

WHY THE RIGHT IS HEGEMONIC IN MEXICO?

By Julia Aibar*

THE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES depicted Mexico's July 2012 elections as a crucial test in which the country was at stake. Although this warning was heard in other presidential elections there is no doubt this time seemed to acquire a much more vivid and real meaning, both due to the current conjuncture (War on Drugs) and the consequences of an older process (Neoliberalism). Nonetheless that sense of emergency did not materialise as a rejection of past policies. Neither was raised for the harmed sectors a political agenda for them to express their discontent and/or demands.

Overall, the election of this year confirms that, in Mexico, 1) there appears no emergent alternative paradigm seriously challenging neoliberalism; 2) political elites remain distant from broader society; and, 3) the Left is not prepared to offer an alternative political order. Although these issues are closely related, they refer to different problems. However, there is a common question: why the main political actors are more interested in continuity rather than change?

THE CAMPAIGN: A MESSAGE FOR THE ELITES

Despite Mexico's poor economic performance since the 1980s and persistent high levels of poverty, inequality, and (a shocking) wealth concentration, what is striking is the superficial, tangential manner in which candidates had addressed the economy. They not only proposed to follow continuity along the neoliberal agenda, but to widen and deepen its main tenets (!). Furthermore, although the 'security' question should have played a more central role in elections, particularly when violence escalated in the last five years with over seventy thousand people dead, twenty thousand disappeared and thousands displaced, no candidate seriously questioned the government's existing policy.



In other words, neither the economy nor security took over the heart of the debate. The absence of such discussions was irreducibly clear, wherein the campaigns revolved around mutual accusations of corruption. Thus, the election never turned itself into a critical moment where the main societal problems could be raised.¹

If this was a peculiar feature of the recent Mexican election, even more curious was the ways in which the conservative ruling party –the National Action Party (PAN)- addressed these topics in the final phase of the campaign. Despite being the main responsible for the current situation, that party and her candidate vindicated macroeconomic stability and accused both the Leftist candidate – from the Democratic Revolution Party (PRD)- of wanting to indebt the country and the right-of-centre Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) candidate of setting obstacles in Congress to approve the “structural reforms”, which refer to reforms on energy sector (basically opening the State oil monopoly to private investment), labour (aiming to decrease workforce costs), and tax system (launch a single, universal tax). With respect to security, the Right in government vindicated its repressive policy and irresponsibly accused any opposition’s candidate (at the local and national level) ascending in the polls as “colluding with organised crime.”

PRI’s candidate, for its part, not only proposed continuing current economic policies, but also, as in response to PAN’s criticism, committed to carry out the structural reforms: one of the unaccomplished dreams of the PAN administrations. For the government, the PRI and the New Alliance Party (PANAL), the majority of academic, intellectual, economic elites and the mass media, the cause of stagnation lies in the difficulty of executing these reforms. As in a sort of sinister *déjà vu* of the neoliberal creed that was the *sole discourse* two decades ago in South America, the aforementioned reforms are for Mexican elites the only way to attain growth: the supposed true spark which will activate the

economy. They seem not to be aware that this economic paradigm is actually found to be wrong everywhere else. In this sense, far from concluding that the hardships of a major part of the population are due to neoliberal economic policies applied since the 1980s, they claim that the poor economic performance is a consequence of the “insufficient deep” of those policies.

To an important extent, on security issues, the PRI did not go beyond reproducing the proposals and measures of the ruling party. Peña Nieto promised to continue “the attack on organised crime”, though making clear that he would make some minor adjustments. Hence, the measures included in PRI’s electoral platform are: strengthen international co-operation to stop smuggling; professionalise and increase police corps; create a national militarised police; and combat both addictions and the financial flux of illegal money.² Following the official line, PRI dissociated security policy from State’s obligation to secure Human Rights. Despite talking about the “Rule of Law”, security was not seen as a fundamental human right that is not allowed to suppress other human rights. This, above all, clearly implied that security policy will remain repressive.

The main parties seem to ignore widespread social demands, which on its own reveal the profound social isolation of the political elites and the weakness of society to make their demands being heard. Nonetheless both that estrangement and weakness do not explain why the parties (PAN, PRI and PANAL) that proposed continue and deepen the current model, obtained 68% of total turnout. In other words, the relation between the electoral performance, the effects of neoliberal policies, and the actions of the elites during the campaign, make us wonder how is it possible that despite its evident failure neoliberalism was not questioned? How was it possible that the advocates of that model achieved so much electoral support?

