



CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN MEXICAN POLITICS: THE LEGACIES OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION*

Stephen D. Morris

Middle Tennessee State University

The Revolution set Mexican politics on a unique course. After years of internecine struggle, the Revolution eventually gave rise to one of history's longest surviving and most durable one-party, authoritarian regimes. Steeped in contradiction, the *sui generis* post-Revolutionary system combined conflict with stability, authoritarianism with a democratic constitution, repression with inclusiveness, uninterrupted elections with one-party hegemony, corporatism with pluralism, centralized control within a federalist framework, almost unlimited presidential power coupled with periodic peaceful successions, and even institutionalized revolution. Bolstered by decades of strong, state-managed economic growth known as the Mexican miracle this novel system proved amazingly capable at managing the changes necessary to stay in power up until the end of the century.

Owing to these extraordinary features or starting point, Mexican politics also followed a unique path of change. In striking contrast to the numerous cases of democratization during the last quarter of the 20th century – the so called third wave – the Mexican transition was gradual, protracted, and piecemeal, in some ways almost unrecognizable.¹ There was no dramatic military march back to the barracks, a celebrated negotiated pact among the ruling elite, the purging of a brutal dictator, a foreign invasion, or mass protests demanding change. Instead, the system eroded gradually, over time, becoming less and less effective at surmounting the challenges of a modernizing society, and slipping ever so gently from the PRI's grip.² Indeed, the unique nature of the transition makes it difficult not only to date its beginning with precision, but its culmination as well.³ Following the economic crisis of the 1980s and the imposition of austerity measures and neoliberal reforms, the state's and the PRI's already declining legitimacy eroded further, the government's ability to parlay the system's spoils into political support or acquiescence – what Alan Knight (1996, 223) once referred to as “chequebook peacekeeping” – slowly dried up, and opposition parties began to attract even more voters to the polls and/or to the streets to demand change. Though reformist efforts contained and channeled these demands for a while, by the mid-1990s the

*I wish to dedicate this essay to the loving memory of Rafaela (Fita) Nájera de Díaz, my wife's grandmother, who on more than one occasion shared with me her recollections and eye witness accounts of the Revolution and its impact in Mexico City.



PRI and the government had negotiated away their control of the electoral machinery, thereby setting the stage. By 1997, the PRI lost its majority in the Chamber of Deputies and three years later, the presidency. Though a perhaps a long-awaited surprise, the PRI's acceptance of its electoral loss in July 2000 seemed in some ways just another step along the slow path of change rather than an abrupt and clear historic break.

Together, both the uniqueness of the post-Revolutionary system and the novel path of transition raise questions about the mix of continuity and change, and hence the legacies of the Mexican Revolution. But rather than re-chronicle the unique features of the *PRI-gobierno*, its impressive record of reformism, or even its slow dissolution, this essay attempts to briefly lay out the surviving components of the post-Revolutionary regime and highlight the major areas of change. The essay emphasizes not only how Mexico's gradual transition has crafted a unique combination of continuity and change, but how this combination of continuity and change complicates our interpretations of the nature of the current challenges facing the country. In the final section, I contrast three non-mutually exclusive interpretations of the current challenges. The first sees many of today's problems as continuations of certain features of the authoritarian regime or holdovers from the past. This view rests on the notion that democratic change has been uneven: more pronounced in the political/electoral arena and less so in the area of rule of law. A second perspective envisions many of today's problems as stemming from the vacuum created by the elimination of old practices before new institutions and practices have been created to take their place. According to this perspective, Mexico has moved from a strong state built on informal institutions to a weak state. Finally, a third perspective contends that many of today's problems are new problems growing out of democratization. This view seems to suggest that democratization is a mixed blessing and can carry with it some unique problems.

