
THE PRI AND ITS THREE PARADOXES

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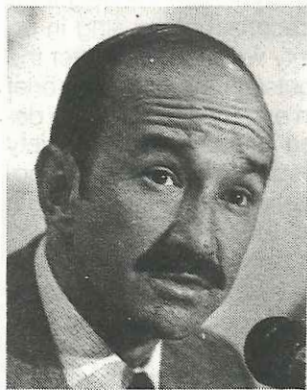
"Resistance is support". They say that was Jesús Reyes Heróles adage for explaining the secret behind the political reform he helped promote. Thanks to that reform, authentic competition between political parties could begin in Mexico. Reyes Heróles, who died in March 1985, understood that preserving the Mexican political system, even with its historical stability, would require not only the further consolidation of power, but also the recognition of rights and a role for minority political groups. Thus, he sponsored legislative changes, which since 1977 have allowed new political parties to obtain legal, institutional status. Since then, these groups have even been eligible for federal support. While they have grown slowly, they now represent more consolidated alternatives within the Mexican political system, with specific ideological characteristics and programatic platforms. Mexicans, who before had virtually no choice but to vote for the PRI or to abstain, now have a much broader range of alternative projects from which to choose. And while people's knowledge of these new options was still insufficient, in the 1982 presidential elections, voters could choose from among seven registered candidates. In next year's elections, there

will be a similar number of presidential hopefuls, but the campaigning is bound to be hotter as the parties have intensified the political struggle.

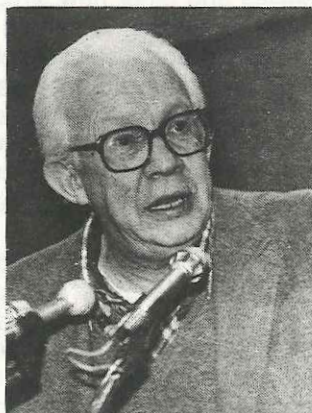
It is a foregone conclusion that the victor will be 39-year old Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the young man who represents the option of continued political domination by the PRI. Given that it is so easy to predict the winner, it might seem hard to find the attractions in the upcoming race. Nonetheless, Salinas' candidacy faces at least three paradoxical situations, which give a novel twist to this presidential contest.

First, Salinas has few ties to the country's traditional political elites; his main base is among young government officials, many of whom have done graduate studies abroad, but who have limited experience in negotiating the relationships between political power and the country's social sectors, a fundamental component of the Mexican system. Salinas' candidacy, and his certain victory, represent a triumph for this new generation of statesmen. They have promised a "new political style," free from some of the traditional vices that plague the Mexican political system (influence peddling, authoritarianism, corruption, etc.). Nonetheless, in order to put together an acceptably effective team, and especially to maintain the balance required in exercising presidential powers, Salinas needs the support of the old Mexican political elites. Thus, the need to reconcile different interests within the governing apparatus, may force him to compromise on his drive for political modernization.

Another disadvantage for the candidate, and for his future government, if he holds true to the positions he's held until now, is his economic policy. As Minister of Programming and Budget, Salinas was responsible for implementing an economic strategy, which in general terms can be considered neoliberal. It limited public spending, lifted some protective trade restrictions, weakened the state-run sector of the economy, set wage restrictions and held firm on government commitments to continue paying interest on the foreign debt. While the strategy may



Carlos Salinas de Gortari,
PRI presidential candidate.
(Photo from Novedades archive)



Heberto Castillo, PMS candidate.
(Photo from Novedades archive)

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well have been applauded on Wall Street, it has provoked widespread complaints in Mexican society, especially among working people. Now, the candidate, already committed to a specific economic line, must define what could be a slightly different course if he wants the votes, and later, the support of organized labor. For now, the most notorious tensions to emerge within the PRI's power structure over Salinas' nomination have come from traditional union leadership.

Therein lies the first paradox for Salinas' candidacy. He promises democratic political modernization, but his plans for economic modernization tend to imply even greater restrictions for Mexican society; and his hopes to consolidate a new political style among the country's political leadership are challenged by the need for reconciliation with Mexico's most traditional politicians.

