

POLITICAL REFORMISM IN MEXICO:
Past and Present

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INSURGENCIA DEMOCRATICA: LAS ELECCIONES LOCALES. Edited by Jorge Alonso and Silvia Gómez Tagle. (Mexico City: Universidad de Guadalajara, 1991. Pp. 214.)

EL PULSO DE LOS SEXENIOS: 20 AÑOS DE CRISIS EN MEXICO. By Miguel Basáñez. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1990. Pp. 411.)

SOLIDARIDAD A DEBATE. Edited by the Consejo Consultivo del Programa Nacional de Solidaridad. (Mexico City: El Nacional, 1991. Pp. 227.)

EL TIEMPO DE LA LEGITIMIDAD: ELECCIONES, AUTORITARISMO Y DEMOCRACIA EN MEXICO. By Juan Molinar Horcasitas. (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1991. Pp. 265.)

LA TRANSICION INCIERTA. By Jaime Sánchez Susarrey. (Mexico City: Vuelta, 1991. Pp. 230.)

Mexicanists are generally divided in the debate over continuity versus change. Those favoring a positive or "optimistic" assessment of political change and democratization cite such developments as the increased presence of opposition parties in state and local governments, the weakening of sectoral and corporate organizations, the revitalized role of elections as a source of legitimacy, structural economic changes, or the "modern" discourse of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Meanwhile, more "pessimistic" colleagues underscore the Mexican government's poor record on human rights, the strengthening of the presidency under Salinas, the lack of internal reforms in the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), or continued electoral fraud and corruption. After all, they prod, similar accolades accompanied Luis Echeverría's so-called *apertura*, José López Portillo's political reforms, and even Miguel de la Madrid's campaign for "moral renovation."

Behind the debate over continuity versus change lie deeper theoretical and even philosophical queries. For instance, this controversy reflects the long-standing theoretical debate over the impact of reform: whether (or under what conditions) reforms unleash the forces of fundamental political change (as held by Alexis de Tocqueville) or alleviate the

pressures for change and thus serve as a substitute for revolution.¹ Frequently, the debate becomes reminiscent of Plato's dilemma over the possibility of forcing freedom, which in Mexico translates into whether elections are truly free if their outcome hinges on the will of the president rather than on that of the populace, even if the two coincide.

Exploring the continuity-change problematic and the role of reformism presents clear theoretical and methodological challenges. One initial means of addressing this theme is to compare past and present periods of crisis and reform.² A threefold objective emerges: to uncover by analyzing past periods of crisis and reform the main patterns and determinants of the Mexican regime's historically proven capacity to adapt to adverse conditions and hence use reforms to prevent fundamental change; to employ this historical framework to interpret the nature of the current period of crisis and reform; and by comparing past and present, to ascertain the novelty of the current crisis or changes in the regime's adaptive capacity that affect the probable outcome of the reform process. The works of Mexican scholarship under review here offer a starting point for this endeavor. Juan Molinar Horcasitas in *El tiempo de la legitimidad* and Miguel Basáñez in *El pulso de los sexenios* both concentrate on past crises and reforms. Jaime Sánchez in *La transición incierta* and the contributors to *La insurgencia democrática* explore the wrenching dilemmas informing the current crisis, and *Solidaridad a debate* surveys the salient features of current reform strategies and tactics.

Past Crisis and Reformism

Molinar's *El tiempo de la legitimidad: elecciones, autoritarismo y democracia en México* brilliantly traces and examines Mexico's electoral and party subsystem since the Mexican Revolution. As Molinar notes at the outset, Mexico is the only authoritarian regime that has been able to maintain uninterrupted noncompetitive elections within a formally multiparty system (p. 10). Rather than treating elections as barometers of popular will, Molinar uses them to explore the dynamics of the Mexican authoritarian system, particularly its regenerative potential. He concentrates on the historic role of electoral and party reforms in reckoning with a constantly

1. This debate is discussed at length in Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), 346–64.

2. Crisis analyses has long dominated the study of Mexican politics. In fact, the term has found its way into the titles of a host of books for more than twenty years. Curiously, reform (or reformism), the antithesis of crisis, has rarely been so honored. The best collection outlining the latest crisis as of 1989 is *Mexico's Alternative Political Future*, edited by Wayne A. Cornelius, Judith Gentleman, and Peter H. Smith (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1989). Although many analysts have focused on reform, one of the best treatments remains John J. Bailey's *Governing Mexico: The Statecraft of Crisis Management* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).

reemerging dilemma that pits the demands of legitimacy against those of maintaining control. Molinar brings a wealth of data to bear on the ebbs and flows of opposition parties, the average number of candidates per district, the degree of competitiveness, and the major factors like urbanization and industrialization that are associated with voting for the PRI or the opposition.

