

The Structural Problem of Power: Why President Peña's Way of Governing Does Not Work in Current Times*

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It is no secret that the government of President Peña has responded poorly to several problems and challenges in its tenure. A symbolic, but revealing, example of this was the decision to remove a government advertisement whose message was “*ya chole con tus quejas*” (roughly translated as “enough with your complaints”) as a way of addressing the President’s low approval ratings as well as the lack of credibility that characterize his administration.

It seems clear that this is a government that feels besieged, protected behind the walls of the Presidential residence but without the ability to understand what is happening outside. What is the reason for the President’s approval ratings’ reaching the critical situation where they are today, in his fourth year in office? The administration does not seem to even understand the nature of the problem, what the population is concerned about, and why all of a sudden the mood became so grim.

At the beginning of 2015, the British magazine *The Economist* stated that the President “doesn’t get that he doesn’t get it”, which summarizes both an attitude and a factual situation. If a problem cannot be accurately defined then it cannot be resolved.

Beyond the lack of willingness to understand the problem, something astonishing if only for what it says about political survival, it is also clear that even if the government had successfully responded through better communications and political management, the bottom line is that more than improved communication is required to address the challenge the Presidency faces. The country requires much clearer responses, new public policy proposals, and a rethinking of its institutions.

The political problems that characterize the country are structural which means that even the most elaborate media response would be insufficient. If *The Economist* is right (and it is), it is understandable that the Peña administration does not want to understand.

The structural problem

The structural problem of Mexican politics has three different angles: a lack of legitimacy, a dysfunctional system of government and non-institutional political activism.

Lack of legitimacy, a factor that encompasses the population’s perception of the government, the political system, politicians and parties, can be observed in all areas. Some obvious examples are

the low popularity that characterizes the administration and its political party, the government's paralysis and that of all the political apparatus, but especially the widespread perception of corruption and impunity which is attributed to the system and members of all political parties.

Although problems of legitimacy could be attributed to some particular events or specific individuals, the problem has a wider scope: a complete lack of ability to govern, a fact that, with few exceptions, is also characteristic of local governments throughout the country. Mexican governments do not govern because they are engaged in other matters and because they do not see themselves as responsible for creating conditions in which the population can improve their lives and prosper. In Mexico, a Governor does not get into his office to try to improve the lives of his or her constituents but rather to make money and or build the road towards a Presidential campaign. Governing is not a priority.

The dysfunctionality of the political system derives from the changes experienced in the country over nearly a century. In all this time, the system of government has not adapted to new and ever-changing circumstances. One example summarizes it all: when the government was accused of violently suppressing the 1968 student demonstrations its reaction was not to build a modern police force that was well-trained and taught to respect citizens' rights. Instead, every government since then has chosen to never impede any demonstration or blockade, regardless of its origin or potential harm to others. From that moment in 1968 onwards, all governments in the country have opted to protect protesters at the expense of the citizenry that, needless to say, are the ones who produce, create jobs and pay taxes.

Security policy is merely a sign of the decrease in the quality of the Mexican government. Its structures were designed, organized and built for an era in which the government dominated most aspects of national life, there were no significant links between the population and the outside world, and the economy was effectively self-contained. This system of government remains though the population has tripled since 1960, the country is now fully connected to global media outlets, and citizens are connected to relatives abroad via email and are less dependent on government actions for their economic development.

These circumstances explain various deeply concerning issues. For example, an attorney general's office which does not have effective, independent and professional powers for criminal investigations; inefficient public spending 34 The Problem of Power that can always be manipulated by authorities; a world of flagrant corruption; and the absence of a professional bureaucracy or civil service dedicated to the management of national assets in a way that looks beyond the political authorities of the moment. Mexico never professionalized its system of government and is now paying the cost in the form of illegitimacy and dysfunctional and dismal performance in all of areas: the legislature, public security, public finances, justice, infrastructure, etc.

