THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN MEXICAN POLITICS

*Delal Baer**

I. MEXICO AND U.S. SECURITY INTERESTS

Mexico's future political and social stability is a matter of direct concern to the national interests of the United States. Since the Mexican economic crisis erupted in 1982, a visceral anxiety about Mexico's political future has exacerbated the traditional friction in bilateral relations. Issues that had perennially complicated bilateral relations—immigration and drugs—have acquired new dimensions stemming from preoccupations about the basic security of the United States *vis-a-vis* Mexico.

Many are concerned that drugs and immigration are symptomatic of deeper structural problems in Mexico. On the heels of these anxieties is concern regarding the potential for another 1910 style revolution in Mexico. These anxieties are compounded by our increasing awareness of the vulnerability and uncontrollable nature of our southern frontier. The initial dilemmas posed by the frontier are unconventional security challenges resulting from the destabilization of Mexican society. These include massive immigration, narcotics traffic, and low intensity border conflict. Californians and Texans are more sensitive to this reality than any other regional constituencies.

Even more serious, the interface between an undefended U.S frontier and Mexican stability is fraught with East/West implications. Mexican crisis and instability would be a windfall to Soviet-Cuban calculations and interests in the hemisphere. Clearly, no event could more rapidly force a reordering of U.S. global strategic priorities than a major change in the political status quo or the appearance of instability in Mexico. The scope of U.S global commitments and the nature of the U.S. force structure presuppose peaceful and friendly borders.

This delicate issue must be approached by balancing the opposing views of alarmism and complacence. It is essential to avoid

* Fellow, The Mexico Project, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

alarmism and its potentially counterproductive repercussions in Mexico. Questions of confidence when raised on this side of the border tend to have deep political resonance on the other side, and potentially undermine stability and confidence in Mexico. On the other hand, the United States may not complacently assume that Mexican political stability is guaranteed. This type of an assumption leads to lack of preparation and contingency planning. Thus, it is extremely important that we walk the fine line of quiet realism and preparedness, pursuing a constructive approach.

Efforts to calculate the odds of significant instability in Mexico or elsewhere are uncertain at best. Optimistic estimates regarding Mexico are bandied about in respectable policy and scholarly circles. However, we have not had tremendous success in predicting instability in other countries. Iran is a prime example of a predictive intelligence failure. The United States' predictive track record being dubious, it may be useful to pursue an exercise in political seismology, outlining the potential faults and fissures in the Mexican political system. After acknowledging our analytic pitfalls, we must be prepared to think about the unthinkable; if only to be better equipped to prevent its occurrence or manage its consequences.

II. The Forces of Stability

The case for continued stability is quite strong. The majority of the policy and academic establishment share the belief that Mexico will somehow muddle through, relying upon the residual strength in the system. Mexico has been stable for almost fifty-seven years, a track record not lightly disregarded. Mexican government officials continually remind U.S. officials, that there are no on-going insurgency or terrorist movements in Mexico. Mexico continues, by and large, to enjoy social peace. The memory of the 1910 revolution has made Mexico afraid of its own potential for violence, and therefore encourages a certain political caution. The nearby examples of Central American social instability restrain those who might take political risks. While Mexican discontent may be on the rise, the costs of destabilization are far too great to risk. United States' policy makers also realize that political experimentation and the decay of the status quo in Mexico will not necessarily result in a transition to democracy or an outcome favorable to U.S interests.

Furthermore, some argue that there is no mature alternative to the current Partido Revolucionario Institutional (PRI) dominated system. There are no credible or charismatic opposition figures—no

Corazon Aquino, for example, on the horizon. Nor is there a Ferdinand Marcos to serve as an easy political target. It is hard to take aim at a tentacular and bureaucratic institution such as the PRI. Furthermore, the political party structure, at least that of the opposition, is relatively weak and underdeveloped. Living in the shadow of the PRI for fifty-seven years has not resulted in a well organized dynamic system of electorial opposition in Mexico.

