

Mexico in Transition

Barbara Hogenboom

- *Mexico's Politics and Society in Transition*, edited by Joseph S. Tulchin and Andrew D. Selee. Boulder/London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003.
- *México al inicio del siglo XXI: democracia, ciudadanía y desarrollo*, edited by Alberto Aziz Nassif. México: CIESAS & Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2003.
- *Globalización y alternativas incluyentes para el siglo XXI*, edited by Jorge Basave, Alejandro Dabat, Carlos Morera, Miguel Ángel Rivera Ríos & Francisco Rodríguez. México: Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas. UNAM & Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 2002.

Whereas in the 1990s much was written on change and transformation in Mexico, since the victory of Vicente Fox in the presidential elections of 2000 the term 'transition' can be frequently heard and read in political discourses as well as in scholarly literature. That there is no longer a representative of the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional/Institutional Revolutionary Party) in the presidential palace after more than seventy years is of a different classification from that of the PRI losing political control in other places. Due to the peaceful and democratic change of power, Alberto Aziz Nassif and Jorge Alonso Sánchez on page 79 state that, 'El siglo XXI en México empezó ese 2 de julio'. The victories of the opposition in several states and municipalities from the late 1980s, the end of presidential control over the Federal District in 1988 where the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática/Party of the Democratic Revolution) won the first free elections for the city's mayor in 1997 and again in 2000, the autonomy of the Federal Electoral Institute (IFE) in 1996, the end of formal political corporatism in 1996, the PRI's loss of the majority in the chamber of deputies in 1997, and a range of other reforms and changes have been significant in themselves, but taken together they have contributed to a situation that has allowed a candidate of the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional/National Action Party) to become president. Still it is usually assumed that for Mexico's political system and society, a non-priista taking the lead has had an even more profound impact. The use of the word transition suggests more than some changes or steps in a process of transformation, for it implies that Mexico is moving from (semi-) authoritarianism to democracy.

The three new volumes on Mexico's contemporary politics and social and economic development that are reviewed here present an interesting overview of the circumstances that Mexico's society and Vicente Fox's cabinet have been facing recently. With contributions on a wide range of processes and events of the 1990s, the books show that understanding shifting state-society relations requires looking into political as well as economic and social developments. Reading through these assessments, one is impressed by the multitude and variety of changes. But while one becomes increasingly convinced that a definite transition is taking place in Mexico, the overall nature and direction of this transition is not clear. Can Mex-

ico's political transition be expected to result in a stable democracy? And are the country's economic and social conditions supporting this? Three years after 2000 – when Fox won the elections and when most of the chapters to these volumes were written – it still remains difficult to formulate clear answers to these questions. What to think, for instance, of the rapidly decreasing popularity of Fox, and the extremely high level of 58 per cent abstention in the mid-term elections of July 2003?

As may be expected, each of the three volumes pays attention to effects of regionalization and globalization, but they do so in very different ways. *Mexico's Politics and Society in Transition* has a strong North American focus. Written by a mix of US and Mexican authors, the editors mention that the book is about 'our neighbouring country to the south' (p. 7), and is meant to help 'people in the United States to understand what is happening in Mexico' (p. 5). Evidently, for both countries the other's proximity is increasingly affecting internal circumstances, whether through trade, migration, capital flows, (drugs) crime and political pressure of various sources. It is nevertheless somewhat awkward, particularly to a non-US reader and in these times of globalization, to see a timely and overall interesting volume on Mexico presented as a product for a geographically limited readership. The book *Globalización y alternativas incluyentes para el siglo XXI* counts a much broader authorship, including contributors from Mexico, the United States, Latin America and Europe. It includes several chapters on globalization, deals extensively with Latin American trends, and contains a number of chapters on Mexico. The other Mexican volume, *México al inicio del siglo XXI: democracia, ciudadanía y desarrollo*, was written by a team of six Mexican scholars. The chapters on political and policy changes focus on internal processes, but the chapters on the shifts in Mexico's development model encompass regional and global influences, as may be expected by a subject that is so heavily affected by external actors, trends and crises.

