

Mexico: Democracy and the Future

Kathleen Bruhn

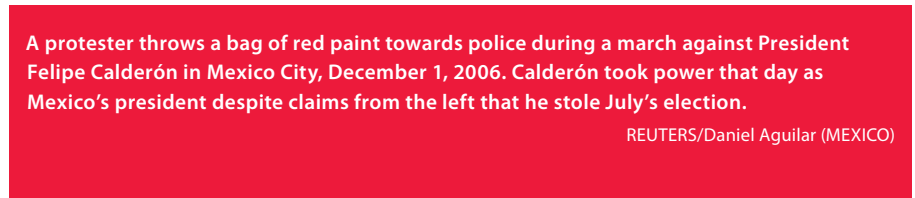
Mexico has been moving slowly toward full democratic development. In this article, reprinted from the ABA's magazine for secondary teachers, *Insights on Law & Society*, Spring 2009, political scientist Kathleen Bruhn analyzes the transition from historic one-party rule in Mexico to the current day, where three political parties—spanning the ideological spectrum—vie for the presidency and seats in the congress.

During most of the twentieth century, Mexico was governed by one of the longest-ruling authoritarian parties in the contemporary world. Even as most Latin American countries democratized in the 1980s, Mexico remained under the control of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI. It was not until the 2000 presidential election that a two-party system emerged, culminating in the victory of conservative National Action Party (PAN) candidate Vicente Fox, followed in 2006 by the election of Felipe Calderón, also of the PAN. Today, Mexico is a democracy. Yet many of the legacies of its authoritarian government remain, making Mexican democracy both less complete and less stable than established democracies. In this article, I examine the transformation of Mexican politics, the characteristics of the political system, and some challenges that democracy faces.

The PRI System

The PRI regime traces its roots to the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917). The revolution began when wealthy northern Francisco Madero called for a popular uprising against President Porfirio Díaz, who had governed Mexico for over 30 years. Madero only meant to call for elections, but he got a social revolution, mobilizing peasants around demands for land.

During the next seven years, a vicious power struggle pitted members of the “revolutionary family” against each other. By 1929, most of the revolution's leaders



had been executed or assassinated. In 1929, President Plutarco Elias Calles called for a different way to transfer power. His solution was a ruling party that would share power among the revolutionary factions. This party would avoid destructive rivalries by dispensing with competitive elections.

The revolution also left behind a politically mobilized peasantry. President

Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940) proposed to demobilize them by distributing land and bringing the peasants into the ruling party. In the system he devised, known as corporatism, affiliated organizations got state support, monopolies, benefits, and representation in congress. In return, they gave the PRI electoral support and accepted government-controlled selection of their leadership. In time, these

leaders became more loyal to the president than to their own members.

Finally, the ruling party devised an electoral system that permitted other parties to compete but gave the PRI the power to determine the results. Allowing opposition parties—and beating them by 80 to 90 percent—gave the PRI a façade of democratic legitimacy without endangering its control. Opposition parties were given just enough representation to keep them playing the game.

For 60 years, this system operated effectively. The PRI never lost a governorship or a senate race and never won less than two-thirds of the Mexican Congress. Because he also controlled who could become PRI candidates, the president of Mexico had extraordinary power. A docile congress would pass whatever legislation he proposed. Governors resigned if he asked. His only limitation was that he could serve a single six-year term—no re-election. To ensure that the transition would not unleash dangerous competition, he had the power to name his own successor. This also protected his position after he left office.

Democratization

The PRI system always had critics, but until the 1980s, these challenges had limited effects. What changed? Three factors stand out:

The Economic Crisis of the 1980s

From the 1930s to the 1980s, Mexico adopted a development policy that relied heavily on state intervention in the economy. Mexican businesses were privately owned but worked in partnership with the state, receiving subsidies of key inputs like electricity and enjoying protection from foreign competition. The state also provided benefits to workers, including health care. The economy grew rapidly, which satisfied most other sectors of the economy. As a result, the PRI enjoyed ample popular support.

There were, however, problems. As the number of protected industries and

the size of the working class grew, so did the costs of subsidizing them. The industries remained inefficient, which constrained their ability to export products. When they reached the limits of domestic demand, the economy began to slow. Public and private debt began to expand dramatically.