Continuity: *Todo sigue igual!*

Contemporary Mexican politics have much in common with the post-Revolutionary system. First, and foremost from a legal and institutional perspective, is the 1917 Constitution. Though the document has undergone revisions at the whim of presidents over the years, its main features dating back to the Revolution remain largely intact. This is both significant and unique. An early task of many new, emerging democracies is to scrap the old authoritarian rules and draft a founding constitution that incorporates the current political debates, interests, and actors. For Mexico, however, the continuation of the 1917 Constitution means that the basic contours of the state – a presidential form of government, separation and division of powers, federalism, pluralism, and basic civil liberties, as well as its more unique features like no reelection, secularism and anti-clericalism, recognition of workers and indigenous rights, ownership of sub-soil rights, and a strong role of the state in the economy – remain in place: components

that reflect past controversies and ideals, perhaps, rather than current ones.

Second, and somewhat related to this legal continuity, the Mexican political culture continues to embrace many of the sacred principles of the Mexican Revolution. Though public opinion polls indicate a general tendency to the right and a largely non-political public, large portions of the public continue to believe in some of the basics principles of the Revolution such as no reelection, keeping religion out of politics, the ideals of social justice, and the role of the state in addressing issues of poverty and inequality. Most still believe in the ideal of political inclusiveness found in the document, in the state's ownership of the petroleum, and, above all, in Mexican nationalism. Carved from the brutal lessons of the 19th century and defined and reified by the Revolutionary elite in the first half of the 20th century, Mexican nationalism still encompasses a strong sense of national belonging, racial pride and a feeling of uniqueness (*raza cósmica*), a distrust of the U.S. and a sense of difference vis-à-vis the predominant *other*, and even a Benito Juárez-inspired belief in the principles of non-intervention in the affairs of other nations. Part of the continuity of the ideology can be seen in the maintenance of the nation's patriotic symbols and holidays, and the relatively unchanged pantheon of heroes and villains, many associated with the Revolution.

In addition to the legal contours of the system and its guiding principles, a third area of continuity involves the major political actors, and political cleavages that divide them. Unquestionably, the main political parties and actors survived democratization with minimal change and continue to dominate the political landscape. Despite predictions of its disappearance following its 2000 electoral setback, the PRI remains very much alive and well. The party of the Mexican Revolution is still touted as the only truly national party with a competitive presence in all 31 states and the federal district (much less so in the latter), has continued to hold more gubernatorial seats, state legislative posts, and municipal presidencies than any other party, and maintained the largest voting bloc in the national congress. Though running a distant third in the tight 2006 presidential race, the party made significant gains during the 2009 mid-term elections and is well positioned to compete for and potentially recapture the presidency in 2012⁴ (if it does, of course, it will recoup a different presidency than the one it relinquished twelve years earlier). Though torn, tattered and poorer than during its glory days, the party still operates an impressive clientelistic machine, and continues to embody many of the principles of the Revolution to which its name still refers. Indeed, Kenneth Greene (2007) calls *caciquismo* PRI's enduring legacy, and locates the continued relevance of the party in its ability to serve as an umbrella party occupying the political center.

But the degree of political continuity goes beyond the PRI. The PRD, forged in 1989 following the dramatic departure of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and his colleagues from the ranks of the PRI to challenge the PRI's



candidate in the fraud-marred 1988 presidential election, not only pre-dates the democratic transition, but also effectively competes with the PRI for the mantle and legacy of the Mexican Revolution. Representing the historic nationalist, left wing of the Revolution, and with many current PRD leaders being former PRI militants, the PRD mobilizes its supporters behind the principles of the Revolution, defending past gains, while using tried and true clientilistic mechanisms to build support. Even the ruling PAN, though it does not claim any allegiance to the Mexican Revolution or its ideals, nonetheless traces its origins to its opposition to the more leftist policies of the Revolution represented by President Cárdenas in the late 1930s. This includes opposition to the strident anti-clericalism of the period, political centralism and the power of the federal district, and the state's dominance over the economy.