As Molinar shows, electoral and party reforms have differed over the years according to the nature of the equation of legitimacy and control. For example, early reforms sought to eliminate the electoral presence and threat posed by dissidents from within the official party and to centralize control over the electoral process in order to weaken competing regional powers. Subsequent revisions, however, sought to shore up the declining legitimacy that naturally results from noncompetitive elections while channeling, dividing, and disarticulating the opposition. For instance, the reforms of 1963 curtailed antisystem behavior by increasing the costs of boycotting the congress or the electoral commission, a tactic used by the Partido de Acción Nacional (PAN) in the late 1950s to delegitimize the process (p. 53). The 1978 package of reforms under López Portillo, in turn, augmented the number of parties and enhanced the electoral channel of participation by broadening proportional representation and easing restrictions on the registration of parties. This package also reduced the number of districts in which PRI candidates ran unopposed by making proportional representation conditional on the opposition's placing candidates in a set number of federal districts; and it fostered the overrepresentation of the PRI and small opposition parties to the detriment of PAN, its major opponent. As Molinar stresses, periodic revisions in the electoral and party subsystem have restored the legitimacy of the process and confidence in it while helping assure continued PRI hegemony and noncompetitive elections.

Molinar's historical analysis, which makes up more than half of *El tiempo de la legitimidad*, and his perceptive analysis of post-1988 trends underscore two fundamental aspects of past processes of reform. The first casts change as a critical ingredient in system continuity. As Molinar asserts, "Hegemonic party systems, behind their apparent stability, live on the edge of crisis: either they increase the repression of mobilized groups and sectors, or they constantly renew themselves in order to survive without democratizing" (p. 81). The continuity of Mexico's noncompetitive elections thus offers not "stability without change but continuity by means of change" (p. 29). Second, Molinar reverses the traditional causal path that depicts Mexico's noncompetitive elections as the result of authoritarianism, arguing instead that maintaining noncompetitive elections amidst pluralism has in fact permitted authoritarian rule.

In *El pulso de los sexenios: 20 años de crisis en México*, the nature of past crises and reforms is explored even more pointedly by Miguel

Basáñez, a commentator usually associated with Mexican public-opinion analysis. He focuses exclusively on four cases: the events surrounding the 1968 student movement; the economic-political crisis capping the Echeverría term in 1976; the 1982 crisis associated with López Portillo's nationalization of the banking sector and the debt crisis inherited by de la Madrid; and the fall of the Mexican stock exchange in October 1987. Divided into three somewhat disparate segments (facts, figures, and opinions), Basáñez's study begins by tracing the patterns of each crisis, the nature of the reforms, and their general impact. In the second and third parts, he presents an array of statistical data and two public opinion polls (one taken in 1983 and the other in 1987) designed to link the crises to objective and subjective trends.

In a broader version of Molinar's legitimacy-control equation, Basáñez attributes the emergence of the 1968 crisis to a contradiction between the popular origins of the state (which requires mobilization and constant provision of social benefits) and its capitalist development model (which rests on corporatism and authoritarianism) (p. 29). According to Basáñez, after a "populist" phase in the 1930s, the demands of capitalist development peaked, strengthening the corporatist-authoritarian component and exposing this destabilizing dialectic. Exemplified by divisions within the Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicanos (CTM) in 1947, the railway workers and teachers movements in 1958, and the intellectual Movimiento de Liberación Nacional in 1961 among others, this clash culminated in the 1968 massacre of students at Tlatelolco.

For Basáñez, the 1968 crisis marked the turning point that thrust Mexico into a prolonged period of transition and almost unremitting crisis. In exploring this and the three ensuing periods of crisis and reform, Basáñez contends that the resolution of each crisis generated the next crisis. He attributes this pattern to the Mexican government's tendency to attend to the effects of the crisis rather than to its underlying causes.³ Thus Echeverría reacted to the 1968 crisis by seducing youth and the left with increased government jobs, educational benefits, massive public spending, a "shared development" model emphasizing redistribution, a somewhat timid political opening, and leftist rhetoric and foreign policy. This populist posture, however, subsequently generated the opposition and maturation of the entrepreneurial class, prompting capital flight and the economic downturn of 1976. Incoming President López Portillo, in turn, concentrated his reformist attentions on winning over this disgruntled sector with grand projects financed largely by foreign loans, a strategy

