1982 was not unique to Mexico. The forces that obliged the PRI to propose changes to its fundamental nature were born of an economic crisis that erupted almost simultaneously in many peripheral—and even some central—countries. Its impacts had already been felt by other systems in Latin America and elsewhere. One of the effects of this crisis was to impose extraordinary limits on the material resources available to government bureaucracies for maintaining wide support in national politics. In general terms, this consensus coalesced during the thirties and forties around the idea that the state should be the principal promotor of economic growth, as well as a guarantor of a minimum level of security and welfare for the lower classes. Fiscal and balance of payments crises forced Latin American political systems such as those of Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, and Great Britain in Europe, to make widely diverse attempts to dissolve popular groups and organizations—inefficient industries, middle classes, organized workers and peasants—whose consumption was partially subsidized for political reasons. These groups were always considered central to the regime and, as a result, had demanded direct influence in the political process—and in income redistribution. Today, the neoconservative project proposes that market mechanisms should determine, generally if not exclusively, the proportion of income to go to each social class or sector.

The heart of the new economic model, alternatively labeled as neoliberal or neoconservative, is the resolution of the structural crises of stagnant economies, achieved through limiting the role of the state to economic supervision and regulation. Market forces are given greater weight in the distribution of jobs and benefits, and production is oriented more toward international, rather than internal, markets.

[4]See the opinions expressed by Rodolfo González Guevara, a member of the PRI's Modernization Commission, in his column in *Excélsior*, 15 October 1988 and the interview on the same subject in *Uno Más Uno*, 14 and 15 October 1988.

Exporting primary and manufactured goods in comparative advantage situations (or where such a situation is developing) is seen as the new engine which can invigorate indebted economies currently stagnating in their internal markets. The new export model demands high efficiency and productivity in order to rebuild economic viability in the midst of a growing foreign debt and ferocious competition from those countries—like Japan at one extreme, and Korea and Taiwan at the other—that today dominate the art of growth through international commerce. This economic model thus precludes the maintenance of privileges and protection of consumption that popular social sectors or groups, strategic labor unions, and inefficient national industries had previously enjoyed for political reasons. In principle, any economic advantages which one group holds over another in the future must be justified in terms of market operations and not deliberate state actions, dysfunctional as they would be in the struggle for productivity and efficiency.[5]

The fundamental character of politics in Latin America in the period between the two world wars was largely determined by the incorporation of the popular sectors in decision-making processes.[6] This was the basis for the developmentalism proposed and legitimized by ECLA theories during the fifties and sixties. These theories stressed the capacity of the Latin American regional market and internal markets—after a redistribution of income to the popular sector, to be accomplished by political means— to support an adequate rhythm of economic growth and development in the area. Supposedly, with the passage of time and the advantages of economies of scale, Latin America, or at least the region's biggest countries, would evolve into an economic zone capable of competing in international markets. Such competitiveness would not, of course, be an end in itself but rather a by-product of internal development.[7] Nonetheless, in the sixties it became clear that the development model had not resulted in significant redistribution or the creation of strong internal markets; nor had it overcome those markets' inability to use exports to earn the foreign exchange they needed to continue developing. The discovery and development of new oil fields in the late seventies postponed the final crisis for a few years in Mexico, but falling prices on the world oil market eventually made the situation insupportable.

[5]The discussion of the structural crisis of the "welfare state," the "consensus state," and the crisis-instigated dissolution of popular sectors is based on Schamis 1988.

[6]For more on the process of incorporation of the Latin American masses into the political regime, see Collier and Collier, n.d.

[7]The ECLA model is synthesized in such works as Urquidi 1962, and Prebisch 1967.

In 1982, no longer able to keep up with service payments on its enormous debt, Mexico was temporarily forced to suspend those payments. At the same time, amid strong political tensions, it began the difficult task of dismantling the old populist system that had been built up during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas nearly fifty years before. The government took steps toward a neoconservative economic model which would replace the old system, but it wanted to avoid the costs of modifying the traditional political model. The central bureaucracy thus opted for market liberalization (joining the GATT), liquidation of nonstrategic parastate companies (in 1982 there were 1,155 public-sector companies, of which only 496 remained in 1987), reduction of the role of the state as the engine of the economy (public-sector investment fell from 11 percent of GNP in 1981 to just 5 percent in 1987), and a reduction of subsidies (the primary fiscal deficit, 7.6 percent of GNP in 1982, was transformed into a 4.9 percent surplus in 1987). All this was possible because of the preservation of authoritarian mechanisms for controlling demand. There is no other reasonable explanation for the relative peace between capital and labor at a time when real income fell by 40 percent.

The neoconservative project, designed and implemented by Miguel de la Madrid and his administration, developed in a tension-laden political atmosphere. Mexico's foreign debt would soon surpass the $100 billion mark and, as a result of the debt, the country's economic growth would average 2.6 percent between 1982 and 1987 (Cornelius 1986). These tensions were expressed in 1983 in state party electoral losses and, later, in a series of unbelievable regional victories that seriously undermined the legitimacy of the government and the regime.

