Facing Political Reality in Mexico

By Andrew Reding

IN THEIR VIEW of Mexico City, the foreign policy establishments in Washington and Ottawa have a lot in common with Voltaire’s Dr. Pangloss, who, no matter how bad the situation, always insisted that “particular misfortunes make for the general good; so that the more particular misfortunes there are, the more all is well.” What if the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) reneges on carrying out sections of an electoral reform agreement negotiated with the opposition? No problem. That’s just a sign that, in his zeal for reform, President Ernesto Zedillo has gone well beyond what his party is willing to stomach.¹ The general whom Zedillo hand-picked to lead Mexico’s war on drugs turns out to be working for one of the country’s largest narcotics cartels? It’s another good sign, according to President Bill Clinton: The Zedillo administration is “obviously saying to the world and to the people of Mexico, ‘We will not tolerate corruption if we can find it and root it out, even if it’s at the highest level.’”²

Never mind that President Zedillo has failed to solve even one of the prominent assassinations that have shaken public confidence in the country’s institutions. Never mind that he has declined to investigate and prosecute corrupt PRI power-brokers while applying the full force of the law against PRI defectors and whistle-blowers. Or that he has refused to take action against corrupt PRI governors who have plunged their states into lawlessness and fomented armed rebellion. Or that he is keeping an exemplary general in solitary confinement, for the sole offense of seeking to cleanse the armed forces of corruption and human rights abuses. In Ottawa as in Washington, Zedillo, like his now-disgraced predecessor and mentor, Carlos Salinas, has that golden touch. Anything he does turns out to be a further sign of his commitment to reform.

To be sure, Mexico is undergoing a deep and genuine process of reform—arguably the most far-reaching in its history. But President Bill Clinton and Prime Minister Jean

¹ None of the Zedillo apologists seemed to even notice that all but one of the 283 PRI representatives in the Chamber of Deputies voted for the amended election reform bill, while PAN and PRD representatives voted against it. Had Zedillo any intention of backing the reforms, he could have counted on loyalists within the ranks to keep the deal reached with the opposition from being watered down. Julia Preston, “Ending Dialogue, Ruling Mexican Party Dilutes Election Reforms,” New York Times, November 16, 1996, p. A3.
Chrétien are viewing it through conceptual lenses that stand reality on its head. The protagonists of reform—those truly committed to rooting out corruption—are in the political opposition. Zedillo’s most vociferous critics on the left and right are the prime forces driving the country toward a democracy it has never before known, and toward the public accountability and respect for law that alone can begin to unravel the web of corruption and complicity that currently engulfs virtually every Mexican institution.

On July 6, Mexicans voted in midterm elections that marked a turning point in their country’s transition to democracy. Frustrated with economic hardship and corruption, they ended the PRI’s 68-year hegemony. In Mexico City, where voters for the first time elected their mayor, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) soundly defeated his two main rivals and is now the second most prominent political figure in the country. Nationally, the PRI also lost control of the Chamber of Deputies, though by nowhere near the same margin; it retained the largest bloc of deputies, but the PRD and center-right National Action Party (PAN) will together command more votes. This signals the beginning of the end of the defining feature of Mexican authoritarianism—presidencialismo, the arbitrary and near-absolute authority conveyed on the president by what has until now been a rubber-stamp Congress.

President Zedillo’s contribution to this process has been primarily inadvertent. Granted, he agreed to some critical electoral reforms, most notably the creation of a truly independent electoral commission no longer under the thumb of the minister of internal affairs. But with the legitimacy of the regime in tatters following the December 1994 plunge of the peso, he had little choice. Apart from that, the president’s chief contribution to reform has been his own failure to carry out his promises of reform, a failure that has caused a majority of Mexicans to turn elsewhere in search of the genuine article.

