



La presidencia imperial
Ascenso y caída del sistema político mexicano
 (The Imperial Presidency
 The Rise and Fall of the Mexican Political System)
Enrique Krauze
 Tusquets
 Mexico City, 1997, 510 pp.

for María Teresa Rivera de la Mora

“A strange job of writing, the history of Mexico.”
Enrique Krauze

The idea that the history of Mexico is to be found in the biographies of its great men was not born of an incorrect reading of our history (whether recent or remote), nor is it attributable to the doctrines of individualism or liberalism. Rather, it has been an obsession and a rallying cry for our rulers in different periods and —the other side of the coin— the price we have all had to pay, the fate anxiously experienced by all those who have had to live on the margins of power.

Today it is mainly the citizens who will be able to recognize Mexico’s waning political system and “strongmen” in the pages of Enrique Krauze’s last book, *La presidencia imperial*, covering the period from 1940 to 1996. A monumental work —if there is such a thing— in almost 500 pages this piece of historical research uses a great many bibliographical sources as well as interviews, a genre which the author himself uses with great mastery. Krauze’s interpretation of that profusion of voices does not ignore a subjective look and impres-

istic evaluation of the personalities portrayed, a method he applies particularly in the part of the work dedicated to the period from Luis Echeverría (1970) to Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1994).

Like Marcel Schwob, Krauze knows that his characters may have a habit, an important character trait, that may be decisive when interpreting a more complex or historically transcendental event. Therefore, the “personal leadership style” is at the same time both cause and effect of the Mexican political system which puts the president at its center as the main figure since he has unlimited resources—more like royal prerogatives, some would say—which lead him to govern not institutionally, but personally.

Since his *Siglo de Caudillos*, Krauze recognized his debt to the political thinking of Octavio Paz, citing something the Nobel-prize winner had already pointed out in *Postdata*: the combination of two kinds of religious autocracy in the concentration of power in Mexico, the pre-Columbian indigenous *tlatoani* and that which stemmed from the Spanish Crown, with its *encomendados* (land owners “charged with” the souls of the people on their domains), hacienda owners and viceroys.

In an article published a decade ago in the magazine *Vuelta*, Krauze says that “it was [President] Carranza who in 1917 defended the benefits of *personal* government.” In the same article he says that it was finally [then-Secretary of Public Education Jaime] Torres Bodet who in an amendment to Article 3 of the Constitution finally nailed down the definition of Mexican democracy as “a system of life founded on the constant economic, social and cultural betterment of the people.” In this way, he consummated the perversion of what the men who carried out the nineteenth century liberal Reform movement and Madero, leader of the anti-dictatorial movement that led to Mexico’s 1910 Revolution, understood by democracy. They never thought about putting adjectives in front of the word “democracy.” Krauze’s conclusion is implacable. “If a party could be at the same time revolutionary and institutional, then it is perfectly all right to talk rhetorically about the concept of democracy to the benefit of its transgressors.”

This kind of thinking is the leitmotif that Krauze uses once again 10 years later in his introductory chapter of *La presidencia imperial*. But the zealous historian does not stop there. In the remaining chapters, he intersperses it with detailed research on how, and to what degree of subordination the collective protagonists of history (the legislative and judicial branches of govern-

ment, the press, the workers and peasants, among others) revolved around this “*priista*-presidential sun.”

At the beginning of the book, Krauze says flat out that the Mexican state never based its legitimacy, social vocation or prestige on the ballot box, “but on the notable synthesis of old traditions which operated silently within the very depths of Mexican political culture.” This interpretation should be taken as a courtesy to his readers since it discloses the sleight-of-hand and concealment that official histories practiced for 50 years of PRI rule with institutional blessings. What else was it they were doing but to deny their debt to the Porfirio Díaz regime, which in turn owed a great deal to the Viceroyalty?

In light of the events that have fostered Mexico’s political reform, and in which the opposition parties, the press, the non governmental organizations and guerrilla movements have played a major part, books like *La presidencia imperial* add to these efforts and become very important for educational and dissemination purposes, particularly given its opportune publication. Suffice it to recall, as Krauze does, the expectations raised by the Iberoamerican Summit of Chiefs of State, held in Guadalajara in the middle of the Salinas administration, to note and condemn the negligence of Mexico’s president in carrying out the accords reached there. In the framework of that meeting, in which Latin America’s emerging democracies pledged themselves to “good conduct” and Mexico seemed to be the leader of democracy and freedom, Salinas, at the pinnacle of his power, spent his time ignoring some and rejecting others.

In the last few pages of this magnificent book, Krauze poses his concern about President Zedillo’s ambiguity: his statements to the effect that he would limit presidential interference in party policies were not borne out by his actions, since on many occasions he used his office to ostentatiously support the PRI. Today, after what happened July 6, Krauze—and we with him—can put forward some new, more precise judgements about the Mexican president’s republicanism.

Today, Krauze is convinced that “the institution of the imperial presidency is surrounded by a daily growing democratic movement; but no one can foresee what will happen because history moves following trajectories and structures, human determination and free actions; but as the ancients knew quite well, it is also governed by an inscrutable god: chance.”

Mauricio Grobet Vallarta
Mexican writer and editor