At the time of the 1988 presidential elections, wage-labor's buying power was, on average, 10 percent less than at the beginning of Luis Echeverría's administration seventeen years earlier.[8] This decline in the majority's standard of living is clear, dramatic, quantitative evidence of the degree of the salaried sectors' effective political exclusion. If politics is nothing more than the process for determining who gets what, when, and how, as Laswell (1936) pointed out more than half a century ago, then it is not difficult to see why the policies adopted in Mexico in 1982—sometimes called industrial reordering policies, or simply modernization policies—were seen by numerous social groups as the end of the populist pact that had underpinned consensus and government legitimacy in Mexico since the late thirties. The costs of transforming

[8]This figure, and the figures on public-sector spending and the decrease in state-owned companies, were taken from data presented in a lecture by Aarón Tornell, 17 October 1988, New York City.

the economic model were borne by precisely those popular sectors that, in political oratory dating back to the thirties, provided the regime its raison d'être: to assure their protection and the satisfaction of their needs. Traditional political discourse altered little despite the crisis, but it did ring increasingly hollow as the objectives of the economic model changed.

One result of the attempt to transform Mexico's internally focused market economy into one that was export-based was that the popular organizations that constitute the PRI's various sectors lost their power, provoking a dramatic fall in living standards. This decline acted as a culture medium for widespread multiclass dissatisfaction that, on the right, helped motivate an aggressive PAN (*neopanismo*) to compete directly with the state party for the support of the middle class. It gave sustenance to a coalition of a wide range of positions on the left that eventually prevailed over their differences and united around the leadership of a group of PRI dissidents headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, ex-governor of Michoacán and son of one of the great heroes of the Mexican Revolution.

The July 6 election, in which Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas won at least 31.1 percent of all valid votes, demonstrated that the PRI's labor sector—supposedly the cornerstone of Mexican corporatism and of the entire regime—could no longer guarantee the support of the proletariat. For the first time in its history, the PRI lost elections in predominantly working-class districts in Mexico City and Mexico State. The government and its party's traditional methods for controlling the electoral process were blocked by effective opposition surveillance over the polls.

The PRI leadership that took power on December 1, 1988 decided it had to change the political system if it was to carry out the neoconservative economic project with which it was now irremediably identified. Its aspiration was to create conditions favoring a true multiparty system, capable of productively—or at least peacefully—channeling the social forces which the drive for productivity and inefficiency had shut out, and would continue to shut out, of the economic process.

Given the course of political processes in Mexico, there remain only two possibilities for resolving the problem of exclusion of the popular sectors in the wake of the dissolution of the old populist pact. One is to transform traditional, inclusive authoritarianism—the authoritarianism that arose from the Mexican Revolution—into an exclusionary authoritarianism similar to that of certain South American countries. The other is to create an exclusionary system that nevertheless maintains political democracy's institutions and, consequently, legitimacy. In other words, the only alternative to repression that is compatible with the government's six-year-old industrial restructuring program is an exclusionary democracy. It is not an attractive alternative, to be sure, but the other option is far worse.

The essence of an exclusionary democracy is that the governmental apparatus reduces its reliance on the direct support of mass groups as much as it can while still assuring its own safety. At the same time, however, it encourages the organization of competing social forces in institutions—parties—that peacefully fight for the right to decide how to distribute the wealth created in a new market ruled by the logic of productivity and maximization of profits. This is an entirely new formula for Mexico, and there is no guarantee that it is danger free. Nonetheless, in principle it could be implemented by the new government both to revitalize the process of capitalist development in Mexico and to recover government legitimacy.

In order to initiate and direct the structural transformation of the old, authoritarian, populist political system into an exclusionary but democratic one, the political group led by Carlos Salinas de Gortari proposed at the outset to modify the PRI to fit the new circumstances. These circumstances demand that the old party renew itself and win elections on its own, without relying on the unlimited resources of the state.[9]

If the PRI is to compete successfully with a right and a left strongly rooted in their own social bases, the presidency—the focal point of all political negotiation in the current regime, and the source of all important decisions regarding the state party—must be willing to cede some of its enormous power to the PRI. For its part the new PRI ideally should be a party endowed with an effective inner life, whose programs, legislative activities, and selection of candidates arise from negotiation, not dictates from above. This is the only way that the PRI can continue to occupy a legitimate place in Mexico as the country approaches the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, the obstacles now arrayed against this reform are so formidable as to appear nearly insurmountable.

The Burden of the Past

Every president, governor, and senator, and nearly every congressman and city mayor elected in Mexico since 1930, has been a member of one political party. That party is the Institutional Revolutionary Party—the overwhelmingly predominant party in Mexico and an

[9]Carlos Salinas made the proposal for modernizing (democratizing) the political system, particularly the party subsystem, in a speech on democracy given on 22 April 1988. See *Excélsior*, 23 April 1988.

integral part of the country's political power structure. Any consideration of the chances for democratizing or modernizing the PRI must begin with a brief look at the political system of which it forms a part.

