The Presidency, the Parties and Democratisation in Mexico

Abstract.

This discussion tries to explain how democratisation in Mexico reinvigorated a party system which a generation earlier existed mainly on paper. The strengthening of the party system had much to do with the weakening of Mexican presidentialism. It is also significant that market-oriented reforms adopted after 1982 were controversial and the resulting divisions helped to invigorate the party system.

Text

The process of democratisation in Mexico involves an interesting perspective on institutional continuity and change. At the beginning of the democratic transition Mexico was characterised by an enormously strong presidentialism and a very weak party system. It now has a much stronger party system and a much weaker presidentialism. This did not result from any single dramatic rupture but from a sequence of changes, many of which were unpredicted.

Whereas the political role of the parties has changed completely during the democratisation, the identity of the parties has changed only somewhat. The two largest parties in
today’s Mexico, the PAN and the PRI, both existed in 1940. The Left-wing PRD was formed by an alliance of groupings, several of which were already in existence by 1980 but one of which was not. However save for the defection of some Left-wing members of the PRI in 1987, there has been no major change to the party system as such. Presidentialism has survived too, though in greatly weakened form.

Moving from continuity to change, three developments have been particularly significant. One goes to the heart of the democratisation process itself. In authoritarian Mexico, unwritten rules completely dominated written rules. Today there is still a place for unwritten rules, but written rules matter. Election results are honestly counted, the Courts are far more politically influential than they were, and there is only just a residue of the unthinking loyalty which was once the cornerstone of the system.

This decline in the importance of unwritten rules also translates into a decline in presidential authority. Before 1982 Mexico was not just a hyper-presidentialism, but a meta-presidentialism as well (Weldon 1997). Today the role of the executive is much more limited. This is partly because the three party system makes it hard for the most powerful single party to enjoy absolute majorities among congressmen or state governors. The PRI lost control over the Chamber of Deputies in
1997, and President Fox today controls neither house of Congress nor the majority of state governorships. There is therefore a real sense in which the institutionalisation of party politics has involved the de-institutionalisation of meta-presidentialism.

The emergence of three party politics also relates to changes in the nature of society’s electoral preferences. The PRI has lost power relatively, though it still remains a political force to be reckoned with. Its relative decline was not just the automatic consequence of honest voting. Authoritarian Mexico does seem to have been based on genuine popular acceptance of the dominant party. When large-scale opinion polling started in Mexico in the early 1980s, pollsters were surprised at how much genuine support the ruling PRI enjoyed (Basanez, 1990). However Mexican living standards today are barely higher than in 1982. Periods of economic progress have been punctuated by sharp recessions, such as those of 1986-88 and 1994-95. These recessions led to a loss of support for the PRI – to the Left after 1986, to the PAN after 1994. Economic recovery allowed the PRI to regain some ground but not to fully restore its previous position.

Changes in party behaviour and electoral preference were however consequences of democratisation itself. Civil society and the opposition parties were only able to influence Mexican
politics once democratisation had reached a certain point. The Mexican authoritarian state, moreover, was not forced to democratise — in the sense that it did have other, possibly unpalatable, options which did not involve democratisation. From a public choice perspective the most interesting question is why they did so. A part of the answer is that the preferences of the technocracy that ruled Mexico after 1982 did not involve political maximisation as such but rather the achievement of an economic project (Centeno 1994). The ruling idea was the achievement of economic development in Mexico by market-oriented means including integration with the US market through the NAFTA. This idea required democratisation because the US would not allow Mexico into the NAFTA without a credible promise to democratise. Ultimately the technocracy was prepared to take the political risks associated with democratisation in exchange for the entrenchment of its preferred economic strategy via membership of NAFTA. The parallel with Spain, where the political elite needed to democratise in order to secure entry into the European Union, is an obvious one (Democratization, 2000).

The motive behind democratisation was therefore external and economic. We cannot explain why democratisation occurred in terms of party politics. However when the transition started, party politics became a vital means of ensuring that change took hold. The point is that the three main party organisations
were able to adapt to and cope with decisive formal and informal rule changes.

This discussion analyses the transition at two levels. One is at the level of state-party relations. The point about the Mexican dominant party system is that it was the government that controlled the party and not the other way round. This situation did not immediately change even when democratisation started. However after 1994 the PRI became increasingly independent of the government, and this was an important dimension of change. The other level has to do with the growing success of opposition party politics from the mid-1980s. There have never been many questions about the independence of the main opposition parties but at least until 1988 there were many questions about their political relevance.

