

The key of three

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Three categories of institutions lie at the heart of a political system: the State, the Rule of Law and an accountable government. For those who conceive of institutions as the large buildings that personify them, the perspective of Fukuyama* permits the understanding of institutions to a lesser extent as a product of legal structures or of great designs and pacts and to a greater degree as the result of customs and norms that take shape through long-term evolutive processes in which the government as well as the society little by little do their part and achieve a functional equilibrium.

Perhaps what is most interesting about this author's analysis is his view of the way that traditional societies constructed institutions: first these societies centralized the power, typically in the hands of tribal or military authorities who controlled a determined territory. A second axis arises from daily practice: the authority defends the community against external aggression, all the while responding to economic evolution, protecting the property that over time is being defined by its members. What's interesting about Fukuyama's argument is that there is no preconceived plan of political evolution, but rather institutions gradually take shape according to the needs and daily challenges that emerge. In this manner, in the third axis, the growing demands on the part of the society build themselves in order to limit the excesses and abuses of the governor. In piecemeal fashion, those demands come to compel the encoding of practices and agreements, giving rise to written law. Over time representative bodies are organized (assemblies and parliaments) that formalize the obligation of the governor to render accounts to the society. Modern democracy is born when governors accept the formal rules and subordinate themselves to these, which implies limiting their power and sovereignty, recognizing the collective will as expressed in frequently held elections.

The three elements (State, laws, accountability) are functional when they achieve a non-paralyzing equilibrium: each is the counterweight of the others but the coming together of the three arrives at resolutions and decides on core matters. What's crucial is that the population is added into the process, not because of generosity or altruism but instead because doing this satisfies their needs and attends to their interests. The Rule of Law ends up being the formula of interaction among distinct interests, some conflicting, others simply different.

Not all countries reach a balance. For example, Singapore has a strong State as well as strong Rule of Law but lacks effective account-rendering mechanisms. Russia, says Fukuyama, has a strong State and elections are frequent, but their governors do not feel obliged by the Rule of Law. Afghanistan has a weak government and a fragmented society, incapable of exacting the rendering of accounts. In these terms, it is not difficult to characterize Mexico as a nation that experiences frequent electoral processes, where the law is a poor referent for social interaction and the government as well as the society is relatively weak.

The evolution of each country possesses a relentless genetic signature. In some nations war drove the development of the State, in others war enfeebled it; in some cases it was religion that caused the rise of a strong society that later led to the Rule of Law. Technology, geography, population density and neighborhood are all explanatory factors. The interesting thing about the XX century is that it demonstrated that it is possible, at least under certain circumstances, to break with historical determinism. That opportunity, which nations such as Korea, Spain, Chile and other similar countries took advantage of to transform themselves, should be the model for Mexico to consider for the future.

According to Fukuyama's conceptual schema, Mexico entertain lacks in the three categories: weak State, defective Rule of Law and a society that has not transcended criticism in order to become a positive and effective counterweight. Our history has a great deal to do with this. The only two times during which the country achieved true economic progress were the Porfiriato and the PRI's good years. The common denominator of both periods was a government capable of organizing the society and imposing itself on it. When the government overstepped itself (as in the 1970s), it produced chaos; when it managed to get the equilibrium right (as it did between the late 1940s and the mid-1960s), the success was noteworthy.

This history invites many to imagine that Mexico's problem lies in the decentralization that took place in recent decades, therefore everything would be fixed by returning to the fold. The evidence against this is overwhelming due to the nature of this moment in history, technology and Mexico's geography. Rather, the problem resides in the chaos of the decentralization and in the lack of leadership in the construction of institutions and of the mechanisms of accountability that makes institutions possible. That is, it's not that the state governors must go back to being pawns of the president or that the society must be docile, both unviable propositions. In the absence of a natural equilibrium such as the one described by Fukuyama, what's lacking is a strategy of decentralization that entails the construction of State capacity (administrative, judicial, the police, etc.) that in turn leads to the construction of a modern country.

What we have today is a deteriorated political system that hasn't gelled and that, given the track we're on, never will. Leadership is required that is willing to construct and subsequently self-limit. It's not easy, but it's obvious.

*Fukuyama, Francis, The Origins of Political Order, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 2011

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