New Sources of Power

A second novel aspect of this political campaign grows out of a new, and still emerging, perhaps less authoritarian, profile of presidential power. It is common knowledge



Jorge de la Vega Domínguez and Adolfo Lugo Verduzco, president and general secretary of the PRI. (Photo from Novedades archive)

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that during their drive to consolidate power, reaching something close to omnipotence at times, Mexico's presidents are able to balance diverse political forces, guide the country's growth, resist foreign and domestic pressures and establish themselves as the definitive and often unquestionable designers of the nation's course. In formal terms, Mexico's political system is democratic, since despite the excesses and even the occasional manipulation of electoral results, it is obvious that those in office have been chosen by the majority of voters. But, in practical terms, this capacity for democracy within the Mexican system has been conditioned by the concentration of power in just a few hands (and often, in regards to important matters, in the hands of a single individual, the President). Formally, the President's legal resources are virtually limitless. Ten years ago, in fact, given the absence of a legislative branch capable of forming an effective counterweight to presidential powers, Jorge Capizo, now the UNAM's rector, wrote that "pure *presidencialismo*" reigned in the country.

Nonetheless, today it would be difficult to affirm that pure *presidencialismo* (that is a political system that concentrates tremendous power in the president), without constraints or counterweights on the excess authority of a single individual, is still an effective way of governing Mexico. It is widely held that the concentration of power in any country is inversely proportional to the society's vigor, organization and free expression. As a society diversifies, gains experience and generates different political currents and parties, it tends to produce new sources of power, which eventually can act as a counterbalance on executive authority.

It is impossible to understand presidential power in Mexico without examining the contradictions of its early

20th century history. *Presidencialismo* as a form of government was consolidated 50 years ago by General Lázaro Cárdenas, after an intense period of civil strife and rule by regional strongmen. Since then it has functioned to reconcile—or subordinate, when deemed necessary—the dissident forces both within and outside of the governing political bureaucracy. This exercise of presidential power, authoritarian, but without excesses, conciliatory, but pluralist, permitted sustained economic growth (at least until the 1970s). At the same time and above all, it led to political stability, in contrast to the situation throughout the rest of Latin America and to the country's own earlier history.

While *presidencialismo* has played an important role in Mexico, it is quite possible that its historical cycle is now drawing to a close. Mexican society has changed since the 1930's and 40's, when the country was just beginning to take its first simultaneous steps toward urbanization and modernization. While large swatches of Mexican society remain unorganized, there is a perceptible and growing move toward greater participation. Perhaps some of the most important examples of this phenomenon, although not the only ones, are the recent student mobilizations, strikes and other new struggles by labor, the neighborhood organizing to defend or reconstruct housing in urban areas and a spirit of solidarity which spread after the 1985 earthquake. These were outstanding and often brief moments, which form part of an experience still to be developed (and even to be studied in detail), as the society evolves in search of greater freedom from political imposition, or perhaps, of greater participation or influence in decision-making.

Presidencialismo is increasingly challenged here, at times with reason, at times with exaggeration. It has occasionally been blamed for events or decisions arising from circumstances much broader than the domain even of Mexican presidential powers. Such was the case with the decision to nationalize the country's banking system. Commonly believed to have been President López Portillo's sole, personal decision, it was in fact, also determined by

economic considerations and the resulting need to reorient the Mexican financial system.

On other occasions, *presidencialismo* is mythified and apparently reinforced. Carlos Salinas de Gortari's nomination by the PRI is a good example: suddenly he became heir, even before the elections, to all the traditions, practices, faculties and defects related to the exercise of presidential power.

Nonetheless, Salinas will hold presidential powers diminished by the country's new political conditions. It is increasingly clear, in both governmental and non-governmental circles, that Mexican *presidencialismo* must cede some of its privileges to the rest of the state (for example, the Senate and House should have some of the authority denied its by omnipotent presidentialism), and of course, to civil society. The deterioration of the presidential image may well have been greater in the last several years than at any other time in contemporary Mexican history. Until recently, it was virtually unheard of for the press to question the President; it was simply taboo, and no journalist or editor was willing to violate it. In the last five or six years, that unwritten rule has disappeared, to the degree that now the President is often the subject of political cartoons, and his decisions are the object of sharp criticism in a whole range of ideologically diverse publications.