Significantly, Mexicans are now voting primarily for those opposition politicians who seek a clean break with the PRI. That is especially obvious in the diverging political fortunes of PAN leaders, most of whom entered into a strategic alliance with the PRI under President Salinas. That alliance persisted for the first two years of the Zedillo administration, with Antonio Lozano serving as attorney general. But with Salinas now in complete political disgrace, the collaborationist wing of the PAN is likewise being punished at the polls. Whereas the radically noncollaborationist Vicente Fox won the governorship of Guanajuato by an overwhelming 2-to-1 margin, former PAN president Carlos Castillo Peraza, a leader of the collaborationist wing of the party, faced ignominious defeat in Mexico City at the hands of Cárdenas, one of the more intransigently anti-PRI leaders of the PRD. More generally, the PRD, which was for a while badly hurt by its unwillingness to negotiate with the PRI at the height of Salinas’s popularity, is now the fastest growing political force in Mexico, under the dynamic leadership of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who likewise insists that reform can be achieved only by removing the PRI from power.

These are among the real protagonists of reform in Mexico, together with human rights advocates, who are risking their lives to publicize mistreatment of ordinary Mexicans, and whistle-blowers, who are being punished with trumped-up charges and imprisonment by a government pledged to create “a nation of law.” It is to these forces that policymakers in the United States and Canada need to redirect their attention if they are...
to correct the serious misalignment of the two countries’ foreign policies in favor of the quickly disintegrating PRI.

**Zedillo: Rhetoric Betrayed by Actions**

But first, it is important to examine the Zedillo record more closely, to debunk the myth that the Mexican president is a reformer at heart whose initiatives have been frustrated by intransigent PRI “dinosaurs.” The very fact that the myth has been recycled verbatim from the Salinas presidency should raise suspicions. Salinas, who was lauded even more loudly as a “model developing-world leader” from Washington and Ottawa, is today in de facto exile in Ireland. His brother Raúl, a lifelong crony entrusted with Carlos’ dirty work, is jailed on charges of ordering the assassination of PRI Secretary-General José Ruiz Massieu. It has also come to light that Raúl spirited away well over a hundred million dollars into foreign bank accounts under a false name. A growing body of evidence suggests that the money was obtained from two sources: kickbacks from investors who benefited from Carlos’s privatization of state enterprises (one of Raúl’s nicknames was “Mr. Ten Percent,” and it is a reasonable conjecture that the millionaires who made the kickbacks assumed they were contributing to Carlos’s “retirement”), and protection money from drug cartels. None of this should have come as a surprise. As I pointed out in the *World Policy Journal* as early as 1988 and 1989, the Salinas pattern was clear from the outset, in such actions as the appointment of politicians suspected of having links to drug cartels to key cabinet posts, and in Raúl’s recruitment of a Marxist terrorist group (*Antorcha Campesina*) to carry out covert attacks on the PRD.3

Although there is little reason to believe President Zedillo is anywhere near as corrupt as the Salinas brothers in his personal affairs, his record in office bespeaks a staggering level of toleration of corruption by others, which stands in stark contrast to his repeated vow to prosecute corrupt officials “no matter how high up.”4

Take, for instance, his relationship with the Hank family. Carlos Hank González is a PRI power broker who parlayed a lifelong career in public service into a $1.3 billion private fortune, with the motto that “a politician who is poor is a poor politician.”5 Hank helped clinch the PRI nomination for Zedillo, using official government stationery and fax machines (he was at the time secretary of agriculture) to rally support among government officials, in flagrant violation of the electoral law.6 Yet he was never indicted. Several months after Zedillo took office, customs officials briefly detained Hank’s son Jorge Hank Rhon at the Mexico City airport after the latter was caught trying to smuggle ivory and pelts of endangered species into the country. The detention spurred speculation in the press that Jorge might finally be called to account for the 1988 murder of Héctor Félix

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Miranda, a Tijuana editor and columnist who had been investigating his personal finances. Security guards from Jorge Hank’s Agua Caliente race track, led by Hank’s personal bodyguard, carried out the murder. Despite these previous incidents, Jorge Hank was released without further ado following the intervention of his father.

