

## The PRI of Yore

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The proposal seemed infallible: restore order and growth. After years of disorder, criminality and an economy that appeared not to get off the ground, an effective government was promised. Many bit the hook, a sufficient number to provide a new opportunity for the old political party that, in one of those linguistic sleights of hand, presented as new something from a distant past that it intended to recreate. The premise of the new government, like so many others that preceded it, that of Fox above all others, was that the former governments comprised an inept group that didn't understand anything. The new group embodied the truth and the capacity to make it stick.

The problem does not lie in the notion of recreating a better era but rather the pretension that this is possible. The past disappeared because it was unsustainable: because the reality passed it by. Echeverría broke with nearly four decades of a line of government –the so-called stabilizing development- because this had ceased yielding high growth rates. Certainly a change was required, but his response was the wrong one because it initiated the era of crises that beleaguered the Mexican economy for a quarter of a century. The reforms finally began in the eighties, under very difficult circumstances due to the hyperinflation into which Mexico almost plummeted. Had we taken the liberalizing pathway from the 1970 on (instead of a decade later), the process would have been gradual and without much ado.

The governments of the eighties and nineties were learning, almost always grudgingly, that the world was changing and that only by adapting themselves to the new realities would it be possible to redirect the Mexican ship. The post-revolutionary era had been characterized by iron-fisted governmental-PRI control of political and economic activity, but also of criminality. In each ambit, the government-PRI couple dominated and administered it for its own benefit.

Three examples illustrate the change that came about and that is irreversible, independent of governmental preferences. In the first place, no government can control what happens in an open economy. Control of the economy in the past sustained itself on autarky: nothing occurred without bureaucratic authorization that, additionally, was an interminable source of corruption. An open economy revolves around the consumer, whom the entrepreneur is required to cater to because he faces the competition of other producers through imports. While the government previously assigned resources, protected its favorites and determined the success or failure of enterprises, the governor of today must explain and convince the citizen at every turn.

Second, one of the characteristics of the past was control of information: the government nearly monopolized that basic resource, which it employed to exercise full control. At present a child has more information within his reach than all of the information possessed by the government of yore. Today's world hinges on the ubiquity of information, which implies that the country must adhere to the global rules that expose corruption. It is not by chance that the current government has interposed a set of rules that limit liberalization in certain sectors or activities. However, despite the intention, this is no more than a vain attempt to control something that no one can control any longer, in Mexico or anywhere else.

The third example is that of information management, above all with regard to the government-press relationship. In the past, the government could pretend that what it informed abroad did not filter inside or that its impact would be less. In that era there were bureaucrats at the airport who censored imported periodicals when a note criticizing the Mexican government appeared. Now such pretentiousness is impossible but, notwithstanding this, the present government has attempted to send differentiated messages outside and inside: to the *Financial Times* it declares that there is a crisis of confidence but within it ratifies that there will be no change in its acting, despite that it is this that has brought on that crisis of confidence. Perhaps the main difference between the governments of Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas was that the former had to confront these new realities but it was the latter that assumed these to be an inescapable reality. That government would never have denied the existence of torture, even if it did little about it. No one can turn back the clock on ever increasing free-flowing information. If the government wants to restore some of its leadership it will have to assume this as a fact of life.

Conceivably the greatest error of the “old” PRI was that of holding the society in contempt. Fox won the presidency in 2000 in great measure because he understood the frustration of the citizenry. The PRI continued, and continues, to operate under the premise that the society is irrelevant, and is now confronted with a society bereft of hope that accepted efficacy of government in exchange for corruption only to find nothing of the former and everything of the latter and, to top it all off, without money in its pocket. The PRI not only fails to recognize that its acting generates fury but also that it has become López-Obrador’s campaign team.

Disdain for the citizens’ feelings and perceptions of the whole of the political class will eventually be very costly because although penetration of the social networks is not universal, it is infinitely more widespread than the government realizes. Sooner or later, it will revert against it the notion that it is possible to govern (as if it were governing...) vertically without paying attention to the society’s grievances. The government and most politicians live in an era that no longer is.

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