

A Party System for Democracy

*Alberto Begné Guerra**

Since the 1977 political reform and with particular intensity since 1988's controversial presidential elections, Mexico has been immersed in continual electoral reforms; at the end of the day, they have produced a profound transformation of its political system. In the last 20 years, six constitutional and legislative reforms (1977, 1986, 1989, 1993, 1994 and 1996) have established the conditions, first, for the legal recognition, the inclusion and the participation of opposition political parties in state institutional life, and then for citizens to freely and effectively cast their

votes, for electoral competition and the development of political pluralism and parties alternating in office. The advances have been substantial: today, in brief, the wide gamut of fraudulent practices that for decades characterized the Mexican electoral system are history, and with them, the previously unquestionable hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

The dimension of the transformation is clearly illustrated with the changes in the distribution of public posts in Mexico during the same period. While before, almost all elected positions were concentrated in the hands of the PRI, in the 1980s a gradual, but increasing process of deconcentration began. "In the early 1980s the Institutional Revolutionary Party still monopolized the vast majority of elected positions. Of 3,479 posts including the presidency, the Congress, governorships, state congresses and mayorships, the

After decades of single party hegemony, Mexico's political party system has begun to look tri-partisan: three parties —the PRI, the PAN and the PRD— have weight nationwide and significant representation in different government bodies.

PRI controlled 91 percent. During the 1980s, the quasi-monopolistic nature of the distribution of power changed gradually until the PRI's share dropped from 91 percent in 1982, to 62 percent in 1994 and 54 percent in 1997.¹

The opposition parties have won major posts. Today, the National Action Party (PAN) governs six states (Aguascalientes, Baja California, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Nuevo León and Querétaro), while the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) governs three (Mexico City's Federal District, Tlaxcala and Zacatecas) and has just won the governor's seat in Baja California Sur.

Therefore, of a total of 32 states (including the Federal District), until 1989 all governed by the PRI, the PRD and the PAN now occupy the local chief executive's seat in 10. The figures for municipalities are also telling, particularly given not only the quantity but the quality of opposition wins: they head up 60 of the 100 most important cities in the country. The 1977 federal elections lost the PRI the absolute majority in the Chamber of Deputies for the first time in its history, and with it, its ability to legislate alone without having to build a majority with other political forces.

If for decades the defining trait of the political system was the absolute hegemony of a single party and, based on that, the president's almost total domination of the legislative and judicial branches and also of state governments, today, with political parties increasingly alternating in office and the map of the new distribution of power in mind, we can say that that system has come to an end. Does that mean that the process of political change has concluded? Is it time to celebrate the beginning of a new democratic era in Mexico?

* Lawyer, political analyst and coordinator of the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico's Electoral Studies Program.

If the firm trend of the last few years toward electoral normalcy continues and conditions (effective norms, autonomous institutions, transparent procedures and equitable funding) for honest elections and real partisan competition consolidate, there will no longer be any reason to continue centering political discussion on elections. Thus, from demands and debate centered on the legitimacy of political power, the discussion should shift to issues of the exercise of power, its faculties and the organization and functioning of the branches of government. And no political party will be able to elude its responsibilities.

From that point of view, the issues concerning the process of political change acquire a dimension which transcends the electoral sphere.

Periodic free, competitive elections are, in effect, a necessary condition for democracy, a condition without which democracy cannot exist. But, this is not enough, unless we commit the tremendous mistake of reducing the definition of “citizen,” or, even worse, the definition of “person,” to that of “voter.” What do we need, then, to bring the process of political change to its conclusion and consolidate democratic life?

Far from thinking fondly of individual moments which lay the very foundations of the system, I see Mexico’s political change as a complex process and therefore, as a series of negotiations, agreements and political decisions that, not without resistance and risks, make it possible little by little to build democracy. Therefore, I think that there are several different demands that should be satisfied to consolidate the process. One of these seems to me decisive. It is linked to the system of political parties and the possibility that consensuses be reached and reforms made to ensure the establishment of an efficient government by law.

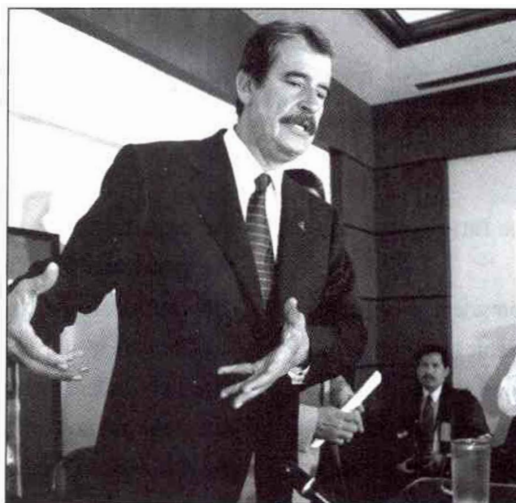
Over the last few years, after decades of hegemony of a single party with no electoral competition, the system of political parties in Mexico has begun to look like a tri-partisan structure, a framework made up of three parties with national presence and a very significant representation in different government bodies: the PRI, the PAN and the PRD. This tendency was confirmed in the 1997 federal elections and the 1998 local races.