The crash came in 1982, when a collapse in world oil prices triggered a major debt crisis for oil-exporting Mexico. The government declared imminent default on its debt and asked for emergency loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Mexico had to accept drastic conditions, including budget cuts, higher interest rates, and caps on wages, which triggered a severe recession.

This crisis had two major effects on the PRI. First, it no longer had enough resources to pay off supporters. Without a steady stream of rewards, the political coalition began to unravel. Labor unions and peasant organizations did not challenge the PRI; indeed, these groups often cooperated with draconian policies to freeze wages because their leadership had long ago been captured by the PRI and maintained in power through undemocratic internal practices. Nevertheless, workers and peasants increasingly failed to obey labor leader demands that they continue their traditional electoral support for the PRI. Business also began to back opposition parties, particularly the PAN, after President José López Portillo's nationalization of the banks in 1982 convinced them that they could not trust the PRI to protect their property. Finally, Mexico's shift to a free-market model meant that state protection was no longer available, further reducing incentives to support the government.

Second, the PRI's popularity deteriorated. A decade of high inflation and stagnant economic growth wiped out the gains of two decades of development.

Poverty increased; middle-class professionals and workers lost their jobs, and everyone blamed the PRI.

Rising Levels of Education and Wealth

By the 1980s, Mexican society had changed dramatically from 1929. A mostly poor, agricultural, illiterate society became an urban, industrial, and increasingly educated society. The first signs of this shift emerged in 1968, when a powerful student movement led by high school and university students demanded more political freedom. Although this movement was crushed by the Mexican military, it was instructive that pressure for democracy began among the most educated segment of society.

Democratic theory tells us that societies with wealthy, educated populations are more likely to support stable democracy. Democracy requires a people capable of reading and interpreting information about candidates and policies. Moreover, educated people commonly feel that they have the capacity and the right to make such choices. Finally, as incomes rise, people have more time and energy to devote to political activity.

The Growth of Civil Society

In fact, political activity did increase. By the 1990s, a growing number and variety of popular organizations operated independently of the PRI. Cities grew so rapidly during Mexico's development that there were enormous backlogs in public services. Shantytowns created from salvaged materials sprang up on marginal land. They lacked electricity, plumbing, or clean running water. Neighborhoods organized to pressure the government for these services. Feminist organizations, environmental organizations, and human rights organizations were also created by middle-class residents.

In 1988, many of these organizations came together in support of the presidential candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a PRI insider and only son of President Lázaro Cárdenas. He broke with the PRI over market reforms and the party's refusal to allow him to compete for its presidential candidacy. His campaign relied heavily on networks of

popular organizations. In the end, the PRI resorted to massive electoral fraud to deny him victory, leaving another major stain on its legitimacy.

The 1988 campaign also marked the foundation of Mexico's main left party, the Party of the Democratic Revolution, or PRD. Over the next 12 years, the PRD worked tirelessly for electoral reform and democratic change. Although the PRD did not benefit directly (the conservative PAN won the 2000 presidential election that ended the PRI's rule), its contributions to Mexico's democratic transition are incalculable. The PRD was the first viable political threat to the PRI. More importantly, the fact that this threat came from the left gave the PAN leverage to make a series of deals. In exchange for PAN support of economic reforms, the PRI's pro-market reformers accepted opposition electoral victories (of the PAN) and negotiated reforms that removed elections from direct PRI supervision. The experience of governing gave opposition politicians credibility and reassured voters that electing candidates from the opposition would not lead to disaster. The electoral reforms created a more level playing field and sealed the end of the PRI's one-party regime. Ironically, the PRD challenged these same institutions after an excruciatingly narrow loss (less than 1 percent margin) in the 2006 presidential election. PRD candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador charged the PAN with electoral fraud and led nearly six months of mass demonstrations attempting to prevent the inauguration of Felipe Calderón. Although the PRD has since returned to normal behavior in the Mexican legislature, the fact that many of its followers remain less than fully committed to the current set of legal norms regarding elections is a troubling indication that Mexico's democracy has not yet consolidated.

