

Critical Debates

Authoritarian Legacies and Democratic Consolidation in Mexico

Claudio A. Holzner

Cornelius, Wayne A., and David A. Shirk, eds., *Reforming the Administration of Justice in Mexico*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. Tables, figures, appendix, acronyms, 536 pp.; paperback \$37.50.

Fox, Jonathan A., *Accountability Politics: Power and Voice in Rural Mexico*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. Tables, charts, figures, bibliography, index, 448 pp.; hardcover \$110.

Fox, Jonathan A., Libby Haight, Helena Hofbauer, and Tania Sánchez Andrade, eds., *Mexico's Right-to-Know Reforms: Civil Society Perspectives*. Washington, DC: FUNDAR/Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2007. Tables, 347 pp.; PDF version available, Spanish version available.

Haber, Stephen, Herbert Klein, Noel Maurer, and Kevin Middlebrook, *Mexico Since 1980*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Figures, abbreviations, acronyms, bibliography, index, 272 pp.; hardcover \$80, paperback \$23.99, E-book \$80.

Schlefer, Jonathan. *Palace Politics: How the Ruling Party Brought Crisis to Mexico*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. Photographs, tables, figures, appendix, notes, bibliography, index, 312 pp.; hardcover \$60, paperback \$24.95, E-book \$60.

The victory of Vicente Fox of the PAN over the PRI's presidential candidate in 2000 was a watershed moment for Mexican politics, but it was only one of many such moments for Mexico during the past decade. Economically, the administration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari negotiated and signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); it reformed the constitution to allow the privatization of *ejido* holdings; and it sold off hundreds of state-owned companies. Politically, the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas radically altered the discourse and treatment of indigenous groups in Mexico while simultaneously revitalizing Mexican civil society; the PRI's loss of its majority in Congress after the 1997 elections marked the beginning of real checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches; and the creation and later strengthening of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) was a core

institutional innovation that was at least as important for Mexico's democratic transition as Fox's victory.

Much of what has been written about Mexico during the past few years emphasizes all that has changed. Many things also have stayed the same, but these continuities with the past have received much less scholarly attention. All five books reviewed here are concerned with the extent and significance of continuities with Mexico's authoritarian past and the implications these legacies have for democratic consolidation and economic growth. Two books, Jonathan Schlefer's *Palace Politics* and *Mexico Since 1980*, co-authored by the impressive team of Stephen Haber, Herbert S. Klein, Noel Maurer, and Kevin J. Middlebrook, highlight how formal and informal institutional legacies continue to harm Mexico's economic prospects. While both take a relatively *longue durée* view of history (long at least for political scientists), going as far back as the 1940s and 1950s to find explanations for Mexico's more recent economic crises, Jonathan Fox's *Accountability Politics* focuses on the period since 1990 to analyze the transition to accountability politics in rural areas. The edited volumes by Wayne E. Cornelius and David Shirk on the one hand, and Fox, Libby Haight, Helena Hofbauer, and Tania Sánchez Andrade on the other, provide comprehensive and multidisciplinary assessments of Mexico's justice system and new laws guaranteeing citizens' access to governmental information.

As difficult as it was to remove the PRI from power, eradicating the legacies of its rule may prove to be more difficult. Though all the authors are (more or less) optimistic that reformers will, in due time, overcome the very significant challenges Mexico's authoritarian legacies pose for the consolidation of democracy in the country, the cumulative list of obstacles produced by their research is daunting. To make matters even more difficult, the success of reforms in one issue area depends directly on the success of reforms in other areas. The danger of this kind of institutional interconnectedness is that lack of progress in one arena may doom reform efforts in others, causing Mexico to fall into (or remain in) vicious cycles of low growth, low transparency, low accountability, and continued impunity for corruption and fraud.

RURAL MEXICO

Mexican specialists have been vulnerable to periodic bouts of "irrational exuberance" when speculating about the country's political and economic prospects. Such was the case during the mid-1990s, when the economy was booming, credit was flowing, and democratic reforms had some momentum. It was also the case after Vicente Fox's electoral victory ended decades of authoritarian rule and generated unrealistically high expectations for further economic and institutional reforms. Of

course, the Salinas presidency ended with political and economic disasters, while the Fox presidency underwhelmed citizens with its actual accomplishments. One problem is that analysts frequently underestimate the enduring importance of subnational politics, especially rural politics, for Mexico's overall political and economic health. Indeed, reports of the demise of rural Mexico have been grossly exaggerated. Despite massive economic transformations that have turned Mexico into an increasingly urban society, a quarter of the population still lives in the countryside, and many of these people belong to indigenous groups whose integration into the nation-state remains incomplete and contested.

