

The Country's Dilemma

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The dismay never fails to surprise. I visit various places in Mexico and hear the same complaints and concerns: how is it possible that the deterioration of the country continues? Some worry about the insecurity, others went to college but now drive a taxi, others simply do not believe that their economic situation is going to improve. The question is no longer when but if it will be possible to emerge from the hole at all. This is especially true in the case of those who, in addition to the anguish, must also undergo the *via Crucis* that is confronting the judiciary to exact compensation after being harmed or forcing a service provider to comply with the terms of a contract or agreement.

The dilemma about governing the country is very simple: reestablish the control mechanisms of yesteryear or construct a new political structure. The first option, only modestly creative but easier to achieve, implies recentralizing power, imposing a set of control mechanisms in various areas, and attempting to subordinate society and above all the so-called "de facto powers" to the presidential purpose. The alternative, which is much more complex and ambitious but also potentially much more durable, is redesigning the political system. At some level, the second stage implies finishing what was started by Plutarco Elías-Calles in the 1920s but adapted to the needs and circumstances of the 21st century.

In one of his articles, José Luis Reyna touched upon a crucial theme: "One difference between democracy and authoritarian systems is that few institutions and rules are required for governing in an authoritarian system; the will of the governor is sufficient for imposing his will, arbitrary or not, on the others. In contrast, in a democratic regime the rules must be able to be followed, obeyed and respected. For that institutions are needed to implement the agreements, the differences and their consequences." Under this metric, Mexico continues to be, or at least behave as, an authoritarian regime.

The critical part of the Mexican reality is that since 1968 the centralized regime that concentrated power weakened until it virtually vanished but the country did not enter into a stage of institutional development. The result has not been the flowering of a society avid for democratic participation (although there are incipient manifestations of this) but rather the dispersion of power and the disappearance of responsibility. From what previously, within a very distinct domestic and international context, permitted the existence of a functional government (although not always effective and grandiose as the legend suggests), the country passed into an era of entitlement claimants in which the whole society –from the president to the most remote mayor, including legislators, business people, union and social leaders-- defended privileges and perks, that is, the status quo. The authority and capacity for intimidation disappeared, at least at the federal level, but in all areas the forms continue to be authoritarian. It is the worst of all worlds: new mechanisms were not developed for resolving problems nor was there still capacity to use the mechanisms from before. Greater control and concentration of power will not change this reality.

The heart of the matter is whether the problem is one of persons or of political structures. Although all politicians have strengths and defects, Mexico's problems transcend its presidents. The paradox is not a small one: given the weakness of the institutions, an effective president has enormous space in which to maneuver and, with that, the opportunity to do great good or great damage to the country. An effective leader can construct the foundations of a promising future or can do harm to opportunities for such

foundations. Echeverría and López-Portillo exemplify the costs of strong leadership that damage the country and create disorder and costs that last for generations. Carlos Salinas modified the course of the development of the economy but did not consolidate it. The great statesmen of the past, such as Elías-Calles, ended up betraying themselves. The question for President Peña-Nieto is whether he will go down in history as one more president who tried but could not and as the president who inflicted irreparable harm on development, or as the new constructor of institutions, who made the country's next stage possible. The challenge is the creation of a strong government that stems from the strength of its institutions.

Fragment from the book *A Mexican Utopia: The Rule of Law Is Possible*. www.wilsoncenter.org

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