The Contemporary Political System

Though historic, the election of PAN president Vicente Fox in 2000 did not

change the institutional framework of Mexican politics. The Mexican Constitution is loosely modeled on the U.S. Constitution. It is a presidential system, with a Senate and a Chamber of Deputies, and an independent judicial branch. Formally, it is a federal system, which means that state and national governments share power and are separately elected. It has 31 states and a Federal District (Mexico City). The Mexican president is only slightly more powerful vis-à-vis the legislature than the U.S. president, but the judicial branch is significantly less powerful than its American counterpart. Mexico's Supreme Court only acquired the power of judicial review (the power to declare a law unconstitutional) in the 1990s. It does not have a tradition of acting independently of presidential wishes, and access to the court is more limited than in the United States. Any U.S. citizen can appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court, but only specific actors (such as legislators) can bring cases to the Mexican Supreme Court.

One of the most significant differences between the United States and Mexico is the electoral system. The United States uses a plurality system, in which the candidate with the most votes wins the seat. Mexico uses a mixed electoral system for its legislature. In the Chamber of Deputies, for example, there are 300 plurality district seats, but there are also 200 proportional representation seats. Parties end up with roughly the same percentage of seats as their percentage of the vote nationwide. As a result, instead of a legislature where one party nearly always controls a majority, as in the United States, Mexico's legislature since 1997 has never had a one-party majority. This can make it hard to pass legislation. Putting together a majority requires negotiation between at least two parties.

On the other hand, the existence of plurality districts tends to reward larger parties. Thus, the Mexican party system is less fragmented than those

of countries with pure proportional representation. There are three major parties that together win over 90 percent of the seats. The parties are relatively stable, disciplined, and ideologically distinct from one another—the PRD on the left, the PAN on the right, and the PRI in the center. Despite its recent setbacks, the PRI continues to operate in all Mexican states and in fact governs more states than any other party. It often acts as a partner to the PAN in passing legislation but sometimes takes the side of the PRD to oppose a presidential initiative. The current PAN president, Felipe Calderón, has proven particularly adept at negotiating deals with the parties in congress. He has been able to pass several important reforms, including to the tax and criminal justice codes. His success, however, has depended heavily on his personal skills.

Consolidation of Democracy?

In addition to the legislative gridlock, Mexico still faces a number of challenges.

The first and most critical challenge is the rule of law. Due to the legacy of authoritarian rule, Mexico never developed an independent and efficient court system. This has two major consequences: (1) investors cannot count on speedy and impartial enforcement of contracts and property rights, which reduces investment and economic growth; and (2) criminal prosecution is ineffective. As a result, citizens suffer growing problems of public security or take the law into their own hands. Chief among the security threats is an increasingly violent confrontation between the government and powerful Mexican drug cartels.

The second problem is a long-standing one—poverty and inequality—which worsened, as Mexico turned toward free markets. Inequality can cause political unrest, and it has also slowed economic growth. Too few Mexicans have the education, care, and skills necessary to make them productive citizens in


Discussion Questions

1. *What are the key elements of a democracy? How does Mexico serve as a democratic model? What challenges do Mexicans continue to face?*
2. *What factors led to the demise of one-party political rule in Mexico?*
3. *Can you identify some of the similarities and differences in the political systems of Mexico and the United States?*
4. *How does Mexico's success or failure as a democracy impact the nation's neighbors, such as the United States and Latin America?*

a democracy. Likewise, too few have enough access to capital to start their own businesses.

These two problems contribute to the third problem—an economy that grows more slowly than countries with similar profiles and too slowly to provide jobs for its young population. When Mexican economic growth slows, immigration to the United States increases. Poor economic performance also creates dissatisfaction and may undermine legitimacy.

Mexico will probably muddle through in the near term as a less-than-perfect democracy. But these challenges must be confronted in Mexico's democracy to endure and meet citizen's needs in the long term. U.S. nongovernmental organizations (like the ABA) as well as the U.S. government may have a role to play in helping Mexico to meet these challenges. One example might involve U.S. acceptance of a slowdown or even reversal of some NAFTA requirements

in order to allow the Mexican economy to adjust and become more competitive. Although the primary responsibility rests with Mexicans themselves, it is in the interest of the United States to encourage and support these developments, as a consolidated democracy on our southern border is certainly better than an unstable or anarchic system. 

KATHLEEN BRUHN is professor of political science at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She teaches and conducts research in comparative politics in Latin American Studies and is the co-author of *Mexico: the Struggle for Democratic Development* (University of California Press, 2nd ed., 2006).



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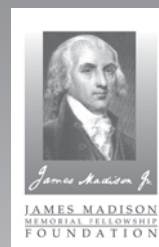
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