

Incomplete Change*

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From "perfect dictatorship" Mexico became the "imperfect democracy." Over the last decades, the old system collapsed but did not disappear: while today there are regularly held elections that are impeccable in their operation and management (independently of one of the candidates and his party disputing them), Mexico's government is far from being functional, effective and at the service of the citizenry. The consequences of this new reality are tangible.

The old system gradually lost its capacity of control fundamentally as a result of its own success in pacifying the country after the Revolution and establishing the bases for growth. High growth rates throughout various decades (1940s–1960s) generated enormous differentiation in Mexican society, extraordinary urban growth and the development of professions, universities and all types of factors that, in time, emerged as incompatible with the old system of control. Little by little, Mexican society was freeing up spaces in the face of centralized power control, weakening the traditional structures that, additionally, proved excessively rigid for it to adjust and adapt.

One must not lose sight of that the system was created to appease the country and to establish an institutionalized process of decision making after the feat of the Revolution. The mechanism of attraction –the carrot- for the leaderships that were incorporated into the new organization was the promise of access to power and/or wealth through the system; the cost of being incorporated consisted of relinquishing freedom of operation outside of the system, given that belonging to the new Party -PRI's grandfather- entailed acceptance of the system's "unwritten" rules whose essence comprised submission to the presidential power. The system was so effective in terms of compliance with its discipline that Mexico engendered a caste of affluent and powerful politicians as a result of their appertaining to the exclusive club. The so-called "Revolutionary Family" took care of its own and compensated them generously.

The presidency of Carlos Salinas was illustrative of the incentives found: a modernizer president, the only statesman that we living Mexicans have known (in terms of constructing a long-term, visionary, development project, affecting important interests along the way), dedicated himself to transforming the foundations of the country's economy with the objective of raising its growth rate. Innumerable reforms followed in matters of foreign trade, in addition to the privatization of enterprises that were up to that point state-owned, such as telephony, television and the banking system. Reforms in economic matters were ambitious and thoroughgoing but, at the same time, limited because of the ulterior objective that, while not explicit, was nonetheless obvious: it procured elevating the growth rate of the economy *to avoid* a political change, that is, loss of

control of the system and the benefits that the latter bestowed on its beneficiaries. The price of that duality came to be evident in the crisis of 1995 and has yet to be eradicated.

The era of Salinas coincided with that of Gorbachev in the Soviet Union: both presided over reformist moments in their countries. Gorbachev headed a process of political liberalization (*Glasnost*) that he conceived as necessary to bring about the economic transformation (*Perestroika*) possible. The outcome was that Gorbachev lost power and the Soviet system collapsed. In that context, Salinas, a keen observer of what was occurring in those latitudes, concentrated on economic reforms, even though these were limited in view of the political conditioning. The consequence was two-fold: on the one hand, the reforms sowed the seeds of a new economy, competitive and productive, but one limited in its reach, leaving an immense number of Mexicans in the old industry, distant from modernization processes and with very low productivity levels. On the other hand, in one of the ironies of history, that of Mexico as well as that of Russia, each in its own manner and its own historic tradition, eventually rebuilt part of their old political systems.

The relevant fact was that the Mexican economy underwent a profound transformation but not a generalized one; by the same token, the old political class, much of which opposed the reforms of these decades, has pursued a gradual but systematic process of re-concentration of power, guided to a greater extent by nostalgia of the old system than by a new political model or an economic alternative. The question is, Can this change?

There are innumerable signs of extraordinary effervescence throughout Mexico. In some cases, groups of women have risen to eradicate narco traffickers from their towns; in others, entire communities have organized to search for their disappeared relatives, victims of the violence of the last years. There are many more examples of citizen mobilization than one would imagine from the outside. However, it isn't obvious that from these cases a serious, systematic capacity to exact change could emerge, but that is probably the only opportunity Mexico will have to break away, in an institutional, non violent way, from the obstacles that today keep the population in such state of anxious unease.

* Extract from the book: *A World of Opportunities* <http://bit.ly/2supStM>

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