At the level of formal (not real) rules, Mexico already had a potentially competitive party system in the sense that regular contested elections occurred. The ruling party, eventually renamed the PRI, was set up in 1929 from within the government. The pro-Catholic PAN was licensed and recognised as an opposition party in 1939, as part of the ending of Mexico’s post-revolutionary Church-State conflict. Minor Left-wing opposition parties were registered in the 1950s to accommodate a small constituency that was prepared to be loyal domestically but wanted to be pro-soviet internationally. The Communist Party was itself officially recognised in 1977.
However the rules of the electoral game were not really taken seriously before the mid-1980s. They were not enforced and few people cared about the lack of enforcement. Electoral rituals were just that, and calculated mainly to leave no potential political space unfilled. Until the mid-1980s the official party had never lost a national or state election or even a senate seat – though it did admit occasional defeat in municipal elections and in elections for the lower house of congress.

After the mid-1980s electoral rules were taken increasingly seriously. The regime at first responded to growing opposition strength by ballot-rigging, in local elections in 1985-86 and in presidential elections in 1988. However international reaction to the ballot-rigging was adverse, and the Mexican government needed US support in order to cope with what would otherwise have been crippling economic problems. The results of the ballot-rigging stood, but the Mexican government tacitly agreed to change its ways. 1988 was the last truly scandalous national election in Mexico.

The way in which the process of democratisation led to the development of a three-party system had much to do with the relative decline of the PRI. The 1994-95 recession was an important factor here, as was growing disgust on the part of middle class Mexicans at the traditional authoritarian
practices used by the PRI in rural areas. However the PRI’s decline was not absolute, and it remains in a position to compete electorally even though it has lost office at national level.

The Ancien Regime in Mexico: 1940-82.

Between 1940 and 1982 Mexican politics, like Mexican society, underwent some change. However there was sufficient continuity for it to be possible to treat the political system as a unity. The nature of the 1940-82 system can be summed up in a few simple propositions, of which the most evocative is Cosio Villegas’ famous phrase that Mexico had a ‘six year dictatorship’ run by the president of the day (Cosio Villegas 1974). At the end of his six years, the outgoing president chose his successor. National elections were held, but there was no serious doubt about the outcome. The government party, renamed the PRI in 1946, always won.

It was the president who controlled the dominant party and not vice-versa. This situation emerged as the result of a bitterly fought political conflict in the 1930s in which President Lazaro Cardenas defeated party-boss Plutarco Elias Calles. There remained occasional tensions between the president and the party after 1940, but conflicts were always resolved in
favour of the president. Examples include the dismissal of Carlos Madrazo as head of the PRI by President Díaz Ordaz in 1965 and the dismissal of Jesús Reyes Heroles as head of the PRI by President Echeverría in 1975.

The over-riding role of the government meant that, although Mexico was a dominant party system, it was organised quite differently from systems where the party had real power. Ideology was not really important in Mexico: administration mattered much more. To the extent that ideas did matter, social consensus was prized over conflict. Overt Marxists and political Catholics were largely excluded from power, but Mexicans with a range of diverse political views could enjoy preferment so long as they were loyal to the system and accepted the authority of the president of the day.

The top levels of the state were almost entirely based on patronage. Presidential power to appoint ran through central government, local government and the party itself. Since there was no reliable system of accountability from below, this power of appointment was crucial to the way in which the system worked. It led to a fairly strongly centralised regime even though political competition was not completely absent. Such competition, whether taking the form of ‘Court politics’ or constrained mobilisation politics, was mainly intended to win the presidential ear and get presidential support. Informal groups, so called camarillas, tended to act as teams in pursuit
of advancement via presidential preferment. Camarillas often included extended families involving more than one generation with the result that the core political elite was formed to a significant degree by informal family linkages as well as formal procedural norms (Camp 1984). The core political system thus became something of self-perpetuating oligarchy although one that was never completely closed to outsiders. After 1982 the power of appointment was used to create a fairly homogenous technocratic elite strongly committed to a market-oriented economic strategy—and not, perhaps, to much else.

All of this led to the unusual situation in which political organisation became less and less important further up the hierarchy. At lower social levels there was significant political organisation. There had been intensive political mobilisation in the 1930s, when peasants and organised labour were organised to help President Cardenas defeat party-boss Calles. A land reform and the entrenchment of various forms of social control rendered the rural vote essentially safe for the PRI even after the land reform essentially ended. The post-1940 role of organised labour also became more corporatist than militant. Nevertheless, while the labour confederation, the CTM, was very moderate in its politics it was not purely demobilising. Labour was somewhat represented as well as being firmly controlled. The PRI itself was a hybrid party, involving
distinct labour and agrarian constituents but also containing a sector which individuals could join directly.