Since republican government was restored to Mexico in 1867 free elections have been guaranteed as the primary means of maintaining government legitimacy. Although elections have assumed different forms over the past 121 years, in theory they have continued to serve their primary purpose: to allow groups of citizens organized into political parties to offer their political platforms to the body politic. Voters then consider both the platforms and the candidates and make their choice of elected officials for a specific term in office. A legal framework defines and limits the power of those elected and clearly identifies the rights and obligations of both the governed and the governing.[10]

But constitutional and legal protections aside, Mexican political history has yet to record a single case of presidential power passing peacefully from one political party to another as a consequence of the electoral process. Mexico's two postindependence periods of political stability—the *porfiriato* and the regime that emerged from the Revolution—contrast markedly in their solutions to the problem of the orderly transition of power. Stability was maintained during the *porfiriato* through the systematic reelection of high officials, while after the Revolution it was maintained through the principle of no reelection.[11] In neither case—although both strictly observed the formalities of the electoral process—did elections actually determine who would take power. That decision was made earlier, and the elections served functionally as a referendum only.

Since the 1917 birth of the present regime, political power in Mexico has been transferred between opposing parties or groups only once, and then as the result of a military rebellion (the Aguaprieta uprising of 1920). After 1920, whenever the opposition posed a serious electoral threat to the dominant power group—as it did in the opposition campaigns of José Vasconcelos, Juan Andrew Almazán, and Miguel Henríquez Guzmán—the government, supported by its social, bureaucratic, and military constituencies, simply refused to recognize election results.[12] Now, as opposition parties have begun again to gain

[10]For an analysis of the evolution of Mexico's electoral framework, see Medina 1977; Orozco García 1978.

[11]The one exception to the principle of no reelection was the reelection of General Alvaro Obregón in July 1928. Obregón was assassinated before he assumed the presidency for his second term, and his death helped to firmly establish Mexico's no reelection rule.

[12]See, among others, Skirius 1978; Michaels 1971; Reyna 1985.

strength in Mexico, the subject of electoral fraud has once again become a central theme of political debate.[13]

The PRI's unrelenting hold on political power in Mexico, a fact of political life ever since the party was born as the PNR, has led both Mexican and non-Mexican observers to label Mexico's political system authoritarian, especially after the political crisis of 1968. Mexico's system does allow, however, for some limited political pluralism and a higher degree of institutionalization and accessibility than the authoritarian regimes that dominated Latin America's Southern Cone a decade ago.[14] The nondemocratic characteristics of the Mexican political system, together with the enduring and delegitimizing effects of the 1982 economic crisis, have led many critics inside and outside the PRI to suggest that the time is ripe for a transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Mexico. The alternative is a process of political decay which would endanger the institutional character of Mexican political life.[15]

It has been said that the historical origin of a political party has a profound influence on its eventual evolution (Duverger 1969, 15). Today's PRI was not erected to contest with other parties the right of the so-called Revolutionary Family to monopolize the political power it had won by force of arms and an overwhelming popular mobilization. It was born from the need to address an intragroup power struggle. In 1928 Mexico's leadership needed an institution to hold the dominant power group in check following the assassination of revolutionary strongman Alvaro Obregón.[16] When he created the party at the end of his term, President Plutarco Elías Calles pointed out that it was time for Mexico to make the transition from political strongmen to political institutions, and that the purpose of the new party and the coalition of revolutionary groups it comprised was to compete openly in the electoral arena. However, this political rhetoric was soon contradicted by events. In fact, the PNR was created to maintain discipline within the heterogeneous and contentious coalition of interests that made up

[13]Recent examples of suspect elections can be found in Krauze 1986*a*; Molinar Horcasitas 1987.

[14]A compendium of the arguments of those scholars who define the contemporary political system in Mexico as authoritarian can be found in Reyna and Weinert 1977.

[15]Some of the most representative examples of the demand for democratization which were offered prior to the July 6th elections can be found in Krauze 1986*b* and Sánchez Susarrey 1988. Following the elections, *Excélsior* published an important call for the internal and external democratization of the PRI in a series of front-page articles by Rodolfo González Guevara, a member of the Modernization Commission of the state party.

[16]For an analysis of the origins of Mexico's predominant political party, see Garrido 1982; Lajous 1979.

the revolutionary family. At no time did the new party demonstrate a willingness to allow election results to put in question its right to govern—or to claim the support of an overwhelming majority of the electorate.

