

Governability and Democracy In Mexico and Latin America An Impossible Mix?

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The Mexican Chamber of Deputies.

During the last decade, the Mexican political system has been drastically transformed. “Pragmatic hegemonism” has disappeared,¹ and a regimen of free and fair electoral competition is being built in its place. We live on the threshold of an unprecedented era in Mexico, which will bring enormous challenges to all political par-

ties, who will be responsible for leading the nation on the road to governability and the consolidation of democracy. We must put to ourselves the need to establish constitutional and electoral formulas that will make the democratic system function better.

During the long hegemonic period, the mechanisms used to elect the country’s legislature were designed to ensure the permanent over-representation of the party in power to the detriment of the opposition. Even when congressional seats

began to be distributed by proportional representation, the formulas used only operated as a way of compensating the minority parties, rather than as an electoral mechanism that would guarantee the existence of a genuinely competitive system. Later, with the successive political reforms, creating impartial electoral bodies and equal conditions for competition became a priority, but the issue of profoundly revising the formulas for electing the Congress was relatively neglected. And, even though, of course, significant

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changes have been made in this area, they have not satisfied important parts of the political class and the public, who demand that it now be a priority, in an atmosphere of free electoral competition, to revise the electoral formulas regarding the election of the president and of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

Also, a new culture of civic participation demands that new forms of direct democracy be introduced and that the importance of the increasingly numerous and influential nongovernmental organizations and non-partisan political institutions be recognized.

Free electoral competition gives full meaning to the system of checks and balances. The executive no longer has the legislative branch's tacit support; this creates situations that could lead to institutional chaos if what some analysts and critics of the pure presidentialist system have called a "train wreck" comes about, which happens when agreements between executive and Congress become impossible.

The Mexican electorate reiterated its desire for a divided government in the 2003 federal elections. The National Action Party (PAN), currently in office, lost almost 60 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, which will be dominated by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and where the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), the third force, almost doubled its number of deputies. Mexico's president, reluctant to recognize mistakes, has not been able to concretize a single one of the liberal projects that he dazzled the public with in 2000. The economy, which contracted during his first year in office, grew in 2003 by less than one percent and prospects for coming years are not encouraging.

On the other hand, the 2003 elections left us with important lessons about the need to have a more effective, credible political class. The notorious banality of Mexico's extremely expensive electoral campaigns has been a determining factor in producing a scandalous 60 percent abstention rate. While the candidates wallowed in frivolity, waste and insults or debated whether the president should make publicity spots or not, issues of major national importance affecting a country of 100 million inhabitants weighted down by poverty, imbalances and corruption were shunted to one side.

A historic abstention rate and a major defeat (by four percentage points) for the ruling party at the hands of a reborn PRI leave the president, a member of

the questions of labor, energy or tax reform that he had promised.

In short, our incipient democratic regimen faces challenges that the government should meet with sensitivity and intelligence and the entire political class should deal with with an enormous sense of responsibility. But, is this really possible? Are there sufficient incentives to ensure that the country's leadership will put national interests before partisan ones?

LATIN AMERICA: DEMOCRACY'S NEW MISFORTUNES

The fall of Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada's government in Bolivia, together with similar events in other nations like Ecua-

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the PAN, at the mercy of the legislative opposition, three years after he had buried the single party amidst popular jubilation. But generations of absolute power do not evaporate overnight and the PRI, which, in addition, won back four of the six governor's seats up for election, has shown that it still controls large parts of Mexican life. The apathetic 2003 elections, touted as a plebiscite on the Fox administration, have not resembled the 2000 democratic fiesta very much. Frustrated by the thwarted expectations of change created in 2000, the Mexican people have punished the head of state at the ballot box, forcing him to negotiate with the opposition for the rest of his term around

dor, Argentina, Paraguay and Peru, have reopened the debate about the viability of democracy in Latin America. Many hypotheses have been put forward, but two are of note: the first says that aspirations of political democracy and liberal capitalism are incompatible; the second emphasizes that the increased number of protagonists, and, even more, excessive participation, make democracy ungovernable.

Democracy presupposes the values of freedom and equality. Capitalism assumes an implicit inequality in the right to property and operates by stimulating other inequalities when it urges competition. In the most advanced democracies, this conflict has been sur-

mounted by the state, which promotes equality. In our democracies, in contrast, the absence of a state that effectively promotes equality is at the root of the problems of governability.

The last Latinobarómetro survey,² published recently, shows that 64 percent of Latin Americans prefer democracy, but only 53 percent are satisfied with its results as a means for resolving economic and social problems. This is not surprising if we think that half of all Latin Americans live below the poverty line and that the gap between rich and poor is widening.

Democratic governability is a concept in construction. If we dare to try to pin it down, we could say that it means the ability a democracy has to deal with people's expectations and needs.

Democratic governability is more than Congress's willingness to vote the executive's bills. It implies a citizenry that integrates political, civil and social rights.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said in the last Human Development Report that "Governability is perhaps the most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development." Democracy corrects itself with better democracy. Dialogue, participation and establishing an inclusive paradigm can be the road to recovering democratic governability.

Democratic governability demands more participation of citizens than simply voting regularly. Participation may be one of the most highly touted political discourses at the same time that it is the most resisted by those who talk about it.

Participation has also acquired macro-economic, managerial legitimacy

today. The macro-economic legitimacy is due to its being the basis for social and human capital, currently valued as a condition both for economic and human development. Its managerial legitimacy comes from the fact that the most participatory organizations are also the most productive.

In addition to increasing managerial efficiency, participation guarantees equity in distributing costs and benefits of different initiatives and, by creating capacities, it ensures sustainability. To participate is to share power, and this is the key to the resistance to it. This deeply-rooted objection is often disguised with arguments like the idea that participatory exercises take time and results are urgently needed, or that people with no education are not able

to participate, or that a hierarchical organization is more effective than a horizontal one.

As we have seen, our countries suffer from a colossal increase in social exclusion. To a great extent, it is possible to attribute this to the failure of the "trickle-down theory," which presupposed that, once economic growth had been achieved, its benefits would inevitably be distributed among all layers of society. This theory created the illusion of an "automatic syntony" of capitalism and democracy, which reality demolished.

For more than 10 years, the United Nations has been publishing reports on human development, proposing the

replacement of economic development with this concept as the paradigm for progress. Human development presupposes guaranteeing a long and healthy life, access to education, the availability of indispensable material goods and full participation in community life. It is an inclusive paradigm and, as such, is a more solid basis for legitimizing democracy than economic development and the trickle-down theory.

If in Mexico during the 1990s, instead of being dazzled by the growth rate of the gross domestic product, we had looked at the results in terms of human development, we would have had a real measurement of the way in which the state harmonized democracy and capitalism.

Democratic governability is much more than Congress's willingness to vote the bills sent by the executive branch into law. It demands much more than a political reform of the kind that has been announced and never concretized. It implies the construction of a citizenry that integrates political rights with civil and social rights. It requires new institutions that foster participation as a means and end in themselves. It must include spaces and habits of dialogue inside and outside the institutions as a permanent option counterposed to violence and populism. **MM**

NOTES

¹ The author refers to the 70 years of political hegemony of a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party. [Editor's Note.]

² Latinobarómetro is a well-known Mexican company that specializes in opinion polls. [Editor's Note.]