3. Although Basáñez's argument on this point is sound, he never really addresses the reasons for this tendency. Is it because the contradiction between the popular and capitalist origins of the Mexican state is irresolvable, or is it due to a lack of political leadership, or is it because addressing symptoms is simply the political path of least resistance?

that provoked the financial disaster of 1982 and the desperation measure of nationalizing the banking system. De la Madrid subsequently embraced a policy of scrupulously recognizing Mexico's obligation to its debtors in order to restore the declining levels of confidence among the national and international financial communities. Yet as Basáñez shows, this policy was rooted in stock-market euphoria and unchecked speculation that eventually provoked the October crisis of 1987 (p. 11).

Basáñez's hypotheses incorporating the empirical data on facts and figures attempt to capture the social climate affecting reformism. Specifically, he cites improvements in socioeconomic indicators over the years and heterogeneity of popular opinion along class and regional lines as critical components in shaping reform processes. According to Basáñez, the socioeconomic improvements indicate the growing autonomy of political, economic, and social spheres, which cushions the impact of crisis and hence eases the need for reform. Divergent opinions similarly act as a source of resistance to crisis (and hence as a facilitator of reform) by preventing coalescence of the opposition and tempering the pressures for change.⁴

In considering past crisis and reforms as explored by Molinar and Basáñez, three points seem relevant. The first centers on the crisis-management environment in which constant change and manipulation are required in order to ensure the system's survival: the fact that "*gatopardismo*" (changing to remain the same) is fundamental to the survival of Mexican authoritarianism.⁵ As both Molinar and Basáñez show, such changes—facilitated by the heterogeneous nature of Mexican society and sectoral autonomy (as Basáñez contends)—may not necessarily "resolve" underlying problems but do permit short-term adaptation, with repression being used strategically as a temporal device designed to "buy time" and alter the opportunity structure. By extrapolation then, it seems that the danger of breakdown (or breakthrough) is greatest when no change is present.

Second, past experiences with reforms reveal the periodic expansion of participation in the political system, accompanied by a demonstrated willingness on the part of the Mexican government to negotiate and liberalize. The thrust of electoral reforms has generally expanded the presence of the opposition in government while maintaining noncompetitive contests. The reforms since the Echeverría *sexenio* have entailed greater press freedoms, new outlets for expression, greater public scrutiny over the government, promises of freer and honest elections, and

4. Despite the book's title, Basáñez does not explain why crises seem to concentrate in the latter years of the *sexenios*, or conversely, why the system's capacity for reform seems to weaken at this point. For an exploration of this point with regard to anticorruption campaigns, see my *Corruption and Politics in Contemporary Mexico* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1991).

5. This view clearly parallels Bailey's assessment in *Governing Mexico*.

even efforts to reform the PRI. Although such efforts may have failed to achieve their “stated” objectives, they have succeeded in adding to the system’s longevity.

Finally, past reforms highlight the president’s role in orchestrating reform, pointing to Mexican presidentialism as perhaps the prime determinant of the regime’s adaptive capacity. The electoral reforms examined in *El tiempo de la legitimidad* and the varying responses to crises discussed in *El pulso de los sexenios* all sprang from presidential initiative and control and essentially reinforced them. Although supported by a string of legal changes, the pattern of crisis and reform identified by Basáñez features the president courting and bargaining directly with aggrieved parties, offering (and withholding) concessions unilaterally.

Present Crisis

La transición incierta calls attention to the contemporary scene. In his compilation of essays (originally published in the magazine *Vuelta* between 1987 and 1990), Jaime Sánchez Susarrey offers lucid and insightful analyses of the current dilemmas facing the Salinas team. The book touches on a wide range of themes related to political reform, among them: the nondemocratic aspects of Mexican corporatism, the emergence of neocorporatism, declining levels of political legitimacy, the problems of presidential succession, changes in the Mexican political culture, the impact of the 1988 election, contradictions among supporters of Cuátemoc Cárdenas (“emissaries of the past?”), the problems and disintegration of the Cardenista coalition, the issue of reforming the PRI, and Mexican presidentialism.