These questions were already asked, in practice, in the Mexican public arena. There appears to be two answers. For the Right, there are no real



alternatives to the current neoliberal model, which was categorically revealed both by their lacklustre attempts in questioning the economic and security policies as well as the refusal of the parties to listen to social demands. Thus, the Right attempted to establish the idea that there is not any the chance to question the dominant paradigm unless paying high political costs. For the Left, in contrast, PRI's electoral success is explained by extortion, vote-buying, manipulation of the big TV broadcasters, and the unequal available resources.

Although partial, both answers are regarded valid by significant portions of the population. However, they mask two fundamental facts: what hinders political alternatives from public's view is neither the effects of neoliberal policies nor the inexistence of different ideas; rather it is the establishment of status quo as a common sense which has seriously constrained the scope of political options; and, that the electoral outcome is largely due to both the weakness of the Left to challenge the ruling paradigm and to its outstanding inability to develop and launch alternative proposals.

NEOLIBERAL COMMON SENSE

If the discourse of the elites "makes sense" in wide sectors, is because there are deeply rooted narratives that make it credible. In Mexico there is a common sense that has become increasingly solid through years, fed by both sectors within the PRI and its detractors from Left and right, which relates the Nation with a protectionist, corporatist, and authoritarian State. Nationalism for its part is connected with the Mexican Revolution and above everything to the regime built in the post-revolutionary process.

Mexican history is told as a lineal process, shaped by necessary subsequent moments. For history written by the PRI's State, this succession –positively valued, started with institutionalisation (Calles' Government);

continued with social reforms (Cárdenas' Government); and was consolidated after through economic development. The critical version nonetheless sees these moments as the culmination of an authoritarian project: institutionalisation is codified as an antidemocratic and corporatist State's expansion; social reforms as co-optation and disciplining of society; and development either as statist dirigisme (liberal rightist account) or as capitalist deepening (Leftist account). Neither of these interpretations acknowledges zigzags nor ruptures, neither manages to grasp the depth of measures introduced in the Cardenist period.

The convergence in their critique by both the orthodox Left and the neoliberal right largely

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explains the weight and effectiveness of common sense opposed to PRI's revolutionary nationalism. All this turned into a consensus in which politicians, academics, cultural and economic elites took part. The confluence of so many actors was greatly due to the gradual erosion of revolutionary nationalism as well as the emergence of two deep internal ruptures in it. The first one occurred in October the 2nd 1968, when a brutal repression on the students' movement exposed how the regime had grown apart from the people. The second came with the 1980s economic crisis that gave way to the rise of PRI's neoliberal sector that denied the principles over which that party was created.

Although part of the Left managed to recover and maintain the demands of democratisation, the right succeeded in holding more political weight and initiative. The latter seized the democratic demands reducing them to the procedural-liberal format and imposed free-market ideology.



Since then every discourse with national content was regarded archaic, as a melancholic expression of a lost community that, in the name of the people, denies the individual and the citizen; as an attempt to revive a 'paternalist' State that suffocated the vitality of economic agents. This chain of negative valuations is currently synthesized in the word 'populism.'

This neoliberal consensus although redefined still keeps its defining kernels. This partially explains why today it does not seem possible to think of inclusive and redistributive economic programs; in a State with more presence that does not only assume repressive functions.

This group of dominant ideas and practises, which contains but also by far exceeds an

performance. On the other hand he clarified that he would not introduce new taxation schemes and, in order not to scare businessmen, he specifically expressed that he would not affect the incomes of the richest. In regards to the 'Structural Reforms' he said he would not apply them although did not clearly elaborated why.

In respect to violence his proposals were rather feeble, abstract, and not very precise. He limited himself to both raise some social measures to attack poverty and to vaguely propose some measures to improve police performance.

Although the coalition that endorsed López Obrador did not share a substantial part of the rhetoric of his opponents, the differences between his block and the others were not clearly set out.

Fearful of being accused of 'radical' this candidate strived more on showing a good face than on setting up an alternative.

