

Two Worlds

By Luis Rubio, President, Centre of Research for Development (CIDAC), Mexico City
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Mexico has spent decades confronting the past with the future without wanting to break with the former to decidedly embrace the latter. The situation is overwhelming and particularly visible in the interminable collection of governmental actions oriented toward pretending to change without there being any change.

In the two ambits in which politico-governmental activism has been greatest in the last decades -the electoral and the economic-trade- the country has been characterized by enormous reforms with relatively poor results. I doubt whether there are many countries in the world that have undergone so many electoral reforms in so few years and, despite an extraordinarily exemplary and professional system, emulated around the world, we continue to live through an uncontrollable electoral dispute and, above all, one of credibility, whenever there are elections. In the economy, the country has striven to orchestrate trade agreements all over the world and has carried out ambitious reforms that never end being thoroughly implemented.

It would not be exaggerated to affirm that, thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the job opportunities that U.S. economy contributed for decades, the Mexican political class has not had to change its customs or diminish its privileges. While the average economic performance has been, to say the least, mediocre, it has been sufficient to keep the ship afloat. In the political arena, the many electoral reforms have not changed the nature of party interaction, although they have made it much more complex: rivers of money continue to flow, outgoing governments and the Federal Government persist in manipulating the results and the elected positions continue to be sources for the acquisition of wealth, not for good government. All these reforms have failed to produce an effective system of government, as illustrated by the security crisis.

Another way of saying this is that the country goes on living in the past while paying homage to the future. Deidre McCloskey expressed this idea in a most revealing way: “The Left and the Right join in opposing the future: the one because it is not a planned future, and the other because it is not identical to the past.” The future that everyone promises ends up being a mirage because no one has the least intention of building it.

Today, Election Day, it is necessary to reflect on the candidates' promises vis-à-vis the lags, lacks, problems and gaps that persist and that are the product of a past that created them but that is incapable of solving them. How can these two realities, these two sides of the same coin, be reconciled?

Historically, Mexico has been the spoils of war –to steal or to construct another, future, post, but the spoils nonetheless- for the parties and the politicians, begging the question of whether the ongoing and unstoppable exercise of postponing solutions is sustainable. That is, although the economy has grown at a rhythm of more or less 2% in recent decades, that number, like any average, conceals more than it reveals. Some states and regions grow at almost Asian rates while others contract. The potential for social conflict in the latter is infinite and, in many senses, constant. Despite this, governments come and governments go but the lags –and their consequences- linger on.

The worlds of the past and of the future do not communicate, but one depends on the other and it is there that governmental activity clashes. The problems of the past - insecurity, poor education, lousy infrastructure, absence of authority- impede the future from being built, a future that would require conditions for individuals to be able to develop their capacities to the maximum. It should appear obvious that it is necessary to deal with the past for it to be possible to construct the future, but that obviousness is not within the terrain of governmental action because that would imply undermining vested interests: insecurity or poor education can be solved, but the solution involves corralling the political groups, unions and, in general, interests beholden to, and benefitting from, the status quo. Therefore, the past –abiding as it does in the present- sabotages the construction of the future.

A new government would have to think about moving from the past towards the future. It is not possible to deliberate on attracting investment –the State of Mexico (Edomex), for example, has been driving it out- unless the problems of security are tackled. The insecurity (a by-product and the disagreeable aftertaste of the old political system) can only be confronted with a new system of government, founded on the concepts and realities of the XXI century, not those of the old PRI inherited from the era of Porfirio Diaz in the XIX century. Without security, the future is inconceivable. The same is true with education: education conceived for control and for the benefit of the Teachers' Union is incompatible with the knowledge economy and is the main cause of substandard jobs and low salaries. It is not by chance that the union's bastions are the principal supports of the most reactionary summons to vote in the election of the Edomex of today.

With Trump, the old system has been stretched to the limit. The question is who offers a better alternative.

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@lrubiof