

Elections, Governance, And Coalition Governments

Tania de la Paz Pérez Farca*



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*With all my affection, to the memory of Dr. Jorge Carpizo,
beloved friend and exemplary jurist.*

Today, Mexico is facing grave problems of insecurity, unemployment, poverty, social inequality, and poor quality education, among many others. However, despite the difficult straits the country finds itself in, political actors must seek solutions to the problems plaguing the populace.

In Mexico, we are nearing the next federal elections, which, like every six years, will take place on the first Sunday of July. That day, all federal elected posts will be contested. We will elect the new president, who heads the executive branch, in addition to 500 deputies and 128 senators, who make up the entire federal legislative branch.¹

Unfortunately, the vagueness of the proposals coming from the candidates aspiring to these posts is evident. Once again,

the possible representatives of the citizenry seem to have a phobia against sharing power; they think that when they win the election, they will get the biggest piece of the pie. Nevertheless, the reality is that, at bottom, the problem of dealing with the crisis the country is experiencing is not a matter of reforms but of political will.

In short, the party that wins the coming elections will need a coalition government to be able to move the country forward. It will need a national front with a government program negotiated by the three strongest parties to be able to thoroughly deal with the great difficulties facing Mexicans today.

This must be considered because today, more than ever, government coalitions are indispensable in our country. It is not enough for the parties to seek a majority; it is a mistake to think that with partisan majorities, but with a divided government, a country like ours can be made to move forward. This is because, even if one party achieved a majority in the two chambers of Congress, what does not look possible is for a single party to get two-thirds of the seats required for making structural, constitutional reforms to benefit society.

*Visiting professional at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

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GOVERNMENT COALITIONS VS. ELECTORAL COALITIONS

Now then, what is a coalition government? There is a lot of disinformation about this. The concept can often be confused with electoral coalitions or coalitions around a certain project, also called legislative coalitions. Frequently, political coalitions—whether electoral or around a particular issue—are sought during processes of democratic transition, or political, social, and economic polarization, such as what Mexican society has been immersed in for several years now.

In our country, electoral coalitions, and even legislative coalitions are common practice. By contrast, government coalitions are an unexplored possibility that politicians who aspire to represent the citizenry in coming years must study and consider. This means that it is important to point out that government coalitions can be defined as a group of political parties that agree to pursue common goals, pool resources to achieve them, and distribute the benefits when those goals are reached.² However, there are those who maintain that these kinds of coalitions are only viable in parliamentary systems, given that, there, the government must have the support of the parliament in order to continue to exist, forcing the parties to form government coalitions.

There is a great deal of literature on this point, and very little on coalitions in presidential systems, but these coalitions should not be considered indispensable and transcendent exclusively in the parliamentary system. Today, more than ever, it is clear that countries with presidential systems of government have divided governments, which is why they have to generate consensuses to allow them to move ahead with a political agenda that benefits society.

In other places in Latin America, large numbers of successful coalition governments exist that Mexico should study and take into account, precisely to avert government crises. Most Latin American countries are going through political processes in which the party in office is attempting to forge

pacts or agreements with the different opposition parties to generate a force that will make it possible to carry out a common government project. According to César Cansino, “In the Latin American political systems it would be difficult to find full autonomy or full dependence of the national executive branches *vis-à-vis* the parties that support them.”³

Mexico is a country with a presidential system that operates with a divided government, and very probably it will continue that way. This should not alarm us. Divided governments are not, in and of themselves, a threat to democracy. Quite to the contrary: they are the result of the political reality of our country today. This is why the success of public policies in presidential systems of this type depends on government coalitions.

In this sense, by building a base with multiparty support, alliances are beginning to form in the Congress. This will ensure that a divided government will not cause political immobility. As a result of a multi-party cabinet, and given the need to support the president in Congress, a coalition government would be forged with the aim of achieving a shared government without legislative deadlock and in which its members would necessarily have to be much more careful in putting forward their ideas and projects. As Jorge Carpizo points out, a bad project would have catastrophic results for the country since Mexico is moving ahead in its historic evolution. What works must be preserved, and reforms must not be made just to create change, but to improve.⁴

It is probable that the next chief executive will not have a majority in Congress, which seems to me enough reason and a strong incentive to negotiate with other political parties. If the next Mexican president wants to see his/her main public policies go into effect, he/she will have to forge agreements between the administration and the political parties that will be part of the coalition. These agreements are designed by the executive and the legislative branches; that is, the president will have to invite the members of other parties to be part of the cabinet to ensure that his/her bills are passed in Congress by the governing coalition.