The case is revealing not only because of repeated failures to enforce the law, but because the Hanks are widely believed to have links to the notorious Tijuana drug cartel. Among the many intriguing indicators:

- The Agua Caliente race track in Tijuana is a reputed laundering center for drug money;
- A Boeing 727 loaded with cocaine landed at an airstrip used by Taesa, the airline founded by the Hanks;
- Following the 1993 murder of Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas at the Guadalajara airport, the assassins, led by reputed Tijuana cartel kingpin Benjamin Arrellano Félix, flashed police credentials to board an Aeromexico flight back to Tijuana. Two stewardesses on that flight subsequently testified that Jorge Hank was in the first class passenger cabin with the Arellanos.

Coincidence? A case of mistaken identity? Perhaps. But there is no sign that prosecutors in the stymied Posadas assassination inquiry have seriously pursued this lead. Moreover, despite a 4-year-old warrant for their arrest in connection with the assassination, Benjamin Arellano and his brother Ramón remain at large, even though they are frequently seen in public in Tijuana. The inescapable conclusion: They have very powerful protectors, whose own impunity renders the Arellanos untouchable as well.

Impunity is the key to understanding why Zedillo has, with the one exception of Raúl Salinas, failed to deliver on his promise to get to the bottom of the three most prominent assassinations. In all three cases, the most tantalizing leads have raised questions about the involvement of high-ranking members of the PRI power structure. The Posadas case, as we have seen, could possibly implicate the Hanks and expose the hidden powers behind the Tijuana cartel. Among the unexplored leads in the 1994 slaying of presidential candidate Luis Donaldo Colosio is the arrest by Tijuana municipal police of Jorge Antonio Sánchez. Sánchez, who was detained at the scene, had Colosio’s blood on his shirt, and his hand tested positive for having recently fired a gun. Could he have been

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9 Felipe Cobián, “Un Hank Rhon iba en el vuelo 110 de Guadalajara a Tijuana, inmediatamente después del asesinato de Posadas” (“A Hank Rhon was on Flight 110 from Guadalajara to Tijuana, immediately after the assassination of Posadas”), *Proceso*, no. 969 (May 29, 1995), p. 13.
10 Felipe Cobián and Antonio Jáquez, “Surgen nuevas dudas con la identificación de Sánchez Ortega junto a Tranquilino y Aburto” (“New doubts emerge with the identification of Sánchez Ortega with Tranquilino and Aburto”), *Proceso*, no. 914 (May 9, 1994), pp. 28 - 29; Idem, “En documentos judiciales, evidencias que podrían
the elusive second gunman? If so, it would tend to implicate his employer, the Center for Investigation and National Security (CISEN), a federal security agency that was then operating under the oversight of José Córdoba Montoya, President Salinas’ chief of staff and cabinet coordinator.

Finally, in the case of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, it turns out that Raúl Salinas had a bitter run-in with Ruiz Massieu while the latter was governor of Guerrero. Ruiz Massieu rebuffed Raúl Salinas’s efforts to secure state government contracts for a construction company and a corn flour company, both with ties to the Hanks. Could the fact that Ruiz Massieu was about to become president of the Chamber of Deputies, where he could influence the award of government contracts nationwide, have played a role? And could Carlos Salinas, who had been in a lifelong partnership with Raúl, not know what his brother was up to? At the very least, we know that President Salinas helped cover up credible allegations of his brother’s involvement in the assassination.

Despite his rhetorical commitment to punish corruption “no matter how high up,” President Zedillo has consistently stopped short of breaking the PRI’s unwritten rule that no current or former president or cabinet member may be indicted for any crime, no matter how serious. The closest he has come—the arrest of Raúl Salinas—only skirted the rule, as Raúl never held cabinet rank and was only the brother of a former president. The former president himself may have been exiled, but he has not been subjected to any serious investigation. Nor have former agriculture secretary Carlos Hank, nor former cabinet coordinator José Córdoba, who had a well-documented extramarital affair with a former policewoman who was reportedly on the payroll of Juan García Abrego, former kingpin of the Gulf Cartel.

