

Past and Present

By Luis Rubio, President, Centre of Research for Development (CIDAC), Mexico City
(English translation of article in Spanish published by *INFOLATAM*, September 6, 2015)

Those who idolize the old PRIist system speak of the predictability that characterized it. The rules were clear, the values consensual and the risks known. Those who were part of the system knew that there were ups and downs but loyalty was always rewarded. To be “institutional” constituted a distinction only bestowed upon those who had lived equally through triumph and political disgrace. Not exceptional were those who had crossed the desert. The system worked thanks to the combination of loyalty and hope: fealty to the chief in turn, hopes of attaining political redemption. From this arose a natural order: barring a justifiable exception, good behavior was prized and dissention was penalized. There was an order.

The old PRIist order was not based on the law or legality but rather on that peculiar misnomer invented by the system of the “unwritten rules”, which were nothing other than loyalty to the President in turn and respect for the form, the acceptable way of doing things. What is interesting is that the combination of these two elements constituted a factor of stability that distinguished Mexico for decades. Although the system conceived by Plutarco Elías Calles in 1928 did not accomplish the consolidation of a “country of institutions” as he proposed at the time of the creation of the National Revolutionary Party, the grandfather of the PRI, the great achievement was a regime of order and stability whose backbone lay in the six-year limit to power and fealty to the President of the moment. These mechanisms would not pass the test of an idyllic democracy such as that which tends to be dreamed about today, but that does not take away the enormous merit of having procured an era of peace and stability in tremendous contrast with the majority of countries in the region.

On one of his writings under the spell of his depression and melancholy, President José López Portillo affirmed having been the last of the revolutionary presidents. In effect, the author of the crisis of 1982 broke with all of the rules of the system and, with that, gave flight to the era of the economic debacle. Up to the eighties, all of the Mexican post-revolutionary presidents had been military men or lawyers, both committed, from their professional training, to the value of forms and formality: adhering to established patterns, repeatable and predictable, which implied a basis of trust on which the society could depend. Thus, although politicians’ careers individually rose and fell (often referred to as the wheel of fortune), the society knew that there was a minimum point from which they would never deviate: an order. Some presidents emphasized the Left, others the Right, but none departed from the accepted canons of the epoch. Additionally, compliance with the forms generated confidence in the business community and the presidents understood that this comprised an essential factor of trust. Everyone played the game.

The era of the crises began in 1976 and ended (one hopes!) until 1995. During those twenty years, the country lost its historic stability, sources of trust and economic viability. Changes in the world context had a great deal to do with the disappearance of the “minimal” platform that had functioned historically, but the greatest of the changes was the fact that the system held fast to the past and did not have the capacity to foresee and adapt to the transformation of the Mexican society itself (an incapacity evidenced in living color in 1968), as well as of the world economy and globalization.

In the eighties the technocrats arrived to the rescue: novel criteria and forms of acting that clashed with the old system. The economy was liberalized, government-owned companies were privatized and new forms of economic administration were adopted, forms that adhered to a greater extent to the international norms than to the national history but that, unfortunately, never delineated in black and white: they always left a margin for granting personal favors and, with that, the impossibility of arriving at full modernity.

But not only had the economy changed: the reverence also disappeared for “the forms”. What previously comprised unrestricted respect for the “unwritten rules” suddenly turned into legislation redacted by economists (instead of lawyers) that came to be, with great frequency, indefensible in a court of law. The end of the country of forms was accompanied by attempts to codify a partially open economic system but that never consolidated. Thus, although the economy reaped some good years of growth, the highs and lows have been the constant since the close of the eighties.

Thus, Mexico never forsook its past, therefore it never was able to construct a distinct future. The extreme is the current government, whose mantra is forget the future and return to what worked in the caveman era of the old PRIist system. Back to form over substance.

Order is a necessary condition for the progress of a nation. Without order everything is an illusion because the propensity toward disorder and instability is permanent. This does not imply that the system conceived by Porfirio Diaz (1876-1910) of “order and progress” is required, but Mexico does have to find institutional mechanisms, ideally within its precarious democracy, to consolidate a minimal platform of stability and trust as the old system did at its time. The world of today is not in any way like that of the middle of the past century, but one thing never changes: the need for the population to have trust in their governors. That is something that even Mao Tse Tung, the Leninist communist, understood from the beginning, but that our government does not recognize even as the dollar hovers close to 18 pesos per.

www.cidac.org

@Irubiof