In perhaps his best essay, Sánchez begins by focusing on a defining trait of the current crisis: the incompatibility of corporatism and democracy as divergent means of bridging the gap between the state and society. Sánchez shows current corporatist bodies, particularly official labor unions, to be largely deficient as representatives of the working class and guarantors of political stability. He also posits an inverse relationship between representation via parties and elections and the negotiating potential of the corporate organs. Given the corporate system’s minority position in society, its continued functioning depends on the privatizing and depoliticizing of society, which Sánchez believes is no longer feasible. Recalling Molinar’s dilemma over legitimacy versus control, Sánchez contends that legitimacy demands promoting and developing the party subsystem, particularly in economic hard times, at the expense of the corporatist system. Sánchez further develops this line of thought in subsequent essays, exploring the decline of Mexican corporatism and the concomitant dawn of neocorporatism—a transition signaled in part by President Salinas’s attacks on entrenched union bosses like Joaquín Hernández Galicia (“La Quina”)

and Salvador Barragán Camacho. As Sánchez points out, such attacks, combined with other antilabor moves by Salinas, have responded to the political quandary raised earlier as well as to the exigencies of neoliberal economic reforms.⁶

A second theme central to the current equation of crisis and reform discussed by Sánchez involves party strategy. Specifically, he underscores and praises the new *modus operandi* linking the government and PAN, with the former providing the latter with greater political space (as in respecting the PAN gubernatorial victory in Baja California and appointing a Panista to a gubernatorial post in Guanajuato) in return for (actually, as a reward for) PAN's supporting a series of constitutional revisions. Sánchez touts this gradualist-transitional approach by the government and PAN as the cornerstone of the current transition to democracy. At the same time, he takes grave exception to the confrontational strategy of Cuáhtemoc Cárdenas and the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). In Sánchez's opinion, such a tactic raises the specter of ungovernability and prevents the government from engaging in a dialogue with the left. This perspective eventually leads Sánchez to question the democratic credentials of Cárdenas's party (in ways that are themselves questionable). In his view, the Cardenistas' involvement in the democratic transition becomes "conflictive and problematic" (pp. 178–79). At times, Sánchez's critique of members of the Cárdenas movement as emissaries of the past and harbingers of ungovernability begins to sound like a vote of confidence for patriotic fraud.⁷

In addition to highlighting the decline of corporatism as a system support, Sánchez points out several political, social, and cultural changes that make the current crisis qualitatively different from those in earlier periods. Foremost is the combination of internal strains within the PRI (manifested only in part by the Cárdenas faction) together with external pressures from the opposition. In contrast to official party dissidents of the past who either disappeared from the political scene or were reincorporated into the political fold, the threat from Cárdenas continues, and hence the danger of further dissension. A second distinction, according to Sánchez, involves the new "democratic culture" evidenced by participation in the electoral contest of July 1988 (p. 157) and the electoral-based

6. On the changing nature of labor-state relations, see Kevin J. Middlebrook, "The Sounds of Silence: Organized Labour's Response to Economic Crisis in Mexico," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 21, pt. 2 (1989):195–220; and the series of articles in *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* 52, no. 3 (1990):97–212.

7. Sánchez correctly points out that in contrast to Salinas's intervention in the elections in Baja California in 1989, he did not intervene to overturn fraud in the concurrent Michoacán elections because he had no dialogue with the Cardenistas to protect. Yet what Sánchez fails to appreciate, in my view, is the role played by Cárdenas's confrontational strategy in facilitating the PRI government's willingness to bargain with PAN and PAN's strategy of gradualism.

legitimacy of the system (p. 158).⁸ Sánchez ties this culture to the rise of PAN rather than to the PRD (p. 196). Finally, Sánchez underlines PAN's transition from opposition party to governing party as both a unique feature of the current period and proof of Mexico's transition toward democracy, a phase that began with the inauguration of Panista Governor Ernesto Ruffo in Baja California in late 1989.

The nine contributions to *Insurgencia democrática: las elecciones locales* focus on local, state, and federal elections in Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Nayarit, Baja California Sur, Jalisco, Chihuahua, Michoacán (two essays), and Baja California during the 1980s (most of them incorporating post-1988 contests). These essays explore further the uniqueness of the current crisis situation by tracing the growing importance and politicization of local elections. Once noncompetitive and apolitical rites, local contests have become the "privileged space" of the opposition and a source of tension, politicization, and divisiveness within the ranks of the official party. Increasing opposition strength over the course of the 1980s, even in states with a limited history of opposition, has produced a growing list of non-PRI victories that greatly complicate the task of reformism. More important perhaps, local elections have spawned increasing mobilizations and instability: by the opposition in order to expose fraud and "win" (as often politically as electorally); and by local PRI partisans mobilized to gain a greater say in the party's candidate-selection process or to protest decisions resolving disputed results made in the faraway governmental and party headquarters in Mexico City.