The system, therefore, was not purely exclusionary although it was significantly so. The president of the day, while clearly enjoying a high degree of autonomy, sometimes chose to appear as a semi-neutral arbiter in the face of certain kinds of licensed conflict. Most presidents were also keen to preserve the appearance of pluralism within their government, though any such pluralism was often more apparent than real. Genuine opposition politics did exist to some degree, but did not prosper partly because there were no institutional mechanisms by which oppositional forces could make themselves effective and partly because the majority of Mexicans were essentially happy with the status quo. A survey carried out in the early 1980s found that only some 4% of the sample participated actively in politics (Zavala 1987).

While the political regime was partly based upon consensus, it was also tightly run and disciplined. As a result, no independent source of power was allowed to exist within the institutional structure of the state, although sources of social power independent of the state such the business community did exist. The political role of business was ambiguous, and this ambiguity was a source of unresolved
tension for much of the post-war period (Bailey 1988). Many of Mexico’s most important business leaders felt excluded from the political process, while the political elite tended to acknowledge and to some extent fear the potential power of business. The relationship between the two oscillated between arms-length co-operation at best and mutual paranoia and dislike at worst (Basanez 1981). During the Echeverria period (1970-76) relationships between the government and business interests became tenser as the government moved away from economic orthodoxy toward what later became known as ‘fiscal populism.’ There was certainly an anti-business streak in many leading PRIistas at this time.

This system did have weaknesses, of which the most important was a vulnerability to almost any form of presidential irresponsibility. However it is important to note that the system was for the most part popularly accepted and to a significant degree successful. Mexico’s economic record during 1940-82 was quite positive. The system was also powerfully organised at elite as well as popular level. These factors were bound to influence the pattern of democratisation when it came. Democratisation in Mexico did not respond to any imperative to remove an unpopular ruling elite –which was the case in many South American countries governed by military dictatorships. Nor was the system vulnerable to overthrow because of an obviously poor policy performance –though this did become much
more of a factor after 1982. The fundamental agent of political transformation was the government’s loss of economic policy autonomy after 1982, and its willingness to take some political risks in pursuit of an economic project. This need partly due to policy errors made by the successive Mexican governments (notably during 1981-82) and partly due to changing international circumstances.


Political liberalisation in Mexico preceded democratisation. This was the result of opposition pressure, but the political elite did not resist too hard because of a belief that not too much was at stake. Two particular pressures require mention. One came from the Left, where resentment at the authoritarian and repressive government of Diaz Ordaz (1964-70) had earlier led to a failed insurgency. Eventually semi-liberals within the government came to believe that a constructive response to violent opposition would be to encourage opposition within the system by strengthening the weak and small opposition parties. In 1977 the Communist Party was given official recognition and a complex system of proportional representation was introduced into the lower house of congress. This ensured that up to two hundred congressional seats would be allocated to opposition
parties even if virtually nobody voted for them. Left-wing intellectuals could now hope to become congressmen.

A more serious development occurred in 1982 when the Mexican authorities mishandled a difficult economic situation and precipitated a full-scale economic crisis. This led to significant government unpopularity. Those who were initially most alienated by the government were members of the middle and upper middle class whose savings were in effect confiscated as part of the dramatic bank nationalisation of September 1982. Significant numbers of businessmen were powerfully alienated as well. As a result the Right-wing opposition party, the PAN, - which had from its foundation in 1939 played only the most peripheral role in politics- became an important vehicle for those who wished to protest at the government’s handling of the economy. The PAN won some important municipal elections in the north of Mexico during 1983.

By the mid-1980s, at a time when South America was tending to democratise, party competition in Mexico was gradually increasing in importance. It was still far from the main aspect of politics, but it was no longer completely irrelevant. Meanwhile the government needed to work out its own response to the slight strengthening of the opposition parties. In the eyes of the Mexican technocracy the most important question here was not electoral but related to development strategy. How could
the Mexican economy emerge from the crisis of 1982? What political strategy could best complement economic policy?

Some advisors of President Lopez Portillo (1976-82), who had originally advocated the bank nationalisation, continued to recommend policies that would have moved Mexico sharply to the Left. The most dramatic possibility was a debt default, perhaps co-ordinated with the other major Latin American republics. The logic of such a strategy would ultimately have been a siege economy with foreign exchange controls. Such a strategy would, to put it mildly, have been very risky in country with a strong private sector, a large middle class and the US as a neighbour. However the idea that there was a potential radical alternative to the policies eventually adopted eventually brought about a split in the PRI.