Even beyond the political parties, many of the same institutional actors remain largely in place. Despite extensive privatization in the eighties and nineties, many state industries like PEMEX, NAFIN, BANOBRAS, and others remain. Many of the major corporatist labor unions like the CTM continue to survive, though some with far less political influence than in the past, and others, like the teachers union (SNTE), with significant political clout. Nor did political change *per se* seriously alter the overall structure or operation of the economy. Characterized by large oligarchies, minimal competition, and inequality and poverty, democratization – as opposed to economic reforms – arguably has had minimal effects on the economy.

A final area of continuity that should be noted relates to the operation of the rule of law – or the lack thereof. Despite democratization and even sweeping reforms to the judicial system both before (1994) and after (2007) the PRI's defeat, the rule of law in Mexico remains frustratingly weak. Corruption continues to be a serious problem (Morris 2009), few people trust the police or the criminal justice system despite the changes, few report crime, few expect fair treatment by the justice system, impunity remains more the rule than the exception, and human rights abuses continue to occur (see Zepeda 2004 and Amnesty International 2009). Indeed, as Edmonds-Poli and Shirk (2009, 139) conclude, "Mexico has not changed much. Mexican citizens continue to live in a society where the law is applied arbitrarily and does not guarantee protection of individual rights."

Change: Mexico's Democratic Breakthrough

Compared to other countries perhaps, the extent of continuity in Mexico's political transition is vast, yet compared to itself, it is the degree of change that is so striking. Indeed, by the 21st century the main features characterizing Mexican politics during the 20th had largely come to an end.

First, and perhaps the key unlocking other changes, was the end of one-party hegemony. Today, both the credibility of elections and the level of electoral competition are quantitatively and qualitatively different from the past.⁵ Not only does no single party win all the elections as

once occurred, but with the creation of a truly autonomous electoral authority in the 1990s – the Federal Electoral Institute – no party today abuses the power of incumbency to the degree that the PRI had once perfected. Multiple political parties now compete relatively fairly for votes throughout the nation, the outcome is largely undetermined before hand, and most of the country generally trusts the computation of the results. Among the many consequences of growing electoral competition has been a fundamental change in the nature and role of elections themselves. Under the old regime, elections served less as a vehicle for recruiting officials – since for all practical purposes they were already selected by PRI leaders, especially the president – and more as a device to legitimize the revolutionary party, renew popular faith in the principals of the Mexican Revolution, mobilize supporters, among other functions. With the changes, however, elections have become the primary vehicle for selecting political leaders, the trajectory of the politically ambitious, and, consequently, the site of intense political conflict. These changes shifted power not only to political parties and Congress, but alas to the voters.

Second, the changing nature and outcome of Mexican elections refashioned the Mexican state and state-society relations. As the PRI's electoral monopoly crumbled, the president lost much of his dominance, bringing to an end the central pillar of the old regime, *presidencialismo*. Concurrently, the power, autonomy, and roles of Congress, the bureaucracy, the judiciary and even state/local governments expanded. Perhaps the greatest reduction in presidential authority stems from the president's new relationship with Congress. As Benito Nacif (2005, 8) categorically states: "With the emergence of divided government, a lengthy period of presidential dominance over Mexican politics was brought to an end." Though the president retains important powers to be sure, there are real limits on his powers, making the Mexican presidency relatively weak by Latin American standards (Mainwaring and Shugart 1997; Weldon 1997). For its part, the increasing autonomy of Congress has led to a dramatic increase in the number of bills introduced by opposition parties, a reduction in the overall number of presidential initiatives (Nacif 2005, 9), and a strengthening of Congressional oversight. In contrast to his predecessors, for instance, President Fox was forced to negotiate legislation with Congress, saw some of his important reform initiatives defeated, and at one point was even denied permission to travel abroad.

