

Mexico's Political Transition And the Congress¹

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Today's analysis of Mexico's political transition is taking on new contours due both to the new balance of forces expressed in the July 1997 elections and to its effects in the sphere of public office.

To correctly situate the Mexican transition process, its obvious achievements, its pending items and the particularities of the current phase, some of the main aspects of our social

and political history must be taken into consideration. Undoubtedly, the Mexico of today is a product of its historic development, its formation as an independent nation, of the fundamental definitions that laid the basis for the republic in the nineteenth century and of this century's different social movements for democracy, social justice and sovereignty.

Because of the particularities of this historical process, there is no general agreement about when the political change that aimed for complete democratization of power relations began.

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Some political analysts trace it to the revolutionary movement of 1910, saying that it unleashed a process of political liberalization vis-à-vis the Porfirista regime,² especially through the Constitution of 1917. Others pinpoint its beginnings in the 1968 student movement³ because of its demands and long-term effects on Mexico's public life. Still others think it began in 1977 when Don Jesús Reyes Heróles⁴ championed the political reform that permitted the legalization of the Mexican Communist Party. Some think the transition began with the political events of 1987-88,⁵ and finally, there are those who say it began July 6, 1997.

But, no matter what the starting point, there is clearly broad consensus that in the last 20 years fundamental changes have been made in the rules of the political game—a basic characteristic of any transition—and that new models of relationships between the state and society have paved the way toward the consolidation of democracy. There also seems to be agreement that one of the distinguishing features of the Mexican experience is that it is qualitatively different from the cases of some South American countries, Eastern Europe or even Spain, which in its time was so often admired and seen as a model.

Certainly, the Mexican case is different. It has its own characteristics and its central driving force is not the need to refound the political regime—like in those other countries—but rather to renovate and expand the rules of living together, political interaction and competition that have progressively been built throughout the contradictory, uneven process that gave rise to a political system that, while clearly top-down and centralist in many ways, was liberal and democratic in others.

As a result, it should be specified that in the Mexican case, neither theoretically nor practically can the transition mean inventing a new regime, given that the basic principles underlying the contemporary Mexican state and laid out in its Constitution defining it as a representative, democratic, federal republic and establishing its basic freedoms and guarantees are not under discussion.

In that context and in contrast with other countries, the political transition Mexico has gone through has not meant a radical break since it

has followed the complex and tortuous—but finally productive—road of reforms typical of public institutions.

It is on this basis that the balance sheet must be drawn about the implications and consequences of the July 6 federal elections. Everyone undoubtedly recognizes the institutional solidity underpinning the organization of an electoral process characterized by intense campaigns, a level playing field for competition and the public's high expectations about the outcome. Therefore, the political transition can be deemed practically concluded in terms of establishing and operating under rules of the game that permit a real contest for power.

The voting results created an unprecedented balance of forces in the Chamber of Deputies. The fact that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) does not enjoy an absolute majority is no mere electoral statistic; in many ways, it expresses the singularity of the historical-political moment we are living through.⁶

Of course, an incorrect reading of the meaning and intention of the election results would have profoundly negative effects on Mexico's political life. In today's conditions, party interaction would be grievously damaged if competition were viewed as a zero-sum game among irreconcilable adversaries. If this were the dynamic, we would see not the victory of one side or another, but the questioning of a party system that has recently begun to incorporate the notion of competitive pluralism among various, clearly differentiated parties, each with its own profile. In addition, it should be considered that the public's expectations do not run to confrontation or paralysis, but to the orderly, productive modification of some aspects of the political structure and dynamic that existed at another time and under other circumstances.

During this decisive phase of its political transition, Mexico would pay a very high price if the political players held on to

polarizing attitudes that would distort the meaning of the public's will expressed at the polls. Through its vote, the citizenry decided on a plural Chamber of Deputies and called on its representatives to run it in an inclusive fashion. It was not the public's will that there be an absolute majority but a number of forces with different political weights that would have joint responsibility for the chamber.

