

Political Parties in Mexico Since the Changing of the Guard

César Cansino*

None of the country's three main political forces has read correctly the new role they have been called upon to play in the political-economic scenario that opened up because of alternation in the presidency.

After more than 70 years of domination of a single political party, alternation in the presidency since the 2000 elections has made for enormous challenges for Mexico's main political parties, including the previously "official party." They have had to struggle to remain or turn themselves into viable options for power in a context in which, at the end of the day, the real competition characteristic of a democratic system was imposed. Nevertheless, as I will attempt to show here, neither the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) nor the National Action Party (PAN), today's governing party, nor the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) have been up to the challenges. What is more, none of the country's three main political forces has read correctly the new role they have been called upon to play in the political-economic scenario that

opened up because of alternation in the presidency. They all seem to be holding tight to the script from the past that satisfies their particular short-term interests but which in the end eludes all commitment to the big problems and challenges inaugurated by the twenty-first century.

INTERNAL DEMOCRACY

The PRI, PAN and PRD, each in its own way, have shared the challenge of being up to the new political zeitgeist and of therefore making the internal institutional and programmatic transformations that these new conditions demand. All this has the aim, in particular, of exorcising the dangers of weakness or political irrelevance or, worse, the threats of internal splits that plague them all to a greater or lesser degree. Another vital issue has been their political, strategic repositioning vis-à-vis the executive branch.

The high point of the internal life of the three parties was reached dur-

ing each of their respective national assemblies in 2001 and the subsequent election of their main leaders. Of course, the PAN replacing the PRI in office forced the latter and the PRD to carefully review the reasons for their electoral defeat, while demanding that the PAN evaluate the implications of its new situation as governing party. However, none of the national assemblies led to a significant redefinition of positions or countered the inertia of the past.

The PRD, for example, could not change or balance the presence of strong charismatic leaderships or factional groups that not only slow the party's much-needed institutionalization but also present it before public opinion as an organization divided and crisscrossed by factional, patronage and corporatist interests, all highly contradictory with the democratic ideal that is apparently increasingly maturing among ordinary Mexicans. The PRI has also been unable to concretize its efforts and initiatives for structural transformation. Quite to the contrary, its leadership has not been

* Professor and researcher at the UNAM and the Autonomous University of Puebla. Editor of *Metapolítica* magazine.



Antonio Nava/AE Photo



Antonio Nava/AE Photo



Antonio Nava/AE Photo

From left to right: Felipe Bravo Mena, president of the PAN; Rosario Robles, president of the PRD; and Roberto Madrazo, president of the PRI.

The PRI has not been self-critical in its analysis of its 2000 defeat.

self-critical in its analysis of its 2000 defeat nor in introducing corrective measures. There has been, however, a stage of extraordinary repositioning by Roberto Madrazo, one of the party's old guard. Despite the fact that he represents all the vices the party must overcome in a real institutional transformation, in achieving control over the party, to a certain extent Madrazo has solved the irrefutable problem of the lack of an effective party leadership. Finally, the PAN has not managed to define its ideal relationship with President Vicente Fox. Mutual attacks are numerous and range from the president's unacceptable pragmatism to the clear, traumatic marginalization of PAN cadre from senior posts in the administration. To make matters worse, the present and

future of the PAN are tied —perhaps tragically— to the charismatic figure of Fox. The correlation is irrefutable: the drop in the president's popularity has been accompanied by a marked decline in the party's electoral results.

Another important moment in the dynamic of the parties after the onset of the PAN administration was reached in October 2001 when, after three months of lobbying and negotiations, the political parties and the administration decided to sign the Political Agreement for National Development, along with other actors in the country's political and economic life.

In practice, however, this agreement gave rise to very poor and only momentary gains since it left out the most pressing issues that would give substance

and new horizons to the democratic transition, such as the reform of the state.

Nevertheless, the inability to live up to challenges like this one is not the exclusive responsibility of the parties; it also lies with the federal administration whose political operatives have been ineffective and ambiguous.