Finally, there is the issue of increasing political activism. The good news is that much of this activism is an indicator of the maturity of a society willing to demonstrate, block government actions, criticize, and complain. Rising social activism has shown two trends: on the one hand, there are those who seek collective action without breaking the law or disturbing the daily lives of the rest of the population. Although these groups are growing in number, their impact can only be observed as they acquire public visibility.

Activists that take to the streets and blocking avenues as well as public buildings are excluding the citizenry and advance their own causes only by being outside of the institutional and legal framework. Some even go so far as to ask for the resignation of the President before the end of his second year in office. The fact that even demonstrations as well organized and motivated as those arising from the Ayotzinapa case have not achieved the goal of removing the President is a vivid example of the enormous distance between Mexican politicians (a topic discussed in Chapter IV) and the citizenry. Above all, it is a reflection of the aforementioned second problem: in the absence of the mechanisms that are inherent to a modern system of government, such as checks and balances, the public response to a dysfunctional government cannot be anything other than protesting, whether in an active or passive way.

Activists in Mexican society have not acquired the capacity to mobilize effectively or the power to jeopardize the government's stay in power though this is what many such groups aspire to. Nonetheless, they have had the effect of branding the government as illegitimate, decreasing its approval ratings, and paralyzing it altogether. These all are signs of a structural problem of enormous depth. The result is that 21st century Mexico is characterized by a system of government that does not work and by a society that lacks the most essential means of participation or influence, all of which creates an environment of frustration, uncertainty, and distrust.

Old solutions

In the industrial era, governments had the ability to control their societies largely because the dynamics of production generated a self-contained system that took hold through forms of organization and participation inherent to that time, namely labor unions. In this context, all a government had to do was to create conditions of certainty for essential political and economic stakeholders and everything else would emerge from those conditions.

Back then, stability could be explained by an entire social and productive structure that would not defy those in power and did not have the capacity or information to do so. Life was simpler and the tasks and services required of government were easier to perform and provide. The old solutions worked because they were not old then –they were responses to the specific circumstances of the time, the country, and the world.

Nowadays, the real business -in social, economic and politic fields - is information and knowledge. That is the source of development, in the broadest sense of the word, of a society. What used to be about control now works thanks to creativity; what used to demand discipline now requires merit. The old education system was conceived as a mechanism for strengthening the PRI's hegemony and controlling the population, but what is required today is a population with the ability to think, analyze, process, and transform information into economic development. In the era of knowledge the discipline of the industrial age is no longer functional since every person has more control over their lives and does not feel a connection with the old control mechanisms. In other words, the fundamental structural problem of Mexican politics is that they are stuck on the dogmas that belonged to the era of the Presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas while the country and the world now live in the information age.

My impression is that Mexico's main problem is that the government still in place today was formed after a revolutionary movement and continues to act as such. Unlike governments emerging from society or which aim to address the population's demands, Mexican administrations come from a group that won the Revolution and never felt obliged to cater to the people. Fidel Velázquez, the fabled labor leader, once said about the government: "By the force of arms we won power and only by the force of arms will we relinquish it." Mexico's system of government has not evolved towards democracy or along paths that will enable its professionalization. One needs to observe nothing more than the way in which the rules of the game (the real ones, not those written in laws and regulations) are modified with every new administration: it is difficult not to conclude that there is a fundamental problem of institutional weakness in the very structure of government.

The problem worsened as the system was modified in the nineties when the first major electoral reform (1996) led the single-party scheme to transform into a three-party system. That is to say, Mexican democracy has made great strides in electoral matters but never really opened the system in terms of power. What the various electoral reforms after 1996 did was to open up the system for two new stakeholders, PAN and PRD, without altering the power structure in Mexican society. This is neither good nor bad, except that, besides incorporating these parties into the structure of power, it did not improve the quality of government or, in the long term, provide legitimacy for the system. It is not difficult to conclude that the poor economic performance of recent decades reflects not just economic structural factors but also a reflection of the institutional weakness that characterizes the country which is, in turn, a result of political disagreements.