Mexico's Politics and Society in Transition discusses various recent developments, divided into politics, economic development and migration. Under the first heading Raúl Benítez Manaut describes how Mexico's democratization has taken place at a time of a rising role of the military. In the context of growing organized crime, narco-trafficking and the crisis in Chiapas, some rural areas and state institutions (especially those dealing with law enforcement and public security) of Mexico have been remilitarized. Historically the Mexican army was never autonomous from the political system, and therefore not a factor of instability. The remilitarization since the early 1990s is again contrary to most Latin American cases where democratization coincided with demilitarization. Apart from becoming a serious national security problem, militarization is evidently affecting Mexico's democratization process. Also Rodolfo Stavenhagen's chapter on the Zapatistas mentions threats for security and peace: structural conflict over rights of indigenous peoples in various parts of Mexico; ongoing problems with paramilitary groups ('armed civilian groups' in euphemistic government discourse); and little or no contact between the Zapatistas and the government since the Mexican congress in 2001 approved a law on indigenous rights that did not live up to the government's commitments in the Peace Accord of San Andres.

Ilán Bizberg's chapter 'Transition or restructuring of Society?' (a slightly different Spanish version is in *México al inicio del siglo XXI*) combines an interesting analysis of recent trends in Mexican society with a valuable contribution to the

theoretical discussion on civil society and democracy in Latin America, criticizing the definition of democracy and citizenship as developed by the transition school (in particular O'Donnell and Schmitter). Less optimistic about Mexico than many other contributors to Tulchin and Selee's volume, Bizberg points at the dispersion of political power. Unlike democratization in many other Latin American countries, autonomous civic organizations were not decisive in bringing the old Mexican regime down. None of the new, independent civic organizations – UNT, Alianza Cívica, Barzón, Zapatistas – have filled the power vacuum left by the PRI regime's decomposition. Instead, in various regions of Mexico this is being done by caciques (local authoritarian leaders), 'who either rise out of the feudalization of the PRI or by the strengthening of openly illegal forces' (p. 155). The other winners of political change are the entrepreneurs. Bizberg concludes convincingly that 'the Mexican transition seems to lack the social forces necessary to attain its completion' (p. 167) as popular classes are still under control of the PRI, or collectively too weak for reconstructing civil society. As long as formal citizenship is not turned into active citizenship, restoration of the old regime is one of the possible scenarios of Mexico's political future.

The chapters on labour and gender seem to support Bizberg's conclusion on the lack of social forces. Katrina Burgess argues that both old and new unions still need to find a balance between autonomy and influence. The traditional relation between the PRI and the CTM (Confederation of Mexican Workers) based on a socioeconomic and political bargain, turned into a liability for the PRI with the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. This relation changed radically in the late 1990s with the peso crisis, the death of its seemingly eternal leader Velázquez, and the rise of the National Union of Workers (UNT) and the Social Workers' Movement (MST). So far, the CTM has remained loyal to the PRI, even though most of the circumstances and interactions on which their alliance was based have disappeared. Marta Lamas writes about the absence of organized political force of Mexican women, and their limited participation and representation in political parties. The large increase of women entering the workforce through self-employment or maquiladoras and the trend that more women are studying have not been translated into a more prominent role of women and gender issues in politics. This political context renders it unlikely that in the short term something will be done about the weak economic and social situation of women, such as the fact that 50 percent of them still earn less than the minimum wage.

