

Crying Need for Regional Movements

A two-party system is not what Mexico needs in order to strengthen its democratic process

Mexico's local elections have generated controversial reactions in the U.S. press. Whereas many Mexicans also regard recent elections as anomalous, sometimes their line of reasoning falls into simplistic analyses which prescribe solutions that are foreign to our system and don't take our idiosyncrasy into account. Given the different interpretations of this issue, VOICES OF MEXICO asked several experts on Mexico's political system to express their views. Manuel Villa is a researcher from the Center for Sociological Studies of the Colegio de Mexico, and is regarded as a leading expert in the field. His views:

As was expected, this has been a crucial political year to either further stimulate or start to correct the problems that are churning up a crisis in Mexico's political system. This is true both because of the importance of the elections at stake and because of political polarization in some of the states where gubernatorial races were held. The most critical cases are those where the National Action Party, PAN, accumulated enough strength and broad-based voter support to actually contend for the governor's seat and for some mayor's offices: Sonora, Nuevo León, San Luis, Durango and above all, Chihuahua. Though less of a problem but nonetheless important, there are also cases where the left has built a solid political base, such as in Juchitán, Oaxaca.

It would be too long to try to analyze each particular election, even though it would be helpful to do so. Instead, this article will take an overall view of the process, paying close attention to the two most significant cases in recent elections: Chihuahua and Juchitán.

Mexico's political system possesses some particular characteristics, such as its resistance to recognizing electoral victories either on the left

or on the right; its "dangerous obsession with unanimity", as it has been referred to by a group of intellectuals; its proclivity towards the use of extralegal mechanisms even when resorting to them has sometimes meant the use of force. These traits coexist with the opposition's unbending determination to achieve electoral gains; with the broad-based sympathy stirred up by their legitimate efforts, and with a generalized rejection of the system's "full-house" policy. All of this bears analyzing.

In the first place, these factors point to a crisis in the system's ability to attain electoral credibility and to stimulate greater voter participation. Secondly, these traits may indicate a possible trend toward a bipartisan system.

The first conclusion is a foregone fact, and there is no doubt that nothing has been done up until now to seek the means of exchanging imposition for participation in order to regain credibility for the system. Yet how to achieve greater voter participation is not at all clear, nor is it clear whether bipartisanship is an adequate and sufficient means of doing so.

A quick analysis of available facts shows the scant feasibility of a two-party system. At the same time, an overview of the factors this statement is based on reveals some possible reasons for the current electoral dissidence and is helpful in coming up with some valid and realistic responses to the problem.

It must first be understood that even though electoral response to the PAN in many states has been broad and solid, this party is nonetheless a scantily integrated political force. This is true at both the national and local levels. The PAN's electoral force depends on finding local candidates who have voter-sympathy and strength of their own and are willing to be championed by the PAN. These are not party militants, nor

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do they possess party politics and ideology. And as a last factor, just to mention the main ones, the PAN doesn't represent a specific project. Rather, it tends to provide cohesion for a diversity of demands and insatisfactions, making its votes part of a protest movement but hardly an alternative for government.

Although the PAN received a considerable number of votes in Chihuahua, 35.17% versus 61% for the official Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI, the truth is neither party defeated abstentionism. Voter absenteeism shrank from a previous 70% of the registered total to 45% this year, but this only moves Chihuahua from a position of extremely high abstentionism into the national mainstream.

If the previous facts and figures point to the PAN's limitation for becoming a national alternative, these others, pertaining to municipal-level elections, are even more enlightening: "up until 1985, only 43 out of a total 2,366 city councils were held by the opposition. The remaining 2,323 were controlled by the PRI. ...the votes the opposition obtained in order to win these 43 city councils represent less than 3% of total voters registered nationwide." (Luis Gutierrez, "Contracolumna" (Countercolumn), "Uno + Uno", July 27, 1986.) We might add that in the nationwide federal elections in 1982 the PAN got only 16.41% of the votes.

The bipartisan option's weakness is obvious despite a certain amount of electoral mobilization on the part of the PAN. In any case, the disturbing fact is that the government is fearful of recognizing other party's gains despite what the figures show.

And just for the sake of exhausting the analysis of the bipartisan option, what about the situation on the left? The outlook is even more dismal. First of all, the left's electoral results in Chihuahua show that the votes of all left parties fell from 7.48% of the total in 1985 to barely 5% in 1986. But the results in Juchitán constitute an even graver expression of the left's situation. Although the left maintained its electoral force, it was incapable of achieving an equivalent advancement in terms of power, and failed to win the city council.

Although there are well-founded suspicions that many votes were "magically" transferred from the PSUM-COCEI left-coalition to the PRI, the revealing fact is above all that the left has been fenced into precisely defined boundaries and has not even been able to consolidate a regional presence. Thus, there is no indication that a nationwide party alternative may emerge from the left.

If neither the PAN nor the left show sufficient electoral strength to shape a national political