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If incorrectly managed, the pluralism of the Fifty-seventh Congress could lead to unending bickering among political elites, with negative effects on governability. For government as a whole, the consolidation of democracy would be very difficult to achieve if short-term temptations and individual interests are not overcome in favor of new long-term consensuses.

To understand how the Chamber of Deputies has operated recently, we should recall that the new internal balance of forces had to be dealt with in a legal framework inadequate for regulating the legislative dynamic with order and flexibility.⁷

Therefore, since no party had the absolute majority needed to make the Chamber of Deputies functional and governable under current legislation, a stage of relative uncertainty opened up that led to a series of decisions that were not always made in the spirit of democratic conciliation and political and administrative rationality.

As a result, a tendency emerged of trying to make tests of strength, polarize the Chamber of Deputies even at the sacrifice of party identities and win ballots by forming an “opposition bloc” made up of the National Action Party (PAN), the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the Labor Party (PT) and the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico (PVEM). This began to be a pattern of parliamentary behavior; its main object was to oppose any and all initiatives of the executive branch and the PRI, which holds 48 percent of congressional seats. In this way, what the opposition had justly criticized as the PRI’s mechanical use of its parliamentary majority in the past became its own norm of operation.

The repercussions of this climate of polarization became clear in no time. Things became very tense on the floor of the chamber, and the most visible results were very damaging to legislators’ public image.⁸ Unfortunately such important issues as how to open the session of the lower chamber and distribute the chairmanships of its commissions and committees among the different parties were decided on the basis of quite questionable criteria, more according to partisan interests than parliamentary effectiveness.

International experience shows that in advanced democracies, the heads and members of legislative committees are decided mainly on the individual profiles of the legislators themselves, taking into account their legislative knowledge, ability and experience: in a nutshell, taking into account their technical expertise in a specific field.

In fact, we should not forget that in Mexico, just as in many other democratic countries, there is a certain parallel between congressional committees and areas of federal public administration and that therefore the committees become true bridges of communication between the legislative and executive branches of government. In that context it is clearly disadvantageous to exclude people with the necessary skills for being effective in legislative tasks strictly on a partisan basis.

During the session that closed in December 1997, the executive sent several bills to the Chamber of Deputies and the Mexico City Federal District Legislative Assembly sent one. The chamber’s docket also included a series of other bills presented from the floor and those that were pending from the previous session.

Of particular importance was the bill passed in November 1997 amending the Mexico City Federal District Charter, considerably increasing the Mexico City mayor’s prerogatives. This poses a challenge for the political relationship between local and federal government since the current mayor is from a different political party than the president.⁹

The bills that elicited the most debate because of their undoubted priority in this first session of the Fifty-seventh Congress involved taxes and the budget. The political dynamic on the floor suffered a considerable upset when the so-called “opposition bloc” split, with the PAN deciding to vote with the

PRI to approve the budget, called the Federal Law on Income and Spending. The PAN based its decision on the fact that many of its own central proposals had been included in the bill the executive sent the Congress.

Following the break-up of the opposition alliance, the future trend will probably no longer be one of confrontation between two large



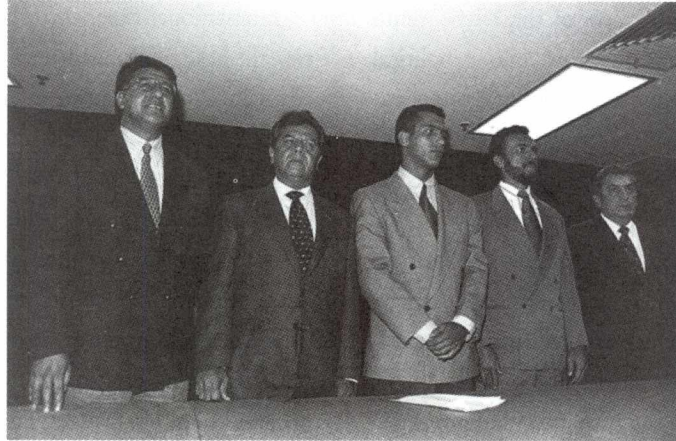
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A new internal balance of forces has to be reached in the Chamber of Deputies since for the first time no party has an absolute majority.

groups, but a dynamic of coming to specific agreements between different parties around concrete political objectives.