The government remained in the hands of President de la Madrid (1982-88) who was an orthodox economist and a political conservative. There was no likelihood that de la Madrid, once inaugurated as president, would have taken the enormously risky step of breaking with the international economic order. Instead, he initiated a change of economic direction by moving toward free trade and free market economics. As already noted, his political strategy was essentially designed to be supportive of this overall economic priority.
In retrospect President de la Madrid’s decision to abandon authoritarian nationalism and adopt market-oriented reforms, no matter how reluctantly or gradually taken, effectively ended Mexico’s national economic autonomy. Over the next generation, Mexican economic policy would be tied up with the world of conditionalities, 'structural adjustments', IMF programmes, Baker Plans, Brady Plans, and the general panoply of means by which policies of market-oriented reform have been urged upon debtor countries. Policy was also constrained by the ever-present danger of renewed capital flight. Moreover once protectionist policies had been abandoned, they could not be reinstated. It therefore became increasingly clear that Mexico could not return to a semi-nationalist form of development. In the end, economic change could not be kept separate from demands for political change.

In late 1985 renewed economic crisis developed. The international oil price fell, and Mexico’s economic problems worsened. Meanwhile the Mexican public was becoming increasingly alienated and disillusioned. For the first time, significant numbers of Mexicans (though by no means a majority) were willing to vote for the opposition parties (Basanez 2000). The government responded by a policy of ballot-rigging but this, in turn, created both domestic and international scandal. To make matters worse, a devastating earthquake in Mexico City on 19 September 1985 was incompetently handled. Although it was
far from clear at the beginning of 1986 that Mexico was about to go down the globalisation/democratisation route, it was becoming evident that the status quo was under growing pressure.

These pressures, though, were still more economic than political. Even under the adverse economic conditions of the mid-1980s, the PRI faced the prospect of no more than isolated election defeats even without ballot-rigging. Moreover if ballot-rigging occurred, the opposition parties were in no position to mount a national challenge because of their weakness at national level. Their response to ballot rigging, to threaten public order, was not a plausible tactic because the means of coercion were securely in government hands. The only short-term political threat to the state came from internal disunity and this could only happen if the political discipline governing the whole system were somehow relaxed. In the longer term, the government hoped that economic recovery would lead to a restoration in the fortunes of the PRI.

However the Mexican government did need the support of the US if it was to avoid a further vicious downward economic spiral when the world oil price collapsed at the beginning of 1986. The price of US support was a commitment to gradual democratisation. Even today, the Mexican authorities would never willingly admit that they democratised Mexico under pressure from the US. Nor is there conclusive evidence of overt
pressure on Mexico from the US government. However there is conclusive evidence of heavy criticism of Mexican authoritarianism in the US Congress, the press and by some US foreign policy intellectuals. In October 1986 Senator Jesse Helms inaugurated a set of hearings into Mexican politics, the tone of which was highly unfriendly to the Mexican government. Interviews conducted by this author indicate that de la Madrid during 1986 increasingly realised that he had to take US public opinion seriously if the US government was to be persuaded to help the Mexican economy recover.

The Breakthrough into Transition Politics 1986-89

In January 1986 a group calling itself the Democratic Current formed in Mexico with the aim of lobbying within the PRI against Mexico’s market-oriented reform programme. This Current wanted a statist-nationalist economic strategy rather than the free market one that was clearly being adopted. It was not immediately clear what significance this Current would have, if any, though many people believed that its purpose was to influence the outcome of the presidential succession which would become known in September 1987.

In July 1986 there was flagrant rigging of the ballot in several elections in the north of Mexico, particularly in the border state of Chihuahua. For reasons already noted, this was
a bad time for the Mexican government to find itself facing public protest. Accordingly the president of the PRI was removed from his position and a new electoral reform negotiated with the opposition parties. On the face of it, this reform did not seem enormously important but in fact it decisively changed the incentive structures facing some opposition parties and so enabled the formation of an alliance between opposition within the PRI itself and some opposition parties.

The main point of the 1986 reform was to introduce proportional representation into Mexican state legislatures as well as (which was already the case) in the federal legislature. This was a most important reform because it ensured that the opposition parties would have some political role in every state in Mexico. The additional legislative representation allowed to the opposition also provided a catalyst for their organisational development. The effect of this change was to significantly increase the independence of two small Left-wing parties (the PPS and PARM) who were previously regarded as very tame indeed. This, in turn, meant that there was some possibility of political life in Mexico for defectors from the PRI (who in the past faced certain oblivion) and this weakened political discipline within the ruling party itself.

The consequence of these two changes taken together was that the Democratic Current within the PRI and the hitherto-
dependent parties of the Left joined forces. One of the PRI’s former satellite parties in 1987 decided to nominate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the former leader of the Democratic Current within the PRI, for the presidency. This was a decisive step because, without such institutional support, the Democratic Current lacked a legal basis and could have been refused permission to present a candidate for office. (Something of the kind had happened when there was a minor split in the PRI in 1963, and the splitters were then destined for oblivion). Meanwhile, whereas the Marxist parties of the ‘old’ Left were incapable of launching a significant challenge to the PRI on their own, a Cardenas candidacy was a qualitatively more serious matter. Cardenas was the son of the famous 1930s president, and he could bring name recognition and some organised muscle to a challenge to the PRI.