Zedillo has similarly been loath to take action against corrupt PRI governors. In Tabasco, PRD leader Andrés Manuel López Obrador (now national president of the PRD) was able to obtain and make public a truckload of official documents showing that Roberto Madrazo had spent more than $70 million in his gubernatorial campaign, more than 60 times the legal limit. Yet Madrazo remains in office. In Guerrero, state police slaughtered

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13 A brother-in-law of former president Miguel de la Madrid was tried and convicted in the United States for involvement in the murder of Drug Enforcement Agency agent Enrique Camarena.
14 Carlos Marín, “Exlocutora de Televisa, exagente federal, contacto de jefes narcos, confidente de José Córdoba…Marcela Bodenstedt y sus misterios” (“Former Televisa announcer, former federal agent, contact of drug kingpins, confidante of José Córdoba…Marcela Bodenstedt and her mysteries”), Proceso, no. 968 (May 22, 1995), pp. 6 - 13; “Mexicans Edgy After Wiretap Scandal,” Austin American-Statesman, June 18, 1995, p. 7A.
17 unarmed peasants at a roadblock in June 1995. Governor Rubén Figueroa, who had previously warned that the organization the peasants belonged to was headed for trouble, produced a doctored videotape purportedly showing that the peasants had been armed. But an anonymous source provided a copy of the original videotape to the Televisa television network, which revealed that the police had first massacred the peasants, then planted guns on their bodies, just as eyewitnesses had claimed. Even so, Figueroa, who is a compadre of Zedillo (they are godparents to each other’s children), was able to merely take a leave of absence, without fear of prosecution. Yet the effects of his repression—and the impunity accorded him—continue to reverberate through Guerrero and neighboring states, where another guerrilla insurgency (that of the Popular Revolutionary Army, EPR), launched on the anniversary of the Aguas Blancas massacre, is further destabilizing rural southern Mexico.

Unable or unwilling to tackle the causes of increased violence in Mexico—ever more powerful drug cartels, an economic model that continues to exclude the poor majority from any real benefit, and repression by the PRI in the rural south—Zedillo has responded by militarizing the country. The process began early in 1995 when he capitulated to army demands to move against the Zapatista (EZLN) insurgents in Chiapas. Negotiations with the rebels have stalled ever since. Reacting to the June 1996 emergence of the more deadly EPR insurgency, Zedillo has deployed the army in large numbers throughout southern Mexico. Meanwhile, to fight the war on drugs, he has assigned military officers and troops to take over police functions in Mexico City’s Federal District and at least eight states, including the border states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas. In the first two years of his presidency, Zedillo increased troop strength by 15 percent and military spending by 16 percent, despite a severe economic recession and fiscal austerity measures. Those who point out that military spending remains low by international standards overlook a critical point: The Mexican army is in effect a militarized domestic police force, with virtually no need to defend against foreign aggression.

Despite his increasing reliance on the military, Zedillo has shown the same reluctance to pursue reform in this most secretive and autonomous branch of the government as he has with other key Mexican institutions. Underscoring this point is the fate of Brigadier General José Francisco Gallardo. In an October 1993 article in Forum, an obscure Mexico City journal, Gallardo proposed creation of an ombudsman to counter corruption and human rights abuses in the armed forces. The military high command responded by imprisoning Gallardo. Although Mexican federal courts have dismissed almost all of the false charges filed against Gallardo, Zedillo has failed to exercise his constitutional

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15 Salvador Corro, “‘En el video de Aguas Blancas, vi algo vil, inhumano, intolerable; me duele esta impunidad’: Ricardo Rocha” (“‘In the video of Aguas Blancas, I saw something vile, inhuman, intolerable; that impunity pains me’: Ricardo Rocha”), Proceso, no. 1009 (March 4, 1996).
responsibility to enforce the law. In a ruling made in October 1996, but released in January 1997, the Organization of American States (OAS) Inter-American Commission on Human Rights determined that the military had jailed Gallardo “with no reasonable, logical or justifiable purpose.” Disregarding Mexico’s treaty obligations under the American Convention on Human Rights, Zedillo has declined to heed the commission’s call to free the general.