In addition to re-forging executive-legislative relations, a fundamental change has also taken place in the role of the bureaucracy and its relationship to the executive and to the public. Under the PRI-dominated system, the state's massive administrative apparatus constituted the primary site of political struggle and elite negotiations. It was here where corporatist and clientelistic forces bargained with state officials over the details of policy, and where the president and the party secretly brokered state resources and official favors in exchange for loyalty and support (Guerrero 2004, 84). As such, the highly politicized bureaucracy constituted the very



foundation of presidential power and focused more on protecting the PRI's and the president's power than on the efficient delivery of services to the public (Sánchez 2004). The growing political competitiveness among parties and the shift in decision-making authority toward elected officials, however, has pushed toward a depoliticization and an opening of the bureaucracy. Pressured to produce results to attract voters, politicians at all levels tend to see the bureaucracy more as the site for the delivery of services rather than the site of political bargaining and discretion. Moreover, the watershed election of 2000 split the administration from the bureaucracy. As Sánchez (2004, 443) contends, "Upon the PAN's winning of the presidency, the fusion of the political elite and the upper public administration was broken, forever separating the PRI from the bureaucrats." Key aspects of this shift include the creation and strengthening of independent, autonomous, and more professional agencies within the administration, and the passage of an access to information law in 2002 that pried open government offices to public view. Indeed, the level of transparency – though still incomplete – starkly contrasts the thick opacity that characterized the old regime (see Fox et al. 2007).

Despite the level of continuity of rule of law noted earlier, the judicial system has also undergone fundamental changes. Like the bureaucracy, the Mexican judiciary historically operated to sustain the authoritarian system, serving as a pillar of presidentialism. Reforms both before and after democratization, however, changed the nomination process and internal administration to make the court more independent of the president, broadened the court's jurisdiction over constitutional cases, and actually empowered it with a limited form of judicial review. Overall, the reforms greatly enhanced the political role of the courts "in ultimately defining the rules of the game as they apply to the law as well as to society" (Cossio 2005, 123). In terms of "social accountability," judges, the courts and their rulings are now part of the political debate (Fix-Fierro 2003, 262). In recent years, the courts have decided on the constitutionality of local electoral laws, of single trade unions in public agencies, of NAFTA's Chapter 19 bi-national panels, of financial and jurisdictional conflicts between different levels of government, of extradition treaties, and of the intervention of the armed forces in public security (Lopez-Ayllon and Fix-Fierro 2003, 317). And in a dramatic departure from the past, the courts have struck down presidential initiatives and launched investigations into government human rights abuses.

As with the changing functions and relations between institutions at the federal level, the relationship between federal and state/local governments has also undergone a fundamental transformation. At one level, the PRI's loss of the presidency eliminated the informal controls presidents once exercised over the states: controls routinely utilized by PRI presidents over PRI governors, PRI-controlled state legislatures and PRI-controlled municipalities. At a more formal level, democratization has brought about a real decentralization of power and hence a re-focusing of many of the

nation's political struggles to the state/local arena (see for instance Cornelius et al 1999; Díaz-Cayeros 2004; and Rowland 2003).⁶ Through a number of initiatives from the strengthening of municipal governments in the early 1980s to the decentralization of education, health and other social policies in the 1990s, resources and decision-making authority have significantly devolved to state and municipal official (Díaz-Cayeros 2004, 207).

One of the most important changes prior to and amidst the political transition has been a drastic reduction in the size and scope of the government and its role in the economy. In the face of the massive debt crisis that erupted in 1981 and the periodic economic crises throughout the eighties and nineties, the government sold off state firms, ended its policies of import substitution industrialization, curtailed consumer subsidies, allowed inflation to cut real wages, liberalized major economic sectors, and even ended agrarian reform and the *ejido* sector: a major legacy of the Revolution. Both sets of measures – austerity and neoliberal restructuring – fundamentally altered the state's controls over society, leaving the state without the "fruits" it had long relied upon to nourish and discipline its corporatist groups and co-opt social actors. The power of PRI-controlled organizations, like labor unions generally, both within the party and vis-à-vis other societal groups, dwindled in the face of these changes. Even national business, now freed (or abandoned) to compete on its own against foreign business, found themselves freer to voice their interests and mobilize politically, with many bolstering the ranks of the PAN.

