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Mexico is a federal country composed of 31 states and one federal district for the capital, Mexico City. The current President of Mexico is Vicente Fox Quesada, of the National Action Party (PAN). He was elected in 2000 for a six-year term, which does not allow for reelection.

Background: The Reform Process

Before beginning my overview of the Mexican political system, it is necessary to present some background to the current situation. It is important to understand that Mexico has recently undergone a transition from the longest-running authoritarian regime of the twentieth century (albeit civilian rather than military in nature) to a democratic one as a result of the 2000 presidential election. This is important to understanding Mexico today because of two reasons (1) many of the authoritarian structures of the past continue to operate in the democratic period; (2) democratization is an on-going process - indeed it remains incomplete in much of Latin America where the experience with both democratic norms, and the transition from military dictatorship is older. Therefore we expect the institutional and societal aspects of Mexico's new democracy to develop and consolidate over time.

The key element regarding Mexico's history is that the 71 year-old "civilian dictatorship" of the PRI (Revolutionary Institutional Party). In its origins, the PRI was an institution intended to allow elites to circulate through positions of power and to distribute access to state wealth to them. Later developments grafted a corporatist structure onto the party through which party elites were able to organize and control both organized labour and peasants (the rural poor). The entire system worked through patron-client relationships and different levels of "bosses" which ultimately culminated in the president himself. It is also important to note that in its pre-2000 development, the PRI did not work as a traditional political party to aggregate, articulate, or represent interests of society, but rather to control society. This meant that the opportunities for an independent civil society to emerge were effectively limited – a requirement for a healthy democracy – were limited..

Why the System Fell Apart

The system of PRI corporate control began to fall apart in the 1980s when economic crisis hit the country as a result of its debt default in 1982. The crisis meant that the party no longer had the resources needed to grease the system – and the party began to lose its control over the corporatist and patron-client networks upon which its power was based (and perhaps most importantly the vote was delivered). The pursuit of neoliberal restructuring (and the hardship it imposed on the poor – wage freezes, etc.) under presidents Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1982-1994), also reduced the corporatist influence of the state – and left more Mexican voters' unaffiliated and willing to vote against the PRI.

A series of electoral reforms conducted after 1977 with the purpose of legitimating the PRI's rule by encouraging the opposition parties to contest, to a limited extent, elections and participate in the Mexican political system, gradually opened a political space which enabled opposition parties, particularly the PAN, to win elections, first at the municipal and state levels. The consequence of this reform process, in which opposition parties demanded fairer and more transparent elections in exchange for political participation and regime legitimation, was ultimately the opening of sufficient political space to permit the defeat of the PRI by the PAN in the 2000 presidential election.

The Parties

The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)

Despite its 2000 electoral defeat, the PRI remains the dominant party. Its support base is strong particularly in rural areas where traditional patron-client relationships continue to be important in mobilizing political support, and among government employees and business elites who have benefited from its long rule. The PRI is essentially a non-ideological party, following the governments of Miguel de la Madrid and Carlos Salinas de Gortari, which moved its traditional centre-left, statist orientation to the right.

Since I have already discussed its role in some detail, I will not elaborate further on the subject, only to point out that the PRI continues to hold the majority of municipal and state-level governments, as well as the majority (actually a plurality) in both houses of the Congress.

The National Action Party (PAN)

The PAN currently holds the presidency, and was responsible for the historic defeat of the PRI in the 2000 presidential election. Among the major opposition parties it is the oldest, dating from 1939, and in this respect has been a long-term symbolic competitor with PRI. However, its relatively cooperative relationship with PRI led to the acceptance of electoral wins at the gubernatorial level – allowing party to build a strong organizational base, particularly in the northern border states, especially Baja California, as well as in Jalisco, Guanajuato (Fox's state), Yucatán, and Mexico City (Craig and Cornelius, 1995: 271). Its support base is among urban middle and lower-middle classes.

Ideologically speaking, it is social Christian (opposed to Mexican anti-clericalism), pro-free market and business, and relatively pro-American (US).

Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD)

After leftist parties legalized in 1977, the left has emerged as a political force, despite the fact that most of its traditional constituency was already co-opted by the PRI. The PRD was created in 1989 out of a splinter movement from the left wing of PRI, and existing ex-communist and socialist parties. The high point of its support was 31% received by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 presidential contest (even though the PRD had not been officially formed at that point). It also won the mayorship of Mexico City for the first time in 1997.