Present Reformism

Overcoming the dilemmas of the current crisis phase without losing power (the objective behind reformism) hinges on current political strategy and the tactics of many political actors. The Alonso and Gómez collection and *Solidaridad a Debate* help bring into focus much of this strategy on the part of the current Salinas administration.

Combined with more recent observations, the contributions in the Alonso and Gómez volume highlight a tripartite strategy by the government to deal with politicized local elections. The first component is fraud. Most of the essays underscore the presence of old and new techniques of electoral fraud to guarantee continued PRI dominance. The machinery to ensure a PRI victory was in place even in Baja California in 1989, only to

8. I must take exception to Sánchez on this point. The relegitimization of the Mexican state and the PRI since 1988 has clearly resulted from Salinas's acts as president and his adroit political style rather than from elections. It is undeniable that his election was not the source of his legitimacy and that the 1991 electoral recovery of the PRI was a result of this renewed legitimacy, not its cause.

be overturned by orders from the federal executive. Yet as the essay on Nayarit makes clear, fraud (like repression) renders only short-term benefits that create considerable costs in the future. Fraud can effectively mobilize the opposition or, as Aziz shows in the case of Chihuahua, engender citizen fatigue and apathy that undermine regime legitimacy.

A second reform pattern associated with local elections centers on incorporation, dialogue, and concertation with the opposition. This defining characteristic of the new reform setting takes a variety of forms that include establishing shared municipal governments (the norm in Oaxaca), negotiating directly to divvy up contested local areas, or actually allowing the opposition to win outright, as was done in Baja California. This strategy is designed to assuage the demands of the opposition (and hence demobilize it), restore faith in the process, overcome the poor images created by fraud and corruption, and reward the strategy of gradualism. For example, the "respected" PAN victory in Baja California, as Tonatih Guillén notes, reflected the PAN's willingness to form an alliance with Salinas over the question of electoral reform. The growing dialogue on local contests indicates a tendency on the part of the current administration to seek accommodations and solutions that transcend the traditional corporate organs of the PRI.

Finally, local elections reveal a greater concentration of power in the upper echelons of the party and government as a critical mechanism in the reform process. Rather than the longed-for democratization of the PRI, which many tout as the sine qua non of system democratization and the party itself officially endorses, several essays point to a clear pattern of increasing centralization of authority. Such measures include the removal of unpopular, corrupt, or intransigent state governors in order to install politicians more willing to engage in dialogue and concertation with aggrieved parties and sectors,⁹ the use of strategists and technicians from the center to direct local and state election campaigns, and reinvigoration of the "dedazo" tradition of naming PRI candidates to public office by private shoulder-tapping.¹⁰

As noted earlier, these changes within the PRI have also been a

9. Unofficially, Salinas has removed more state governors than any of his predecessors. At last count, as many as nine state executives have been removed (transferred) during the first half of the Salinas term: those in Veracruz, Jalisco, Baja California, Guerrero, Michoacán, Yucatán, San Luis Potosí, Guanajuato, and Tabasco. The efficacy of this strategy is attested by the ability of Chihuahua Governor Fernando Baeza to ease tensions in his state following the 1986 electoral debacle (massive fraud that was later censured by the Organization of American States) and to garner subsequent electoral gains for the PRI.

10. Despite the intentions expressed in the PRI's fourteenth assembly in 1990 to democratize the selection of candidates, party documents indicate that well over 90 percent of the PRI candidates for the chamber of deputies in 1991 were "unity candidates" selected by the traditional dedazo method. Party preparations for numerous 1992 elections indicate the same pattern.

source of controversy. At one level, the party's rhetoric calling for internal democratization has made maintaining discipline within the PRI more tenuous. Conspicuous divisions springing from unstable (uninstitutionalized and often fraudulent) experiments to select candidates at the base have become a common source of concern. On the one hand, the divisiveness has prompted the party to pull in the reins and reinforce the use of the *dedazo* method of selection. On the other, it has generated protests and in several areas desertions by local partisans to the opposition. At a second level, the upper-level negotiations between the government and the opposition to determine the fate of local elections has increasingly enraged and mobilized many local PRI officials. They consider these accommodations with the opposition too costly, contrary to their interests and perhaps even to the goals of democracy. Mobilizations, protests, the taking of buildings, abandonment of the party, and alliances with the opposition by PRI members following the negotiation of state elections in 1991 are all strikingly similar behavior to the antisystem activities of the opposition over the years.