At this point, the presidential candidates are Andrés Manuel López Obrador, Enrique Peña Nieto, Gabriel Quadri de la Torre, and Josefina Vázquez Mota. Ideally, they should inform the citizenry about their government proposals and the actors that will make up the governing coalition. I think it would be a good idea for the coalitions to be built before the elections, in full view of the citizenry, and not afterwards. That way, the citizens can choose in time, in a transparent, objective, informed way, who will govern our country.

The president's ability to govern a country with a divided government, such as the case of Mexico, depends on the negotiations and agreements arrived at with the opposition parties. This means that including in the cabinet members from parties other than the president's is very important; it gives the other parties the possibility of influencing and participating in the decision-making process.

It is also necessary for the president to include diverse projects from other forces on the political agenda in order to govern together. The influence of each of the coalition actors in designing government policies depends on the balance and composition of that government, that is, on the president's degree of autonomy or the level of commitments. This is why it is important that the chief executive seek the correct combination through negotiation, and a formula that will get the necessary public support for the governing coalition to remain stably in office.

It is important to emphasize that legislative or constitutional reforms are not necessary to form this type of coalition. It is just a matter of will, political common sense, as has been shown in the success stories like Chile or Brazil, countries that share many similarities with Mexico. These two nations have achieved stable democracies and foster agreements and negotiations to govern with a common project. Undoubtedly, this brings with it the participation of different political parties in the cabinet and stable support in Congress.

CONCLUSIONS

Government coalitions are the result of negotiations and political agreements that, by their very nature, would be very hard to regulate in legislation. "Sometimes I have the impression," continues Carpizo, "that people try to make up for the lack of dialogue, negotiation, and political consensus-building by proposing constitutional reforms, which is naïve and extraordinarily dangerous."⁵

The candidate who wins the presidency will probably be very debilitated; his or her strength will depend to a great extent on negotiations and consensus-building with the opposition parties. In this sense, the Congress will be a very important actor for the coming government.

Mexico needs a political system that can guarantee legality, pluralism, and, with that, tolerance. For that reason, in a divided government like ours, this kind of coalition can help us to have politically responsible authorities, where account-

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ability and transparency have an impact on the confidence of the citizens in their institutions.

It is necessary that the candidates for public office, among whom are our representatives, come to inclusive agreements that put to one side individualism and focus on the construction of alliances with diverse groups to trace political proposals that make it possible to create a strong government with a legislative majority for the coming years.

For all these reasons, it is very important —rather, it is urgent— to create awareness among the different political groups about the formation of coalitions. It is to be hoped that in the next elections, Mexico will achieve a government coalition that will bring with it negotiations, pacts, and agreements that move toward joint political responsibility. The participation of the minority parties in the cabinet would be irrefutable proof of the coalition parties' level of commitment to the public policies fostered by a government coalition, so that the political parties would take on joint responsibility for government decisions. ■■■

NOTES

¹ It is important to point out that local elections will occur simultaneously in 14 states and the capital: Campeche, Colima, Chiapas, Mexico City's Federal District, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, the State of Mexico, Morelos, Nuevo León, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Sonora, Yucatán, and Tabasco.

² This idea is Kaare Strom's, as quoted by Daniel Chasqueti, "Democracia, multipartidismo y coaliciones en América Latina: evaluando la difícil combinación," Jorge Lanzaro, comp., *Tipos de presidencialismo y coaliciones políticas en América Latina* (Buenos Aires: Clacso, 2001), p. 329.

³ César Cansino, comp., *Gobiernos y partidos en América Latina* (Mexico City: Centro de Estudios de Política Comparada, 2001), p. 34.

⁴ Jorge Carpizo, "Propuestas de modificaciones constitucionales en el marco de la denominada reforma del Estado," Diego Valadés and Miguel Carbonell, comps., *El proceso constituyente mexicano. A 150 años de la Constitución de 1857 y 90 de la Constitución de 1917* (Mexico City: IJ-UNAM, 2007).

⁵ Jorge Carpizo, op. cit., pp. 170-171.