There are five "P's" that have served as the glue that holds the system together. The first is prosperity: in the thirty years prior to 1982, economic growth has rarely sunk below six percent. The second is patronage: the system has effectively distributed benefits to just about every member of society, and insured the loyalty of most of the important actors of the Mexican society. Third is presidentialism: in the past, the president was almost a mythic figure and sustained a sense of respect and hierarchy in the system. Fourth is pragmatism; a non-ideological approach to problems and questions that gave the system flexibility, creativity, and initiative in dealing with its challenges. And finally, there is the PRI; the single party that has maintained effective control of Mexican politics by constructing a grand coalition which incorporates every social sector—business, labor unions, the middle class, the peasants—in an organized fashion in the political system.

III. THE FORCES OF CHANGE

Despite the preceding list of strengths, weaknesses exist in the system that are becoming increasingly apparent. The coalition described above is showing serious signs of erosion: significant social actors have begun to drop out or waiver. The first of these waivering actors has been the private sector. The nationalization of the banks in 1982 struck a severe blow to business confidence in Mexico, upending the traditional rules governing the relationships between the state and industry. As a result, leading elements in the private sector began to question their security within the system.

Another symptom of the disintegration of the traditional coalition is dissent among the left wing of the PRI. Leftism ideologues within the party are challenging not only the wisdom of economic policies in the fact of crisis, but the very modus operandi of Mexican political life. Rumblings are heard within the restive and increasingly independent labor union movement. The decrease in economic resources flowing through the system has made it harder to buy the political loyalty that the PRI traditionally enjoyed. Eco-

nomic austerity has strained the patronage-based Mexican consensus and introduced zero-sum calculations that exacerbate long-standing ideological fissures.

Finally, we have seen an impressive upsurge in electoral disturbances in Mexico. The electoral process is the institutional mechanism through which discontent over the crisis has been most frequently expressed. The corruption associated, rightly or wrongly, with recent administrations has tarnished the image of the presidency and undermined the credibility of political institutions. Discontent with specific government actions and poor economic performance have diminished electoral support for the PRI.

Broader forces are also at play. In the entire northern tier of border states, as well as in major central highland cities such as Puebla and San Luis Potsi, the PRI's electoral margins appear to have diminished dramatically since 1982. PRI support is strongest in the rural areas and weakest in the cities, polling an average twenty percent lower in urban areas across the nation. This pattern indicates an overall loss of support in middle class, modern constituencies, where the political future of the nation rests. In Mexico City, a sprawling capital of eighteen million, official statistics acknowledge a PRI plurality of just under fifty percent. Unreleased opinion polls are reputed to suggest even greater deterioration. Should Mexico City's population ever attain the degree of electoral mobilization achieved in Chihuahua in 1986, the future of Mexico could change overnight.

Socio-demographic changes have accumulated over a twenty year period, making Mexico increasingly urban, middle class, and educated. This new society eludes effective control within the formal scheme of corporate interest representation. The increasing dissatisfaction and political maturity of a growing middle class is the principal challenge to the PRI, which has seen its support decay in those states that are most urban, populated, industrialized, and modern. An emergent democratic, civil culture, based mostly in the modern sectors of society, bears the greatest challenge to the future of the Mexican single party state.

CONCLUSION

The 1988 Mexican presidential election inevitably raises questions regarding continuity and change. Understandably, U.S. attention is most clearly aroused by bleak scenarios of dramatic change such as a protracted insurgency or a sudden collapse of authority

leading to a Marxist-Leninist regime. There must be a middle ground between the alarmists and the somnambulists, between scare stories and reasoned concern, for the wide range of scenarios that are clearly within the realm of probability. The policy making community should be sensitive and respond positively to the wide variety of subtle transformations and opportunities. The risk of change may be great, yet the costs of resistance to change may ultimately be greater. Hardened immobilism and explosive decompression are not inevitable in Mexico. A wide range of creative and positive scenarios may yet emerge out of what has been generically labeled "la crisis," with Mexico finding unexplored opportunities for positive economic growth and political evolution.