

Backward or Forward

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(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATUM*, May 21, 2017)

The only facet of life that is implacable is time gone by and, in political matters, Mexico is nearing the start of presidential succession. Positions are beginning to be honed, candidacies are cropping up everywhere and, little by little, the last stage of the sexennial cycle is emerging. As Miguel de Cervantes would write, “Neither good nor evil can last forever... so thou must not distress thyself with the misfortunes which happen...” The panorama is becoming clearer, evidencing the lacks. Up next is to understand why, after so many decades of reforms and good wishes, the country continues to be held back by ups and downs, unable to take that great leap forward that characterizes so many successful societies in the world.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Albert Camus foresaw what has occurred in our country during these decades: “Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. My generation knows that it will not reform it... Heir to a corrupt history, in which are mingled fallen revolutions... and worn-out ideologies, where mediocre powers can destroy all yet no longer know how to convince...”

All governments come to their inauguration with the certainty that they will know how to change the world, that all of their predecessors were torpid and inept. No one like Trump in that regard, but the phenomenon is universal: no promise is ever too great for a candidate to make: they all believe that they will leave an indelible footprint, the bedrock of the future. That is how the government of President Peña commenced, who, rolling out all the fanfare, launched a series of initiatives and strategies, both of reform as well as of how to govern, which ended up producing a mixed balance: legislative advances (almost) without precedent, but an everyday reality ensnared in the throes of growing deterioration. Part of that was the product of the contradictions inherent in this government itself, but much of it was not distinct from what has transpired in the country during the last half century.

The contradiction at the core is not peculiar to the current government: it is the same stone over which all of the governments since the eighties have tripped. In recent days we have been provided with a window of opportunity that permitted us to observe one of the many examples illustrating the incapacity to extricate ourselves from the old political system. The case of the pipeline thieves, the so called *huachicoleros*. The existence of these gas and petroleum-pilfering groups is suggestive of the fundamental problem; beyond the enormous cost both economic as well as of illegitimacy for the system of government that represents the impunity in this and in all the rest of national affairs, the reality is that there is no incentive to limit, impede or punish those who engage in this crime for a very simple reason: there are *huachicoleros* who are apprehended up to two or three times in the same day and who, after paying a symbolic fine, are set free to continue their criminal activities. They do this because it is not considered a crime of consequence, not one involving jail time; consequently, even with the police that we have, the incentive to catch these criminals is negative because their crime entails no consequences. The relevant question is not why they steal the gasoline (that is obvious), but instead why it is not a serious crime that would serve, at least in principle, as a dissuasive factor. The evident response is that

there are powerful political, union and criminal interests that benefit from the status quo and that wield the sufficient power, or the threatening capacity necessary, to preserve it.

The same is true in all ambits of national life: there is no reform -economic, political, labor or of civil or human rights- that does not affect the powers frozen in time, those that have embezzled for decades from the system and directly or indirectly pillaged the Public Treasury. The existence of these powerful interests has meant that the reforms, from the most modest to the most ambitious, never deliver all of their benefits, because that would imply altering the status quo from which they benefit; thus, the reforms neither advance nor confer feasible benefits, creating a vicious circle: the reaction -and the reactionaries- in this world discredit the reforms, vowing a return to the idyllic world of the past. And this is where the ongoing succession process crosses paths with daily life.

The recent French election established a new paragon. In contrast with the U.S. election last year, in which Trump embraced increasingly extreme stances every day and Hillary did nothing other than promise the same thing but a little less of it (e.g. TPP), the candidates in France did not waste any time: Le Pen proposed a return to the past while Macron presented an ambitious, proactive and bold agenda, the past vs. the future, nostalgia vs. hope. I ask myself whether there will be some candidate in Mexico who will be capable of advocating a distinct future, a promising opportunity for a society plunged deep in that sinking feeling. Break the vicious cycle.

We already know the past, which is precisely that which lies behind the interest of the power of the old political system and which, as the *huachicoleros* exemplify, were not perturbed even by the governments run by the PAN. Mexico needs a new political regime: would that the aspirants who fight with such zeal for the candidacies, also possess the vision and the courage to break with the old regime that eats away at everything.

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