This has never been a problem for Jonathan Fox, who has built a long and prolific career studying economic and political developments in places like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and the Huasteca regions of Veracruz and Hidalgo. His "ear to the ground" approach, based on close contact with Mexican academics, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens, has inoculated his writing from the more fleeting academic fads that either overstate how much has actually changed in Mexico or underestimate the sincere commitment ordinary Mexicans—including poor and uneducated peasants—have for democracy. Much of his research and writing has focused on understanding the conditions under which democratic practices can take root in difficult rural contexts characterized by authoritarianism, clientelism, official impunity, and lack of rule of law. *Accountability Politics* represents a culmination of his thinking on the subject, bringing together some previously published essays with new research in an attempt to understand how civil society actors contribute to the construction of institutional checks and balances that can hold government officials accountable.

While several of the other books reviewed here argue for the essential role civil society must play in transitions to accountability, whether that involves increasing transparency or reforming the judicial system, *Accountability Politics* is the only one that systematically assesses the conditions under which civil society actors can successfully demand greater accountability from government officials and agencies. One essential analytical distinction Fox makes is between "transitions to democracy" and "transitions to accountability," which are processes that often occur independently of each other. Indeed, several of the books reviewed here, along with other recent studies of democratic consolidation, show how free, fair, and competitive elections frequently fail to produce accountable governance (e.g., Przeworski et al. 1999). A basic reason for this is that transitions to democracy involve a change in regimes—that is, in the rules of the game—whereas transitions to accountability require changes in the much stabler public institutions of the state (7).

Once this distinction is acknowledged, it is much less surprising that electoral democracy has not brought more accountable governance to

Mexico. Whereas Mexico's political regime has undergone truly remarkable transformations during the past two decades, the Mexican state has changed little in comparison, retaining important continuities with its authoritarian past. The criminal justice system is one obvious repository of authoritarian practices, but so are policymaking agencies (chapter 9), state-level executive and legislative branches (chapters 2, 8), and federalist institutions, particularly institutions for submunicipal representation (chapter 7).

The empirical essays explore state-society interactions before and after 2000 in order to uncover the conditions that allow civil society to thicken and push toward greater accountability of state institutions. These essays consistently identify three essential conditions: the presence of reformist state agents, who open opportunities for civil society actors to mobilize and pressure the state from below; the presence of accumulated "social energy," either in the form of existing autonomous organizations or shared prior experiences with political mobilization; and the ability of local organizations to "scale up" their activities; that is, to establish linkages to larger regional organizations, which can facilitate collective action and give local actors greater clout. It is interesting that electoral competition is not one of the conditions Fox emphasizes, although it surely plays a role. But the larger point is that transitions to accountability can happen independently of electoral politics, and, indeed, can progress even where free and fair elections do not yet exist.

Some of the experiences Fox describes are heartening. For example, he finds an immense amount of social energy in unexpected places, including densities of autonomous organizations in Mexico's least democratic contexts (e.g., Oaxaca and Chiapas). Though this is evidence that a vibrant civil society can survive in highly repressive contexts characterized by clientelist relations between state and society, it also means that authoritarian practices and elites can endure despite impressive grassroots efforts to reform these institutions.

The chapters also uncover other unexpected ironies. Foreign actors such as the World Bank have done more to entrench authoritarian practices than to promote governmental accountability. Also, Mexico's new era of social spending programs, such as PROGRESA and Oportunidades, demand greater transparency and accountability from citizens to the government—what Fox calls "reverse accountability"—than the other way around. In a new essay, Fox also explores the possibility that "exit" can lead to voice, in the form of organizations of migrants in the United States putting pressure on state and local governments in Mexico to respond to the needs and demands of local constituents.

Clearly, Mexico has a long way to go before it can claim to have consolidated its democracy. But one of the lessons of *Accountability*

Politics is that Mexico cannot democratize without democratizing its countryside. What can be done to speed up this process? Unfortunately, clear-cut propositions about the role of civil society in promoting accountability are not easy to make, partly because the actual outcome of state-society interactions depends on the local context in which they take place. Autocratic governors have immense power to thwart local-level advances, so policies that work in one setting may fail in another. Without change in the personnel and practices in state-level institutions, local-level progress will always be slow, pressures from below and openings at the national level notwithstanding. What is certain is that local and rural politics matter. Students of Mexican politics ignore the Mexican countryside at their peril.

