

THE TWISTED PATHS TOWARDS THE MEXICAN DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

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Amazing. For those of us who were born in the 1940's, the Mexican Revolution was already history and in the matter of politics the state party, the PNR-PRM-PRI, seemed as an everyday reality, normal and appalling as permanent and indestructible. For that reason, what happened in the ballot boxes July 2nd, 2000, although expected and entirely explicable in analytical terms, did not cease to be something astonishing.

That July 2nd, after monopolizing the Executive Office uninterruptedly for 71 years, the institution that lost control over the supposedly all-powerful Mexican presidency was not actually a political party, but an organization, that since its foundation, was intended to be seen not as the political legitimate representative of a segment of the Mexican political spectrum, but of its totality. And its defeat was as spectacular as the way it was achieved: in a peaceful manner, through the ballot boxes! That had never happened before in Mexico. Only a few years ago, not long after his death, one of the most important and symbolic leaders of the PRI –the union leader Fidel Velásquez- had assured that if his party had to win over power by force (the Mexican Revolution), then only by force they would abandon it. Nevertheless, after the elections of the summer of 2000, the leader of that state party- the President- had no other option but to accept unconditionally his defeat and hand over his place without resistance. Everything seemed to suggest that Mexican society, supported by a favorable international context, had finally stood up to a corrupt, authoritarian political elite. It was assumed that an entire collective way of life, that an entire antidemocratic political

culture, humiliating and dreadfully corrupt, came to an end. It was assumed that the political future of Mexico seemed frankly promissory. Nonetheless, in December 2006, when the first administration of the new regime was coming to a close, the democratic confidence, very recently achieved, was greatly weakened. It was demonstrated what was stated by a classic: the past never passes, it has not even passed. Each time it becomes clearer that the formidable and terrible heritage of the PRI remains alive.

From euphoria to restlessness and uncertainty. At the present time and politically speaking, Mexico is deeply divided in two irreconcilable groups –with the indifferents always present in the middle- up to the point that the atmosphere is so similar to the one that was breathed during the midst of the 19th century, when the dispute between liberals and conservatives was *increscendo*. For one faction, the main responsible for that initial loss of optimism devolves upon the populist and belligerent left that did not know how to lose gracefully and that instead of strengthening the institutional structure, it undermined it.¹ For the other one, on the contrary, the responsibility for what happened was of a dishonest political right, that had decided to entrench itself in the structures of institutional power to defend the privileges that are given by a social structure where one single family can accumulate a fortune of 53 billion dollars while, on the other side, 20% of the poorest families have to survive with hardly 3.1% of their disposable income.²

Regardless of the ideological orientation, there is almost a consensus in Mexico on the appalling role that the main accountable politician for the first government of the new regime has played –President Vicente Fox-, for he simply did not measure up to his

¹ Lajous, Alejandra, *Confrontación de agravios. La postrelección de 2006*, (México: Océano, 2007).

² Source: The amount of the fortune of Carlos Slim was calculated by *Forbes* and quoted by the newspaper *Reforma* (April 12,2006); the figures of income distribution for 2006 were taken from *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2006

historical responsibility and wounded the process of democratic consolidation in its initial stage. Never before had Mexico experienced such a great opportunity to give shape to a grand democratic consensus, but the lack of vision and greatness of both the Presidente and his closest advisors –the majority raised in the world of the big private companies- and of the political elite in general, allowed this historical opportunity pass by.

The year 2000 did not end with a new legal frame, but was rather the continuation of almost everything previous, from the people to the institutions and, mainly, the cultural patterns. Although in contemporary Mexico the term “change” has been used *ad nauseam*, it has resulted much less significant than what was expected: the mediocre economic reality continues to be the same, the social structure remains highly unbalanced or even more than before, the institutional arrangement is still as inefficient as before, the material and mental gap that separates the political elite from most of society remains enormous, as does the corruption of politicians and public administrators. The change did not arrive, at least not as it was promised, which prompted the imagination of many.

The achievements. Anyhow, and regardless of its results, the great democratic accomplishment of the Mexican summer of 2000 was not an insignificant one. The bulk of society confronted and defeated, almost without violence, the most successful authoritarian political system of the 20th century. Of course, between 1988 –the beginning of what was called the electoral insurrection- and the year 2000, the PRD and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* or EZLN) were forced to pay a blood toll on behalf of the Mexican political development, but given Mexican political history, the situation could have been a lot worse. As a matter of fact, the Mexican regime, that ceased to exist at the turn of the century, was born

before the PRI when in 1916 Venustiano Carranza managed to impose himself over his external and internal adversaries by force. Since then and until the year 2000, political power and its mechanisms of transmission were always kept within the same political group. Elections were mere form without content, since a real substitution of one party by another never took place. This meant that the authoritarian system that governed Mexico, without interruption throughout almost the whole 20th century, was born a few years before Lenin and the Bolsheviks took over power in Russia and was able to maintain its monopoly of power for almost one decade after the disappearance of the USSR. In the year 2000, other political systems similar to the Mexican, for example, the one of Atatürk in Turkey, Franco in Spain or Salazar in Portugal, were history and the ones that still existed had to survive two or three more decades before they were able to break the record established by the victorious leaders of the Mexican Revolution and their direct heirs, the *priistas*.

