

From Here to the 18th

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Four years is a long time: in this space a country can establish the foundations of its transformation toward development, but also to destroy what was accumulated over decades. The difference lies in the existence of a viable economic and political strategy and the leadership capable of leading the way through. As Martin Luther King affirmed, “darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that”. The question is from whence will come the light?

This president embarked with flying colors upon a long list of reforms and a political mechanism—the so called Pact for Mexico—for their approval. What followed makes plain the nature of the problem: the log jam set in when implementation of the constitutional reforms had to begin, a process by definition involving the affecting of special interests because reform inexorably entails modification of the status quo, but it opted not to do this. Some reforms were shelved, others watered down and yet others were in practice renegotiated. The result: many changes but little probability of achieving tangible benefits, while a dangerous propensity to undermine the existing (and weak) institutional structures was created.

As the months went by, it was evident that the criterion for putting the reforms into effect had no bearing on the success of these, but rather with not affecting specific interests. The case of the educative reform is illustrative: every single union section that rebelled against the reform was granted an exception. The same went with the National Polytechnic Institute. It is natural and even commendable for the government to privilege peace and stability, making circumstantial concessions. However, exceptions are useful if only to buy time for subsequently forcing implementation of the reform required: contrariwise, they would become political facts that annul all possibility of the government’s achieving its own objectives. Cancelling the implementation of the reforms can only provoke an expansive and endless wave of new petitioners: Does anyone remember the so called “concerta-cesiones” of the 1980’s, before the 1996 electoral reform, when each concession led to ever more complex demands?

As de Tocqueville once wrote of the reform process as the most dangerous moment for a government, the great risk that President Peña now confronts is having altered the foundations of the old constitutional order without having anything to show for it, undermining the groups and interests that sustain his party without having constructed a new coalition to support it.

By the time the events in Iguala came to be known the government already had problems. Iguala had the effect of unifying all who felt threatened, affected or aggravated by the government, mixing Greeks and Trojans together, some exceedingly innocent regarding the nature of their new “partners”. The absence of government response magnified the event (which I don’t want to minimize but it’s obvious that this also is not exceptional in a country that has witnessed over 100,000 deaths in recent years) and altered the political equation.

What didn't change was the governmental script and frame of reference, which have proven unviable and unsustainable.

The question is what's next. Countries with solid structures that don't rely on the skill or fitfulness of individual persons can navigate for a long time without anything happening: examples of this are plentiful, as with the U.S. today. But the contrary is also true of countries where the absence of institutions confers so much power, but also responsibility, on the individuals in charge. In one word, there's no way that the country could survive without setbacks after four years astray. The government has to act –act differently- or will confront the actions and strategies of those bent on exploiting the roiling river. The strategy of no conflict at any price is leading the country towards anarchy.

The paradox of the moment lies in that the present government possesses the characteristics necessary to advance an ambitious reform project but appears to be unwilling to take the crucial step, which would inevitably imply affecting interests near the heart of the President himself, as well as building an alliance with the natural beneficiaries, although the majority still don't know this: the citizens.

Successful reformers have been those who bestow privilege their reforms over and above their friendships. In their *Praise of Betrayal*, Jeambar and Roucaute affirm that "Everyone understands that it is very praiseworthy for a prince to keep his word and to live with integrity, without tricks or reprimands. Notwithstanding this, the experience our era demonstrates that the princes who have done great things have not put themselves out to keep their word". That's the tessitura in which President Peña finds himself: captain the ship into a safe port or be sunk by corruption, the keepers of agendas of non-institutional change and an economy that does not grow.

The best way of bringing the matter into focus is to acknowledge that the key resides in satisfying the population's most basic needs, starting with the hope of a better life and the certainty that things will not get worse. The economic policy pursued to date goes counter these principles and endangers the viability of the country. Juan Perón observed that the most sensitive organ in the body is the pocketbook, a saying that applies equally to the most modest worker and to the loftiest businessman. The overarching uncertainty of the present can only be defeated with credible and lasting rules: clear-minded stewardship and a growing economy.

The President urgently needs to revert the destructive wave in which he finds himself and that can only happen with a game changer. Leading the nation towards the rule of law would be a grand place to start.

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