THE RULE OF LAW IN MEXICO

Though early research and writing on democratic transitions focused almost exclusively on elections, the importance of the rule of law for the consolidation of democracies is now well understood. Unfortunately, what is also well known is how badly Mexico's system of justice functions. It does not matter how one measures the rule of law in Mexico; all indicators point to the same conclusion: Mexico's criminal justice system is in desperate need of reform. Without reform, citizens' rights will not be protected, government officials will not be held accountable, insecurity will grow, and ultimately, support for democracy may erode. What exactly is wrong with Mexico's administration of justice, and what can be done about it? Those are the core questions the book edited by Cornelius and Shirk addresses.

In their introductory chapter, Shirk and Alejandra Ríos define the rule of law as having three components. One is the maintenance of order in terms of the provision of security, the regulation of social conduct, and the resolution of grievances according to a legal code. A second is the accountability of the state and its representatives under the law in ways that protect the civil and political rights of individuals and groups in society from arbitrary actions by the state and its representatives. A third is guarantees of equal and open access to the judicial system in ways that ensure not just equal treatment before the law, but also effective and swift resolution of legal disputes.

The essays in this volume are organized into sections that roughly correspond to these three components of the rule of law. They collectively seek to diagnose the problems with the rule of law in Mexico, to evaluate the effectiveness of reforms and improvements undertaken during the past decade, and to provide informed policy solutions. Though many of the contributors to this volume are optimistic about the prospects for reform, the overall picture that emerges is rather bleak and

troubling, suggesting that democratic consolidation still has a long and uncertain path in Mexico.

The first set of essays examines historical and contemporary patterns of criminality in Mexico, something that is of great concern to ordinary Mexicans. Though perceptions of crime are increasing in Mexico, the number of reported crimes is declining. Two essays, one by Robert Buffington, the other by Pablo Piccato, address these issues from a historical perspective, helping to put current crime statistics in context. Both essays argue that current “crime waves” are not out of the ordinary, that Mexicans (particularly residents of Mexico City) have always been concerned about crime, and that the Mexican state has, throughout the past century, pursued misguided policies and reforms that often made matters worse rather than better. One of the pernicious consequences of the state’s failure to enforce laws and punish crimes is that citizens dramatically underreport crime, either because they do not think it will do any good or because they fear the police as much as they fear criminals. Paradoxically, this may mean that the decline in official crime rates in Mexico City (and elsewhere) since 1999 may signal that corruption and resource limitations of law enforcement authorities are getting worse, creating distrust among citizens, who choose to bring fewer and fewer crimes to their attention.

The essays in the next two sections pay close attention to how well the institutions charged with enforcing the law—the military, the police, public prosecutors, lawyers, and judges—succeed in doing their job. The collective picture that emerges is both familiar to anyone who has lived in Mexico and immensely depressing: there is a pervasive absence of accountability in the system, enabling widespread corruption and impunity. The lack of professionalism and training for police forces in Mexico is well known and documented, but the essays detail how the entire justice system, including public prosecutors, judges, lawyers, and even the military, is undertrained, underpaid, and subject to very weak professional standards.

One feature of the criminal justice system that stands out as needing reform is the limited investigative functions local police officers are able or allowed to perform. Public prosecutors’ offices, which are notoriously understaffed, have almost exclusive responsibility in the investigative phase of a crime, while police forces can make arrests only if they see a crime being committed or if the public prosecutor’s office issues an arrest warrant. Thus, as Guillermo Zepeda Lecuona points out, not only are a small proportion of crimes actually reported, but only a small proportion of reported crimes are ever brought to trial. Reforms would need to expand the functions of local police to allow them to carry out criminal investigations (along the U.S. model), but also would need to provide for more officers, better training, and better salaries. In addition, Carlos Silva and others argue that for such reforms to succeed,

the existing oversight mechanisms that regulate and punish police officers would also need to be reformed, lest the officers abuse their increased powers. Nothing short of a complete overhaul of the criminal justice system seems necessary to guarantee basic security and rights.

There have been well-publicized efforts to reform the system. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, while head of the Federal District, famously hired the consulting firm of former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani to offer recommendations on fighting crime in the capital (a move criticized by Mario Arroyo Juárez in his essay), while Vicente Fox and Felipe Calderón both increased the role of the military in the fight against organized crime. However, several essays in this volume criticize many of these reforms for being shortsighted and misguided. In one of the better ones, Allison Rowland argues that despite Mexico's federal structure and the local nature of most crime and its prosecution, almost all recent crime-fighting reforms have been concentrated at the federal level as a political response to citizen pressure, with very little attention or resources dedicated to preventing and controlling crime at the municipal level. The militarization of Mexico's Procuraduría General de la República (or PGR, akin to the Attorney General's office in the United States) is one such reform that responds to public pressure to do something about the growing strength of drug cartels, but does little to improve the functioning and capacity of existing organizations, institutional accountability, or citizens' access to justice.