In this sense, despite many analysts underscore that one of the causes of the not-bigger turnout for the Left was the so

-called harsh discourse of López Obrador, the truth is that his campaign was not categorical enough neither in opposing security policy nor in questioning the economic policies responsible of poverty. His message was so diffused that it did not generate a polarisation between his proposals and those of the other candidates. The polarisation if any –more prominent in the 2006 elections, where López Obrador was also candidate- was produced by the other political expressions, confident enough about their own agenda and interests.

Incredibly, the Left allowed the candidate of the violent ruling party (PAN) to raise the banners of 'peace'; did not prevent PRI's candidate –whose party remains responsible of the brutal backwardness of entire regions- from taking over the modernisation's discourse; and did not contested PANAL's candidate –whose party was created by the teacher's union leader accused of the problems in education- monopoly of the

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economic program, is what I call neoliberal common sense. It is a worldview that conceives persons as self-interested rational individuals; the State as an alien entity to society whose purpose is to guarantee the functioning of free market; politics as something that exclusively takes place in liberal institutions and which must be in charge of aggregating interests; and democracy as procedures aimed at selecting ruling elites.

THE LEFT: WITHOUT AN ALTERNATIVE ORDER PROPOSAL

Neoliberal common-sense hegemony in part explains the actions followed by the Left led by López Obrador in the electoral process, whose campaign centred on denouncing what he called the "mafia in power." Regarding the economy he proposed a development plan based on generating resources with a cut on salaries and expenses of the highest paid sectors of bureaucracy. That was his central strategy to improve the economic



proposals to improve education.

López Obrador cemented his image almost exclusively on the moral dimension, making this the core of his proposal -as a condemnation of the corruption of power elites, which strengthened him in his immediate environment, but drastically reduced his potential public. The demands linked to concrete sectorial interests, as has been said, were not addressed for the most part. The few of them taken into account were neither processed nor elaborated.

Despite all these limitations, Left's electoral performance was good, and in some cities and regions was even outstanding. This points out on the one hand, that even if neoliberal common-sense is still dominant, it starts to crack; and, on the other, that the Left can aim at becoming an important political force.

The imminence of the Structural Reforms pre-shapes two scenarios: either an historical political defeat or growing dissatisfaction and protests. In any case, the Left can play an important role, but whether it is prepared to do it she will have to ask to herself the following questions: will we be able to transcend the strategy of politics through compromises with lobby groups, in order to address the deepest social demands? Will we be able to -through assuming and politicising those demands- represent wide sectors of the population and thus create collective subjectivities? In other words, the Left and the López Obrador's one will have to answer whether she will be able to overcome the partial representation of a 'people' understood almost exclusively as the plebeian -furthermore as a culture of those 'below', so as to build another 'people' thought as a political subject that can express and synthesize social diversity through transversal rhetoric as opposed to the current reductive one.

Finally, with that hypothetical social force, will the Left be able to question the place reserved by the neoliberal dogma to the State in order to revalue it, equip it with technical capacities, making it

guardian of social, civil, and political rights, and so broaden the limits of a democracy trapped by proceduralism and legalism?

The possibilities are open. However, the actions of the *really existing* Mexican Left do not seem to act upon them.

To summarise, the strength of neoliberalism in Mexico rests not correlative to its results obtained as a model, but is rather due to a widespread common sense brewed throughout thirty years, which has managed to virtually erase other alternatives from the political landscape. The social disconnection of the major political parties has for its part various components: an unsuccessful integration of civil society with political society, which reflects and reproduces deep economic inequalities, social asymmetries, and ethnic, racial and cultural fractures. On the other side of the coin, the weakness of Mexican civil society -in stark contrast to *societal* density, seals the development of a political community based on shared rights and obligations. Last but not least, the Left's inability to lead a political alternative tells and exhibits its lack of skill and will to politically elaborate -i.e. listen to, channel, organise and represent- the deepest social demands and to forge links with the groups that express them. How long will these features remain unchanged?

NOTES:

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1. The official results of the 2012 presidential election are: Enrique Peña Nieto, candidate for 'Commitment for Mexico' (PRI and PVEM), 38.2%; Andrés Manuel López Obrador, candidate for 'Progressive Movement' (PRD, PT, MC), 31.6%; Josefina Vázquez Mota, candidate for the PAN, 25.4%; and, Gabriel Quadri, candidate for PANAL, 2.30%.
2. To see PRI's platform, visit: http://www.ulsamx/votolassalista/docs/Plataforma_PRI.pdf