Congress' importance in the transition and the consolidation of democracy in Mexico is widely recognized today. Its centrality can be observed both in the way it contributes to structuring the national norms and in its contribution to establishing behavioral models linked to legal certainty, mutual respect, rational dialogue and the quest for agreements that are of collective benefit among legislators.

The centrality of the legislative branch has to do with the dual function it is called upon to fulfill today: on the one hand, it is an essential driving force behind the political reform of the state, key for the consolidation of democracy in Mexico, and, on the other hand, it is the author of its own transformation with an eye toward bringing its norms up to date and strengthening its independence. This is the case because at the same



Leaders of the Chamber of Deputies party caucuses. From left to right: Alejandro González Yáñez (PT), Porfirio Muñoz Ledo (PRD), Jorge Emilio González (PVEM), Carlos Medina Plascencia (PAN) and Arturo Nuñez (PRI).

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time that it is an autonomous branch of government, it shares responsibilities with the other branches.

Undoubtedly, the Congress will have to go through a stage of learning and adapting to the country's new political conditions. The speed at which it moves forward and the specific outcome will depend on the political maturity of its members. In this sense—and even taking into

account the pre-modern, non-democratic traits still present in all Mexico's political parties—a favorable contribution to political change in Mexico can be expected from this institution.

The current atmosphere created by a demanding public admits of neither delays nor negligence on the part of Mexico's professional politicians. The sheer size of the problems confronting society leaves no room for attitudes that are unproductive or hinder the effective functioning of the legislature; rather, it encourages greater institutional responsibility and accountability to the public. ■■■

NOTES

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² Porfirista refers to the 30-year regime of Porfirio Díaz which ended with the Mexican Revolution. [Translator's Note.]

³ Like in other countries, the 1968 student movement had a broad impact on society. Unlike other countries, however, Mexico's movement was brutally suppressed, leaving an important number of dead, political prisoners and people wanted by the police in its wake. [Editor's Note.]

⁴ Jesús Reyes Heróles was then Minister of the Interior and one of the most important liberal ideologues of the PRI. [Editor's Note.]

⁵ The main political events in those two years were the split from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) of an important group of leaders headed by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, organized in the PRI Democratic Current. In alliance with a spectrum of left parties (the Popular Socialist Party [PPS], the Cardenista Front for National Reconstruction Party [PFCRN], the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution [PARM] and the Mexican Socialist Party [PMS], this group ran Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas for president in 1988 in a race that became the most disputed and controversial in recent Mexican electoral history. [Editor's Note.]

⁶ The PRI won 239 seats in the Chamber of Deputies; the Party of the Democratic Revolution, 125; the National Action Party 121; the Green Ecologist Party, 8; and the Labor Party, 7.

⁷ Today federally, we operate to a great degree on the basis of constitutional precepts dating from 1917 which have only been partially modified by reforms like those of 1963, 1977, 1987, 1990 and 1996, that dealt with very specific points of the internal organization of Congress. The lag is also very clear with regard to the law governing the internal functioning of Congress since this legislation was passed in 1979 and a few amendments made in 1994. The Internal Regulations of the Congress is even older: it was passed in 1934. This shows just how urgent it is to bring internal congressional norms up to date around such important questions as the Congress' internal governing bodies, its different commissions, what tenure their chairs should have, schedules for presenting bills and the length of sessions, the format for the president's annual report to the nation, the structure and functioning of special investigative commissions and how monitoring and watch-dog bodies should be set up.

⁸ This refers to incidents on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies including blows between deputies, taking over the speaker's podium, personal attacks, etc. [Editor's Note.]

⁹ On December 5, 1997, the new mayor of Mexico City's Federal District, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano of the PRD, elected July 6, took office. [Editor's Note.]