Electoral politics is also creating incentives for presidents to pursue policies that are politically expedient in the short term but do little to solve core problems. In an important contribution, Sigrid Arzt argues that many recent reforms, such as Fox's creation of new national-level security forces or Calderón's increasing militarization of the public security apparatus, were designed to accomplish the narrow goal of fighting organized crime but may end up severely weakening both the police and the armed forces. In the worst case scenario, the militarization of public security may produce more corruption, more impunity, and more human rights abuses, with little or no improvement in the capacity of local police or prosecutors to fight crime.

Despite the enormous political, fiscal, institutional, and human constraints on effective reforms, several essays hold out hope that electoral competition, along with steady pressure from civil society, will create momentum for ongoing reform. (See, for example, the essay by Sara Schatz, Hugo Concha, and Ana Laura Magaloni.) The growing strength and independence of Mexico's Supreme Court, made possible by reforms in 1994 that substantially increased the court's constitutional jurisdiction and altered selection criteria and appointment procedures, is a sign that the state is building a healthier, more powerful, and politically relevant federal judicial system.

The final essay, by John J. Bailey and Wayne Cornelius, is decidedly cautious, however. The authors do not believe that democratization and political competition will create the conditions for successful reform. Instead, they argue that the best prospects for reform exist at the sub-national (state) level and will be more likely to occur as a product of policy entrepreneurship by political and civil society leaders than as a byproduct of democratic consolidation. The implication is that improvement in Mexico's administration of justice will likely come in fits and starts, only when—perhaps by chance?—skillful and committed governors push through reforms in individual states that can then serve as examples for others.

RULE OF LAW AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Mexico's weak rule of law, which it inherited from its authoritarian past, does more than harm its prospects for democratic consolidation; it also damages its prospects for economic growth and development. This is the core argument that *Mexico Since 1980* makes powerfully and convincingly. The rule of law is important not only because it ensures individual political and civil liberties, which are the foundation of democratic regimes, but because it makes property rights more secure, which is the foundation for a robust economic system.

The deceptively simple title of this book masks a theoretically and empirically rich explanation for Mexico's anemic economic growth. The core theoretical insight on which the authors draw is that secure property rights—secure from arbitrary confiscation by individuals, groups, and especially the government—are essential for sustained economic growth. Without secure property rights, wealth holders do not have incentives to deploy their capital in economically productive activities; this, in turn, leads to economic stagnation. Of course, the state is often the only institution that has the ability to protect property from being stolen or confiscated, but this very power makes it possible for governments to plunder a society's wealth, either through excessive taxation or outright confiscation, for its own short-term benefit. As Haber et al. state, "unless the government can give the population credible reasons to believe that it will not act arbitrarily in its own short-run interest, the population will not invest or engage in a wide range of other productive activities" (5).

This is not a new argument, but it is a powerful one. It was made perhaps most famously by the Nobel Prize-winning economist Douglass North (1981) to explain why the Industrial Revolution occurred first in Great Britain, rather than in France, Spain, or elsewhere. But what kind of institutional arrangements can credibly limit the authority and discretion of governments? The authors list three such arrangements that can

help overcome governments' commitment problem. Multiple "veto points" in the decisionmaking process can limit the discretion of any individual actor in the government. Professional and politically independent bureaucracies, along with a powerful, independent, and effective judicial system, are two possible locations of veto points in both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Also important are mechanisms that allow citizens and government actors to sanction public officials who overstep their authority. Free, fair, and competitive elections are significant in this regard, but so are other institutions, such as effective oversight mechanisms and (again) a powerful judiciary.

Third, institutional arrangements must provide incentives for different actors and bodies in the government to veto and sanction one another. Here, democracies have distinct advantages over authoritarian regimes, because competing political parties have strong incentives to monitor and punish transgressions by members of other parties. But competitive elections are not enough. A strong system of rule of law based on a powerful and independent judiciary capable of holding state and government officials accountable is necessary if officials are to be dissuaded from using their power arbitrarily and for personal gain.

