

Politics on the razor's edge

Political power

The rapid loss of presidential power involves great opportunities as well as dangers. Politically, we are living on the razor's edge, which should lead us to act with great care and intelligence.

Political power —the ability of an individual or group to impose their will on others in public affairs— is something which can just as easily grow as diminish: it can be won or lost, create as well as destroy. All these possibilities are present in today's Mexico; whether they occur —and, if so, how— is a question affecting us all, since all of us will experience its effects.

The nerve center of power in our country is, of course, the institution of the presidency. This has been the case since 1935 under the regime of General Plutarco Elías Calles, known as the *Jefe Máximo* (Supreme Chief). The presidency concentrated so much power that it not only annulled the other formal powers —the legislature and judiciary— but also subordinated local governments and *de facto* powers to its will, since only those *cacicazgos* [the rule of traditional local bosses, known in Mexico as *caciques*] which unconditionally accepted presidential power could survive.

At the beginning of the second half of this century, the entirety of Mexico's real power structure could be summed up in a single term: the Presidency of the Republic. This embodies the essence of our authoritarianism. Dependent on this power were the great industrial, commercial and financial fortunes as well as the government and opposition parties, trade unions, the Church and the *ejidos* [semi-collective farms inherited from the Revolution]. The presidency, and it alone, decided who could or could not engage in politics. Living without presidential recognition was living in error —and sometimes in terror as well.

A weakening at the center

The omnipotent and omnipresent Mexican presidency was born within a predominantly rural society of semi-isolated communities, in which formal education was scarce and the dominant forces, ideas and interests were those that had arisen from the Mexican Revolution. This presidency

began to lose legitimacy —and power— as a result of society's evolution, the loss of the revolutionary legacy's vitality and the crisis of 1968, when it used the force of arms in the face of its loss of legitimacy. A long subsequent chain of economic failures, as well as the consolidation of opposition parties, made it increasingly difficult to keep the huge mechanism of presidential power intact.

The Salinas regime: rise and fall

Carlos Salinas personally felt the cold winds of the new anti-authoritarianism and sought a new way to reverse the loss presidential power. He thought he found it in the "neo-liberal" economics that were on the rise world-wide; in a close and positive relationship with the great industrial powers; in linking the national project with the interests of big domestic and international capital and the Church; and reaching a mutually beneficial agreement with that part of the opposition which supported his economic plans —the National Action Party (PAN). Finally, taking this path also meant weakening the old mechanisms and interests which in years past had served the presidency in general: government-sector enterprises as well as the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and its worker, peasant and middle-class corporations.¹

In the end the Salinas regime was unable to maintain and transmit to its successor the power it had so recently recovered for the presidency. It turned out that Salinas excessively personalized this presidential domain and was unwilling or unable to turn it over to the institution or the system themselves. The international financial community and media had praised and legitimized Carlos Salinas —the young Harvard technocrat and modernizer— but not the old authoritarian Mexican presidency or the PRI's monopoly on elected posts. Both had become outdated in a period marked by the destruction of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes.

¹ The PRI contains three formal "sectors," made up of trade-union, peasant and "popular" (i.e., middle-class) organizations; this structure is characteristic of the *corporatist* system of Mexican politics that took root with the "institutionalization" of the Revolution. (Editor's note.)

Moreover, at the end of Salinas' six-year term the Chiapas rising showed the new political and economic arrangement's inability to provide an adequate, institutional response to the demands of those Mexicans whom the presidency, in its public statements, had claimed to take very much into account—the poor, the disadvantaged, the Indian communities—and for whom the administration's most important social program had been built: the National Solidarity Program (with an average annual budget of 2.5 billion dollars).

Finally, the unsolved assassinations of the candidate and secretary general of the president's own party showed that someone had successfully defied his power.

Zedillo faces an accelerating process

Thus, Ernesto Zedillo inherited a monumental economic crisis and a presidency which had deteriorated, worn out by time as a result of its anachronistic character, its historical failures and, finally, the intensive use Carlos Salinas made of it for his own personal benefit.

The sudden and dramatic crisis of the Mexican "neo-liberal" economic model wound up dulling the shine of what was once the gilded technocracy—the core of "Salinas-ism"—of which the president himself was part. In fact the Salinas economic model, while generating a fiscal surplus [*superávit* in Spanish], ran a super-deficit on the foreign level. It was extraordinarily beneficial for a very few, but showed no mercy to the many. It was very effective at destroying low-productivity jobs but totally incapable of generating new ones in significant quantities.

The danger

The all-powerful presidency has already come to an end, but few of us would be served if we went to the other extreme: an impotent, useless presidency. The presidency's loss of power does not necessarily imply that what it lost will be gained by the institutions every modern democracy requires: parties, Congress, non-governmental organizations, trade unions, state and municipal governments, etc.

What the case of Tabasco, as it has evolved over recent days,² has shown us is that the power lost by the presidency can be gained by regional groups which are just as anti-democratic as the presidency itself, or even more so. If the revolt of the governors takes root, democracy will have gained nothing and we will return to the kind of *cacique*-ridden Mexico that existed in the 19th century.

² When central PRI authorities told their Tabasco subalterns to recognize the loss of a recent state election, the provincial party organization went into revolt, even threatening that the state might "secede" from Mexico. (Editor's note.)

There are other forces, as sinister as the "autonomous" governors, who can take advantage of this loss of power. To begin with, the United States, whose Congress will be making decisions that should rightfully be made by us. The seven great cartels and the almost ninety regional and local drug-trafficking rings that operate in Mexico. There are also the government organizations themselves which, if uncontrolled, can go even further afield—the police, bureaucracy, army, etc.

Finally, there is the possibility that part of the power lost by the great center of the system might not be gained by any person or group—that it simply dissipate, vaporize. That would lead to a victory of the law of the jungle.

We must overcome the politics of the razor's edge; we must put an end to the authoritarian presidency without destroying the presidency *per se*. We need an executive which is both the promoter and result of an authentic and effective national accord. One which allows the president to mobilize society positively and transforms collective frustration into constructive energy. Can the technocrat Zedillo become a statesman? ❧

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