When the PNR appeared on the scene in Mexico in 1929, the sole method of resolving political rifts had been to eliminate challengers. That same year the opposition to the new regime lost its last trump card with the political and military defeat of the Cristero rebellion. Thus the foundations of the PNR's goal of absolute domination of Mexican political life were the absence of a real party system and the support of military and local strongmen, all of whom were welcome to join its ranks as long as they were willing to accept party discipline. Consequently, the value of the vote as political currency came to be of secondary importance. When followers of Vasconcelos rightly cried foul in the presidential elections of 1930, they were given this choice: to instigate armed rebellion or disappear as a political force. They chose to rebel, but their resounding lack of success forced them to the political sidelines.

The PNR's refusal to put its right to govern to the test at the polls was reflected in its unwillingness to make internal party decisions democratically among its membership. From the moment of its inception, the party imposed presidential candidate Pascual Ortiz Rubio over the more popular choice, Aarón Sáenz, vetoed by the party's creator and principal leader, General Calles. From this moment, it was clear that party conventions were not held so that members could exercise their statutory right to participate in basic political decisions. Instead, the exclusive role of the party convention was to rubber-stamp and implement the decisions of the party leadership (Meyer, Segovia, and Lajous 1978, 36–63).

In its early days, the government party was not controlled by the president, but by General Calles—known to the members of Mexico's political elite as the "supreme leader of the Mexican Revolution." As long as Calles was the central force in the Mexican political system, a position he maintained until mid-1935, the PNR was relatively independent of the executive. It even opposed presidential power at times, as in the case of Pascual Ortiz Rubio. All this changed, however, when President Lázaro Cárdenas sent Calles into exile and augmented the president's significant constitutional powers with new, extraconstitutional powers—the most important of which made the president the party's undisputed leader (Carpizo 1978, 190–199).

As head of a party in which decision-making flows from top down, never the reverse, Mexico's president designates his successor, to be confirmed by an election of which the outcome is foreknown. Gubernatorial candidates are chosen in the same manner, as are many federal and state congressmen, and even municipal authorities in the country's most important cities. Through his control over the legislature's power, the president can also remove those elected officials from office should he deem it necessary to do so (Carpizo 1978, 190–199).

The official party's lack of autonomy and its instrumental use by the president cast doubt on the PRI's essence as a political party. Rather than a living organization which can consolidate and communicate the demands of its broad popular base, the PRI is simply one more presidential resource for running electoral campaigns and maintaining discipline among the ranks of the political elite. In the view of Manuel Moreno Sánchez, an old and distinguished member of the official party, the PRI is nothing more than the government's electoral apparatus. The human and economic resources available to the party for election campaigns—presidential campaigns in particular—are not, properly speaking, its own. They are provided by the government, as part of a relationship so intertwined that it is virtually impossible to determine where the government ends and the party begins (Moreno Sánchez 1970). This lack of differentiation between institutional party and government is one of the obstacles to the modernization of the dominant party, and the entire political system as well.

The PRI, then, was created to complement the institutional structure of the new regime, not to do battle with its political adversaries at the polls. It provides the forum for internal negotiations among the governing elite, for the distribution of political patronage awards, and for recruiting (fewer and fewer over time) and socializing new members. During electoral campaigns it acquaints the populace with its soon-to-be-elected officials, and it mobilizes specific sectors of society as needed for the preservation of the system. Between elections—excepting those occasions when government leadership needs limited mass mobilization—the official party practically disappears. Its activities are determined almost exclusively by the president and by the electoral calendar, not by grassroots interests or demands.

Although the basic nature of the official party has not changed since its origin, it has not been immune to change. One such change has already been mentioned—the party's loss of partial independence from the president during the 1930s and its transformation into an instrument of control wielded by the executive over the legislative branch and local government—but there have been other changes as well. The PNR was born as an alliance of numerous, mostly small and locally based parties, but within a few years it was able to dissolve all its

original internal components. By so doing it facilitated the process of centralization and homogenization of postrevolutionary political life, which was the crux of Calles's national project.

Another, more important change came in 1938 as a result of President Cárdenas's populist policies. The PNR became the PRM, a multiclass, corporatist party comprising the principal popular organizations of the time.[17] This reform gave the postrevolutionary government a wider social base than any other regime in Mexico's history. The strength of this organized social base allowed President Cárdenas to ignore the 1940 election results, relatively unfavorable for the PRM, and to prevent the opposition, led by Juan Andrew Almazán, from transforming its strong electoral mobilization into real political power. The same transformation—of the PNR into the PRM—also allowed President Manuel Avila Camacho, Cárdenas's successor, to relegate the military to a secondary role among the company of political actors, firmly establishing the principle of civilian primacy over the military.

