

# Building a liberal state in anti-liberal Mexico

## LIBERALISM AS A POLITICAL MYTH

For a century and a half, liberalism has been a unifying political myth in Mexico. It really started in the 1850s and 1860s when liberal forces headed by President Benito Juárez led the charge against the conservative order and its main pillar, the Catholic Church. From then on, *liberalismo* in Mexico has been a comforting code word, conjuring up the heroic triumph of republicanism, secularism, and progress. Yet, if liberalism (and anti-conservatism) has been present as a *unifying* myth, it was not nearly as conspicuous as a coherent set of political ideas, providing guidance for practical action.

The liberal tradition, though present since the independence—thanks to the intellectual leadership of José María Luis Mora (1794-1850), Melchor Ocampo (1814-61), Ignacio Ramírez (1818-79), Guillermo Prieto (1818-97), Ignacio Manuel Altamirano (1834-93), and Justo Sierra (1848-1912)—has been politically marginal. In the 19th century, this was due in no small measure to its dangerous liaison with Jacobinism, positivism, and even dictatorship—as in the “liberal” dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, from 1876 to 1910. Juárez himself was fairly authoritarian and refused to leave office (death forced him to). Arguably, the Mexico of the “institutionalized revolution” (1910-2000) featured only two liberal presidents: its first (Francisco Madero, from November 1911 to February 1913), and its last (Ernesto Zedillo). During that period, few intellectuals took up the torch of liberalism: Daniel Cosío Villegas (1898-1976), Octavio Paz (1914-1998), and their disciples in academe, literary magazines, and publishing houses. Revolutionary nationalism, populism, and socialism were general and dominant passions of the time in both the political and the intellectual milieux.

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## LIBERAL VALUES AND INSTITUTIONS

Liberal values of individual liberty, impartiality, pluralism, tolerance, and universalism are logically connected to liberal institutions such as political democracy and capitalism. Yet, historically, they have not always come together. Capitalism is possible without democracy and democracy is probably impossible without capitalism. The waves of democratization in Europe after the Second World War and following the collapse of the Soviet empire, as well as in Latin America during the past two decades, indicate that capitalism and

democracy can prevail without much of a liberal political culture as a foundation. The United States of America is where, oddly enough, *liberalism* is mostly a pejorative term and probably represents the only country in the world where liberalism has been the dominant political tradition in modern time. As Lionel Trilling would say, it has been the *only* political tradition. Even the *patrie* of Benjamin Constant and Alexis de Tocqueville is hardly one of liberal tradition. All of which to say, the democratization and liberalization of an anti-liberal country such as Mexico is not, in and of itself, an unprecedented event.

## A QUIET REVOLUTION

Liberalization and democratization in Mexico remains an interesting case study because the impetus for its realization came from the old regime itself. The election of Fox and his Alliance for Change (made up of the conservative PAN and a small ecologist party) represented only a moment (admittedly, one of climax) in a process of liberalization and then democratization. This process was undertaken under Presidents Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), and, above all, Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). Gradually, these reform-minded technocrats dismantled parts of the corporatist state built, at a time when it made some sense, by President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). They liberalized the economy and enhanced civil and political liberties. Their efforts infuriated members of the old guard of their single-party state. Some of them left the party in 1988 to create the nationalist and populist PRD, which in many ways was an orthodox PRI.

The presidential elections of 1988 were notoriously fraudulent. However, these and the subsequent ones allowed the opposition to prosper in Congress, in the states, and in municipalities. By mid-

2000, most Mexicans were ruled by non-PRI parties at the municipal level, and the opposition controlled the Lower House of Congress and 11 governorships out of 31. Most important, in 1996 President Zedillo completed the reform of the electoral system launched with the creation of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) in 1990. And then in July 2000 came the unthinkable: the peaceful and democratic transfer of power from one top executive to another, for the first time in the history of Tenochtitlán, New Spain, Mexico.

True, the same period saw the double assassination in 1994 of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio and of the PRI's secretary-general, Jose Francisco Ruiz Massieu, the uprising in Chiapas and its mishandling by the federal government, and the corruption and assassination charges against former president Salinas and his brother. This political turmoil came on top of all the other predicaments of poverty, inequality, corruption, exclusion, violence, environmental degradation, and then some. As Octavio Paz once said, to commend the PRI we would have to borrow some of the terms used by Marx to praise the bourgeoisie. Still, this kind of peaceful transition from authoritarian rule, initiated and planned by the old regime itself, is nothing short of exceptional.

## EVOLUTION TOWARD A LIBERAL STATE

A number of factors pushed the ruling elite toward the path of liberalization in the 1980s and democratization in the late 1990s: internal pressures resulting from demographic and social trends, essentially, urbanization, and intertwined external and internal factors deriving from the bankruptcy of the anti-liberal model of development in 1982. Mexico joined the GATT in 1986 and NAFTA in 1994. The latest wave of liberalization and democratization throughout the world arguably had a demonstrative effect in Mexico, particularly on the youth, the middle class, and, above all, the most educated sectors of society. Finally, President Ernesto Zedillo and his team deserve credit for taking the steps that they did

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not *have* to take. The Mexican government never faced a blockade like South Africa or a complete implosion like the Soviet Union. Fidel Castro faces even more pressures and so far he has not changed his regime's political practices.

Both Presidents de la Madrid and Salinas were groomed in the PRI and the latter at least professed anti-neoliberal sentiments before becoming president. Yet they both saw economic reforms and liberalization as a necessary *raison d'état*. President Zedillo, whose liberal credentials are more solid, was also a career bureaucrat from the PRI, a U.S.-educated economist, like Salinas, for whom liberalization and democratization are logically connected. Rather than being or becoming liberal, they ended up *statesmen* and bought into a model of state that is now a passport to respectability in the developed world—the liberal state.

We are not witnessing the triumph of *la pensée unique* in the world, but rather of *les institutions uniques*. These institutions can accommodate a variety of political perspectives, from Hugo Chávez's to Vicente Fox's, from Jean-Bertrand Aristide's to Fernando Enrique Cardoso's, to say nothing of the likes of Berlusconi, Haider, Putin, and others. Neither Fox nor the PAN is liberal *stricto sensu*, although the PAN is not as anti-liberal, right wing, and integrist as the PRI and the PRD would like us believe. As it is well known, Fox's cabinet is filled with former leftists such as Adolfo Aguilar Zinger, Jorge Castañeda, Joel Ortega, business

people, who are now heading PEMEX and the secretaries of energy, tourism, communications, and transport, and orthodox economists, most prominently, the secretary of finance. All have become *statesmen* with little or no political experience. Fox himself has a MBA for *management* rather than economics.

For the first time in the modern history of Mexico, the new president comes from the private sector, albeit not directly. He was a member of Congress from 1988 to 1991 and governor of Guanajuato from 1995 to 1999. Like many people who voted for him, he wishes to draw to a close what the so-called *científicos*, conservative liberals influenced by French positivism, embarked on a century earlier—the modernization of the Mexican state. For Fox, this means streamlining the state bureaucracy along a "total quality" approach, boosting tax revenues, and getting excellent voting from credit-risk agencies. It is also important, apparently, to do all this while respecting the law and the democratic rules of the game. In a recent official ceremony, Fox did not mind saying that Benito Juárez was "the most universal Mexican of our history." No doubt he had in mind Juárez the president, not so much Juárez the liberal icon.

History books often present Mexico as the land of "liberalism without liberals." For the first time, it has a true liberal state in construction. It will be interesting to see if this will foster the development of a strong liberal political culture too. 🍀