

# Dilemmas of Democratic Transition in Mexico, National Security, and 9/11 In the United States

Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano\*

I still vividly remember the summer of 1994 when the emergence of the San Angel Group caused excitement and a glimmer of hope among certain sectors of society and public opinion.<sup>1</sup> The vacuum left by the regime dating back to the Mexican Revolution, the uncertainty felt by a group of Mexican intelligentsia and politicians following the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) uprising in Chiapas, the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the presidential candidate for the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and the kidnapping of important businessmen made clear the need for political reform in late twentieth-century Mexico,<sup>2</sup> a country where power had never changed hands peacefully through elections.<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, it is worth remembering that between 1988 and 1994 the opposition<sup>4</sup> had been emphasizing the need to creating a “genuinely competitive” electoral system,<sup>5</sup> and the Carlos Salinas de Gortari administration (1988-1994) had also set about this same task. This priority overshadowed what the opposition would need to do should they actually win office, or how the transition would be agreed upon and long-term considerations like a constitutional reform of the armed forces, the intelligence services, public security, foreign policy, and, of course, national security.<sup>6</sup> However, long-term strategies and a democratic and consensual national security program were almost entirely absent from political party agendas between 1988 and 2000.

## DEMOCRACY AND THE CHALLENGES OF REGIME CHANGE

We should first consider that democracy, once implemented as a system of government, is neither permanent nor a panacea. The democratic state is the result of a long interlude of historical formation in Europe (fifth-century BC Athens and Rome) and, in the modern era, in North America (United States and Canada) that gives citizens a way of life, a political culture, and certain channels for dissidence and representability through solid institutional systems. One of its most emblematic models, albeit controversial, is the representative system institutionalized by the founding fathers of the United States through the legitimacy bestowed by elections.<sup>7</sup>

Democratic states, such as ancient Greece and Rome, can still disappear or become “despotic governments.”<sup>8</sup> We must therefore link democracy to the type of political regime in question, as well as to its historical legacies. Authoritarianism is engrained in Mexico’s political DNA, from Porfirio Diaz’s dictatorship to the long-lasting regime born of the Mexican Revolution. In the United States, meanwhile, democracy has been expansionist or multilateral, depending on its leaders and the given historical and international juncture. Political regimes use such historical arrangements to create their national security visions or doctrines. Therefore, any change in a regime’s nature is one of the toughest challenges for any political system.

Transitions to democracy at the end of the twentieth century in Europe (Spain and Portugal) and in South America

\* Professor and researcher at the Pacific Studies Department, North American Studies Center, University of Guadalajara (U. de G.), Mexico.

The U.S. crisis deepened rifts in Mexico and intensified confrontations due to individual interests and legacies from the past. Ten years on, the Mexican government still lacks consensus, instruments, and strategies to combat security threats.

(Argentina, Chile, and Brazil) can provide important lessons for the reform process in Mexico. To neutralize any threat to democracy that may arise from the authoritarian past, the constitutional reform of the armed forces and intelligence services becomes one of the most delicate points.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, constitutional reform and scrutiny of historical power structures lies at the root of any transition. As a result, the intersection between democratic transition and the inclusion of a new democratic national security doctrine in Mexico has been the Achilles heel for strengthening the rule of law, respect for human rights, and the proper response to combat security threats.

#### UNITED STATES: THE DECISIVE EXTERNAL FACTOR

The watershed in the relations between Washington and the PRI (a relationship that began in 1928) came with the Chiapas conflict and Luis Donaldo Colosio's assassination in 1994. The U.S. government shifted its approach away from its traditional support for the PRI toward promoting democratic transition in a move that benefitted the National Action Party (PAN). The U.S. was strongly in favor of the key actors in Mexico's transition creating the instruments for political change, such as the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), which would give certainty and legitimacy to the elections. However, for some time the U.S. had already been cautiously helping Mexico break free from authoritarianism and accompanying its democratization process.