The Cardenas candidacy did very much better than most observers initially expected. De la Madrid admitted later that he had underestimated Cardenas (Castaneda 1999: 211). Indeed Cardenas may have actually won the 1988 elections had the votes been honestly counted. Even as it was, Carlos Salinas (the candidate of the PRI) was comprehensively defeated by Cardenas in the Mexico City conurbation, and lost to the conservative opposition party, the PAN, in the second city Guadalajara. The official figures gave 51% to the PRI, 31% to Cardenas and 17% to the PAN. The PRI continued to declare itself victorious in
its rural strongholds, but it performed very poorly in Mexico’s main urban areas.

There are a number of relevant conclusions to be drawn from these developments, and some compression is necessary. The first point to make is that the PRI survived and recovered from the 1988 result. There is no doubt that the result was a near-disaster for the PRI. Even if one takes the official result at face value (which would be a mistake), the PRI share of the vote fell from 77% in 1982 to 51% in 1988: given the fact that there was some ballot-rigging, it fell by more.

It is evident that the vote against the PRI in 1988 was in part a protest vote against a very poor economic performance and in part a personal vote for Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. The votes lost by the PRI in 1988 were not irrecoverable. It was therefore feasible for the incoming government of Carlos Salinas to democratise Mexico without necessarily consigning the PRI to defeat. Salinas and his technocratic allies understood that, in the end, formal democratisation would be unavoidable if Mexico was to enjoy good relations with the US. Without this it was, hard to see Mexico enjoying an economic recovery. Clearly, without economic recovery, political events could have become unpredictable to say the least.
There was general agreement that one reason for the decline in the vote for the PRI was economic decline. The period 1982-88 had been one of severe inflation and declining living standards (Lustig 1998). This contrasted sharply with every previous sexenio since 1940, in which living standards had always risen. To the extent that short-term (albeit severe) economic problems were responsible for the decline in popular support for the PRI, then this could be reversible if the economy recovered. This is largely what happened after 1988, until the ‘tequila crisis’ of December 1994 brought renewed setback.

The other problem facing the PRI, as Carlos Salinas and some of close advisors saw it, was organisational. The PRI was largely an extension of the state machine and its tame corporatist organisations. It existed to reward loyalty and not to compete for power. It was largely run by people who treated their positions as sinecures and rewards for service in more important parts of the state. It was much too dependent on government. As a result it performed poorly when faced with a serious electoral challenge. In Salinas’ view, then, the PRI needed a good organisational shaking up in order to make it fit for democratisation.

The 1988 elections also had a permanent impact on the opposition parties. Even though the results may well have been a travesty of the real vote, they made it inevitable that party
politics would start to matter much more in Mexico. The PRI no longer enjoyed an air of invincibility. Even though the PRI became electorally much more formidable after 1988, the opposition parties did not lose all of their gains. Moreover as ballot-rigging declined, opposition parties soon started to win significant elections. An important step was the first opposition victory in a state governorship election, which occurred in 1989. The opposition parties, particularly the PAN, enjoyed something of a virtuous circle in that electoral victories added to their credibility and therefore their electoral appeal.

Finally the Salinas government responded to the electoral threat from the Left by playing a game of ‘divide and rule’ with the opposition. The Right-wing PAN was treated well for the most part, and reciprocated by supporting the government’s economic policies and its NAFTA application. The Left-wing PRD was weakened and disadvantaged at every opportunity (Bruhn 1997). Largely as a result of this, the PAN was by 1994 the most important opposition party and the PRD fell back significantly from where it had been in 1988.

The Politics of Transition 1989-2000

Salinas’ transitional strategy was organisational, economic and political in almost every possible sense of the term. The first
major step was for Salinas to make Donaldo Colosio president of the PRI. Colosio was the first genuine political heavyweight to be given charge of the PRI since Madrazo in 1965. Colosio was already seen as a potential successor to Salinas. His job was to make the PRI electable again. As part of this strategy, the PRI was given a major managerial shake-up. Salinas also ruthlessly removed PRI state governors who were not seen as capable of organising vote-winning campaigns. Nearly a third of Mexico’s state governors under Salinas failed to complete their allotted term.

This led to the paradoxical consequence that democratisation featured an initial recentralisation of power. However there was also a sense in which the PRI was being prepared for democratisation. Loyalty was no longer enough for preferment within the PRI. Electability was important as well. While the effect of this on presidentialism was not immediate, there was an important change in political emphasis over time. After 1991, in which year honest nation-wide elections were held for Congress, successful PRI candidates started to enjoy some genuine legitimation on the basis that they had been freely elected. They were no longer just presidential nominees. The effect of this could be seen quite dramatically for the first time in 1995, when the elected governor of Tabasco state openly defied the wish of central government that he resign. He pointed out that he had been elected by the people of Tabasco
against a strong opponent, and that the president had no constitutional power to force him out.