Perhaps the major lesson emerging from a review of local elections and reformism is that respected elections require more on the part of the opposition than mere votes. They also demand the mobilization of significant proportions to force the president to accept defeats at the local level (p. 21). This tendency can be perceived in some of the elections examined in the Alonso and Gómez volume but most notably in recent gubernatorial elections in Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí, where PRI gubernatorial candidates eventually resigned when faced with massive mobilizations led by the opposition. In the subsequent elections in Veracruz and Tabasco, the march to the capital denominated "Exodo a la Democracia" brought an upper-level negotiated solution to a series of disputed local contests—and only two hours after the marchers arrived in the capital. Such a situation approximates Charles Anderson's model of Latin American politics in which contending power groups must demonstrate an ability to survive repression, mobilizational skills, and willingness to accept the basic rules of the game before being incorporated into the political game.¹¹

Solidaridad a debate highlights a similar pattern of reform. Organized in three parts, the first section presents a solid overview of the nature, structure, operation, and achievements of the Solidaridad program by its general coordinator, Carlos Rojas Gutiérrez. The second section contains short articles by five presidents of *municipios* (mayors) from various regions and parties chronicling the program's precise impact and operation at the local level. These "politicos" generally heap praise on the

11. I refer here to Charles W. Anderson, *Politics and Economic Change in Latin America* (Toronto: Van Nostrand, 1967).

program's unique political-bureaucratic style and results, emphasizing the increased funding for social programs made available through *Solidaridad* and its capacity to "*hacer más con menos*" through organization (p. 94). No partisan or regional differences are evident among the municipal leaders. The third part of *Solidaridad a debate* contains brief analyses of the program by six scholars who employ a range of sociological, political, economic, and ideological perspectives. Luis Aguilar, for example, approaches the program from the modernization perspective, underscoring its role in socializing the public toward a more participant-citizen, liberal, and independent orientation and also in nourishing local autonomy. José Fernández briefly applies John Rawls's theory of justice to the program's design, lending credence to the prevailing view that *Solidaridad* embodies the goals of social justice of the Mexican Revolution, perhaps even more so than previous policies justified according to that precept and associated with the "errors of the Keynesian model" (p. 152). Other essays discuss the array of methodological problems associated with measuring and identifying the poor in Mexico (Hernández) and the thinking behind the program and its perceived role in the current process of "modernization."

Launched as part of Salinas's first formal act as president and touted by many as among "the most novel and efficient" (Morales, p. 205), *Solidaridad* encapsulates, coordinates, and implements with renewed fanfare and funding virtually all the social programs of the federal and state governments—providing health services, constructing schools, supporting literacy drives, regularizing and rehabilitating housing, electrifying rural and urban areas, legalizing land transactions, improving sanitary services, and even establishing a program targeting women (*Mujeres en Solidaridad*). Yet in contrast to its predecessors—Echeverría's COPLAMAR (Comisión del Plan para la Atención de Zonas Deprimidas y Grupos Marginados) and López Portillo's PIDER (Programa de Desarrollo Rural Integral)—*Solidaridad* operates in a fundamentally distinct way by following the basic reformist pattern discussed earlier of dialogue, incorporation, and centralization. Specifically, the program strives to incorporate the demands, talents, participation, and resources of local communities in a state-society cooperative venture, sometimes mobilizing and organizing the local communities in the process. This renewed spirit of concertation centers not only on local groups but on the bureaucratic sectors as well by reducing turf wars and inefficiencies. *Solidaridad*'s basic organization even reflects this inclusionary spirit by including all the organizations affected somewhere within the maze, from social scientists in consultative capacities, state officials, and countless federal bureaus to local *Solidaridad* committees.

As a multifaceted, multifunctional program, *Solidaridad* embodies the Salinista reforms of the state and state-society relations ("modernization") and projects his charismatic style. Fundamentally, the program

endeavors to construct direct channels of communication between the state and society, to foment the bases of a new phase of development, and hence to circumvent the traditional corporate and clientelistic networks (the products of past periods of reform). In addition, Solidaridad seeks to ameliorate the economic consequences of the "lost decade" of the 1980s and to smooth some of the rough edges of recent economic reforms, thus undercutting a major leftist issue (the impact of neoliberalism) while restoring presidential legitimacy, governmental respectability, and the PRI's electoral appeal in the process.¹² Moreover, Solidaridad offers a means of wedding a number of the nation's intellectuals and certain leftist PRI leaders to the Salinas program. This outcome can be perceived in the makeup of its national consulting board as well as in the generally leftist orientation and social-activist background of the leaders and "soldiers" of Solidaridad.