A final important passage for the government party was its transformation from the PRM to the PRI in January 1946. This change had little organizational impact, since the party kept its basic corporatist structure; but by increasing centralization in the decision-making process, it dramatically altered the relative importance of its different sectors in that process. It also changed its ideology: its emphasis on class struggle—a central concept while Cárdenas was incorporating the masses into the party—gave way to a new doctrine based on nationalism and the idea of a distinctly Mexican identity, *"mexicanidad,"* with stress on economic development and cooperation among social classes.[18]

The fundamental changes in the government party from the time of its founding through the mid-forties—from PNR to PRM to PRI—show the party's capacity to adapt to changing circumstances in a changing world. Flexibility has characterized the official party throughout its history, although it was exercised more liberally in the early days than in recent years. Nevertheless, changes to the party were never intended to make elections the fundamental instrument for the preservation of political legitimacy. As José Luis Reyna noted, the party, and the entire political system, already displayed all the characteristics that identify it today as early as 1952. That was the last time—but for the present conflict—that the PRI faced serious opposition at the

[17]For an analysis of the relationship between *cardenista* populist policies and the corporatist restructuring of the government party, see Córdoba 1974.

[18]One analysis of this change in the state party's ideology can be found in Medina 1979, 179–194.

polls (Reyna 1985, 105–110). Changes in the party since then have been inconsequential, even as changes outside of it have been both significant and rapid, especially since 1982, when the old import-substitution model of economic development entered into an irreversible crisis.

CALLS FOR CHANGE

Over the past three decades there have been constant calls for Mexico's inclusive but authoritarian regime and its party to take on a more pluralistic and democratic identity. First heard only six years after the system's relatively successful resolution of the challenge posed by Miguel Henríquez Guzmán and his supporters in 1952, these appeals have intensified of late. A 1958 dispute between the government and the railroad workers union cast doubt on the effectiveness of the corporatist pact that dominated Mexican political life; on that occasion demands for independent labor unions were quelled by the violent disbanding of the protest movement. The next round of criticism and calls for a more open, flexible, and modern political system came during another period of open dispute with the government—the student movement of 1968. Acting on conservative Catholic convictions, students and their supporters raised their voices in favor of greater pluralism in educational policy, demonstrating peacefully against the use of the official textbook as the only textbook in elementary schools.[19] Their demands, and demands for respect for the democratic rules of the game, were stilled with another wave of violent repression.

Pablo González Casanova addressed the basic nature of the Mexican political system in his book *La democracia en México*. Rooting his analysis of the innermost workings of the political system in two distinct and fundamentally antagonistic perspectives—Marxism and structural functionalism—González Casanova issued a call to the Mexican political elite to open up the social and political system, through democratic reforms. By thus infusing renewed vitality into the postrevolutionary regime and the capitalist system on which it depends, the elite would fend off the historical process that would render the system itself obsolete. The clamor for structural political change increased notably in volume, both domestically and abroad, after President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz imposed his brutal solution to the student and middle-class protests of 1968. But most demands for

[19]There are numerous studies of these three moments that challenged the government's legitimacy. A few examples are Gil 1971; Stevens 1974; Paz 1971; Poniatowska 1971; Loaeza 1988.

change came from intellectuals and academics and lacked a broader popular base of support.[20]

Changes in Mexico's political structure from the end of the Cárdenas era until the Echeverría presidency were aimed at invigorating minority parties, especially on the left. These changes included opening up the Chamber of Deputies to a handful of opposition party representatives who served as party deputies. Under Echeverría, partially in response to the crisis of 1968, criticism and self-criticism of the system from within were encouraged. Political reform continued down the road already chosen: Registered political parties received more seats in the Chamber of Deputies, hoping to entice the opposition to focus its energies on the electoral process instead of guerrilla action. However, increased opposition participation was never allowed to endanger the PRI's majority in either the Senate or the Chamber of Deputies. Nor was the opposition allowed direct exercise of power except in a few scattered mayoralties. This strategy of undergoing superficial change, to obviate making significant ones, favored parties on the left and small parties allied with the PRI. But opposition parties like the PAN, with a broad electoral base, gained very little from reforms (Paoli Bolio 1985, 152–161). When all was said and done, the entire political reform process had not touched the core of the political system: presidential power was exercised in exactly the same way as it had been before, and all the opposition had gained was a bigger forum for voicing criticism without having to recur to violence in order to be heard. Not only did the changes fail to alter the established concentration of power, they served to legitimate it.

How can we explain the system's reluctance to modify its principal patterns of action, despite its many crises and admission from the office of the presidency that reform is necessary? The explanation relates in part to the fact that none of the protest movements that exceeded the capacity of institutional conflict-resolution channels between 1958 and 1968 ever achieved national, multiclass standing. When railroad workers, teachers, electricians, and oil workers engaged in protests at the end of the fifties, most members of the middle class stood on the sidelines as hostile spectators to the battle. Several years later, when sectors of the middle class assumed the role of protester, it was the workers' turn to remain outside. Not only did they not support the protest, through their official unions they offered to help suppress it. The middle class's heterogeneity, meanwhile, led it to attack the government at times from the right and at times from the left. Peasants, for their part, never managed to organize a protest movement able to

[20]Part of this critical bibliography, and an analysis of it, can be found in Meyer and Camacho 1979, 19–46.

transcend regional boundaries, nor could they build alliances with other classes at the local level. The last social group, the bourgeoisie, had no reason to oppose the government. As the primary beneficiary of the Mexican government's economic development policy, this class had nothing but praise—until the mid-seventies—for a political elite which, though it refused to share its power with the bourgeoisie, did protect their economic interests.