Concomitant with these changes in the nation's political structure and the state's role in the economy there occurred an awakening and strengthening of civil society. This includes an expansion of press freedoms, a growth in the number and presence of civic organizations (NGOs) – what Jonathan Fox (2007) refers to as a thickening of civil society – the decline and weakening of official corporatist bodies, and an increase in the scope and intensity of societal demands. The press, for example, which throughout much of the 20th century had also served as a pillar of support for the *PRI-gobierno* (Hughes 2006; Lawson 2002), underwent a substantial change in its relationship to the government. Due in large part to the economic crisis, the government sold the company providing subsidies for newsprint, cut back on advertising, and curtailed the customary pay-offs to individual reporters though this practice has not disappeared entirely (Laufer 2004, 138–150). As a result, the press became more independent and more professional. As Sallie Hughes (2006, 4) notes, "By giving voice to oppositional messages that challenged the PRI's monologue, the civic-oriented press eroded autocrats' ability to shape political reality through the control of information and national symbols in the mass media."

In the *ancien régime* Mexico's major societal organizations were co-opted into a top-down corporatist relationship extending from either the PRI or the state (see Brachet-Marques 1995). The PRI, for instance, incorporated the nation's major labor, peasant and "popular" organizations: an



arrangement that empowered the party – more specifically the president – to selectively and strategically distribute the spoils of monopoly power (i.e. “elected” and administrative positions within the government, roles in the implementation of policy, state resources, opportunities for corrupt gain, protection against prosecution) among the organizations and their leaders. Yet during the transition, civil society organizations have become far more numerous, more active, more autonomous, and more focused on the pursuit of political and social rights. Civil society has not only untied many of the corporatist knots that once constrained it, but also has begun to openly question predominant values of the political culture, the nature of Mexican politics, and to offer new ideas on the role of society and the state.

Accompanying and feeding this wave of civil society activism has been the emergence of a new political discourse, what Edmonds-Poli and Shirk (2009, 191) characterize as a transition from clients to constituents. Among its components, the public has come to more openly question the government and criticize the president: something once considered taboo; its demands for effective rule of law have “become a mantralike phrase in public discourse” (Fix-Fierro 2003, 241); and it has come to expect transparency and accountability, terms new to the Mexican political lexicon (see Fox et al 2007; Morris 2009). Part of this shift has been an empowering of civil society and the sense that civil society provides a pathway to counter the corrupt state, effectively address societal problems, and establish the rule of law. Arguably, this may be the most dramatic change marking the period.

Interpreting Change/Continuity and the Present Challenges

Mexico’s unique combination of change and continuity not only underlie the many challenges currently facing the country, but also complicate our understanding of those problems. The literature seems to point to three broad and non-mutually exclusive interpretations of the current situation.

The first view suggests simply that many of today’s problems stem from the continuation of certain features of the authoritarian regime – holdovers from the past – and that democratic change has been uneven. As Manuel Guerrero (2004) correctly observes, the forms of coming to power have become far more open and democratic, but this is not the case for the exercise of power which remains more closed and authoritarian. This disjointed pattern of change can perhaps best be seen in the area of the rule of law. Despite the dramatic turnaround in competitive elections, the new role of Congress, and even the growing levels of checks and balances within a formal democratic system, little has changed in terms of the weak rule of law, the level of impunity, or the lack of trust in Mexico’s formal institutions. Indeed, demarcating the dimensions of change, Magaloni and Zepeda (2004) stress that the changes affecting the Supreme Court have actually had limited impact on people’s lives. Diane Davis (2006, 55) similarly contends that police and judicial reforms have enjoyed

mixed success at best. Indeed, José Aguilar (2006, 102) refers to the lack of confidence in politicians as a legacy of authoritarianism and the birthmark of Mexican democracy. Fundamentally then, this interpretation suggests that progress has been uneven, and that certain areas lag behind others in terms of democratic advances and simply have to catch up.

A second perspective, however, posits that many of today's problems represent not simply a holdover from the past, but the elimination of old practices before new institutions and practices have been created to take their place. Rather than emphasize the prevalence of old problems as merely politics-as-usual, this perspective envisions today's problems as arising from change amid the failures of the democratic changes to truly take hold. Fundamental to this view is the notion that the elimination of the informal institutions that once helped guarantee stability and predictability has had the effect of exposing the weak formal institutions underneath, creating a political vacuum.

