

Excesses and Vacuums

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The accusation of supposed acts of corruption has turned into a national sport. No day goes by without the social networks posting photographs of a public official boarding a governmental helicopter or a politician's wife entering a store in Los Angeles. The phenomenon cuts across the entire political spectrum, but the look is fixedly trained on the federal government. The faults of the Left appear lesser in the logic of the prototypical accuser. Is this an excess or merely a patriotic, therefore democratic, act?

My perspective is plain from the outset: on the one hand each person is free to express himself or herself as they please. Freedom is above all debate. On the other hand, it is evident that in the country there exists an enormous propensity for abuse, corruption and excess. Freedom is an extraordinary means in the hands of a committed citizenship to expose and fight corruption, abuse and excess, and nobody can object to this fundamental principle.

But such a broad definition of liberty is not equally free, even if it seems tautological, when the social media is used as a concerted instrument of attack, defamation and unlimited hate. I am not suggesting establishing any limit to freedom, but it is impossible to pretend that a concerted effort such as Mexicans have been witnessing is the result of free individuals acting on their own.

In this context, Does a person –civil servant or a relative- have the right to go shop wherever they like? Does such an act imply, by itself, an act of corruption? Clearly, it is not the same to employ government property or assets for personal or private purposes, than the freedom of each individual to do what they chose with their patrimony and their life. If the President's wife wants to go shopping with her own money, since when is it a matter of concern for the remainder of us Mexicans?

In the perverted political and media circus that Mexicans politics has become, two distinct matters have been amalgamated that are not alike. In the first place we found the freedom of each person, from the President and his family and his inner circle –functionaries or not-, to the most modest of Mexicans, to do what they want with their life and money. Pretending that a few opinion bloggers or tweeters have the monopoly on the truth and the right to decide, with no responsibility whatsoever, with respect to whether this is legitimate or not, is not only arbitrary but potentially lethal. No society can survive if it does not respect the private life of its governors.

Second, the latter does not imply that the use of public resources for private ends is equally legitimate. In those cases in which specific behaviors are duly sanctioned by law, any infringement should be penalized immediately; the alternative would be to accept and recognize a distinct double standard for politicians with respect to common mortals. By the same token, where the law does not typify a situation of potential corruption or when it is a case of the private life of a functionary or his relatives, the mere pretension, by itself, of this being a situation of corruption is not sufficient: that must be decided by a judge. In the last weeks and months the

two matters have been confused to such a degree that the political viability of the country as well as of organized society has been threatened.

The problem is that the latter is not a product of chance. Much of what goes on in the country on a daily basis responds to a much greater degree to the actions and causes of persons and groups dedicated to systematic denunciation as a political strategy. But at heart, this has become possible, because the government has left an immense vacuum: it is the government that has created the culture medium for the mistrust overwhelming the country. When the government lets down its guard in a society characterized by weak institutions, it rapidly becomes the source of all evil and corruption.

On lack of governmental action, one must look at what does exist, and that is a vacuum that has been filled by groups, interests and actors, some organized and other not, many of these with obvious agendas. In the absence of the government, the agenda is determined by the collective public that, in a country buttressed by institutions that are both dysfunctional and easy to manipulate, entails the risk of running off the rails. Which is precisely what has been happening. The governmental defense, expressed in the periodical *El País* last December, is frankly pathetic: “We are not going to substitute reforms with theatrical acts of great impact, we are not interested in creating successful 72-hour media cycles. We are going to be patient in this new cycle of reforms. We are not going to cede even if the public clamors for blood and circus or to cater to the tastes of op-ed writers. It will be the institutions that get us out of the crisis, not a show of bravado”. The country does not cry out for shows of bravado but instead for leadership, clarity of vision and certainty. This also is not about theatrical acts but rather, simply, about there being someone in charge, commonly known as “governing”.

“Troy is burning,” Homer would have said, but the current government appears indifferent. A country like the U.S. could do the dead man’s crawl, but Mexico does not enjoy that privilege because certainty depends wholly on the government in turn. As long as the President does not assume leadership, the country will continue to remain adrift and the cost, as occurred in the “Tragic Dozen” (1970-1982), will end up being defrayed by the country and the present government. That outcome would not good for anyone.

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