The core problem with Mexico's democracy, the authors argue, is that despite economic reforms that opened up the economy to foreign trade and investment and political reforms that established a competitive electoral democracy, none of these did away with the multiple legacies of authoritarianism, which create enormous drag on Mexico's economic growth and public investment. Chief among these legacies are a corrupt police, out-of-date and difficult-to-access property registers, and inefficient courts, which together make property rights (in addition to individual rights) highly uncertain and difficult to enforce. The economic consequences of the lack of rule of law have been devastating: repeated economic crises, the collapse of the banking system, lack of jobs, the impoverishment of millions of Mexicans, exceedingly small government revenues from taxes, and the government's consequent inability to invest in infrastructure, affordable housing, health and welfare systems, and education.

The book's political economy framework provides new and enlightening insights into the interconnectedness of political and economic reforms. It is not simply the case that Mexico's economic crisis of the 1980s helped undermine authoritarianism, as is commonly noted. The authors show, in clear and exhaustive detail with abundant charts and empirical evidence, how the lack of institutional innovation in courts, police, and property rights regimes continues to undermine economic growth by encouraging rent-seeking behavior, restricting credit, and discouraging public and private investment. Slow growth and low revenues, in turn, hamper the government's ability to reform its prop-

erty rights institutions, strengthen the police and courts, and thereby establish firmer foundations for the rule of law. Low levels of tax revenue also inhibit reforms to the education and welfare systems, which are necessary if Mexico's workers and firms are to be competitive in a global marketplace. Reforms are clearly in order, but, as the authors argue, Mexico's electoral system, in which three large parties divide up most of the seats in Congress, coupled with constitutional prohibitions against re-election, makes consensus building around contentious policy reforms difficult, if not impossible (154–55).

I have two quibbles with the book. Despite the generic title, this is primarily a book about Mexico's political economy since 1980, which uses a relatively sophisticated theoretical framework to understand Mexico's anemic economic growth in recent years. Though the authors do make an attempt to provide enough historical information and context for students encountering Mexico for the first time, readers looking for a book that will provide a broad overview of recent developments in Mexico in a manner suitable for undergraduate classes may be disappointed.

Second, early in the introduction, the authors state, "authoritarian and democratic regimes imply substantially different systems of property rights and taxation, and they produce as outcomes dramatically different levels of public investment and economic growth" (3). Though the specific argument about property rights, veto points, and the sanctioning mechanism is convincing and has empirical support outside of the Mexican case, one gets the sense that the authors overreach by trying in this way to generalize the argument to all democratic and authoritarian regimes. There are good reasons to suspect that at times, property rights will be at greater risk in democratic systems than authoritarian ones; witness Chile under Salvador Allende or Venezuela under Hugo Chávez. On the other hand, we can all think of examples of authoritarian regimes that sustained rapid economic growth for decades, including Mexico between 1950 and 1980. Indeed, the book does not answer obvious questions that emerge from Mexico's history: why were growth rates so much higher during Mexico's authoritarian era (1950–1980) than during its democratizing period (1994–2008)? Shouldn't growth rates have improved under Fox and Calderón? Why do authoritarian legacies dampen growth more than authoritarianism itself?

ELITE BARGAINING AND ECONOMIC COLLAPSE

Readers need only look as far as *Palace Politics* for a compelling answer to at least some of these questions. The central puzzle that concerns *Palace Politics* is, why was Mexico's economy so stable in the decades

before 1970 and so vulnerable to repeated crises thereafter? A common but unsatisfying answer is that good policymaking and economic management sustained earlier stability, but bungling by the policymakers and managers brought on crisis in later years. This explanation, while correct in a narrow sense, is unsatisfying, because it tells little about why smart people sometimes do smart things and at other times do stupid things. It is particularly unsatisfying in the case of Mexico, because the three presidents responsible for Mexico's worst economic crises (José López Portillo, Miguel de la Madrid, and Carlos Salinas) all rose to the presidency from positions in economic, not political ministries.

Schlefer finds the answer in the changing dynamics of elite factional conflict, which he explores through interviews with many of the key players in each of the six presidential administrations from 1952 through 1988. Whereas prior stability was the result of norms of elite conflict that allowed ambitious politicians to invest in the long-term stability of the political and economic system, when these norms broke down, elite conflict created the conditions for macroeconomic crises.

While *Palace Politics* can be read as a study of elite politics, it also engages directly with the political economy literature on economic growth and collapse. It entertains and forcefully rejects three common explanations for the economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Schlefer finds little evidence that the microeconomic policies associated with import substitution industrialization—tariffs on imports, government ownership of businesses in key industries, excessive tax breaks for businesses, and (over)spending policies—produced economic crises. Making an argument with which economists would wholeheartedly agree, Schlefer contends that it was mismanagement of macroeconomic policies—fixed exchange rates, excessive deficit spending, inflationary monetary policy—designed to stimulate economic growth for short-term political gain that precipitated every major crisis.