Perhaps the single-most important of presidential powers in the Mexican system has been the president's prerogative to name his own successor. The tradition was

maintained this year, although with certain nuances. As a result of the frequent criticisms of **tapadismo** (the presidential practice of keeping his successor's name secret until the last moment) and the need to generate a bit of movement in the PRI, President Miguel de la Madrid decided that this time six members of his cabinet would be publicly named as contenders for the Party's nomination. In the second half of August, each of the six addressed the PRI leadership, providing a synthesis of their political thinking and an outline of the program they would implement if elected president. The public and, above all,

The precedent for open competition will clearly influence the selection processes for other PRI candidates

PRI members, got the chance to have formal contenders for the nomination (unknown in the PRI for the past 30 years) and to express support for their favorite. The final decision was still the President's, but the process allowed Party leadership at all levels and from all sectors to exert pressure on behalf of their respective candidates. This nuance may appear minor from a distance, but given the orthodoxy that defined the succession process before, it

OPPOSITION LEFT AND RIGHT

To the right of the PRI is the National Action Party (PAN). With roots in the middle-class, the PAN campaigns for a weaker state, especially as related to its traditional role in directing the economy. It will be difficult for the PAN to gain significant new support at the polls in the next elections (it's never received more than about 18 % of the total vote), in part because the PRI will be making a special effort to win back the middle-class, especially in the northern part of the country, where the PAN has been strongest. In addition, the fact that the PAN has found support among influential, elite political sectors in the United States, rather than helping the party to recruit here, has actually led to its repudiation. Although it is not likely to grow, the PAN will probably take up increasingly radical positions.

Also to the right on the political spectrum is the Mexican Democratic Party (PDM), small, with modest ambitions, but constantly active. With considerable strength in central Mexico, the PDM has dusted-off a pro-clerical discourse, recited by candidate Gumersindo Magaña as he campaigns in the party's traditional strongholds: Guanajuato and Jalisco. Despite its activities, it seems unlikely that the PDM will ever be more than a small, virtually regional, party. In 1985, it won 2.73 % of the vote.

There is more movement on the left of the electoral spectrum, although there probably won't be any more new surprises. The Mexican Socialist Party (PMS) was formed earlier this year through the merger of several left parties, the most important being the Unified Mexican Socialist Party (PSUM, which won 3.2 % of the vote

in 1985) and the Mexican Workers Party (PMT, which won just 1.5 % of the votes that year). It was hoped that the PMS would become a pole for consolidating left opposition, what with its real capacity for growth and an appealing, personable presidential candidate, Herberito Castillo Martínez. Castillo won his party's nomination in a rather curious primary, in which voting was not limited to party members, but was open to all citizens.

Nonetheless, shortly after the PMS primary, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano, another well-known political figure identified with the left, although an active PRI member, announced his own candidacy. Governor of Michoacán, thanks to the PRI, until little more than a year ago, Cárdenas, at the head of the "Democratic Current," had proposed a radical reorganization of PRI internal procedures. He later decided that the space for such democratizing efforts did not exist within the PRI and became a member of the small Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM), which immediately named him as its presidential candidate.

Traditionally subordinated to the federal government and the PRI, the PARM enjoys little prestige in the country. Nonetheless, it does have some popular support and some autonomy in certain parts of the country, especially in northern Tamaulipas. It received so few votes in 1982 that it dropped below the minimum percentage required by federal laws and temporarily lost its legal status as a party. In 1985, it was able to reestablish its status, winning 1.65 % of the vote. Respected son of the general who governed Mexico some 50 years ago, Cárdenas and

his candidacy could occasion a rapid recovery for this otherwise deteriorated party.

In relation to the elections, his candidacy will most likely have its greatest impact on the left, especially the PMS, rather than on the PRI. Many people, without being PMS members, who probably would have voted for Castillo, may now decide to opt for Cárdenas, a less radical candidate and product of the traditional political system, whose split with the PRI has gained him new popularity.