Three examples help illustrate this pattern. One involves the shift in power vis-à-vis state and local governments discussed earlier. The ending of informal presidential powers over governors coupled with decentralization has essentially left governors and other local officials with a broader range of authority and discretion, creating what Guerrero (2004, 124–125) refers to as the *"feudilizacion del poder."* No longer tied to the president, local actors and groups now operate for themselves rather than as "men of the system." Even prior to the formal transition in 2000, Wayne Cornelius (1999, 12, 14) noted how deconcentration of power could potentially strengthen authoritarian elites in the periphery, calling Mexico's "new federalism" a "double-edged sword." Summarizing these tendencies, Luis Carlos Ugalde, the former head of the federal electoral institute, contends that corruption at the state level is actually worse, despite the "Good intentions at the top of the administration," because "States have more money to spend, more autonomy than before and no supervising" (cited in Reyes 2004).

A further example illustrating this interpretation involves Mexico's growing problem of drug trafficking and drug-related violence. Various analysts in this field point to a close, collusive relationship that once linked drug traffickers to the state (see for instance Andreas 1998; Flores 2009; Lupsha 1995; Shelley 2001; Shirk 2010). During the PRI-led system, Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) operated under a single hierarchy wherein public officials extorted from and in turn protected the organizations. According to Peter Lupsha (1995), "Mexico's justice agency was in reality an arm of drug trafficking, and organized crime's government intermediary. . . Key traffickers and trafficking routes in a centralized authoritarian system like Mexico always needed the '*con permiso*' of those within the Federal District." George Grayson (2010, 29) advances a similar argument: "Relying on bribes or *mordidas*, the desperadoes pursued their illicit activities with the connivance of authorities, frequently through ad hoc pacts that might last days, weeks, or months." Although the dominance



of one political party did not contribute to the development of the rule of law, as Louise Shelley (2001, 215) notes, it did contribute to a law of rules, or informal institutions and mechanisms that governed the relationship between drug traffickers and the state. Above all, this state-sponsored racket resulted in lower levels of violence (Snyder and Duran-Martínez 2009, 262). But political competition and democratization undermined this pattern largely by hampering PRI's capacity to control the enforcement and non-enforcement of the law (Snyder and Duran-Martínez 2009, 262). As opposition parties began to capture control of state and local governments, this increased the number of potential protectors and prevented a central state from being able to guarantee enforcement or non-enforcement. At the same time, this lack of a unified, overarching hierarchy of corrupt state officials contributed to the fractionalization of the DTOs (Shirk 2010, 11). As Shannon O'Neil (2009) concludes, "by disrupting established payoff systems between drug traffickers and government officials, democratization unwittingly exacerbated drug-related violence."

A third example of this pattern of change stems from the challenges posed by pluralism. While generally the rise of civil society has had a positive effect on the nation, pushing for transparency and accountability, some envision more pernicious consequences from an active civil society amid weak institutions. According to this view, civic or criminal organizations or social movements mobilize their resources to directly challenge governmental authority and gain particularistic solutions to their demands. In what Aguilar (2006, 115) calls the dark side of social capital, there is a growing sense that social protests employ illegal methods to essentially blackmail and extort concessions from the government (Sefchovich 2008, 165). One observer of the violent social protests against the construction of the airport in 2001, for instance, commented: "what is bad is that once civil society decides to participate, they appear armed with machetes in the center of Mexico City impeding the construction of the new airport in Atenco" (Escalante 2006, 33). Hector Aguilar Camín seems to agree with this view. Commenting on the arrest of one of the leaders of the social movement in Oaxaca in 2006, he asserted that the activists were not breaking the law to defend justice, but were actually irregular clients who abused the law to negotiate impunity with the government (cited in *Milenio* December 6, 2006).⁷

According to this second interpretation then, Mexico has transited from a "strong state" whose strength rested largely on informal rather than formal mechanisms and elite unity toward a rather "weak state" characterized by the withering of the informal mechanisms, elite polarization and weak formal institutions. In short, the transition has undermined the old system without creating a new one, thereby facilitating intense conflict and state capture.