Schlefer also rejects the argument that pressure from labor unions, peasants, and urban residents for more distributive policies forced President Luis Echeverría to pursue populist policies that eventually led to bankruptcy. Similarly, he rejects the argument that PRI governments overspent during the 1970s in an effort to stitch together a ruling coalition that became irreparably frayed after the Tlatelolco Massacre in 1968.

Furthermore, though he recognizes that international conditions played a role in several of the crises—the Federal Reserve's precipitous 1979 interest rate increase, the decline in oil prices in the following years, or the U.S. stock market crash of 1987, for example—Schlefer argues that previous administrations were also subject to instances of capital flight, interest rate pressures, and unfavorable international conditions. The difference is that earlier administrations did a better job managing the external shocks.

Why were earlier administrations better able to contain spending and manage macroeconomic policy? Schlefer's answer has little to do with presidents' skills at managing the economy and everything to do with their ability or willingness to manage political conflicts between rival factions, or *grupos*, in the political system. Elites were engaged in a form of prisoner's dilemma: all groups had strong incentives to use the power of the purse for political gain, particularly in the year preceding the *dedazo*, when the sitting president anointed his successor. But if all *grupos* pursued their short-term interests by overspending in order to secure the support of key constituencies and gain favor with the president, they would place the entire system at risk. In earlier periods, two weakly institutionalized norms checked these destructive tendencies. The Treasury, which had enormous power over budgets and spending, was more or less depoliticized, partly because employees of the Finance Ministry (and the Central Bank) were well trained and highly professionalized, and partly because of what appeared to be a tacit agreement that ministers of finance would not be candidates for the presidency.

More important was that presidents, who could do little to control the spending of ministers and undersecretaries before the transition period, were willing to reassert control over spending after they nominated a successor. They enforced fiscal discipline primarily by punishing individuals and *grupos* who tried to grab too much power for themselves while ensuring the political survival of *grupos* who lost the nominating struggle. "Overall, in the 1950s and 1960s, the assurance of political survival for obeying the president was worth more than the uncertain chance of grabbing power by manipulating the public purse" (127).

These informal arrangements, however, were only as strong as a president's commitment to them, and both eventually disappeared when ambitious presidents during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s sought to preserve their influence beyond their single term. The unraveling began with Echeverría and López Portillo, who allowed, if not actually encouraged, greater conflict and less cooperation among rival *grupos*. During these two administrations, internal contests over presidential succession turned all or nothing, with losing political cliques destined for permanent political exile. As losing *grupos* increasingly feared being expelled from politics, succession conflicts came to trump any long-term concerns or loyalty to the system.

Making matters worse, López Portillo created a new superministry, the Ministry of Planning and Budget (SPP), which took over many of the budgeting and spending responsibilities that had previously been the sole responsibility of the Finance Ministry. Though the newly created SPP was populated by individuals whose professional careers were shaped by their experiences in Finance and in the Central Bank, the first two heads of this powerful ministry were politically ambitious econo-

mists who used innovative, sophisticated, less visible, and ultimately more damaging ways to inflate the economy.

In some ways, this explanation is unremarkable and unoriginal, somewhat resembling the “great man theories” of politics that place most of the blame for Mexico’s economic woes on the bungling administrations of Echeverría and López Portillo. But one of the strengths of Schlefer’s account is that it sheds significant light on the even more severe economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, both Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas, who came to the presidency after serving as head of the SPP with, as it turns out, unwarranted reputations for fiscal restraint, bear much of the blame for the economic crises in 1982, 1987, and 1994. According to the evidence presented by Schlefer, each one of these crises was caused by, or at least worsened by, their irresponsible spending and macroeconomic policies, pursued exclusively for private political gain.

The book is organized thematically and chronologically. The first chapters describe in intricate and delicious detail how Mexico’s political system worked from the perspective of the executive branch. The author spends a lot of time discussing the relationship between the Treasury, the president, and other ministries and organizations, and his discussion of how the mysterious presidential successions worked is illuminating, though not new. The second half of the book applies these insights to economic policymaking in successive administrations to show exactly how elite conflict spilled over its traditional boundaries to produce crisis after crisis.

Schlefer’s command of information and sources is masterful. Though his interviews with elites are important sources, he is meticulous about confirming and crosschecking this information with other sources, including memoirs, academic studies, government reports, and statistics. The result is a rich and intricate account of elite politics under PRI rule. Somehow, however, Schlefer’s discussions of early periods seem much richer and more nuanced than his discussion of the de la Madrid and Salinas presidencies, about which we should know more. Perhaps this is because more political memoirs are available that discuss the period spanning the 1950s and 1960s, or perhaps because the key actors he interviewed from this early period, who are retired and surer of their political legacy, were more frank and forthcoming.