From that point of view, it would seem that the party system already has a well defined format with three strong parties—which among them take up almost all the seats in the Senate and the Chamber of Deputies and are the only real hopefuls for the presidency—and a shifting number of small parties—two of which already have official registration (the Green Ecologist Party of Mexico [PVEM] and the Labor Party [PT]), and four to five more, which will probably obtain legal registration in the next few months—which may hold the deciding votes to make or break legislative majorities. However, different factors allow us to suppose that this trend could change, particularly after the elections of the year 2000.

The most probable scenario is that the format will not change in the short run, but that, rather, it will be consolidated, since the survival of the small parties will depend on their alliances with the large ones, unless the latter suffer splits that create groups or public figures seeking party registration of their own to run in elections. If alliances are made, additions will be made to the threesome, but the structure would not lose its shape; we would be looking at a race among three

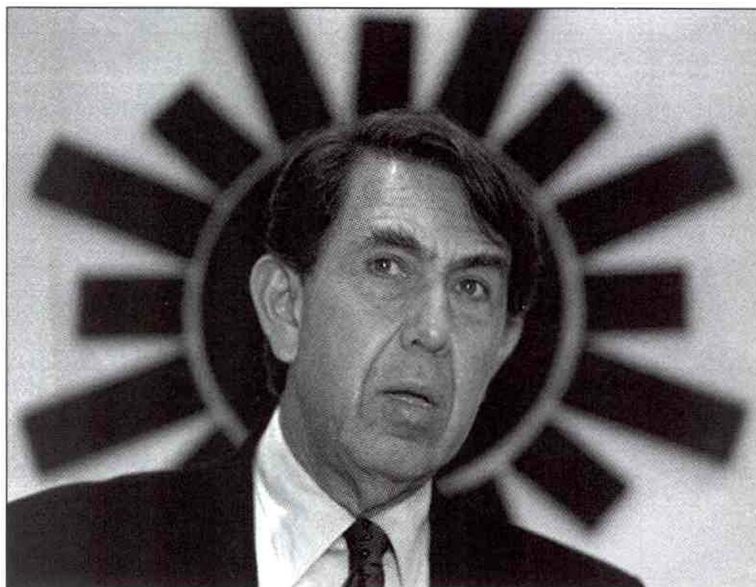
large forces gathered respectively around the PRI, the PAN and the PRD, with their respective allies garnering almost all the votes, regardless of their relative size. If there are splits, the tri-partisan system could be modified and, in that case, the effects on the electoral race’s format are unpredictable. However, presumably, the contest would tend to center on the two large parties that had not split.

In contrast with this scenario, the post-electoral prospects—contrary to what happened after the 1997 and 1998 elections—are not clear in terms of the three main parties continuing to dominate the political scene in the same way. Despite their enormous influence and great capacity for gathering interests under their political umbrellas and effectively representing them, the processes of nominating presidential candidates and their vote outcomes could produce breaks and internal fights that, if extreme, could well bring into question the very survival of the parties—at least as we know them today. In particular, it



Gustavo Graff/Imaginalina

Vicente Fox, the most probable PAN nominee.



Tomás Bravo/

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (PRD) will be running for the presidency for the third time.

is very difficult to imagine the PRI or the PRD after a defeat of their presidential campaign.

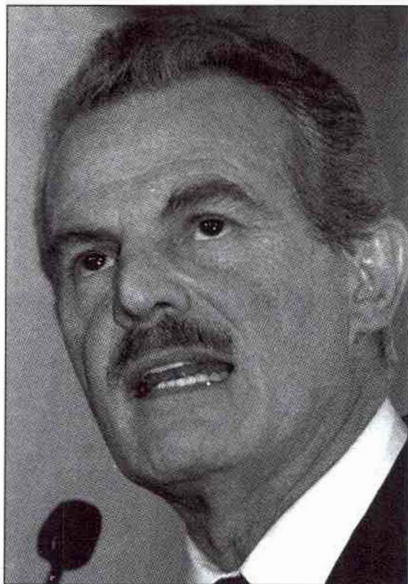
If the PRI were defeated in the next presidential elections, it is difficult to imagine that it could survive. It was born in office and is tied to the presidency by an umbilical cord that has never been severed. This would make it extraordinarily difficult for it to survive the internal bids for control by different groups and organizations that today coexist within it thanks to the catalyst that is the figure of the president and, above all, thanks to the expectations, ambitions and, therefore, party discipline that the office generates and stimulates. These probable clashes or splits would not necessarily mean the death of the PRI. On the contrary, they could herald a redefinition or restructuring that would consolidate it as a genuine political party or give rise to two different bodies. However, there is no doubt that it would be very different from what it is today. In addition, it is not too daring to suggest that in the little time left before the 2000 elections, it is almost impossible for the PRI to come up with effective, truly institutional rules

and procedures that could ensure its unity in case of a defeat in the presidential race, much less when its main challenge is a short term one: averting a split over the nomination.