A third interpretation or pattern holds that the transition itself has created an entirely new set of problems for the nation: that the problems are not holdovers from the past. This can be seen in a number of arenas. For

one, democratization and electoral competition (change) have created a degree of political gridlock unknown in the past. Though the PRI-led regime faced many challenges of governance, when the PRI and the president controlled the reign of power these crises were fundamentally different than they are today. Of course, divided government – the lack of a ruling majority or coalition and elite polarization – are a consequence of change, not a holdover from the past. Some contend that the new emphasis on elections has also introduced more and different forms of authoritarianism and corruption. José Luis Velasco (2005, 72), for example, argues that enhanced electoral competition has led to the greater use of authoritarian practices to gain votes. Sergio Aguayo similarly refers to “new, much more sophisticated forms of vote-buying” in the 2006 election (cited in Fox 2007, 349; see also Estevez et al 2002). Democratization has also opened up new avenues of corruption, while making it more difficult to address corruption in certain sectors (Morris 2009).

Seeing today’s problems as an outgrowth of change rather than a holdover from the past can also be seen in the challenges associated with the rule of law. For some, as noted earlier, Mexico’s weak rule of law stems from the nation’s authoritarian past. But if the authoritarian legacy were the true culprit, then democratization should improve the situation even if at a slow, glacial pace. And yet, the levels of state and societal illegality have arguably ratcheted upwards since democratization. Certainly the number of drug-related deaths and the presence of organized criminal activity have skyrocketed in recent years. At the same time, confidence in the law and in institutions has continued to deteriorate. In fact, during the period of democratization, confidence in the government actually fell from 30 percent in 1998 to 23 percent by 2003, while confidence in the police dipped consistently from 33 percent to 16 percent during those years (Walker and Waterman 2008). Alberto Diaz-Cayeros and Beatriz Magaloni (forthcoming) note that despite the institutional changes supporting accountability during these years, elite behavior has not been in the direction lawmakers intended. Rather than limiting discretion and the arbitrary use of power, the changes have seemingly had the unintended consequence of enhancing both. So while authoritarianism may have rested on the unruly rule of law and the new government inherited that system, democracy as practiced thus far has not only failed to reverse the course, but seems to exacerbate it.

Conclusion

The centennial of the Mexican Revolution means different things to different people, and most likely even different things to the same person. It might mean celebrating the patriotic sacrifice of the nation’s Revolutionary heroes, the principles for which they fought, or even the gains of the post-Revolutionary governments. It might also conjure images of what is often jokingly referred to as the *roboolución*, an allusion to the long history of corruption and the failure of the *PRI-gobierno* to live up to the principles



embodied in the Revolutionary ideals that legitimized its rule. The centennial may even inspire some to see the need for a real revolution. And for some, of course, the centennial might invoke the feeling that the victory of a radical, socialist movement distorted and undermined the nation's Catholic heritage and traditional values.

In contributing to this period of reflection, the current essay has sought, first, to briefly explore the combination of political continuity and change in Mexican politics in recent years. While clearly many legacies of the Revolution remain, the political system that it fostered has undergone substantial change over the past few decades. At the same time, the essay has grappled with different ways of interpreting current struggles. The three views presented here are not mutually exclusive, and in fact some combination of the three is most likely the better explanation. Mexico faces problems arising from continuity, from change, and from the uneven pattern and sequencing of those changes. Combined, they point to the challenges of democratization. Regardless of interpretive approach, the intricate and unique combinations of change and continuity will shape the way the nation addresses its problems, what it can and cannot do, and the inherent dilemmas associated with getting there from here. In the end, perhaps the greatest legacy of the Mexican Revolution is the continued uniqueness, puzzling, and intriguing nature of Mexican politics.

