

Mexico 2011

Parliamentarianism Now

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A few months ago, a group of journalists, academics, intellectuals, officials, active—or no longer quite so active—politicians, who for the last 20 years have shared the curious custom of meeting to talk about issues related to the economy, politics, and culture, organized a new series of debates to—perhaps—draw a balance sheet of the era, and develop a diagnostic analysis of Mexico’s present.

So, using the Democratic Transition Studies Institute (IETD) as a platform, they set themselves the task of meeting on several occasions to listen and dialogue with the main intellectual and political positions of today. After many sessions, discussions, and drafts, they came to a conclusion: “Social Equity and Parliamentarianism,” a document that proposes two reforms—only two—concentrating all efforts to change the country’s pessimistic, confounded face.

On the one hand, it proposes a structural reform explicitly conceived to create a network of universal, unconditional social protection, without exceptions. On the other hand, a change of political regime to preserve the space for freedoms gained over the last part of the twentieth century, assuming unswervingly and unambiguously that pluralism is an undeniable fact of Mexican modernity.

These two pending tasks are profoundly linked. Contrary to the dictates of prevailing thought, for over 50 years, our presidential political regimen, with or without a majority in Congress, has been unable to deal with the substantive change loudly demanded by our economic structure: a fiscal reform.

And that incapacity has meant that the state and economic policy has floundered around looking for shortcuts in a long series of structural reforms of all kinds and depths, at the end of the day submerging us in a kind of “unstable stagnation”: economic growth that has barely hovered a few decimal points above population growth for the last 25 years, flavored with crises, recessions, devaluations, and all manner



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of financial scares that cyclically hurl us backward to the polarized, unequal country without enough jobs that is the only reality for an entire generation of Mexicans.

The generation that experienced the expansion of political freedoms, the implantation of national political parties, electoral reforms, the generation that always breathed in the drive toward a democratic life, and that knocked on the door of the labor market at the beginning of the twenty-first century has also grown up its entire life in an environment of enormous economic adversity: a generalized financial crisis in 1982; a macro-devaluation of the peso in 1985; oil shocks and cruel stabilization plans from 1986 to 1987; the collapse of external accounts and the banking system from 1994 to 1995; the long-

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est recession in modern history (38 months between August 2000 and September 2003); and in 2009, the most serious and profound recession and drop in GDP of the entire period since the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

The damage this has caused is not just not producing more material goods; stagnation causes harm, above all in society's mood: it makes it fearful and conservative. Just look at a recent survey in Latin America published in 2008 that reports that to the question, "Do you think your children will have a better life than yours?" more than half (54 percent) of Latin Americans answered "yes," but 70 percent of Mexicans, pessimistic, answered "no."

This is not just going through a bad spell, or a moment of temporary adversity caused by external factors that must be weathered. These are the kinds of insertion in the world and the kinds of policies, practices, institutions, and economic conceptions that, to the cost of an entire generation, have shown that they are not viable in our country's reality. This means that Mexico may be going through the most pessimistic period of its modern history. And that mood, that level of morale, has become, in turn, yet another cause of the country's stagnation.

Climbing out of this trap, both material and spiritual, presupposes above all a new way of doing politics, with more popular support, with long-term agreements that include strategic continuity. Part of the problem is that Mexican politics has been ruled by the vain illusion of wanting to govern the country alone, based on getting a plurality of the votes. This is the source of the constant friction, the isolation, the difficulty in getting bills passed, the complications in governance, the frequent solitude of the executive branch, and the quarrelsome character of the legislative branch.

This is why the Democratic Transition Studies Institute diagnosis puts forward a policy that explicitly proposes to express and articulate the political and social majority in a government, including the majority of its parties, currents, visions, and interests; that is, an undertaking typical of a parliamentary regimen.

This is neither a desire nor a choice. For 15 years, reality has done nothing but present divided, heterogeneous, unequal votes, just like the country itself. The party that has won the presidential elections has been unable to win a legislative majority, not once, but twice, three, four, and five times. The almost 15 years of political democracy have done nothing but validate and deepen this reality: pluralism continues to advance, dividing national representation, turning it into

an irregular kaleidoscope. The president is from one party, the majority of Congress belongs to another or others. What we need, then, is a structure that will fit this reality, and not the inverse; we need a political regime that embraces this diversity, that requires coalitions and that nourishes pluralism. As long as the real country—not some invented one—continues divided into three electoral continents, profound transformations will only come about as the fruit of an alliance among those currents. That is the true essence of Mexican politics since the conclusion of the democratic transition.

Although legally we are a country with a presidentialist regime and, therefore, the first executive is not elected in the parliament, the truth is that since 1997, we have been forced to form government coalitions to have a legislative branch that accompanies the president and is not his main complication. But this is exactly where the most important deficit is, the principal pending task, the greatest mental obstacle that contemporary politics in Mexico has not been able to overcome.

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This is why, in the face of the majority nostalgia that has dominated Mexico's debate in recent years, we propose a change: parliamentarianism, a new political regimen that with no inhibitions at all would take charge of pluralism without inventing majorities based on ingenious or artful formulas. A way of doing politics that demands, in short, coalition politics.

The challenge for our political economy has a time limit: if we do not manage to change the country's income structure in the coming decade, very probably, Mexico will have stopped being a country of unemployed young people and turn into a nation of impoverished old people with no security in life. The wealth for preparing and sustaining that generation and that future has to be created and distributed starting now, growing, using what we have and have produced in the transitions in this new century: margins of freedom and pluralism like we have never had before, but at the same time listening, for the first time, to the plural, egalitarian message of democracy. ■■