The PRD would be in similar straits, since a possible third defeat of Cárdenas in the year 2000, both because of his age and due to the political exhaustion that that would imply, would leave the PRD without the cohesive factor and the image that has kept it together, allowed it to grow and present itself to the voters as a viable alternative, despite the difficulties it has had to face. If during the first few years the leadership of its caudillo, or strong central

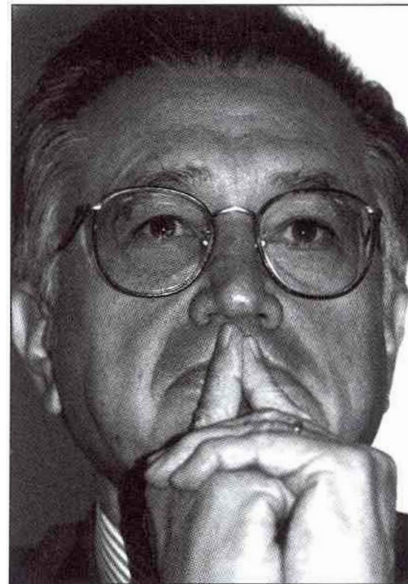
political figure, was decisive for building and maintaining a minimum of unity among its different currents and organizations, now, after the indiscriminate alliances and nominations of former PRI members for governor's seats, this leadership is absolutely indispensable for avoiding natural confrontations and splits. If we try to imagine, then, a PRD after a defeat of Cárdenas in the presidential race, with a few governor's seats occupied by recent PRI defectors and leadership cadre from the old left organizations which originally

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almost all the votes.



Javier García/Imaginatina

Minister of the Interior Francisco Labastida is probably the president's first choice.



Gustavo Graf/Imaginatina

Manuel Bartlett Díaz, first PRI hopeful to campaign for the nomination.

founded the party, it is difficult to picture the consolidation of the PRD. Quite to the contrary, it is very easy to envision all manner of conflicts and splits, unless a different leadership emerged, capable of ensuring cohesion. This, however, does not at all seem a simple matter if we consider that from now to July 2, 2000, there will be no figure in the party other than its already existing central figure.

In the PAN, things are different. It is a party which was not born in office and, quite to the contrary, has managed to grow while in opposition; it has greater wherewithal for surviving an electoral defeat more or less intact. This does not mean that a defeat would not force it into a profound doctrinal, programmatic and strategic review, nor that a strong, charismatic but extremely voluntaristic personality like Vicente Fox, the almost sure bet for the presidential nomination, would not affect the institutional structure of the party. But, the important thing to emphasize is that, in contrast with the PRI and the PRD, it is possible to imagine the PAN almost exactly as it is today running in 2003 or 2006, after an electoral defeat in 2000. Its democratic tradition, shown in the effectiveness of its institutional rules and procedures, make the difference.

These unavoidable risks that the party leaderships run make the 2000 elections a fight to the finish. And this is precisely where one of the central obstacles for the consolidation of democracy emerges: none of the main national political parties seems willing to put the general interests of the nation before its own short-

term interests, to a great extent wedded to the year 2000 race. Could things be any different? Of course they could.

The possibility of assuming the longer-term responsibility on the basis of a general, not a particular, vision of things, and on that basis forging consensuses and agreements around Mexico's strategic needs is not incompatible—or at least it should not be—with the legitimate aspirations to office of each party. However, the contamination of the political arena with baseless palaver and quarrels, dogmatism of every stripe, intransigence and petty disputes seems to take precedence over reason and statecraft, responsibility and a constructive spirit, and a long term commitment to society. The process of political change and the country itself are trapped by a party system which, at least until now, has not shown maturity. And, just as it is probable that the threefold structure will arrive to the year 2000 firmly intact, it is also likely that after the presidential race it will give way to a different party system, with new political organizations and profound adjustments in the main parties contending for the presidency. What is needed, in brief, is a party system for democracy. Perhaps then it will be able to fulfill one of the most important prerequisites for the consolidation of a process of change: the construction of a new institutional arrangement which through pluralism will effectively resolve the demands of governability and development. ■■■

NOTES

¹ María Amparo Casar and Ricardo Raphael, *Nexos* (July 1998), pp. 42-43.