Notes

¹ Among the many works that detail and analyze the Mexican democratic transition see Aguilar Rivera et al. (2006), Eisenstadt (2004), Greene (2007), Magaloni (2006), Peschard-Sverdrup and Rioff (2005). On the watershed 2000 election see Dominguez and Lawson (2004).

² A number of writings seek to understand both the longevity of PRI's power, and by extension, its eventual demise. Writing in the early 1990s (and hence before the democratic breakthrough), I attributed much of the regime's success to the ability of presidents to use their enormous powers to manage reforms through a combination of carrots and sticks and to effectively cast the *PRI-gobierno* as essentially reformist (Morris 1995). More recently, Beatriz Magaloni (2006) centers regime survival on elite unity, mass appeal (through creation of a poverty trap), the manipulation of electoral institutions, and coordination dilemmas, the end of which unleashed change. Kenneth Greene (2007), in turn, proposes a "resource theory of single-party dominance" and blames the transition on the dramatic decline of the PRI's control over resources.

³ Given the protracted nature of Mexico's democratic transition, there is almost no clear starting point. Various events have been emphasized as the key stimulus for change, including: the 1968 massacre of student protesters at Tlatelolco that revealed the authoritarian side of the system; the political/electoral reforms of 1977 that recognized leftist political parties and channeled opposition into the electoral arena; the debt crisis in 1982 that undermined economic growth and the nation's economic model; the

earthquakes of 1985 that prompted civil society to assert itself in the face of government paralysis; the fraud-ridden presidential election of 1988 that undermined the PRI-government's claims to democratic legitimacy and prioritized democratization; or the crucial 1996–97 political/electoral reforms that established a fully autonomous electoral authority. For any of these (and others), the events undoubtedly sparked a series of actions and reactions that were all important in the slow, protracted demise of the old and the establishment of a more democratic political system. In like manner, dating the culmination of the democratic transition is also difficult. Arguably the 1997 loss of the PRI's congressional majority marks a decisive turning point, though most tend to point to the 2000 election as the true beginning of democracy. Yet many reforms and tendencies, including the loss of local and gubernatorial elections, the rise of electoral competition, and even judicial reform, all predate both those events. The central point of this essay, of course, is that the degree of continuity makes it difficult to even affirm that a true transition has occurred, much less date it.

⁴ In the 2009 election, the PRI garnered 36.7% of the vote compared to 28% for PAN and 12.2% for PRD. As a result, it captured 241 of the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, compared to 147 for the PAN and 72 for the PRD. At the same time, the PRI recaptured two governorships (Querétaro and San Luis Potosí), and reaffirmed its control over Nuevo Leon, while Mexican state Governor Enrique Peña Nieto, a likely PRI's presidential candidate in 2012, demonstrated his control over the state of Mexico wresting control of key municipalities from the PRD (Selee and Putnam 2009).

⁵ Alternation in power in 2000 solidified much of the IFE's legitimacy, though controversies surrounding the 2006 presidential election would cut into that legitimacy somewhat (see Eistenstadt 2007, and Córdova and Murayama 2006). At minimum, the 2006 election, as Jonathan Fox (2007, 4) points out, demonstrates that electoral democratization does not proceed in a linear fashion.

⁶ Mexico's power concentration index – a composite measure of the geographic spread of revenues among levels of government and the partisan shares of elected offices among different levels of government index developed by De Swan and Molinar (2003) and cited in Lehoucq (2007) – fell from a score of 90 before 1997, to 77 in 1997 and to less than 50 after the 2000 election. According to Lehoucq (2007), state and municipal governments now spend a larger share of government revenues and engaged in more lobbying of members of Congress than in the past. Governors, in particular, have become key players, creating more veto players and thus making structural reforms more difficult.

⁷ The state of Oaxaca was embroiled in conflict for more than seven months in 2006. APPO (Oaxaca's People Assembly) led a broad-based protest against the Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, occupying the central city of Oaxaca. The clash resulted in 17 deaths.



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