

Citizen Confidence

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Is Mexico a democracy or an autocracy? The response would seem obvious, but it is not. Without doubt, Mexico has changed radically in its forms, but I ask myself whether in reality it has changed in essence. The evidence of the past couple of weeks is not endearing...

The crucial question is why have the fruits expected from the reforms undertaken not blossomed forth along the last half century? The express objective of the reforms initiated since the eighties was to raise the economy's growth rate, which were followed by an entire series of social and political reforms, some planned and others not. The Mexico of today is unrecognizable, at least in its formal institutional structure; the Constitution of today reflects a diverse country, open and complex, something radically distinct from that which existed in 1917.

The reforms have proliferated, but the growth has not been achieved and that, with the evidence of mounting corruption, is what has induced the population to protest. The anger is real and could easily become the tipping point producing unraveling the stability that, until now, has been maintained despite so many ups and downs. Of course there are parts of the country that grow at Asiatic rates, but others contract constantly and systematically; despite that, the evidence suggests that the population understand the dilemmas, now magnified by the coming of Trump. What it does not tolerate is the inequities.

The evidence of inequity is ubiquitous. Privileges persist and the protection mechanisms that the political parties, legislators and politicians enjoy are unintelligible for a population that has withstood everything. Even worse, the governors abstract themselves from the general situation to demand ever higher budgets; the federal government promises to return to macro stability but expenditures keep growing; legislators demand salary increases and gasoline vouchers. The former Federal District persists in its constitutional exercise adding ever more rights, benefits and governmental powers, without any obligations, except for the average citizen that is who, at the end of the day, pays the bills.

I have no doubt that the core problem is but one and a very simple one: the absence of citizen confidence. Confidence is always the key, but it was simpler to achieve this in the PRIist regime because the existence of vertical controls permitted the alignment of governmental actions in a world era characterized by the total control of information. This combination favored economic functionality.

The world changed, the controls broke down, information became ubiquitous and now no one can impose confidence. In this manner, the citizenry's confidence disappeared and now the government seems bent in undermining it ever more. Dozens, if not hundreds, of reforms have been approved, but none is oriented toward protecting the citizen, conferring certainty on him or guaranteeing him his rights in the face of trouncing by the politicians and the risk inherent in a change of guard in the presidency. The electoral reforms are particularly revealing: they only see to the problems of the politicians; none focuses on winning over the credibility of the citizenry.

In the literature on political transitions* two key moments are established: one from authoritarianism and the other toward democracy. Mexico concluded the first stage and for this electoral reforms were fundamental, but it lost itself in the subsequent process. Currently there are professionally managed elections that are an example to the world, alternation of parties in government is frequent and freedoms are infinitely greater. However, we continue to endure autocratic forms in issues of transparency, accountability and corruption: much is reformed but always to take care of symptoms, leaving whoever is in command (because to govern remains only an aspiration) to decide what is to be known and whom to prosecute. The grandiloquently named “National Anticorruption System” will be yet another large bureaucracy: would it not be better to eliminate the causes and sources of corruption?

I daresay that we are at a political (certainly not economic) point in time that is not very distinct from that of 1982: the country is experiencing growing deterioration that is manifested in ideological atrophy; economic erosion in vast regions of the country; endemic corruption; and political dissent –in addition to conflict- among the political elites, each looking for ways out to ensure his or her personal survival. All of that is exhibited in the form of profound anger and uncontainable contempt for the government.

What is paradoxical is that, in contrast with 1982, Mexico today has a highly powerful economic platform, the productivity attained by the modern manufacturing plant is comparable with that of the best of the world and workers’ salaries in that segment of the economy are robust and on the rise. The president had the exceptional opportunity to convoke the population in an exercise of national unity before the challenge posed by Trump, but squandered it in the gasoline decision that was poorly planned and even worse communicated, and not recognizing the social and political context of today.

NAFTA was successful because it protected –isolated- investors from the potential abuse and excesses of our revered government and its bureaucracy. Something similar will have to be achieved internally to confer certainty upon the population and thus to begin to recover the lost confidence. In this era it is impossible to prosper without the citizenship on board, which is exactly what the government seems incapable of understanding.

*above all O’Donnell and Schmitter.

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