Until the mid-seventies the legitimacy of the political system—government and its official party—rested on the fact that the corporatist pact, which united the principal peasant, labor, and middle-class organizations within the PRI and linked them with the business sector through the executive, was able to guarantee a degree of political stability and systematic economic growth unparalleled in any other country in Latin America. Mexico's GNP, growing at an average annual rate of 6 percent from 1940 to 1976, outstripped the rate of population growth, allowing for a real rise in the standard of living despite highly unequal income distribution. The public acquiesced to meaningless elections and the marginalization of the average citizen in the political process, as long as the leaders at the top of the corporatist pyramid honored at least minimally the promises for social justice of the Mexican Revolution and could guarantee continued and systematic economic growth based on import-substitution industrialization.

Having lost the legitimacy which its social programs and sustained economic growth bestowed on the postrevolutionary regime, and with its capacity for mediating conflicts between factors of production still intact but greatly reduced, the government and the political system are subject to increasing pressure. This pressure comes from sectors encompassed by the system's corporative organizations, and from the disenfranchised majority—those who have suffered most from the economic collapse by virtue of their very exclusion. This antisystem sentiment translates into calls for effective democracy, which would give social classes a greater capacity to defend their interests. The power of the presidency in Mexico, with few parallels in today's world, is justly or unjustly thought responsible for the trail of erroneous decisions that brought the Mexican economy to its present disastrous state.[21]

The renewal of the economic crisis in 1982, with its myriad negative consequences for Mexicans' well-being and hopes for the future, has led to demands for the dissolution of corporatism. Groups that have no place in the corporatist political and economic structure, and even some that do, demand an end to corporatism and its political manifestations.

[21]One of the best current examples of overall criticism of Mexican presidentialism can be found in Zaid 1987.

In its place they want adherence to the pluralist, democratic principles set forth in the Mexican Constitution, now revered in rhetoric but not in fact. Dissidents and opposition groups add legitimacy to their movements by attacking the government and the political system in the name of democracy. They are not all necessarily committed democrats, nor do they always believe that they could resolve their specific problems within a pluralist political framework. But given the complete lack of practical experience, nobody really knows how a democratic system would function in Mexico.

The present challenge to the Mexican political system comes from a diverse coalition of social and cultural forces, such as has not been seen since 1952. A list of today's malcontents would include, of course, traditional groups of the right and left. Those groups have been joined by new groups that insist on respect for the electoral process as the only legitimate forum for resolving in the future those demands that the current government, nearly devoid of resources, is no longer addressing. Numbering among the former allies of the government who have joined its critics are: (1) Businessmen and industrialists, who lost confidence in the government with the 1982 bank nationalization and the economic crisis that followed and now want to claim their right to exercise political power. (2) Disaffected former PRI activists who were shut out of the circle built up around the president in 1982, and who created a new opposition movement—the National Democratic Front (FDN)—in response to their marginalization in the federal bureaucracy and the state party. (3) University students, initially motivated by curriculum reform dictated from above by the university rectorate. Their dispute with the university bureaucracy developed into an expression of their own dissatisfactions and insecurities now that a university degree no longer guarantees a job that pays a good—or even adequate—wage. (4) Workers, unhappy with their labor leaders' systematic acceptance of steadily decreasing real wages. (5) Marginalized city-dwellers, who are distressed with their current situation; they have watched their standard of living erode as the government reduced or eliminated subsidies to basic consumer goods to help offset deficits. (6) The middle classes, threatened by rising inflation and unemployment. (7) Traditional peasant power centers which no longer display their old capacity for negotiation, leading peasants to add their voices to the chorus of criticism and calls for change to a political regime that has abandoned rural programs such as the National Food System.

WHAT TYPE OF CHANGE?

Mexican society is frustrated by the country's economic stagnation, inflation, unemployment and underemployment, environmental problems, and inveterate corruption in the public sector, plus the lack of a

feasible alternative national project which would be acceptable to all social groups. This frustration crystallized in the July 1988 presidential elections and the following local elections in Veracruz and Tabasco.

Just prior to the presidential election, some suggested that the PRI candidate could expect to capture just over 60 percent of the votes cast, a close margin of victory for this state party. But apparently no one in the PRI's inner circle anticipated the events of election day: an extensive voter turnout[22] increased support for the center-left opposition and no drop in voter support for the center-right. The unanticipated results led the authorities to withhold voter tallies on the evening of election day, despite the precedent set in 1982 for releasing these figures. When they finally released the tallies several days later, Carlos Salinas's victory was overshadowed by widespread disbelief in the final count. After the election, the demands for change became more insistent, but the resistance to change heightened as well. In contrast with the past, the rate and nature of change is no longer in the hands of a small power elite, or at least not entirely under their control.