Palace Politics is a must-read for students and analysts of Mexican politics in order to guard against the historical myopia that plagues many recent studies. Its longer historical perspective shows that the 1970s were a decade when the rules of the Mexican political game were in flux, and therefore may not be the most appropriate benchmark by which to compare current policies and outcomes. One hopes that this book will help rectify some incorrect assumptions about who is to

blame for Mexico's recent economic crises and stagnation. Though Schlefer by no means absolves Echeverría and López Portillo, one of the bitter lessons he teaches is that the U.S.-trained *técnicos*, rather than the much-maligned *políticos*, bear most of the blame for the collapse and ongoing weakness of the Mexican economy. Now that neoliberal policies are increasingly criticized for not producing robust economic growth, this alternative comparative frame also reminds us that policy options outside of economic orthodoxy do indeed exist.

TESTING TRANSPARENCY REFORMS

Schlefer's insider account of policymaking in Mexico is compelling partly because he manages to penetrate the veil of secrecy that characterized authoritarian rule under the PRI. Information really was power, so elites hoarded it like a treasure, hiding it not just from citizens but also from each other. That is why Mexico's new Federal Law for Transparency and Access to Information (LFTAIPG in Spanish), approved on June 12, 2002 and implemented a year later, is a remarkable breakthrough. This law, together with the new Federal Institute for Access to Public Information (IFAI), recognizes citizens' right to obtain information about the operation of government agencies and creates mechanisms whereby it is relatively easy for individual petitioners to request or acquire this information. The law establishes rather robust standards of transparency by international standards, and therefore holds much promise for creating a foundation for stronger accountability in Mexico.

Mexico's Right-to-Know-Reforms, the product of a joint effort between academics and civil society organizations, analyzes the scope, effectiveness, and operation of these new institutions in a wide range of policy and issue areas. The book consists of 2 introductory essays and 44 short chapters that describe in detail how the LFTAIPG actually functions in a variety of ministries and government agencies. The bulk of the essays document the results of requests for fairly sensitive information from numerous ministries and government agencies covering important issue areas, including the IFE, SEDESOL (Secretaría de Desarrollo Social), Congress, the judicial system, and the Treasury. Though the collection reads a bit like a raw data manual, the two introductory chapters do a commendable job of aggregating and analyzing the experiences described by the individual essays. Collectively they produce an amazing snapshot of agencies' actual practices regarding transparency and freedom of information requests, and should serve as an important resource for further research on transparency and accountability in Mexico.

The essays document pockets of greater and lesser transparency among Mexican agencies. The executive branch seems, on the whole, quite forthcoming with information, most of the time adhering to both

the letter and the spirit of the law. One important reason for this is the creation of the IFAI, which has spearheaded innovations to make access to information, as well as requests for information from federal agencies, much easier. However, its jurisdiction is limited to federal agencies in the executive branch, so that the congress, the judiciary, autonomous federal agencies, and state and local governments either have no mechanism in place to deliver information to citizens or do so in suboptimal ways.

Financial authorities, particularly the Treasury, have insisted on opacity, resisting requests for information about a number of vital budget issues, including how surplus income generated by PEMEX (the state oil company) is used and about the banking system bailout. It is interesting that though the IFE has often been cited as an example of transparency, the authors find that the Federal Electoral Tribunal (TEPJF) is much less transparent in its operation. Under most circumstances this might not be particularly worrisome, but given the crucial role this agency played in resolving electoral disputes after the 2006 presidential election, the lack of transparency damaged the reputation of all electoral institutions.

It is also interesting that while citizens are learning how best to use the new tools to demand greater transparency from government, government officials are also learning how best to satisfy the letter of the law without actually giving out any information. If the formulation of a question is not 100 percent clear and impossible to misinterpret, or is not addressed to the correct office, it will probably be denied. One of the more pernicious new strategies officials use is simply to declare that the information requested “does not exist,” which is allowable under the new law even if the information is already known to exist or is required by law for the agency to collect. Whether this response is sincere (because of general disorder in agencies’ filing systems) or used because officials decide that certain types of information should not be released, the number of times this response to information requests has been given has more than quadrupled in three years.