Bill Clinton's administration saw certainty in 1994 election results as more important even than the very continuity of NAFTA,<sup>10</sup> especially since the Democratic government's security priorities lay in promoting democracy and the free market, and because support for authoritarian governments was perceived as a kind of continuation of the Cold War. Nevertheless, the system's endemic corruption and the 1997 link-up of Mexican army General José de Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo with drug-trafficking were among the factors that led to Washing-

ton switching its support over to the Alliance for Change, a political coalition headed up by Vicente Fox Quesada.

#### SECURITY AND DEMOCRACY

The president's national security advisor Adolfo Aguilar Zinser revealed in February 2001 that initiatives taken with regard to the sectors that helped shape the democratic transition since 1988 had not constituted a plan of government.<sup>11</sup> He even pointed to projects in Fox's administration and in the system itself that were contested for personal, military, and civilian reasons; each in their own way, these internal conflicts weakened the Mexican state and prevented constitutional reform, from the president down.

As an example, Mexico's foreign minister at the time, Jorge G. Castañeda, referred to the absence of security on Mexico's foreign policy agenda. "It was non-existent, not even in bilateral relations.... So there was practically no discussion of foreign policy, not to mention national security."<sup>12</sup> Books written by the first leader of the democratic transition, *Vicente Fox a los Pinos* (Vicente Fox to the Presidential Residence Los Pinos) and *Fox propone* (Fox Proposes), clearly reveal this lack of policy in the president's priorities. At this time, even the round-table talks presided over by the leading figure of state reform, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, did not touch on the subjects of intelligence services and the armed forces. Mexico's Ministry of the Interior (Segob) was firmly against any far-reaching reform of the Center for Research and National Security (CISEN), as had been proposed by Mexico's recently created Presidential Council for National Security.

#### 9/11

At the time of the terrorist attacks on Washington, D.C. and New York, the Mexican state was extremely vulnerable. The risk/threat agendas had not been redefined in the national security apparatus, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) considered that the existence of the new security council in fact posed a serious problem. The SRE was vying with the Ministry of the Interior and the Congress to take the lead on foreign policy, governance, and national security in relation to the United States, issues that required the closest possible coordination and a joint approach by the Ministries of the Navy and National Defense to safeguard land, air, and sea

## SOME DEMOCRATIC SECURITY PRINCIPLES

<i>Principles</i>	<i>General Aims</i>	<i>Key Criteria</i>
Loyalty to the republic (without party bias)	Protect <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Citizens</li> <li>• Freedoms and rights</li> <li>• Institutions</li> <li>• Physical and cultural heritage</li> </ul>	Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preventive</li> <li>• Lawful</li> <li>• Regulated</li> </ul>
Respect for law and exercise of rights	Defend <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rule of law</li> <li>• Territorial integrity and borders</li> </ul>	Ethical and technical consistency
Democratic conviction	Guarantee <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National cohesion</li> <li>• Democratic coexistence</li> <li>• Social peace</li> <li>• Political balance and certainty</li> </ul>	Interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participatory</li> <li>• Cooperative and coordinated</li> <li>• Plural</li> <li>• Interlinked</li> <li>• Simultaneous</li> </ul>
Vision of the future	Monitor and prevent <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economic risks</li> <li>• Political risks</li> <li>• Ecological and natural risks</li> </ul>	Effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant and permanent</li> </ul>

Source: National Security Council Archives during the Vicente Fox administration, February 2002.

borders, as well as the Mexican state's natural and strategic resources. Instead the cabinet was divided.

These problems became exacerbated after the most significant attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor in 1941 triggered a whole series of structural changes in the U.S. government and Washington's subsequent unilateral efforts to launch a global war on terrorism. However, the Fox administration, of its own conviction and at the request of various federal agencies, decided to dismantle the only significant effort toward democratic security, which had sought to set priorities, order, and begin work, from within, on a diagnosis of matters of vital interest to the Mexican state, to modify doctrines, and to create the legal framework required by the transition.