As might be expected, the kinds of change that opposition groups propose vary with their respective definitions of democracy. Leftists want to return the state to its central economic role as a direct producer of goods and services, a role that the present government rejects as inefficient and unworkable. Demands from the right, on the other hand, call for the state to cede more economic power to the private sector by reducing state participation in the economy, accompanied by a thorough reform of public administration to eliminate, or at least drastically reduce, typical levels of inefficiency and corruption. Dissidents within the official party seek a return to the nationalism and populism of the Cárdenas era, sentiments which adhere to the economic model now being discarded. There is, however, one point of agreement among all opposition parties and many of the peripheral groups and individuals who are calling for change: that political democracy is a sine qua non for achieving peaceful change of any kind, that only political democracy has the power to resolve the staggering conflicts fermenting in Mexican society due to the economic crisis (Molinar Horcasitas 1988).

Although the Democratic Current was forced out of the official party in 1987, when it openly challenged the traditional process for selecting the PRI's presidential candidate, there are still important voices within the party which point out the critical need to modernize the party's rules of the game from within. Their shared concerns led to

[22]According to official election results, only half of the registered voters cast ballots in the 1988 election. If true, this would be one of the poorest showings in Mexico's electoral history. However, voter turnouts far below the 50 percent level are suspected for prior elections, although turnout figures were wildly inflated in official reports.

the recent creation of a modernization commission within the PRI. Members of the official party who equate modernization with democratization support changes in the system for selecting the party's candidates, such that those selected are recognized "popular leaders." They reason that the PRI needs candidates who can win sufficient support from generally sympathetic voters among the electorate at large, such that electoral triumphs will be perceived as reflecting popular will, and not electoral fraud or apathy. These reformers admit that modernization and the development of effective opposition parties will make it increasingly difficult for the PRI to fall back on traditional—fraudulent—means of assuring victory in areas where the opposition has its own poll-watchers and ballot counters.

A second point raised by PRI reformers is the need to permit regional and municipal committees more autonomy, thus encouraging them to stimulate grassroots party activism, and to allow them to participate in choosing their high-level representatives—the only way to assure effective links between the party base and its leadership.

Third is the need to define the long-obscured boundaries between party and government. This lack of definition has made the PRI a mere government agency, with top-level public officials making political decisions independent of the party and, what is worse, often filling administrative positions in the public sector with career bureaucrats instead of PRI activists. Technical merit, not a distinguished party career, is now the most important criterion for appointment to the cabinet.

Finally, the reformers want to change the mind-set of the party leadership, from a policy of winning at all costs to one of respecting opposition triumphs and learning to live with opposition forces rather than plotting their destruction. Real legitimacy lies in increased efficiency and decreased corruption, not in forcibly edging out the opposition. If the PRI fails to modernize, it will lose legitimacy over the long term both for itself and for the government of which it forms a central component (González Guevara 1988).

In principle the internal reform plans of the PRI's modernizing wing are neither utopian nor radical. Nevertheless, their implementation does offer the possibility of renewing the viability of the state party and the entire political system. Under this simple program, as proposed by Carlos Salinas, the PRI would become the country's dominant—but no longer hegemonic—political party.

These reforms—seemingly modest and reasonable—face two formidable obstacles. The PRI has already tried allowing grassroots participation in the process for selecting candidates, but only at the local level and only in a handful of cities such as the recent case of San Luis Potosí. The proposal to extend such participation to the entire

country has been shelved indefinitely, and no one knows when or under what more propitious circumstances it might be implemented. Selection of the PRI presidential candidate in 1987 was a frustrated exercise in "controlled pluralism": party activists, and the public at large, were asked to decide among six "distinguished party members," but there were never any real debate or internal campaigning. Instead, in accordance with tradition, virtually every member of the official party watched and waited for months for a signal "from above" before deciding to support one of the six precandidates. When President de la Madrid gave that signal in favor of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, nearly the entire party jumped on the bandwagon and crushed any hopes for a participative selection process. In the end, the process merely reaffirmed the authoritarian nature of the party's internal decision-making process.

To date, it appears that the foremost obstacle to the democratization of the PRI is the presidency itself, the fundamental pillar of the Mexican political system. A PRI that allowed its members to choose representatives within the party hierarchy and candidates for elected office would not necessarily be more democratic than its rivals. It would, however, be a PRI in which regional and sectoral interests would have a voice in determining the party platforms and in rewarding or disciplining party activists—now one of the president's most important extraconstitutional powers—thereby undermining the president's current role as the undisputed leader of the state party. If the political future of PRI cadres depended more on their links with the party's popular base and less on presidential inclination, then the traditional authoritarian arrangement—wherein the chain of command goes from the top down and the chain of responsibility goes from the bottom up—would be completely reversed. Carried through to its ultimate consequences, this could place the president and the party in opposing positions. Municipal governments, local and federal congresses, and state governments could effectively place limits on presidential power, an unimaginable phenomenon under present circumstances.