This change might have led to conflict between Salinas and Colosio (as had happened in the 1960s between Diaz Ordaz and Madrazo) but in fact the two worked closely together. Salinas was certainly capable of imperiousness as president, but he seems to have been amicable enough within his inner circle. In October 1993 Salinas unveiled Colosio as the next PRI presidential candidate.

The Salinas team as a whole also sought to reposition the PRI to make it a party of the new Mexican elite. There was a vast improvement in relations between Mexico’s political and business elites. These had been very strained after the 1982 bank nationalisation. They scarcely improved in the early years of de la Madrid’s government when at least some business interests openly criticised the corporatist institutions upon which the government continued to rely. The government eventually began serious arms-length negotiations with business organisations in 1987 and a series of corporatist-style pacts were agreed. This policy of negotiating economic targets continued until the devaluation of 1994. There were also regular meetings between government and business leaders under Salinas.
The government’s economic strategy was simply to engineer a recovery in living standards. This involved quite an ambitious set of reforms including debt renegotiations, privatisation and entry into the NAFTA. Some people have criticised the Salinas project as being too political for long-term economic soundness. Mexico’s current account deficit certainly worsened considerably during 1988-94. However Salinas was able to combine market-oriented reform with a sharp reduction of inflation and the restoration of some economic growth. This, obviously, was helpful to the PRI’s electoral strategy.

There was also a darker side to this as well. There is little doubt that some business supporters of Salinas benefited from the major privatisation initiatives undertaken. Not all of the privatisations were corrupt but some assuredly were. Money became increasingly important in politics. There was also quite open arm-twisting on the part of the government to raise funds for the PRI (Oppenheimer 1996). There were also apparent links between Raul Salinas (the brother of Carlos) and organised crime including drug laundering. There is little doubt that drug money found its way into PRI campaigns at both national and regional level. Meanwhile authoritarianism remained a feature of local politics in the poorer and more rural parts of Mexico.
The Salinas strategy was intelligent and might have worked. What undermined it was a series of disastrous events which took place in 1994. On 1 January there was an armed rising by the Zapatistas in the southern state of Chiapas. This was a shock to financial markets and to the political system as well. On 23 March a far more serious event took place, the murder of Colosio who was by then the PRI nominee for the presidency. Colosio was replaced as a candidate by Ernesto Zedillo but he was in one respect irreplaceable. Colosio was the one figure who was at home both in the government and the PRI, and he might well have been able to redesign both the PRI and the political system to cope with continuing democratic transition. Zedillo, more of a technocrat, was a genuine democrat but did not have so assured a political touch.

Nevertheless Zedillo did win the elections on 2 July with just over 50% of the vote, a result which seemed proof enough that the Salinas-Colosio strategy was working. Later in 1994, though, there was further political turbulence. In September 1994 Ruiz Massieu, the Secretary General of the PRI and divorced brother-in-law of Salinas, was assassinated in Mexico City. In a scandalous subsequent development, Raul Salinas was later arrested and convicted of ordering the murder. (A dispute over custody of Ruiz Massieu/Salinas children seems to have been behind it). Finally, in December, a mishandled devaluation brought about a severe recession in Mexico. The outgoing
Salinas administration and the incoming Zedillo administration ended up blaming each other for the devaluation.

The reputation of the PRI never really recovered from this renewed economic setback. The arrest of Raul Salinas was followed by a whole series of dramatic exposures of corruption under the Salinas government. The privatised banking system collapsed and had to be rescued by the government at an approximate total cost of $65bn. During investigation into these banking disasters, further information became available about the illegal financing of the PRI during the 1994 election campaign.

Given the nature of some of these revelations and the collapse of Mexican living standards during 1995-96, one may wonder why the PRI did not lose even more ground than it did. As it was, the PRI lost several major governorship elections in 1995 and 1996, and overall control of congress in the 1997 mid-term elections. Its national share of the vote in 1997 fell to 39%, which is rather similar to its share in 2000 when it lost the presidency.