Although the program clearly represents the current reform strategy and operating style of the Salinas team, an early question about Solidaridad and its role in the current transition centered on the linkage between it and the PRI. While rumors abound that Solidaridad represents the nucleus for a transformation of the PRI itself (into el Partido de Solidaridad?), the originally wide distance between the program and the party has gradually narrowed. Many PRI candidates for local positions have jumped onto the Solidarity bandwagon, looking to the program to fulfill lavish campaign promises. In a sense, this trend buttresses the pattern of bypassing the traditional sectoral mechanisms of demand articulation and channels of distributing social benefits while forging direct links between government officials and local communities. This approach may thus create the new basis for a reformed PRI, one centralized under the direct control of the federal executive.

Conclusion

Current reforms clearly evince a pattern similar to those of the past: selective incorporation of social forces (to enhance legitimacy) facilitated by more openness, dialogue, and negotiations (for greater democratization); division and disarticulation of the opposition; and centralization of power in the presidency (to enhance control). In the crisis-prone period of the 1960s and 1970s, this "controlled" process of incorporation (or co-optation) involved students and the intellectual left, opposition parties, nonofficial organizations, and the business sector—tying all of them to the

12. A recent poll published in the October 1991 issue of *Este País* provides clear empirical support for the role of Solidaridad in boosting the government's image and hence the PRI's electoral appeal. Although the poll showed that a resounding majority of Mexicans have a favorable opinion of the program, such approval was inversely related to social class, with upper- and middle-class respondents expressing higher levels of support.

state through a maze of bureaucratic and corporative devices. Today, the incorporation process extends far beyond the PRI and its corporate appendages to envelope local groups through Solidaridad as well as opposition parties through postelectoral negotiations.¹³ In the past, electoral and party reforms divided the opposition. Today the government plays the right off against the left by selectively incorporating PAN and thereby tempering the threat of a polarization along a system-antisystem axis.

In both periods, moreover, the cornerstone of this reform process has been the power of the presidency. Current reforms have been accompanied by an increasing centralization of authority, thus enhancing the system's adaptive capacity, which had reached new lows under de la Madrid. Being free of legal and institutional constraints, strong and even reinforced presidentialism seems to provide the Mexican system with the flexibility needed to adapt. Numerous developments demonstrate this accumulation of power under Salinas: Solidaridad, candidate selection in the official party, the ubiquitous removal of governors, the federal government's strengthened control over state and local budgets, direct interventions to recognize opposition victories or overturn election results, and more. Solidaridad documents themselves testify to the saliency of enhancing presidential power to effect current reforms: Solidaridad "reinforces the capacity of the presidency to guide the Republic by reformist means . . . to make the transition to a new phase of the Revolution."¹⁴ Soledad Loaeza has summed up the results: "The electoral recovery of the PRI in August 1991 is inseparable from the restoration of the Presidency"¹⁵

Looked at in one way, the similarities of past and present patterns of reformism suggest similar outcomes: an adaptive authoritarianism as opposed to democratization (reformism as a substitute for, rather than a detonator of, fundamental change). Eckstein captures the contradictory essence of this reform outcome when she equates the use of democratizing measures in Mexico to a strengthening of authoritarianism.¹⁶ This interpretation suggests that the further the Mexican president proceeds along the path toward democracy (via dialogue, concertation, incorporation), the more this movement alleviates the pressures for continued change,

13. Susan Eckstein arrived at a similar conclusion: that democratic opening at the local level serves to broaden the regime's base of legitimation and authoritarian rule. See Eckstein, "Formal versus Substantive Democracy: Poor People's Politics in Mexico City," *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 6, no. 2 (1990):213–39. On the role of dialogue and concertation in the government's treatment of rural forces, see Luisa Paré, "The Challenges of Rural Democratization in Mexico," *Development Studies* 26, no. 4 (1990):79–96.

14. Quote taken from a collection of writings stemming from the unpublished document "Convocatoria a la modernización de México del Presidente Carlos Salinas de Gortari," June 1991, p. 6.

15. See Soledad Loaeza, "La vía mexicana a la democracia," *Nexos*, no. 166 (Oct. 1991): 23–26.

16. See note 13.

thereby prolonging the authoritarian system. The more convinced opponents (or the Mexican people) become of the “sincerity” of the gradual reform program and the certainty of the “road to democracy,” or the more they enjoy virgin political space, the more they come to support the incremental strategy and the less likely they are to pressure for further political changes.

