

MEXICO'S PRESIDENTIALISM

*Everyone Else's Weakness*¹

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Throughout 1996, Mexico buzzed with the supposed weakness of the president. The most singular examples were brought up and repeated with boring insistence, as though precisely to weaken the presidency through repetition. However, it seems that the obsessive recurrence of the topic actually shows the weakness not of the president, but of all the rest of the political players, revealing their inability to survive in Mexico's new circumstances.

The president's not meddling in every little thing that happens in each state of the union is often taken as weakness. So is his trying to convince his fellow party members instead of bringing them to heel, his not being a partisan of unanimity, his not rushing to negotiate everything and his not being an applause seeker. Other "examples" are his attempts at consistency and his not being swayed—insofar as possible—by every new turn of events and accommodating himself to every new circumstance.

In plain language, the simple fact is that people do not like the president working within the confines of the law; none of the political parties, the press or businessmen like it because they do not want to have to do it themselves. And, without the president's support, without his willing-



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Zedillo's strength has been questioned.

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Photo: The President's Press Office

The National Palace, seat of government.

ness to negotiate in compliance, no one feels free to seek other arrangements: the president is weak then, in sum, because he will not impose his will in favor of this or that interest group.

Naturally, to a great degree the situation can be attributed to the personal style and convictions of President Zedillo. But it is also partly the result of the changes in Mexico's

political system over the past decade. Most probably, even if he wanted to, the president could not do many things that his predecessors used to do: demand rigorous party discipline, appoint candidates to public office, impose pacts. But this also means that the other political players cannot act as they used to either; they cannot use the strength of the presidency for their own personal benefit as freely as they could in the past. Everyone has to play by new rules.

We should examine the issue with due calm because it is urgent. The traditional power of the presidency requires as a matter of routine agreements and decisions that twist the letter and the spirit of the law, or which in any case exceed the authority vested in the office of head of state. This means that the president not only had the

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ability to act in this fashion, but he was obliged to do so because the normal functioning of the political system depended on it.

The informal or irregular prerogatives of presidential authority, then, not only served the aggrandizement of the president: they were not an indication of his personal power, but of the needs of the political system itself. It was an efficient form of authority, useful because it served as a mainstay of a complex system of alliances and offered a solid guarantee for the agreements of the political class as a whole. Everyone, from members of the [ruling] Institutional Revolutionary Party to the opposition, businessmen, unions and the press, depended on the president's power to make their own moves, and they all suffer equally with its transformation.

The common denominator of the president's new attitudes and decisions —seen as indications of weakness— is the increase in the autonomy of his office. And that means that the other players' ability to influence decisions is undermined: politically, then, they are debilitated.

For the president's office to settle questions that arise in the different states of the union, solutions must always be negotiated with the local political class and notables. If the intention is to no longer do this, then neither is it necessary to negotiate. To achieve the unanimous agreement of all members of the party, something must be given in exchange. If unanimity is no longer necessary, the party cannot continue to make excessive demands either. Similarly, disciplining Congress or the unions, winning the

applause of the business sector or the goodwill of the media all imply a price —particularly a political price— for the presidency. If the president no longer seeks these sorts of arrangements, he is not obliged to pay that price. The presidency, in sum, gains autonomy.

None of this should come as a great surprise: in the last analysis, we are seeing the modernization of the presidency as an institution, a good start for facing

the modernization of the state, beneficial and plausible as long as we think modernity also is. In any case, there seems to be little choice in the matter. Even given its complications of administrative cruelty, depersonalization and bureaucratic inertia, state autonomy is the only political solution compatible with the excessive machinery of modern societies and, in that, for us, there is no turning back.

What causes problems —sometimes very taxing ones— is the transition, because all the mechanisms operating —not so badly— for decades have to be dismantled along the way. The only institution today that seems capable of survival in the modern context is the presidency. All the rest of us, confronted with the urgent need to operate within the law, are lost because, to start with, the motley, irresponsible complex of legislation was designed for a system like the one we had, in which everyone could be right and negotiate incomplicity wherever necessary.

Nonetheless, that is not the most serious question. What is truly significant is the increased autonomy of the presidency which, since it debilitates the other political players, may induce them to commit more than one folly. The president's authority in these cases could be lethal for many if the inertia of our ancient traditions did not moderate it. That authority could be exercised with a force and rigor we are unused to.

Many are already aware of this; they feel it in their day-to-day doings. That is the reason they lament the president's weakness, because they are really concerned —and quite correctly so— with everyone else's. ❧