The deeper issue is that the objectives that have been pursued through a diverse package of reforms cannot be achieved without modifying the system of government, because a great deal of what prevents the successful implementation of the reforms is related to the political system's way of functioning (or not functioning). The problem of power can be observed in several ways:

in the perpetual unrest, in the poor quality of governance that characterizes both federal and local administrations, in the lack of continuity for public policies, and in the insecurity in the absence of a judicial system that is able to address and adjudicate everyday problems.

Although most diagnoses agree on the nature of the problem, the issue at the heart of the problem cannot be resolved until society forces politicians to respond or a leadership able to form a modern and functional institutional construction emerges. The 2015 midterm elections showed a society with an increasing willingness to assert its voice, but with clearly limited resources and skills to do so.

The Presidential response

The aforementioned context should provide the explanation for why President Peña Nieto failed to advance his government agenda. Having previously been a successful Governor, Peña Nieto claimed efficacy was his greatest asset. As soon as he took office, he initiated a legislative whirlwind. In a few months, Mexico's Constitution had had its main articles modified. The agenda of change was not new: everything that was reformed had already been discussed for decades; the impressive feature was his ability to transform proposed reforms into law. The President displayed great negotiation skills, but the key factor (which his predecessors in the PAN party could not handle) was that he was able to control the PRI legislators. 38 The Problem of Power Having been the historical owner of power in the 20th century, the PRI is the beneficiary of the status quo. Its opposition to the previous proposals for reform can be explained due to its desire to preserve its sources of power and cash. Peña's success was based in controlling these groups and preventing them from blocking the legislative process. However, as soon as it concluded, those same interests returned to ignore the reforms once again and continue with their traditional businesses. More important, the President did not have the will, or the power, to oppose them.

In addition to the legislative whirlwind, the new government placed itself above society and recreated old control mechanisms over the general population, Governors, the media, the unions, and businessmen. This reflected a core consideration: the government thought that the country needed to return to order and that the best model for this was to recreate the PRI's golden era: the sixties. Although it is obvious that the old political system and the ancient economic strategy did not collapse because the then-rulers wanted it to, Peña's government ignored the changes that had happened both in Mexico and in the world in recent decades and decided to carry out his own transformation agenda and created its own reality, as if the world would fit its preferences rather than the opposite.

The population saw the arrival of Peña Nieto and his determination with a mixture of awe and anticipation. As if he were an ancient Tlatoani, (Aztec leader), Peña was there to save Mexico.

Mexicans watched him with astonishment. However, the administration's economic performance went from bad to worse, tax increases affected the consumption of the poorest, and the anger of those affected by the increasing controls started to rise. As soon as the first crisis appeared –the straw that broke the camel's back– all of the country had turned against the President. After the deaths of 43 students in Iguala in September of 2014, the political message was clear: it was an excuse for the whole population, disguised in collective anonymity, to express its dissent. “

The extraordinary thing was not the anger or the protests, both observable and predictable, but the government's complete inability to respond. Gone was the effectiveness or promised efficacy –it was now replaced by a frightened and paralyzed government. The reality of power in Mexico won: it was evident that the government's agenda would not alter the power structure but merely provide some efficiency to some sectors or activities, all without undermining the interests that benefit from the system.

President Peña's experience showed that Mexico has a serious problem of power: there is not a basic set of rules of the game that enjoy full legitimacy amongst political stakeholders; therefore, there are no rules at all. The President has enormous powers that enable him to exercise his will arbitrarily at any time which is why investment and credibility are limited to a sexenio, the six-year presidential period, and everything revolves around the trust (or lack thereof) that the President can inspire. Thus, the main problem is that Mexico lacks institutions that provide permanence and legitimacy to the system of government as well as guarantees for Mexican stability.

Mexico is experiencing a permanent schizophrenia: major changes and poor results; successful regions and extreme poverty in others; a government that promises efficiency but only provides a small amount of it. Mexico is caught between the old system of control that still remains and a society that is more prepared and demanding. Just like old times, this enables an apparent stability, but guarantees a permanent illegitimacy. That is, until the arrival of another President with new promises.

- From the new book *The Problem of Power: Mexico requires a new system of government* https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/the_problem_of_power_mexico_requires_a_new_system_of_government_0.pdf

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