Zedillo’s reluctance to reform the military has had disastrous consequences. In February, less than two months after Zedillo appointed Division General Jesús Gutiérrez Rebollo to head the federal antinarcotics agency, Gutiérrez was exposed as working for Amado Carrillo Fuentes, reputed kingpin of the Juárez Cartel. In March, Brig. Gen. Alfredo Navarro Lara was arrested on charges of offering large bribes to the top federal justice official in Baja California on behalf of the Tijuana Cartel. Last October, it was discovered that Capt. Gerardo Cruz Pacheco, a member of both Salinas’s and Zedillo’s military security details, had been on the payroll of the Tijuana Cartel and had collaborated in the execution of Ernesto Ibarra, the top antinarcotics officer in Tijuana, at the Mexico City airport.

But it is in Zedillo’s blatant discrimination between the treatment afforded fellow priístas and that dispensed to those who either defect from the PRI or blow the whistle on corrupt practices that one can read his true attitude toward the rule of law. Whereas impunity is the rule for powerful individuals who remain loyal to the party, insiders who break ranks get the book thrown at them. The Zedillo administration has spared no effort to try to get the United States to extradite former deputy attorney general Mario Ruiz Massieu. Although ostensibly wanted for helping to conceal the involvement of Raúl Salinas in the murder of his brother José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, one cannot help but suspect that, by resigning from the PRI, he also forfeited his protection against prosecution. Similarly, officials began investigating Dante Delgado, a former governor of Veracruz, on charges of income tax evasion the day after he quit the PRI and began organizing an opposition group. He was arrested shortly thereafter. Juan Francisco Ealy Ortiz, owner of the Mexico City daily El Universal, met the same fate after steering his newspaper away from its traditional progovernment stance.

As manifest in the case of General Gallardo, the Zedillo administration has dealt with whistle-blowers in much the same way. Gallardo stands accused of the very charge he leveled against the military: corruption. The same pattern recurred in July 1996, when the Tijuana regional director of the National Institute to Combat Drugs became a whistle-blower. Ricardo Cordero warned that Mexico’s top antidrug organization was so corrupt that his colleagues were acting as bodyguards for traffickers, escorting shipments to the U.S. border, and misusing U.S. antidrug funds. The day after Cordero agreed to testify before a U.S. House subcommittee, the Zedillo administration arrested Cordero himself, charging him with the crimes he had denounced.  

President Zedillo’s vows to create “a nation of law” are betrayed by his own record. There can be no greater contempt for the very concept of law than cynically to “call on every man and woman to contribute to the creation of a new culture based on law,” yet to apply the law only as a form of punishment for those who, for whatever motive, embarrass the government or defect from the PRI.  

And there can be no more telling refutation of a pretense to favor reform than to acquiesce in the persecution of whistle-blowers.

**The Democratic Opposition Must Dislodge the “ Reformers”**

The flip side of Washington and Ottawa’s inability to see through Ernesto Zedillo’s rhetorical mask of reform is a similar inability to perceive the genuinely reformist credentials of much of the radically anti-PRI opposition in both the PAN and PRD. The attitude is that if Zedillo stands for reform, as Carlos Salinas once did, then he is our man, and his opponents must be enemies of reform.

With help from the collaborationist wing of the PAN, PRI spin-control operatives have until recently been successful in portraying the PRD as a party that would like to return to the past. In some ways, it has been an easy target. Most of its founders, including Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, are former *priístas* who left the party after the Salinas-Zedillo technocrats took control in the 1980s and steered the country’s economic policies sharply to the right. Many of its most prominent candidates at the state and local level are *priístas* who switched sides after being passed over for PRI nominations. Not surprisingly, many PRD elected officials have shown the same tendency toward corruption as they did under the PRI label. One former PRD president—Roberto Robles Garnica—has even returned to the PRI fold. Other PRD leaders are former socialists and communists.