Overall the parts on economics and Mexican migrants in the United States in *Mexico's Politics and Society in Transition* are somewhat weaker than the part on politics. Manuel Pastor and Carol Wise present the mixed results of Mexico's political economy. On the downside are mediocre long-term growth, further dependence on the United States and growing income inequality. While the elite gained from economic restructuring, the poor as well as the middle class have lost. On the other hand, the authors state that the so-called fundamentals for solid economic and wage growth (i.e. macroeconomic stabilization and market reforms) are finally in place. Recent figures show, however, that good fundamentals are no guarantee for growth: in the first two and a half years of Fox's presidency growth has been just 1.3 per cent.¹ Meanwhile, rural reform has not realized neoliberal promises, as Kirsten Appendini's interesting chapter shows. Agriculture is still in crisis: rural agricultural growth figures are lower than those of the rest of the economy, and poverty and migration are increasing. There are some positive trends in moderniza-

tion via non-agricultural activities and new collective efforts of farmers, but agriculture by peasants remains a huge challenge. The two chapters on migration provide information on its long history and recent policies, but unfortunately fail to make a profound analysis of this prominent process.

As indicated by its title, *México al inicio del siglo XXI: democracia, ciudadanía y desarrollo* is divided into three sections: politics, citizenship and development. Its editor, Alberto Aziz Nassif, reasons that Mexico's democratic transition is neither starting nor ending, but continuing. The informative chapters on political and institutional development (by Aziz and Jorge Alonso Sánchez) provide an overview of the large number of legal reforms and changing political realities. After the PAN won governorship in 1989 in Baja California, opposition has increasingly gained influence and control in states and municipalities. Electoral reforms gradually allowed for more openness and fairness, and the IFE becoming an autonomous institution played an important role. The PRI's national hegemony is thus clearly over, and the Mexican congress and legislative forces (particularly the supreme court) have become more autonomous. Simultaneously, the presidency has lost ground on several terrains of power, not only because of political reform, but, perhaps even more importantly, because of economic liberalization. Privatization of state companies and participation in the North American free trade zone have, to a large extent, limited traditional presidential avenues for socio-economic control. Moreover, the outcome of the elections of 2000 ended many traditional political relations: between executive and legislative powers; between federal and local governments; between government and political parties; between government and corporatist organizations. Aziz and Sánchez, however, point at the risk of political paralysis due to the combination of a presidential system and a multiparty system, especially since Fox has missed a majority in both chambers of congress. Members of congress are taking more initiative for legislation, but on major issues such as labour and energy reforms there is a deadlock.

Juan Manuel Ramírez Saíz analyzes the democratization of society and the political system, and its limitations: how the traditional corporatist system has gone without being replaced by a new set of relations between state and society; how clientelist practices as well as intolerance against opponents are still strong; how among independent civic groups one can discern a mix of democratizing and authoritarian practices; how major progress has been made in awareness of political rights, but much less so of social rights, citizens' rights, and indigenous peoples' rights; and how civic groups may be successful in creating networks, organizing independent political mobilization, and creating public spaces, but are hardly receiving governmental attention for their demands. Other important lacunas include political parties having a purely instrumental relationship with citizens; the militarization of politics; and large-scale narco-trafficking and infiltrating policies. Saíz concludes that in Mexico there is no clear link between electoral democracy and participatory democracy, and that the political system has prevented the democratization of society. Together with Bizberg's conclusion that Mexico's political transition lacks the social forces necessary for its completion, it is hard not to become alarmed about the uncertain nature and outcome of this process.

In the part on Mexico's development model, Carlos Alba Vega and Enrique Valencia Lomelí present a historical analysis and an assessment of the links between political changes and economic and social reform. The ideology of letting the market rule has not only affected trade and investment. Salaries have become

an element of competition and control on inflation too, which are to be determined by the market, independently from social policy. Mexico's social security system has been segmented and faces hybrid governmental policies. Also, social programmes have been through various profound changes. The current programme 'Progresá' is based on the (fashionable) ideas of human capital and focussing on specific groups, and does nothing about the economic context that causes poverty. More social fragmentation is therefore likely to happen despite the fact that the government's social expenditure has been rising again, and is actually back to the levels of the 1970s.