All the contributors to this volume agree that the LFTAIPG is an exceptional new tool, but one that still needs to be strengthened. Two of its systematic weaknesses are worth highlighting. Though the IFAI acts as an impartial agency to determine whether or not an executive branch agency’s response was legitimate, including giving requestors a right to appeal negative decisions, no similar agency exists to monitor information requests for other areas of government. Citizens whose requests for information have been denied by agencies outside the IFAI’s jurisdiction can appeal the decision, but these appeals are judged by the same agencies that denied the information in the first place.

Second, state and local governments are not subject to the LFTAIPG, which leaves a gaping hole in transparency reforms precisely where

governments operate most opaquely and with greatest impunity. Fortunately, there was enough political will in the Mexican Senate and Congress to reform the constitution in 2007 in ways that will require local governments to meet certain minimum standards of transparency, similar to those established in the LFTAIPG. Even with this reform, however, several of the contributing authors recognize that transparency laws at the local level will be effective only if opposition parties, civil society organizations, and ordinary citizens use the new tools at their disposal to exercise their new information rights and hold state and local governments accountable.

Whereas reforms of the criminal justice system have been slow and counterproductive, reform efforts that guarantee citizens' right to know have made stunningly rapid progress, giving the pessimists among us hope that virtuous cycles of transparency and accountability will rid Mexico of its authoritarian legacies sooner rather than later. Nevertheless, the editors of this volume are, at best, cautiously optimistic. Jonathan Fox and Libby Haight rightly emphasize that "the strength of any institutional safeguard depends a great deal on the *entire* system of protection of rights that it is part of, just as any chain is only as strong as its weakest link" (59, emphasis in original). Overall, many of the contributors to the book agree that the LFTAIPG

has not been capable of making the government truly transparent. . . . Even now, there is still no access to substantial information, which is needed for the public to evaluate government performance and to promote accountability, timely monitoring, and oversight of public spending. In fact, we are still far from being able to claim that we have an open government in Mexico, with transparent and accountable practices, which recognizes and respects the right to know. (Tania Sánchez Andrade, 19)

WHITHER DEMOCRACY IN MEXICO?

As recently as a few years ago, the consensus among specialists was that though Mexico's democracy was not perfect, it was well institutionalized, elections were free and fair, checks and balances were working, and necessary institutional improvements, such as new transparency laws and changes to the judicial system, were moving in the right direction. Recent research paints a much less rosy picture. All the volumes here are less concerned with elections than with other essential components of democratic regimes: transparency, accountability, and the rule of law. While it is commonly stated that the rule of law is important for well-functioning and accountable governments, collectively these books make an important contribution by showing in devastating detail how the lack of rule of law affects the everyday wellbeing of ordinary Mexicans.

Another common theme is that Mexico's democratic consolidation is still very much a work in progress, haunted and hampered by deeply entrenched authoritarian legacies that, in many cases, are finding new strength. While some scholars have written about the persistence of "authoritarian enclaves," the word *enclave* understates just how pervasive, deeply rooted, and powerful authoritarian practices, institutions, and elites are in Mexico. Authoritarian legacies persist in a multitude of federal agencies, thrive in local and state-level institutions, and thoroughly permeate the criminal justice system, seemingly immune to pressures from electoral competition.

The villains in all of these accounts, the actors who are holding up Mexico's democratic consolidation and who bear much of the blame for its enduring economic ills, are the country's political and economic elites, not the parochial, unsophisticated, cynical children of Sánchez who have often been blamed for the weakness of democratic politics in Mexico. Indeed, all the books suggest more or less explicitly that democracy survives in spite of Mexico's self-serving elites, many of whom show no particular commitment to democracy, human rights, or justice. The heroes, on whom many of the authors pin their hopes, are ordinary citizens and civil society organizations, who overcome immense obstacles in order to put steady pressure on political institutions and who consistently show a greater commitment to democracy and rule of law than elites do.

All of the books reviewed here would agree that democracy in Mexico is not yet consolidated. But are its warts large enough to conclude that it is not yet democratic? None of the authors go that far, but given the evidence, it seems like a fair question. The answer depends, of course, on how one chooses to define a democracy and on what evidence one chooses to focus. Still, a political system in which citizens cannot hold government officials accountable; cannot request information with guarantees that it will be provided in a timely manner; in which the rule of law is tenuous, corruption is rampant, and human rights abuses go unpunished; and in which local authoritarian leaders manipulate elections before and after ballots are cast is not very democratic. Given these realities, the existence of free and fair elections every three years at the national level is an important but increasingly tenuous basis for claiming democratic credentials.

REFERENCES

- North, Douglass C. 1981. *Structure and Change in Economic History*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Przeworski, Adam, Susan C. Stokes, and Bernard Manin, eds. 1999. *Democracy, Accountability, and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.