Yet from the outset, the PRD has staked everything on democracy. Although often mistranslated into English as “Democratic Revolutionary Party,” it is in fact the Party of the Democratic Revolution—meaning a revolution in the system of governance to be achieved through the ballot box. True to its name, it has persisted in its reliance on the ballot box even when confronted with electoral fraud and the murder of hundreds of party leaders and campaign workers. It has steadfastly renounced the use of violence to achieve political ends.


Significantly, the PRD stood alone in protesting the string of false “electoral reforms” jointly worked out by President Salinas and the collaborationist wing of the PAN. With the radical wing of the PAN, the PRD has all along held out for genuine reforms, most notably the formation of a truly independent electoral commission. The PRD has also prevailed on other longtime demands, including divesting the PRI of its exclusive use of the national colors, and allowing citizens groups to watch the polls. It has also innovated the practice of selecting candidates through primary elections.²⁵

Until recently, however, the PRD, reflecting many of its leaders’ roots in an authoritarian party, had no idea how to organize or how to run a successful campaign. That began to change in 1996, following the election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president. López Obrador, who earlier built a formidable party organization practically from scratch in his home state of Tabasco, is now doing the same nationwide. The party has honed its message—fighting corruption through democratic accountability—which it now delivers through professionally crafted advertising in the mass media. Tens of thousands of sympathizers have been recruited and trained to go door-to-door in the “sun brigades” (the party symbol is the Aztec sun).²⁶

These changes have helped reverse the party’s sagging fortunes. Last November, the PRD made big gains in Guerrero and won control of Nezahualcoyotl, a sprawling city of 1.2 million on the outskirts of the Federal District. In March, it gained control of three of the four largest cities in Morelos. In conjunction with the PAN, it wrested control of two state legislatures—in Morelos and Mexico, the two states ringing the Federal District—from the PRI. In July, it took Mexico City itself in a landslide and won the second-largest number of seats in the federal Chamber of Deputies, helping deny the PRI its traditional majority.

Just as significantly, López Obrador has taken the lead in challenging some of the most deep-seated elements of Mexican popular culture. Addressing a gathering of newly elected PRD public officials in January, he cautioned them not only against corruption but against machismo:

> Share the emotion of public service with your wives and children. Don’t be like the men of the PRI, who once in power show off a new woman and are the worst example for family unity. Look at the Salinas de Gortari brothers, one recently married in Dublin with one of his aides, and the other photographed on his yachts with his lovers. This is not priggishness. We’re talking about the moral degradation of public functionaries.²⁷

²⁵ The PAN has long used conventions of the party faithful to select candidates; the PRI uses the dedazo (literally, “tap of the finger”) of the president or (at the state level) of the governor.
²⁶ Gerardo Albarrán de Alba, “Con estrategias variadas, la oposición se propone terminar con la mayoría priista en la Cámara—PRD: una campaña profesional y 63,000 brigadistas en acción, casa por casa” (“With various strategies, the opposition aims to end the PRI majority in the Chamber—PRD: a professional campaign and 63,000 campaigners in action, door to door”), Proceso, no. 1074 (May 31, 1997).
The speech sent shock waves through the male-dominated political establishment, ruffling not a few feathers within the PRD itself. The PRD has also taken hits for being the first major Mexican party to favor respect for the rights of homosexuals. At a 1994 campaign appearance in Veracruz, presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was accosted by transvestites hired by the PRI to embarrass him on national television. Yet this willingness to challenge conventional norms sets the PRD radically apart from both the PRI, whose “reformers” still hold to the canons of machismo, and the PAN, whose leaders tend to favor letting the Catholic church dictate morality.