Party rank and file control over the choosing of elected officeholders could allow those in office a certain degree of independence. City officials, governors, congressmen, and senators would find themselves relatively free of control from the traditional center of power, the presidency, upon which they have depended in the past. This could lead to an effective separation of powers, especially given that the opposition now controls nearly half the seats in the Chamber of Deputies. Such a situation has not been seen in Mexico since the Restored Republic, when President Juárez, unable to control his own Liberal Party, had to accept a relatively independent legislature and

judiciary over a century ago. Many of those who seek democratization of the political system believe that renewed separation of powers would constitute a significant advance in the modernization of the country. Conservative PRI members, on the other hand, view such a change with dread.

The other obstacle to internal democratization of the PRI, and to its accepting democracy as the fundamental rule of party competition, can be found in its internal corporatist structures. Given current circumstances, this obstacle seems to pose a greater challenge than the reduction of presidential powers. Before he took office, Carlos Salinas accepted his government's commitment to political modernization through the democratization of the system.[23] But far from making any such commitment, the leaders of the PRI's different sectors—particularly those in the labor sector—have fought the process of system-wide political reform ever since its inception in the seventies. They fought it even harder after the promulgation of the 1977 electoral law, and the election of Salinas as president will not reverse their opposition.

On July 6, the leaders of the PRI's corporative sectors saw clear confirmation of their oft-voiced doubts and fears about the process of political change when many labor-leadership candidates for congressional office were defeated by the center-left opposition. The defeat of Joaquín Gamboa Pascoe, Federal District CTM leader and an important member of top labor leader Fidel Velázquez's narrow inner circle, is particularly notable. Electoral results, and the combative stance of the opposition in Congress, hardened the corporative structure's resistance to all democratizing change. This retrenchment is easily understood, since the old leadership—individually and as a group—has little or nothing to gain and much to lose if the proposed changes take effect.

In fact, should Carlos Salinas's democratizing project succeed, it would likely lead to a basically exclusionary democracy. This project gives unions and working-class organizations little hope of retaining, much less extending, the privileges they already have. As noted earlier, in order to achieve optimum function, the economic model that was instituted in 1982—the continuation of which is the basis of Salinas's economic program—requires a reduction of worker privileges previously obtained not through productivity but through labor's organization and strategic position in the now-threatened political system.

Under these circumstances, the new group in power faces a series of dilemmas. To carry out the goal of political reform, intended to

[23]See the PRI presidential candidate's speech given in Puebla, 22 April 1988, titled "Los retos de la democracia," reprinted in *Excélsior*, 23 April 1988.

modify the political system without destroying it, the new presidency will need at least one, and preferably all, of three things. First, a significant improvement in the economy that would reverse the constant deterioration of the government's fiscal resources and, most important, middle- and lower-class incomes. Second, an agreement from the opposition to recognize the government's legitimacy and negotiate its support for Salinas's reform projects. Third, and perhaps most difficult, to keep the leadership of the PRI's corporative organizations from opposing or sabotaging reforms in the federal Congress, in local congresses and governorships, and in the process of implementation of the presidency's national political decisions.

The problems involved in reforming a system that has avoided substantive change for half a century will be enormous even if the three above conditions are fulfilled. They will be much greater if any of the three are missing. And if none of the conditions are met, reform will be practically impossible. Carlos Salinas enjoyed the support of the industrial sector when he took office—at least that of its most important leaders, though some medium-sized and small businessmen remained loyal to the PAN—as well as the support of the U.S. government and international investors and financiers. But his program's success also requires social bases in a significant portion of the middle class and popular sectors.

Without the support of those sectors, no reform will prevail over the resistance of groups with a vested interest in the status quo. Unfortunately Salinas and his team rose to power from the top ranks of the bureaucracy, by decidedly traditional means, through an election that was anything but clean. All things considered, when the *salinistas* took power they clearly did not have strong ties to the mass social sectors that could effectively support the reform project. They must build new bases from scratch, using what power is left in the institution of the presidency, but they face particularly difficult circumstances.

As Carlos Salinas begins his *sexenio*, there are no guarantees that the efforts toward internal and external democratization of the PRI will be successful, and no indications of how far it might go. However, the alternative to democratization is clearly unacceptable. This option would mean the hardening of the system—a move from "authoritarian but inclusive" to "authoritarian and exclusionary" and away from its traditional mass base. This solution might please hard-liners within and without the PRI over the short term, but over the long term its lack of legitimacy would render it nonviable. It would ultimately lead the country to political decomposition and violence, to the benefit of the very few and the detriment of the vast majority of Mexicans.

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