

The New Streak

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(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATUM*, November 27, 2016)

Western democracies are in crisis. One country after the other undergoes radical changes in the conformation of their electoral structures: voters appear to be fed up with the traditional solutions and begin to opt for alternatives that previously seemed inconceivable. In France, the Extreme Right advances without cease; in Spain the old Spanish Socialist Workers Party–Popular Party (PSOE–PP) duopoly collapsed and it took more than a year to get a government in place; in England the Radical Left took control of the Labor Party. The U.S. broke all the historical cannons. Beyond the specifics, it is reasonable to ask whether in Mexico we will continue in the “nothing’s going on here” mode or, sooner or later, alternatives impossible or unthinkable until now will see the light.

The heart of the disenchantment exhibited by the electorate in the most diverse countries is the same: there is exhaustion, despair and a consequent rejection of traditional politics that promises but doesn’t deliver the goods. Citizens are tired of politicians who steal, provide increasingly less credible explanations, do not solve problems, pass the time dealing merely with ghosts and symptoms, without ever creating the conditions for the economy to satisfy the needs of the population or for democracy to serve as an effective mechanism of representation.

It is entirely possible, even likely, that the solutions adopted by the electorate in any of these countries ends up solving nothing, but the message is clear: patience with poor government has limits.

Over the past few decades, Mexico has undergone increasingly more vice-ridden, petty and dysfunctional electoral reforms that do not even appease the very parties that promote them. And that doesn’t even address the citizenry standing dauntlessly before the spectacle of the political parties’ businesses and their endless waste. It is possible that the El Bronco phenomenon in Nuevo León heralds a new political era, but there is no doubt that what made it popular, above

all in the absence of a credible government program was its vow to put the former governor in jail. The spurning of “politics as usual” is patent.

Although each country is very distinct, two ambits dominate the citizenry’s ire: the economy and the corruption. The Mexican economy has for decades been split in two: one functions and grows like a meteor, the other contracts and becomes impoverished. Instead of tackling the causes of these differences, the political debate revolves around the past (that is, abandoning what little there is that does work) or following the same course of action (that is, don’t change anything, even for the better), although this does not fix the problem. With regard to the corruption, scandals accumulate but the responses to these are always rhetorical: new laws are drawn up because in Mexico there is no problem that does not merit a new law that, of course, will never amount to anything relevant or solve the problem.

The peso experiences its greatest devaluation in decades and this is always the fault of others. The problem seems evident but the justification is always the same: the bad international situation. In the past thirty years there have been periods of extraordinary economic growth in the world and others of recession, but in the Mexican economy, with the exclusion of a pair of really bad years, things have continued exactly the same: a pathetic average annual growth rate of around 2%. What is emblematic is that no one is responsible for this: when things go poorly in the outside, the problem is the U.S. or the Chinese economy, the international recession or the oil prices. When things go well elsewhere, the fault is of the previous administrations or of the opposition political parties. There is no lack of excuses but responses and actions likely to confront the problem are non-existent.

The marvelous part is that, when faced with adversity, the Mexican always responds with a joke and in that things have indeed changed: it is affirmed that the difference between dictatorship and democracy lies in that in the former the politicians laugh at the citizens while in the latter it’s the other way around. Measured under this yardstick, the Mexican democracy is a consolidated one: there is no affair or corrupt practice, however insignificant, which does not occasion a regenerative witticism. Were Mexicans only to devote that creativity to technological innovation, the development of new products or the improvement of productivity, the country would be Switzerland.

Creativity is not absent among politicians either. For decades, the famous quip, now mythical, about when the new president gets stuck, he finds his predecessor had left to him three envelopes. The first says “blame me”; the second, “change your cabinet”; the third reads: “write three envelopes”. The point is clear: do anything but solve the problems.

As illustrated by the electorates of countries like those mentioned at the beginning, the problem is universal in character: the world has changed but governmental and political systems no longer solve the problems. At the same time, many of the problems are not so difficult to solve because their causes are obvious. Reagan sketched out the problem clairvoyantly: “For many years you and I have been shushed like children and told there are no simple answers to the complex problems which are beyond our comprehension. Well, the truth is that there are simple answers. They just are not easy ones”.

In effect, there are no easy solutions, but the answers are obvious. The question is whether the traditional political system will make them theirs or whether others, outside of the system, will come to try.

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