Globalización y alternativas incluyentes is primarily a book on economic development and change, with economists as well as various social scientists among its contributors. This massive volume is divided into two parts: the first on the economy and economic policies, and the second on state, society and politics. Each of these parts starts with several chapters on global trends, followed by some chapters on Latin America, and then a few contributions on Mexico. With its twenty-six chapters, this book is rich in the amount, scope and variety of presented analyses and data, and attractive to those interested in international political economy and contemporary development of Mexico and Latin America. In addition, many of the authors combine academic analyses with clear suggestions for policy changes, thereby indeed contributing to the development of 'alternativas incluyentes'. The economic section of the book is stronger than the political one, although the latter includes a few interesting contributions on global and Latin American trends. However, as this review focuses on Mexico, I will here only briefly refer to some of the chapters on Mexico's political economy.

The chapter of Carlos Morera Camacho shows how large national and transnational companies were the most important agents of Mexico's economic transformation, and how these enterprises were restructured in such a way that they could 'hegemonize' the country's international reinsertion. Through foreign direct investment and capital flight, transnationally operating enterprises became part of increasingly international corporate networks. Also Jorge Basave Kunhardt discusses the trend of international expansion of Mexican companies through direct investment in other countries, especially the United States. Interestingly, several of the large, oligopolistic Mexican companies that internationalized in the 1990s were among those doing so in the 1970s as well, yet with other strategies due to a different context. The recent form of integration is more complex, including insertion into production chains and restructuring of these chains (a topic Gary Gereffi also discusses in the volume). However, as the peso crisis of 1994-95 showed, not regulating these increasingly international corporate activities can cause major damage to Mexico and beyond. According to Morera, the Mexican government should develop new forms of regulation if such crises are to be prevented in the future.

Miguel Ángel Rivera Ríos analyses how industrial production chains in Mexico have been affected by open market policies, and in which sectors technological learning is most likely. Although the auto and electronic products sectors have the most potential for this, a broad national system for technological innovation would have to be created to turn this potential into a reality. This is not an easy task since it would need to involve new forms of state intervention and public investment. José Luis Calva criticizes Mexico's decision for insertion in the global economy by means of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Although returning to the 'model keynesiano cepalino' (Cepalist Keynesian model) would not be

an option, he claims that the 180-degree turnabout of the technocrats was unnecessary. Similarly, he does not suggest to abandon NAFTA but to strive for a system of compensation funding and a free movement of 'labour' (i.e. persons), like in the European Union. In order to attain sustainable development with equity, Mexico would have to focus on a maximalization of employment and a redistribution of wealth, which would include a redirection of industrial policy and financial reform. Recent figures support Calva's criticism and proposals: since the start of Fox's government, jobs in the formal economy have further decreased, and industrial production and manufacturing have declined.²

Together, the three books add in valuable ways to the growing body of academic literature on contemporary Mexico, and show that the changes taking place in Mexican politics and society are hard to summarize in a few catchwords. While previous definitions of Mexico's political system and state-society relationships no longer fit well with current tendencies, few scholars have started formulating new ones. Indeed, as long as there is so much movement and dust it is hard to observe the new shape of things, and to estimate whether political, social and economic developments are leading to a stable democracy in which citizens are actively participating. There seems to be at least one central characteristic, however, that can be discerned in each of these areas, and that is fragmentation. Mexico's society is becoming increasingly fragmented as a result of migration, informalization, and growing inequalities. Its economy is becoming divided into some highly modernized and internationalized companies, and numerous others that are lagging behind, with little to no connections between these two groups. Mexico's political system combines democratization with remilitarization, the rise of new forms of popular participation in some regions, the return of caciques in others, and free elections where not even half of the electorate bother to vote. Next to many other negative aspects of growing fragmentation, these factors could harm or even counter recent steps of democratization.

Barbara Hogenboom is lecturer and researcher at CEDLA.

<hogenboom@cedla.uva.nl>

Notes

¹ Latin American Mexico & NAFTA Report 19 August 2003, p. 11.

² Latin American Mexico & NAFTA Report 15 July 2003, p. 6-7.