If both Castillo and Cárdenas continue to run, the country's center-left electorate will be divided. The PMS still has the option of supporting Cárdenas, although as late as November, the idea was causing heated debate in the party. The Cárdenas candidacy will probably be supported by the Socialist Workers Party (PST, which won 2.46 % of the vote three years ago), recently split over the decision to participate in the PMS, with half of its leadership leaving to join the new party. The Popular Socialist Party (PPS, with some 2% of the vote) will probably line up behind him, as well.

Finally, also on the left flank, is the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT, with 1.5 % of the votes in 1985), which may well-run Rosario Ibarra de Piedra for president. A well known human rights activist, nonetheless, Ibarra's anti-government positions have not sparked interest in significant sectors of the electorate.

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represents an authentic transformation, facilitating more direct and open political life in the PRI.

For now, the precedent for open competition and public presentations of platforms and programs has been set; it will clearly influence the selection processes for other PRI candidates, especially in gubernatorial races and even local elections, where authoritarian decision-making has predominated and base-level PRI members generally left without a say. And from now on, the presidential succession will probably be determined in a more open process, with greater participation by Party members and a smaller dose of the traditional presidential prerogative.

With the most important of presidential powers thus limited, it is reasonable to think that Mexican *presidencialismo* could become less authoritarian. This presents the second major paradox: Salinas owes his nomination and the presidency to the traditional, vertical exercise of presidential power. But he will have to accept (and he may even move to facilitate) a reduction in, what have been until now, the excessive powers and attributes of the Mexican presidency.

Limits on the PRI?

This more modern, and thus democratic, form of *presidencialismo* must allow for its corollary in a more active role for political parties. And that's at the root of the third paradox for Salinas and his team. A greater role for opposition parties implies setting limits for the PRI. But it is not at all clear that PRI members, and especially the old school leaders in certain sectors of the Party, labor for example, or in certain regions where political authority is particularly concentrated, will permit such a redistribution of power.

While presidentialism has played an important role in Mexico, it is quite possible that its historical cycle is drawing to a close

Given this panorama, it's quite reasonable to think that the 1988 elections won't bring any, or but very few, changes to the Mexican political scene. Unless there are some really major surprises, it seems unlikely that past electoral patterns will change much on a national level. But that doesn't make next July's elections, and especially the campaigns leading up to them, irrelevant. Their relevance lies in the chance for people to express their opinions and for the parties to make proposals. Carlos Salinas' insistence since the start of his campaign that people should raise criticisms and make suggestions is significant in this regard. Only time will tell how much those opinions will be taken into account.

In addition, to the extent that they can put together

coherent and believable programs, opposition parties could become both effective interlocutors for political power and intermediaries between that power and society. In this context, then, the 1988 elections represent a real test for the new party system that has begun to develop in Mexico. If they manage to overcome their internal weaknesses and put together a set of proposals, not only to implement if they should win, but rather to present to those in power in the coming years, then opposition parties could have a greater presence in the reorganization of the Mexican political system. All of this implies, among many other things, that they will need to go beyond the limits of electoral politics, organizing, for example, among sectors that have only recently arrived on the political scene: tenants, women's groups, alternative labor organizations, environmentalists, etc.

The challenge for the PRI, the governing party, is to recover some of its lost ground (it dropped from 80 % of the total vote in 1976, to 69 % and later to 64.5 % in 1985). But it can't do this by using force to impose an artificial majority, as some believe it did in the July 1986 elections in Chihuahua. This is the third major dilemma for Carlos Salinas de Gortari and the PRI: to acknowledge that the opposition should be allowed to gain strength by winning fair elections, as one way for civil society to increase its political influence, while deepening the process of transformation within the PRI, so that its capacity to influence policy depends less on government support and more on the strength of its own membership. What is at stake, then, is the creation of an authentic party system in Mexico. That means recognizing, as Jesús Reyes Heróles always said, that despite ideological differences, in politics, "resistance is support." □