Its regional strength is found in the area around metropolitan Mexico City area, Michoacan, Guerrero, Tabasco, and Oaxaca (Craig and Cornelius, 1995: 278). In ideological terms it is "nationalist, popular, and democratic" (Craig and Cornelius, 1995: 277). However, thus far, political support has proved to be personalistic in favour of certain leaders, and anti-PRI, rather than representing the long-term development of a societal base (Craig and Cornelius, 1995: 268).

The Structure of Political Institutions

The President

President elected for 6 year terms with no re-election. Worth noting that “no-reelection” is a principle of the Mexican system which is replicated at all levels of government. Post currently occupied by President Vicente Fox of the PAN. His term ends in 2006.

The President has the right to:

- present initiatives to Congress;
- exercise a line-item veto;
- appoint Cabinet (except Attorney General) without approval of Congress;
- name the 21 judges to Supreme Court with Senate approval.

The Mexican system is often characterized as “hyperpresidential” which means that the president disposes of extensive “king-like” power – less evident in the democratic period when the president and Congress are ruled by different parties, instead “divided government” and institutional deadlock and policy inaction have characterized the relationship between the levels of government.

Congress

Bicameral, composed of the Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

Congress:

- can override a presidential veto with 2/3 vote in both chambers;
- raise and lower taxes;
- must approve some presidential decisions such as signing treaties and naming judges (Levy and Bruhn, 1999: 536).
- Constitutional amendments must be approved by 2/3 of members of Congress, and majority of state legislatures

Senate – 128 members, elected for 6 years, no reelection.

- Each of 31 states elects 2 members (by majority); one seat per state assigned to runner-up;
- 32 seats elected through a country-wide proportional representation system.

Current Composition (2000 election)

PRI	60 (plurality)
PAN (Alliance)	51
PRD (Alliance)	17

Chamber of Deputies – 500 members, elected for 3 years, no reelection.

- 300 members from single member ridings by majority;
- 200 from multi-member ridings by proportional representation;

Current Composition (2003 mid-term election)

PRI	223 (plurality)
PAN	171 (with 17 PVEM)
PRD	96
Others	10

State Level

States have governors and unicameral legislatures. States handle a range of duties, but despite the constitutional division of powers there is “national government control over basic policy” (Levy and Bruhn, 1999: 534).

State congress elections every 3 years, Governor every 6, no re-election.

Municipalities

Over 2000 municipalities. PRI continues to rule the majority of municipalities, but has lost control over some high profile cities such as Guadalajara (to the PAN) and Mexico City in 1997 to the PRD (Levy and Bruhn, 1999: 535). Municipal authorities are elected every 3 years with no reelection (not enough time for institution building) (Mizrahi, 2003: 198).

In 1983, constitutional reform to strengthen municipalities by granting authority over collection of municipal property taxes, in addition to existing income from licences and fines. However, remain dependent financially on states and national government for funds. The reform tended to benefit large urban areas with adequate tax base

Mexican Federalism – The Division of Powers

Despite being, formally, a federation, Mexico has traditionally been highly centralized. According to the constitution states have all powers not explicitly defined for federal government, and in the mid- 1990s, health and education were decentralized to states. However, the Constitution mostly limits the power of states (Mizrahi, 2003: 197).

Even with the devolution of health and education responsibility, the Federal government still “fixes teacher wages and has control over educational materials” (Mizrahi, 2003: 200).

Federal government also has financial and spending power:

- particularly fiscal power – collects all income tax and consumption taxes (80% of revenue);
- allocations made to states and municipalities according to a formula (dating from 1980), but the federal government retains significant discretion in what it invests in and which states it invests in (most transfers are specifically earmarked thus little sub-national autonomy) (Mizrahi, 2003: 197)
- States want a larger share of federal funds without taking the political responsibility for local taxation (The Economist, 27/03/03)

Decentralization viewed as strengthening local patron-client relationships (local bosses) – not seen as appealing to the centre.

Judiciary

Within Mexican federalism, the Supreme Court does not play a major role – although that role is gradually expanding.

In general term, the court has not limited executive prerogative by interpreting the constitution. However, as an example of its evolving role, the Supreme Court ruled in April 2001 to support the Federal Electoral Tribunal in a ruling against the governor of Yucatan who had stacked his state Electoral Council with political appointees – this was the first time that “Supreme Court has resolved a conflict between a state and the federal government.” (Mizrahi, 2003: 201)

Challenge for Mexico in the future, is building nascent democratic institutions, and working towards greater governability throughout the system.