In other respects, though, it is the PAN that is leading the way toward reform. The PAN was Mexico’s first democratic party, founded in 1939. Until recently characterized by the PRI as a right-wing and somewhat counterrevolutionary party, it in fact represents the neglected democratic aspirations—“Effective Suffrage, No Reelection”—of the Revolution of 1910. In addition to clean elections, the PAN has always advocated a system of legislative and judicial checks and balances on arbitrary executive power at the state and national levels. It has also stood for enforcement of constitutional provisions granting a degree of autonomy to states and municipalities.

Now that it controls six state governments and most of Mexico’s largest cities, the PAN has been putting these principles in practice. In Baja California Norte, it set up the country’s first secure voter identification system, with tamper-proof photo-ID cards. In Chihuahua, it rewrote the constitution to limit the powers of the governor, even though the holder of that office was himself a panista. The state human rights commission, for example, is now selected by the state legislature, not the governor.

No state, however, has gone farther than Guanajuato, which is governed by a radically non-collaborationist panista. Under the leadership of Vicente Fox Quesada, a former president of Coca-Cola Mexico, the state has embarked on an ambitious and so far highly successful three-part decentralization program. The first part is federalism—getting the federal government to relinquish control over regional affairs to the state government, in keeping with the constitutional mandate that states be “free and sovereign in all that concerns their internal affairs.” Fox has managed to get President Zedillo, who is strapped by a tight federal budget, to allow the state to take over responsibility for agriculture, water resources, roads, social programs, secondary and university education, and health care.

The second element of decentralization is municipalización, devolution of powers from the state government to municipalities, which are roughly equivalent to counties in the United States. In the case of social programs—such as potable water, sewers, electrification, and paving of dirt roads and streets—that were originally managed by the federal government as part of its system of patronage, the state has transferred these directly to the municipalities. Significantly, it has also transferred control over taxation, in keeping with the constitutional provision reserving property taxes for the country’s “Free Municipalities.”

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The third component of decentralization is citizen empowerment. The city of León, for instance, holds a weekly “Citizen Wednesday,” inviting anyone with a grievance to come to city hall. City and state officials, from the mayor and police chief to the transit chief and attorney general, all attend to complaints in person. In a country long accustomed to centralization of power in the executive in Mexico City, and to submission to the chain of authority running from the presidency down through governors to municipal presidents, decentralizing authority and making public servants accountable to the public are nothing short of revolutionary. So is the concept of checks and balances on arbitrary presidential authority, which is likely to become a reality now that opposition parties have won a majority of seats in the new Chamber of Deputies.

Behind the elaborate charade of official reform, the new Mexican revolution is already under way. Neither the present government nor the self-described revolutionaries who seek to overthrow it by violent means are contributing to it in any measurable way, because both are deeply suspicious of a democratic process they cannot control. The principal protagonists in Mexico’s democratic awakening are the Mexican people and the political forces they are voting for in increasing numbers—the forces of fundamental but orderly reform that have until now been spurned by Washington and Ottawa.

In the course of his May 1997 visit to Mexico, President Clinton gave a belated nod to Mexico’s democratic opposition by meeting very briefly with the presidents of the PAN and PRD. Yet the trip itself underscored continuing bias and condescension in U.S. policy toward Mexico. For while making every effort to portray the United States as respecting Mexican sovereignty, President Clinton once again patronized Mexico by doing something he would never dream of doing to Canada, Britain, or France—timing the visit in the midst of a heated election campaign.

Stuck as he is in the Washington-Ottawa mindset that Zedillo signifies the promise of reform for Mexico, and seeing the PRI headed for a serious reverse in the midterm elections, he staged a protracted series of photo-opportunities designed to portray Zedillo as a firm leader, capable of winning respect from the United States. Ironically, it simply underscored President Zedillo’s dependence on the United States, and Washington’s continuing inability to accord Mexico a level of respect comparable to that afforded its Canadian and European partners and commensurate with the demands of its new partnership under NAFTA. It is time to acknowledge that Mexican democracy is, at last, entering into its own, and that it is the best hope for genuine reform.

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