Despite passing in 2005 a national security law, Mexico allowed security threats to go unchecked, without a diagnosis or the right information; as a result, the country is now facing a genuine national emergency since Felipe Calderón declared his war on drugs in December 2006.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The actors in the 2000 democratic transition proved ill-equipped to handle political change. Also, the terrorist attacks on the U.S. took them by surprise and sent tremors through both the U.S. government and Vicente Fox's incipient administration. George W. Bush responded by defying the international system represented by the UN, as well as international peace and security. This increased the resentment and division among some of the actors who supported the transition in Mexico, because they had contrasting attitudes to Washington and embodied positions that required a government position.

In short, the U.S. crisis deepened rifts in Mexico and intensified confrontations due to individual interests and legacies from the past. Ten years on, the Mexican government still lacks consensus, instruments, and strategies to combat security threats.<sup>13</sup> The momentum of the movement for democracy has largely been lost. Insecurity caused by organized crime

has severely torn the social fabric and weakened the Mexican state. However, the transition did enable proposals to be outlined for a democratic security that may chart a stronger course toward the future, and by the same token, may improve Mexico's relationship with the U.S. post-9/11, as well as with the rest of the world, in the context of which the Mexican state would be able to define a response in the national interest. ■■■

---

#### FURTHER READING

- Ai Camp, R., *Las fuerzas armadas en el México democrático* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2010).
- Bagley, Bruce, and Sergio Aguayo Quezada, *Mexico: In Search of Security* (Miami: University of Miami North-South Center, 1993).
- Bumiller, E., *Condoleezza Rice. An American Life* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007).
- Buzan, B., *People, States & Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991).
- Elizondo, Carlos, and Luis Maira, *Chile-México. Dos transiciones frente a frente* (Mexico City: Grijalbo/CIDE/Prochile, 2000).

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Criticism and doubts about its origins also abound. Its founding members included politicians from across the spectrum: Vicente Fox, Jorge G. Castañeda, Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, and Elba Esther Gordillo, and intellectuals such as Carlos Fuentes, Enrique Krauze, Elena Poniatowska, and Carlos

Monsiváis, who entered into a frank dialogue with public figures like José Woldenberg, Santiago Creel, Manuel Camacho Solís, and Porfirio Muñoz Ledo.

- <sup>2</sup> Sergio Aguayo Quezada, *Vuelta en U. Guía para entender y reactivar la democracia estancada* (Mexico City: Taurus, 2010), p. 126.
- <sup>3</sup> José Woldenberg, *La construcción de la democracia* (Mexico City: Plaza & Janés, 2002), p. 22.
- <sup>4</sup> Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, *¡Vamos a ganar! La pugna de Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas por el poder* (Mexico City: Océano, 1995), p. 187.
- <sup>5</sup> Interview given by former Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, in Jorge G. Castañeda, *La herencia. Arqueología de la sucesión presidencial en México* (Mexico City: Alfaguara, 1999), p. 269.
- <sup>6</sup> Jorge G. Castañeda, *Sorpresas te da la vida* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1994), p. 145.
- <sup>7</sup> Robert Dahl, *La democracia, una guía para los ciudadanos* (Mexico City: Taurus, 1999), pp. 7-23. The 2000 election of George W. Bush cast doubt on the legitimacy of the elections, whereas Barack Obama's election restored confidence.
- <sup>8</sup> Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists; Critics of the Constitution 1781-1788* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), p. 23.
- <sup>9</sup> Felipe Agüero, *Soldiers, Civilians and Democracy. Post Franco Spain in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 5.
- <sup>10</sup> Interview with former Clinton official Arturo Valenzuela by the author in June 2002, Washington D. C.
- <sup>11</sup> Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, "Los binomios de la democracia" (Binomials of Democracy), talk given February 8, 2001, during the series of lectures entitled "Democratic Transition and Protection of Human Rights," in Mexico City. Transcribed by the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH).
- <sup>12</sup> Abelardo Rodríguez Sumano, *La urgente seguridad democrática. La relación de México con Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: Taurus, 2008).
- <sup>13</sup> I identify the following obstacles for democratic security in Mexico: Mexico's type of political system; the regime and state's security situation; certain events linked to transitions to democracy; the legacy of authoritarianism; and the role of the armed forces and intelligence services.