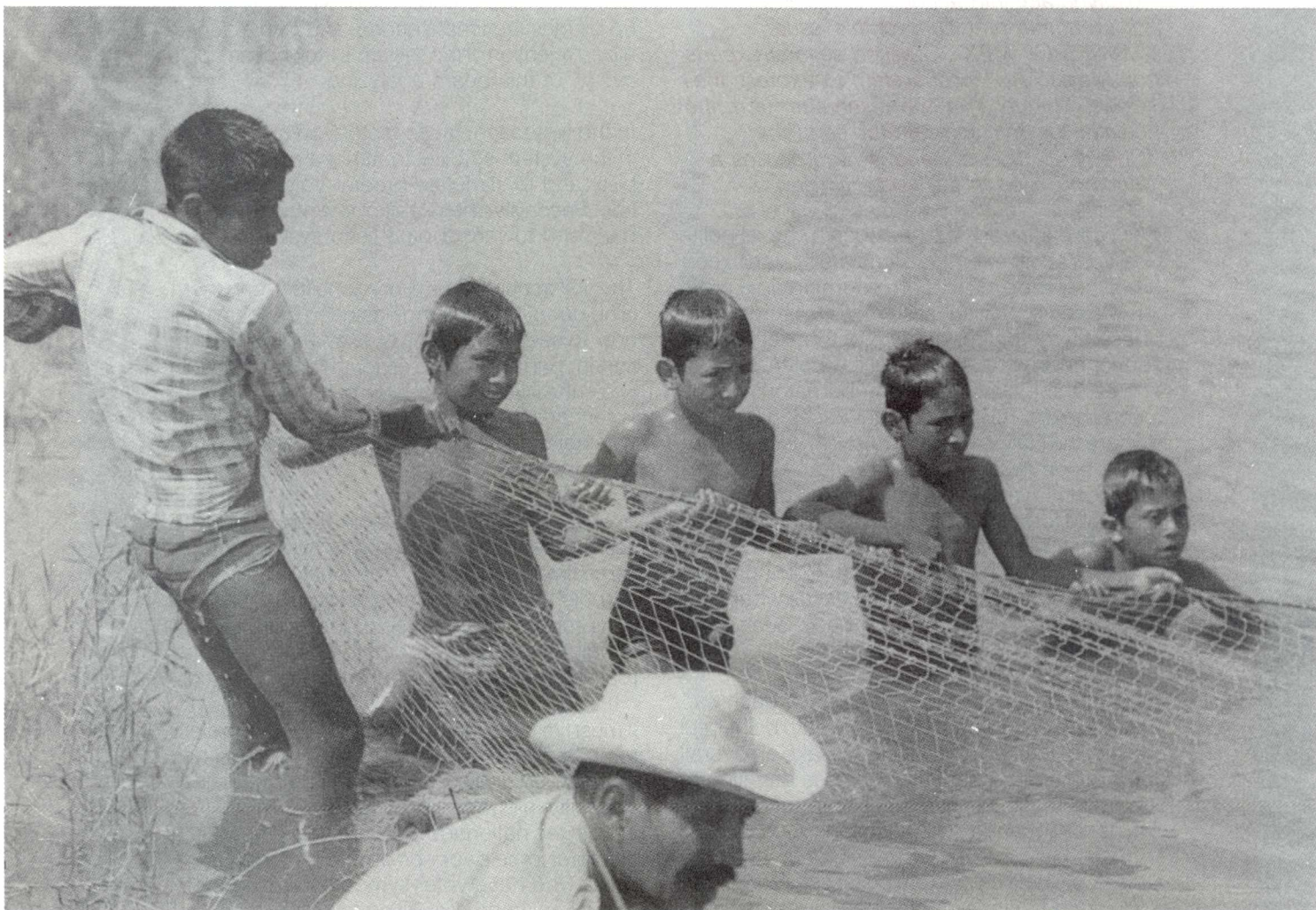


Photo by Garnett and Schalkwijk

Fishing in Tabasco, future generations at work.

alternative to the PRI, and if in most cases these are both local-level forces, what is so critical in the situation and what are the real threats to the political system? Absenteeism is at the forefront, with worrisome figures showing between 50 and 60% of non-participation in all recent elections. A second factor is that the PRI no longer shows definite, legitimate electoral force and seems to be losing voter-appeal. A third aspect of the situation is that all parties, including the PRI, seem unable to capitalize popular discontent and channel it into votes.

In sum, there seems to be a growing chasm

to its own constitution and need for long-term stability. Thus, the regime took on a centralizing federal character, whereas society, on the other hand, is diverse and changeable and tends to be shaped into local and regional units. Thus, to a great extent the state imposed modes and restrictions on society at the state and municipal levels.

The predominantly rural character of much of society at a local level made this imposed centralization tolerable up until the early 1970s. But ongoing urbanization and development seem to be incompatible with centralist uniformity. This is the process the centralized regime seems incapable of understanding and much less of bringing it into tune with its own dominating and self-nurturing logic.

Thus, shaping a national bipartisan alternative doesn't seem to be the solution, since the dominant trend would make both parties lean toward centralization, even if the end result differed somewhat from the current system. The alternative seems to lie elsewhere, specifically in the development of local-level forces whose politics and ideology stem from their own environment, whose size and strength may vary according to the state or region they operate in, and who are flexible enough to work along with the system's logic without having to submit to all-embracing centralization.



Photo from Contenido

Sinaloa is one of the states undergoing political strain and change.

between social demands and available political alternatives. The PRI and the system as a whole point to this critical situation, posing yet another question: what are the reasons for the increasing distance between social demands and political responses to them? The answer seems to lie in the factors that stimulate the outbreaks of electoral dissatisfaction.

A close look at the situation shows that the outbreaks, although isolated from one another in time and place, all point to inconformity at a local level, at a search for a break-down of political inertia at the state and municipal level. At the same time, this factor arises from a situation that was set up long ago and has become problematic for the system as a whole, namely, the way in which relations between the state and society were instituted following the stabilization of the post-revolutionary regime and the formation of the state-party in 1929, and then in 1938 with the establishment of mass-based support for that party.

The dominant, basic trend during both these periods was the extension of central control so that the state could organize society according



Photo by Garnett and Schalkwijk

The Mexican regions are politically diverse because they are culturally and ethnically diverse.

Democracy is a political process that must be built through social processes. It cannot be built from the top of the institutional-political level down, but rather must be done the other way around. The current process of building democracy into society indicates that the forces behind it are struggling only to achieve government of the people and for the people at the legitimate and unquestionable level of local and regional politics.