In conclusion, the political parties have been intensely active since the 2000 alternation in power. However, in the main, their achievements have been poor. What is more, the changes in each political force are not enough to create the appropriate conditions for advancing in the transformation and/or consolidation of our young democracy. In effect, a profound change in our institutions and norms that would mark a departure from the authoritarian past presupposes the existence of strong, solid, mature parties that can serve as intermediaries with an experienced, efficient executive branch (in contrast with the wavering, imprecise one we have had). In the absence of all of this, it would not be possible to carry forward the still unfinished and desirable task

of giving shape to a reform of the state, the most finished expression of Mexico's democratic transition. Up until now, the process of political change has not encouraged these outcomes, among other reasons because the parties, exhausted by their own internal crises, have not been capable of coming to an agreement among themselves and with the executive branch about the kinds of reforms required, how profound they should be and what direction they should take to concretize the indispensable institutional and normative change that the country's new political situation demands.

A REVIEW OF THE DAMAGES

How does Mexican society perceive the three main parties' response to the important challenges that the consolidation of democracy requires in our country?

For the PRI, the most significant risk it has run after losing office is a break-up that could precipitate the already advanced process of Balkanization expressed in regional leaderships, local power groups and increasingly disconnected sectors. Insisting on imposing public figures on the rank and file and the organization itself brings with it the repercussions that the PRI has already fallen victim to and that political rationality would advise against. Nevertheless, what seems to have the upper hand is the PRI supposition that a "leader" can, Messiah-like, guarantee the political strength needed given the insufficiency of political resources in the party's formal and institutional structure and the absence of an external source of power (like the presidency and administration constituted until very recently).

From that point of view, perhaps the PRI's main risk is the possibility of such a problematic confrontation that would lead to schisms impossible to heal by institutional means.

The PRD's situation is different. The PRD exemplifies the tortuous road that the Mexican left has taken in its attempt to become an alternative government when faced with an electorate that is increasingly critical and predisposed to splitting and reasoning its vote. However, it has positioned itself before the public as a party with a democratic discourse that it does not apply internally, where it is Balkanized and fraught with fraudulent practices assumed to be exclusive to other parties. This series

It is no exaggeration to say that the PAN's future depends to a great extent on the strategy it adopts vis-à-vis the Fox administration. The PAN has suffered a significant decline in its electoral results under the current administration. At the very least, it has lost many posts that under other circumstances it would have been able to maintain or win. That is why the party leadership has to carry out a serious, objective balance sheet of its activity in recent years and, based on that, renew its political proposal, but above all, assume the full implications of its role as a governing party. A second, equally important, challenge for the PAN in coming years will be taking the active role that it his-

The present and future of the PAN are tied, perhaps tragically, to the charismatic figure of Vicente Fox.

of inconsistencies noticeably affects the PRD's electoral outcome: in recent local elections, the best it has been able to do is to not succumb to some emerging parties, and it has shown clear symptoms of stagnation, with vote counts lower than those of the PAN and the PRI, maintaining a shaky third place nationwide.

One of the main obstacles to the consolidation of the PRD as a left (or "center-left") electoral alternative is its internal conflicts. It reproduces the Mexican left's endemic proclivity to dispersion and cannibalism. At times, paradoxically, it would seem that the PRD still needs leaders and charismatic strong-men who can coherently mesh the different internal forces and avert greater clashes and dispersion.

torically has as the architect and promoter of the normative and institutional change the country requires to give the democratic transition that began with the alternation in office in 2000 direction and a new horizon. Until now, the PAN's commitment to the reform of the state has been mainly rhetorical and ambiguous.

In summary, as long as there are no solid advances in creating a democracy, in a new design of our system of norms and the construction of real rule of law, we will be left with the impression that the alternation of power our country has experienced with the PAN, the PRI and the PRD as its main protagonists has not been translated into lasting changes that will make legitimacy and democratic governability feasible. **MM**