Yet despite these similarities, two factors suggest a different outcome—that current reforms may actually lead to system breakdown or democratic breakthrough. First, as Judith Hellman and Kevin Middlebrook contend and Jaime Sánchez demonstrates in *La transición incierta*, the current crisis is qualitatively distinct from previous ones, thereby limiting the scope and capacity of reformism.¹⁷ Opposition is emerging from various quarters, the official party is unstable, the economic dislocations are immense, and the political culture has matured. Yet these changes may present as many opportunities for reformism as obstacles. Second, past and current patterns of reform have clear and finite limits, complicating any regime’s ability to attend to the legitimacy-control equation in a positive-sum fashion. As Molinar asserts, the time increments between political periods of crisis and reform have dwindled progressively: the overhaul of the electoral system under de la Madrid survived only three short years, and Salinas’s COFIPE (his set of electoral reforms) already awaits a makeover. This trend suggests that the time bought or the marginal returns of each reform has diminished with each round, thus shrinking the room for effective reform. Similarly, the reformist tactic of ceding more and more governmental space to the opposition (without a concomitant increase in their decision-making powers) has a finite limit. Historically, the opposition has conquered (actually, been ceded) progressively higher and more numerous positions within the Mexican government, constantly redefining the “limits of reformism.” From local governments to the congress, then the senate, and more recently gubernatorial posts, each stage has been marked by protests, social mobilizations, repression, and official reluctance (not to mention announcements of the birth of democracy). A continuation of these trends, however, spells political stagnation and hence either breakdown or breakthrough as the conflict gradually centers on the office of the presidency itself, thereby converting the dilemma of legitimacy and control into a zero-sum game.

A primary intervening variable shaping the outcome and boundaries of reform remains, however, which is the state of the economy. An improved economic profile (both subjectively and objectively) can buy time and broaden the PRI’s maneuverability but (like dialogue) can also

17. See Judith Adler Hellman “Continuity and Change in Mexico,” *LARR* 23, no. 2 (1988): 133-56; and Kevin J. Middlebrook, *Political Liberalization in an Authoritarian Regime* (La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego, 1985).

alleviate the pressures needed for a true political transition. Such is apparently the case today. As the notion of “modern politics” seems to imply, renewed economic health may alter the trend of growing business support for PAN and may also feed a growing complacency and apathy among the middle class and those aspiring to its ranks. A new phase can be detected in the reduced need for intermediaries between state and society and the role of mass-based parties and social movements, as citizens are periodically summoned to the polls by a more highly skilled team of political technocrats.

Treating change as a central component of continuity admittedly clouds the problematic of continuity and change and the divergent views discussed at the outset. Nonetheless, the so-called optimists’ praise of Salinas is based on an either-or premise: either corporatism and complete PRI electoral dominance constitute the central components of the system, such that changes in them denote fundamental political shifts rather than a mere process of adapting the authoritarian system to adverse conditions; or conversely, the crisis is of a nature that makes past patterns of reformism no longer operable. Although these observers correctly stress heightened participation, tolerance, and dialogue as fundamental tenets of democracy, it remains a matter of debate as to whether democracy in a one-party hegemonic system like Mexico’s will actually follow that path. The question is, do steps toward greater openness and participation necessarily preface a transition to democracy? The “pessimistic” view tends to treat presidentialism as the axis of the Mexican system and hence considers the weakening of corporatism and the growing inclusion of other groups as only temporal means toward a reformist end. Not surprisingly, they hold out the dismantling of presidentialism as the true measure of democratization.

Because dialogue, toleration, and increased participation (which the “optimists” rightly see) and greater social autonomy and a decline in presidentialism (which the “pessimists” rightly do not see) are fundamental tenets of democracy (change) as well as adaptive authoritarianism (continuity), both perspectives must be acknowledged as basically correct.¹⁸ The trajectories, it seems, are at this point undistinguishable.¹⁹ The outcome depends on the strategic abilities of opponents and government officials, as in the past, despite the obviously unequal distribution of resources between the two camps. But predictions of the future are always difficult, especially when we forget the past.

18. A corollary to this dilemma involves the question raised earlier about internal reforms of the PRI. On a theoretical level, many analysts assume a positive correlation between democratization of the PRI and democratization of the system in the belief that general democratization requires internal democratic reforms in the PRI. Yet the current situation seems to suggest the opposite: an increase in system democratization (such as freer elections) in the absence of democratic reforms within the party.

19. Huntington, for example, cites centralization of power as a requirement for both reform and revolution. See Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, 355.