The main reason why the PRI did not face complete obliteration after 1994 was its continued strength in rural areas. For example, according to the 1997 election results, there remained twelve (out of 31) states in which the PRI still polled at
least 15% of the vote more than its closest challenger. These were in the more rural parts of Mexico. Clearly the significance of this continuing PRI ascendancy varied from state to state. In some cases it may have reflected genuine popularity. In others there may well have been temporary problems with the opposition challenge. It should certainly not be assumed that the PRI machine in the 1990s controlled rural politics in Mexico in the way that it once did. In 1998 and 1999, opposition candidates did win governorships in several small rural states (such as Tlaxcala) which might have been regarded as bedrock PRI. However there remained throughout the Zedillo period a concentration of PRI strength in the poorest and most rural states of Mexico (states such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, Hidalgo, and Guerrero) where the opposition parties were unable to mount a real challenge so long as the PRI controlled the national government. In some other southern states, moreover, such as Tabasco and the Yucatan, the PRI's margin of advantage was narrower but its democratic credentials seriously questionable. In all such cases, it is less plausible to attribute the continuing success of the PRI to its popularity and more to its ability to maintain 'extra-Constitutional' forms of control - added, of course, to a traditional deference vote.

Many examples of post-1994 cases of abuse of power by the PRI can be given. In 1995 the governor of Guerrero was eventually forced to resign after television coverage exposed as false his
denial that a group of peasants was killed in cold blood by security forces when on their way to a demonstration. Human rights abuses were also evident in the state of Morelos where, early in 1998, the head of the anti-kidnapping unit, the state attorney general and other senior law-enforcement agents were arrested following the death under interrogation of a 17-year-old suspect. In Chiapas, the state governor and the Interior Minister were forced to resign following the massacre, on 22 December 1997, of 45 peasants associated with the Zapatistas.

Against this, however, the PRI lost badly in some of the main urban areas. The towns of the north or semi-north in 1997 voted fairly solidly for the PAN while the PRD retained decisive strength in the Federal District itself. However there were also some encouraging results for the PRI in the more industrialised north of the country, notably an important victory in governorship elections in Chihuahua in 1998. This victory, following an open nomination primary, showed that a genuinely democratised PRI could appeal to even a sophisticated urban electorate with some possibility of success. What stopped the PRI from doing this more often was its continued authoritarianism in some areas and its association with corruption.

There were also many signs of tension between government and party and, in a sharp reversal of previous patterns, some party
elites proved for the first time resistant to presidential control. PRIistas who had faced the electorate successfully were increasingly confident that they, and not the technocrats in central government, should control the party. In 1996 a PRI Congress passed new rules sharply restricting the eligibility of would-be presidential candidates. According to the new rules, no person who had not stood for non-presidential elective office for the PRI was allowed to accept the presidential nomination. This move, at a stroke, made it impossible for Zedillo to secure a technocratic succession from within the government. Perhaps the most important single aspect of traditional meta-presidentialism, the right of the outgoing president to choose his successor, ended. Instead there was a presidential primary on the basis of one citizen one vote.

These changes made a decisive difference in the democratisation of Mexico. Certainly after 1996 the PRI could no longer be regarded as just the party of the state. However what complicated matters was that some figures most closely associated with the democratisation of the PRI along one dimension (freeing it from government control) were not at all associated with the other dimension of democratisation (showing greater respect for political opponents). As a result, there was a suspicion that the project of democratising the PRI was to some extent in contradiction with the project of democratising Mexico as a whole.
Nobody supposes democratisation is a kind of magic wand that automatically cleans up all forms of political abuse. Nevertheless the evidence of continuing abuses by machine politicians associated with the PRI did prove a real turnoff to many Mexican voters. Being a dominant party in a democratic system is not at all the same thing as being a party of the state which relies on corruption, human-rights violations and other forms of lawbreaking in order to maintain power. As Mexico became more democratic, so expectations of democracy rose as well. However, after the events of 1994, the PRI still needed to define itself. Was it genuinely a reborn democratic party or was it still a party with one foot in the authoritarian past?

The national elections of 2000 showed that the PRI could not resolve this dilemma. There were a significant number of Mexicans who might well have supported a party which was neither on the populist Left nor the Catholic Right, but in the end the aura of corruption and machine politics associated with southern Mexico proved too much of a turnoff. Considered as a rural party of authoritarian disposition, the PRI could count on perhaps 30% of the vote nationally. This was not enough to win presidential elections but enough not to risk humiliation. The PRI candidate, Labastida, in 2000 received some 38% of the vote – not much more than PRI bedrock. The vast majority of
Mexicans who might have considered voting for the opposition, in the end did so.

The Party System under Fox, the first few months.

Several months into the Fox presidency, Mexico still has a three party system. Fox himself would clearly prefer Mexico to have a two party system. When running for president as the candidate of the PAN, Fox was careful to build an electoral alliance with the small Green Party and described his candidacy as the ‘Alliance for Change.’ He also tried hard to persuade Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the perennial candidate of the PRD, to stand down in order to allow a two-horse race between Fox and Labastida. He failed in this but certainly persuaded a number of Mexicans to split their tickets, voting for Fox as president and the PRD in Congress. Fox won the presidency with a four percent margin over Labastida while the PAN actually ran behind the PRI in congressional elections. Without Fox’s coalition building, he might just have won the presidency but might well have faced a congress containing an absolute majority for the PRI.