Today. Seven years after the historical and democratic election of July 2nd, 2000, Mexico is still not in the place where it was supposed to be by now: in an advanced stage of its democratic consolidation. In 2007 the Executive Power is held by the representative of a right wing party -the PAN- which officially defeated its left wing rival -a coalition headed by the PRD- by less than 1% of the total votes. Nonetheless, the problem is not that the Mexican presidency is held by a candidate who achieved 35.89% of the votes cast, but whoever was in second place by barely half of a percent of difference -the PRD candidate- does not share his long term project and refuses to recognize the new government and its legitimacy, because he argues that the electoral process itself was not legitimate. The defeated contends that the race was seriously biased against him, and that

at the end the results were rigged. And even though this last accusation has not been effectively proven, its formulation has fallen into an historical terrain very favorable for a growing suspicion.

The accusation of fraud still has to be proven, but not the inequity of the electoral process. In the first place and during the end of the election day in 2006, the highest electoral institution -the Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación- declared the panista candidate as the winner, but in the process the tribunal was obliged to recognize explicitly that during the electoral campaign the outgoing President –Vicente Fox- and a powerful business organization -the Consejo Coordinador Empresarial- acted in an illegal, illegitimate and partial manner, although it was not possible to determine the extent to which their actions influenced the final outcome.³

At the time, the candidate of the left, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, demanded that, due to such a small difference -0.56%-, it was necessary to recount “vote by vote and polling place by polling place” otherwise the suspicions and doubts of the supposedly defeated, by the first count, would be transformed into certainty and rejection of the new government, which they would treat as illegitimate. However, the official winner of the presidential election –Felipe Calderón- his party, the PAN, and the third party involved, the PRI –historically conditioned to be an unconditional ally of anyone that holds power- and the powers that be -the most important business groups, the media, the churches- all opposed the recount and not surprisingly, the legal structure supported them. The left

³ On this matter see Tribunal Electoral del Poder Judicial de la Federación, “Dictamen relativo al computo final de la elección de presidente de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, declaración de validez de la elección y de presidente electo” Septiembre 5, 2006, available at www.trife.gob.mx

rejected the validity of the official electoral outcome, promised to carry out mobilizations and consolidate a significant political fracture.

An explanation. Why did the electoral process in the year 2000 function exactly the way it was supposed to and not in the year 2006 when conditions were apparently more favorable than the ones that existed six years before? Largely because, back in 2000 the margin between the first and the second place was relatively wide: 6%. Also, because the government had decided that it would not impose itself so its credibility would not be compromised, since their deficit in this matter was huge. The third reason, and the most important one, rests in the different interests at stake. In the year 2000 the electoral battle was between Francisco Labastida, the priísta, and Vicente Fox, the panista. At that moment all the polls showed that the leftist candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, –who was running for the third consecutive time- had no real chance of winning the election. In such circumstances, the electoral race was a struggle between two contrasting characters, but with very similar platforms and long term social projects. In fact, since 1989 PRI and PAN had started to successfully negotiate their differences, both in principles and public policy, up to a point where they were almost eliminated. Thus, what was at stake between the authoritarian right priísta and the supposedly democratic right, the PAN, was a difference in styles and history, but not in their long term projects. In the year 2000 it was known beforehand that whoever won that election, the outcome would not lead to significant shifts in the economic, social and international policies. For that reason the powers that be accepted, without significant difficulties the panista victory: it did not imply any substantive change, but an evident gain in legitimacy that would put to an end the deficit generated by the authoritarian history of PRI.

In contrast, in the year 2006 the possibilities for a victory for the PRI in the presidential dispute were null. Since the beginning, the fight was seen not just like a simple power exchange between the PAN and the PRD in the presidency, but like a race between the left and the right for the immediate future of the country. As Joseph Shumpeter pointed out in 1942, the essence of a democratic contest takes place not only with free and fair elections, but also with platforms that imply differences not only in the candidates, but also in their policies. From this standpoint, the 2006 election was the closest Mexico has been to a real political democracy. And that was precisely the problem and main issue.⁴ Indeed, because from very early in the race, the opinion polls indicated that the left, headed by Andrés López Obrador (AMLO), stood a serious fighting chance and precisely because of this, Vicente Fox, openly and explicitly, with the support of the PRI, tried to annul his candidacy through the so called “desafuero” of AMLO, then head of the Mexico City Government. When a growing social mobilization made that intent fail, then all the power of the presidency was used to discredit this candidate. At the same time, the PAN and the powers that be went the whole hog –and carried out a very well designed fear campaign- to prevent the victory of AMLO and to assure the continuity by placing Calderón in the Executive Office. Finally, for that same reason, it was denied what in other places, in similar circumstances, would have been the seal of unquestionable legitimacy: due to the very slim margin of the electoral results, the recount of the votes should have taken place.

In sum. Today Mexico has an outraged, but not violent opposition. The defying position adopted by the left is a consequence of its experience in its tough fight against

⁴ Schumpeter, Joseph, Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, (London: George Allen & Unwin, Aguilar, 1961), pp. 269-283.

the Mexican authoritarian system, which is now focused on the confrontation with the political right now holding power. The latter, on the other hand, maintains an attitude and language reminiscent of a stage supposedly surpassed, that of the Cold War. And now the hypothesis of John Lewis Gaddis, professor of this University comes in handy: one of the consequences of the Cold War in the United States was the development of a dangerous double moral standard: what was not ethically acceptable as part of the internal political game, was acceptable externally: in defending “western values”, it was permitted to employ with their adversaries, actions that denied those principles.⁵ Something very similar has occurred in the Mexican political struggle: in the name of democracy the political right sacrificed the principle of *faire play* in the electoral race, a path that is not precisely the best way to consolidate a new born democracy, one without precedent in Mexican history.

⁵ Gaddis, John Lewis, The Cold War. A New History, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2005), chapter V.