

## **The Limits of Salvation**

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Mexicans live in the hope that someone will come to save them, a hope that is renewed every 6 years. This has to do with the obverse of the PRIist authoritarianism of old: a vast system of political control that curtailed the population's capacity of action, obliging it to wait for a change from above. While the old system collapsed, its forms and its culture remain, even after two PAN administrations, a party that was created in reaction to PRI abuse. This circumstance gives rise to two parallel and in a certain manner paradoxical realities: on the one hand, Mexican society cries out but does not rebel; on the other, the country changes a great deal, and much more rapidly than it appears to.

The world seems difficult when one looks ahead and sees the challenges that Mexico faces and the apparently meager capacity to surmount them. However, when one looks back, it is impacting that so much has changed with regard to the country's reality. Today Mexico is a manufacturing power, the population is at liberty to express itself as it wishes and quality of life levels have improved discernibly. Of course, none of that lessens the lacks that characterize the country, but it does put them in perspective. The contrast in perspectives is revealing in terms of how Mexico has evolved over the last decades. Up to the end of the sixties, the economy grew with celerity and the authoritarian political system (that enjoyed enormous legitimacy) brought about an environment of order and peace. The federal government dominated all national life and took care of security with the methods of the epoch. That idyllic world began to crumble because it did not generate escape valves in the political sphere and because its economic sustenance (essentially the export of grains to defray the costs of importing capital goods) stopped functioning, generating a growth crisis.

From the beginning of the seventies, one government after another has developed responses to the growth problem. Some led the country to the brink of bankruptcy (1970–1982); others built permanent structures, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which contributed to the transformation of the industrial plant. However, similarly to what occurred in the political ambit, that process of economic change has remained truncated due to the presence of power factors that benefit from the status quo. In contrast to transformative processes in other nations, in Mexico there has existed the spirit of change but not the inclination or competence to modify the power structure (both economic as well as political).

The political transition that the country has undergone manifests this in unmistakable fashion. Despite there being an initial agreement (1996) with respect to reforming the electoral rules in order to guarantee electoral equity, there was never an agreement on the point of departure and even less so on the objective to be achieved. In this manner, national politics continues to be as contentious as before and parties recognize the election result only when it is favorable to them. That is, an election is democratic if I win, but not if I lose. Thus, while there is no way to deny the professionalism of the electoral organs and the transparency of the election processes, nearly 35% of the population thinks that what is relevant is not the process but rather the result.

It is within this context that the arrival of President Peña-Nieto into the government and his incapacity for advancing his agenda should be understood. Having been a successful state governor, Peña-Nieto promised efficacy as his calling card. As soon as he assumed the presidency, he launched a legislative whirlwind. In only a few months, the Mexican Constitution had been transformed with respect to its main articles. The agenda for change was not new: all of what was reformed had been discussed for decades; what was impressive was the political skill displayed to achieve the conversion of the reforms into law. The President exhibited a great ability for negotiation, but the key factor, the only one that his PANist predecessors were unable to administrate, consisted of controlling the army of PRIist partisans. For historical reasons, the PRIists, the power holders for decades throughout the XX Century, are also the beneficiaries of the status quo. Their opposition to previous reform proposals was the product of their desire to preserve their poaching rights. Peña's success resided in controlling those groups and avoiding their blockage of the legislative process. However, as soon as that was accomplished, those same interests returned to what they had always done: ignoring the reforms and continuing to engage in their time-honored métiers.

In addition to the legislative marasmus, the new government ensconced itself above the society and reinvented old mechanisms of control upon the society, the governors, the media, the unions, and the entrepreneurs. This manner of acting responded to a quintessential consideration: the government set out from the premise that the country required a restoration of order and the best model was that of the PRI golden era: the sixties. Though it is obvious that the old political system and the economic strategy of yesteryear did not crumple due to the will of the then-governors, the Peña government turned a blind eye to the changes that have taken place in Mexico as well as in the world during these decades and focused on carrying out its own agenda of transformation –and its own reality.

The population encountered the advent of Peña-Nieto and his assertiveness with a mixture of amazement and expectancy. Like the great Tlatoani, the Aztec leader, Peña came onto the scene to save Mexico. In a daze, Mexicans saw how the economic performance of the administration went from bad to worse, tax increases affected the consumption of the most impoverished population and the ire of those affected by the insertion of controls was accumulating. As soon as the first crisis presented, –the straw that broke the camel's back- the entire country turned against the President. Beyond the deaths of the 43 students in Iguala a year ago, its political significance was clear: it became an excuse for the whole population, in collective anonymity, to voice its dissent.

The extraordinary part is not the anger or the upset, both observable and predictable, but instead the absolute incapacity of the government to respond. Efficiency was forsaken, now replaced by a fearful and paralyzed government. The reality of the power in Mexico had won: in the end it was evident that the government did not intend to alter the power structure but only to merely incorporate a certain efficiency into some sectors or activities exhibiting potential, all of this without undermining interests already reaping benefits from the system.

What the experience of President Peña demonstrated is that Mexico has a serious power problem: there is no elemental set of game rules that enjoy full legitimacy among all of the political actors, so there are no rules at all. The governor possesses enormous powers that allow acting arbitrarily at any time, the reason being that investment –and credibility- is limited to a sexennial time frame and everything revolves

around the confidence inspired by the president in turn. That is to say, Mexico's great problem is that it lacks institutions that confer permanence and legitimacy on the system of government and assurances of soundness on Mexicans.

Therefore, Mexico is suffering through permanent schizophrenia: great changes and few achievements; regions that are thriving and great poverty in others; a government pledging efficiency but only a little. Mexico is trapped between the old system of controls that persist and an increasingly prepared, increasingly demanding society. As in the old times, that permits apparent stability but guarantees permanent illegitimacy. Until the next president emerges with newly minted avowals.

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