Since being elected Fox has continued to try to combine the non-PRI forces in Mexico. In November he offered three cabinet positions to the PRD, in return for support in congress.
However to the surprise of many, the PRD turned down the opportunity to participate in the Fox government and resorted to an uncomplicated oppositional role. In the end, the PRD reflects an ideological option—essentially a rejection of free market economics—which has no other serious institutional expression. Since the PRD won Mexico City elections in July 2000, it still has enough political punch to remain a significant independent force in Mexico. As long as it wishes to be a third party in Mexican politics, then there will be a third party.

Meanwhile the PRI seems to have come to grips with its election defeat. It has since suffered a few more electoral reverses in the south east of Mexico, losing governorship elections in Chiapas, having a bad result in Tabasco and appearing divided in the Yucatan. However for some party activists, loss of government office has represented liberation. They no longer see a need to follow a party line in which they do not believe. The electoral defeat of a few of the more notorious southern ‘godfather’ figures might also prove advantageous in the long run. The PRI is no longer a party of the state. If it can show the Mexican electorate that it has made a clean break with its authoritarian past, the PRI may well be in a position to regain lost electoral credibility. The democratisation of the PRI itself, held back for years by its subordination to the government of the day, could now at least be approaching.
Fox' own party, the PAN, has not really taken advantage of the coat tails of the president to emerge as a majority party. It is a Catholic party while most Mexicans, themselves practising Catholics, nevertheless value the separation of Church and state. Serious ideological differences between the PAN and the PRD (notably over the issue of abortion) have prevented the emergence of much common ground. There will almost certainly always be room in Mexican politics for a conservative, religious party but it still seems unlikely that the PAN will anytime soon become the natural Mexican party of government.

The electoral system itself, which is first-past-the-post for the presidency and the state governorships, and based on proportional representation for Congress seems compatible with either two or three party politics. On the face of it, a 'Duverger' hypothesis would suggest an evolution toward a two party system because the effect of the system of elections for Congress gives a majority to any party which can win more than 43% of the vote. The logic of a 'Duverger effect' in first past the post elections is clear.

However Mexico still seems likely to retain a system of three major parties - the PAN, the PRI and the PRD - as well as a number of very small parties. This is partly because there are significant ideological differences between the parties. The
Left-wing and secular PRD can combine tactically with the Catholic and conservative PAN, but profound differences over issues such as abortion clearly limit the possible degree of co-operation. Moreover the PRD remains a natural home for Mexicans who have lost out as a result of market-oriented reform and the NAFTA. These are a minority, but an important one.

The other possible permutation would be for the PRI to divide and allow Mexican politics to polarise between a Catholic Right and a semi-Marxist Left. Such an outcome might appear dangerous. However it is also unlikely. There are enough Mexicans who do not want to vote for either a Left wing party or a Catholic party to provide an ample political base for the PRI. The long process of transition helped to ensure that the PRI did not go down with the authoritarian ship. The reforms to the PRI which started under Salinas/Colosio and continued during the Zedillo period have given it a real prospect of surviving democratisation.

Conclusion

The most interesting aspect of democratisation in Mexico has to do with what has survived transition and what has not. In the context of this discussion, the PRI neither converted itself
into an authentic dominant party nor was it swept away by transition. If it had not been for the assassination of Colosio, then the dominant party outcome might well have occurred. By the same token, if the PRI had not held its nerve and reformulated a strategy after the debacle of 1988, then it might not have survived as a major force in Mexican politics at all.

What does seem clear is that the transition from authoritarianism is now effectively complete. Mexican parties, like parties in other democracies, are now reliant on the will of the electorate. So is the president of the day. Authoritarian practices will hurt their practitioners rather than helping them. All of the main Mexican parties still have to adapt themselves to this new reality.

It seems most likely that the proportional electoral system for congress combined with the genuine ideological identities of the major parties will keep an essentially three-party system in operation. The problem facing the weakest of the three is the likelihood of finding itself squeezed by presidential contests. However ticket-splitting may mitigate this to some extent. It could also be argued that the inevitable personalism of presidential campaigning would always give a third party a chance—just as happened in 1988 when Cardenas nearly won the presidency. A party can go from third to first in six years if
conditions are right. By the same token, if the outgoing president were ever truly unpopular, then his own party might risk going from first to third. It is not obvious that it will always be the same 'third party' that is squeezed.

Mexico’s party system did not democratise Mexico. This happened for other reasons. However the party system has changed the political organisation of the country far more than many expected. Three party politics and a powerful legislature are likely to ensure a period of weak presidentialism. The Mexican experience therefore provides one Latin American case in which democratisation has led to a strengthening of parties rather than the emergence of charismatic anti-party politics.

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