

## Alternation, Transition, and Regime Change in Mexico: Is the Glass Half Full or Empty?

Review Essay by Wil Pansters

- *Vuelta en U. Guía para entender y reactivar la democracia estancada*, by Sergio Aguayo Quezada. México D.F.: Taurus, 2010.
- *Consolidating Mexico's Democracy. The 2006 Presidential Campaign in Comparative Perspective*, edited by Jorge I. Domínguez, Chappell Lawson and Alejandro Moreno. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009.
- *El centro dividido. La nueva autonomía de los gobernadores*, by Rogelio Hernández Rodríguez. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2008.
- *México. ¿Un nuevo régimen político?* edited by Octavio Rodríguez Araujo. México D.F.: Siglo XXI, 2009.
- *Mexico's Democratic Challenges. Politics, Government, and Society*, edited by Andrew Selee and Jacqueline Peschard. Washington/Stanford: Woodrow Wilson Center Press/Stanford University Press, 2010.
- *Savage Democracy. Institutional Change and Party Development in Mexico*, by Steven T. Wuhs. University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

On a number of occasions in recent years LASA panels on contemporary Mexican political affairs have made me wonder whether my learned colleagues at the presenters' table were actually talking about same country I study, read about and visit. Although the notion of 'many Mexicos' is familiar among *mexicanistas*, something else is occurring here. When discussing democratization or transition in current Mexico, 'many Mexicos' does not refer to the country's extraordinary cultural and social diversity, but rather to 'different Mexicos' constructed out of dissimilar conceptual frameworks. My main motive in reviewing a selection of recent scholarly works is to come to a more informed understanding and assessment of the state of the 'democratic transition' or regime change more than 10 years after the PRI was voted out of Mexico's presidential palace. This review essay examines six books, three of which are edited volumes and three are monographs, three are in Spanish and three in English. The edited volumes alone contain 38 chapters, so the reader will understand that I will not deal with all chapters individually, or with the remaining 900 pages of the monographs in detail. Instead, I will concentrate on a few general themes which enable me to connect the works in a meaningful manner. As the main focus will be on political processes, institutions and actors, I will necessarily pay only scant attention to political economy and societal change.

What is remarkable in the books under review here is the absence of a serious analysis of the issues that dominate today's Mexico: violence, criminalization and militarization. I assume this is largely explained by the time lag between the periods in which these books were conceived and written, and their publication. Most

importantly, it makes the reader realize how dramatically the social and political condition of Mexico has changed.

### **The re-invention of authoritarianism**

If the main objective is to obtain a clear understanding of developments in Mexico and their meanings, Sergio Aguayo's book *Vuelta en U* seems a good place to start. Aguayo is known for speaking and writing unambiguously in each of his different roles as scholar, public intellectual and activist. His style is accessible, even colloquial and ironic, and generally wary of academic jargon. This is not a book written for academic scholars only, perhaps not even primarily. It is also the most wide-ranging of all the works under review here as it deals with the 1910-2010 period and goes beyond purely political analysis.

From the outset Aguayo writes that 'la transición vive una regresión, una vuelta en U, porque sobreviven piezas fundamentales de un autoritarismo que se moderniza y porque la democracia funciona solo para beneficio de unos cuantos' (p. 16). He then embarks on an extensive analysis that includes two conceptual chapters about transition and (electoral) fraud. The chapter on the evolution of electoral fraud (it deals with the 1910, 1929, 1940 and 1952 federal elections) draws on some archival sources (mostly US), but it is not a very strong chapter, certainly not for historians, because it leaves out entirely how the management of elections changed over time.<sup>1</sup> The book then largely follows a chronological order that starts in 1963, the year when a new electoral law was elaborated in reaction to the intense social unrest of the late 1950s. For the author this marks the 'formal beginning' of a still unfinished transition. It also establishes a mould for how subsequent electoral reforms (1977 and 1996, to name just two) are causally related to social conflict.

The three chapters that deal with the 1963-2000 period generally conform to the mainstream characterization of the Mexican regime as presidentialist and highly centralized (it does not engage work critical of that interpretation), as well as of the emergence of social and political tensions that gradually moved towards the electoral arena and undermined the PRI's grip on power. We read about the dirty war, the 1977 electoral reform, the 1985 earthquake, the emergence of neo-panismo, the 1988 electoral fraud, the great but deceptive 'Salinas de Gortari-show' and the Zapatistas. Not much new here, except that Aguayo systematically pays attention to the role of the 'external factor', essentially the US, and the question of management of information. With respect to the latter, the concept of 'negation' helps to examine how the winners of authoritarianism cynically deny the existence of unpleasant realities in the knowledge that ordinary people have limited or no options to articulate an alternative narrative. In an interesting paragraph Aguayo recounts the (failed) attempt of narrow-minded nationalist intellectuals to proceed legally against Oscar Lewis and the *Fondo de Cultura Económica* in 1965 after the publication of *Los hijos de Sánchez*, and hence the political importance of information and theorizing for bringing about real change.

The following four chapters constitute the core of the book and the reason it was written in the first place. The first of these chapters deals with the 'sexenio' of Vicente Fox (2000-2006), 'el demócrata desinflado'. The following two chapters examine the highly contested 2006 presidential elections (see also below), while

the fourth, unquestionably the most important of the entire book, attempts to make a broad balance of the 2000-2010 period of 'alternation'. Aguayo examines a series of deep shifts in power within the state and between the state and a number of social and economic actors that threaten democratic principles and forms. The author sentences the Fox legacy as a 'redistribución sin precedente del poder y la entronización de la desigualdad, la impunidad y de una cultura en la cual el poder y el dinero son lo único que importa' (p. 142). Although Aguayo probably puts too much on Fox's plate, his merit is a broad political economic approach to the Mexican transition that incorporates shifting power relations between federal executive and governors, the involution of Mexico's party system, the modernization of corporatism and its incorporation in the new Partido Acción Nacional (PAN)-led ruling elite, profound socio-economic inequalities, social exclusion, the consolidation of 'special economic interests' (telecommunications and media), and, finally, organized crime.<sup>2</sup> The examination of the massive tax returns granted by Fox to Mexico's largest companies is almost shocking (see pp. 253-5). His overall judgement of the 2000-2010 period is that with alternation authoritarianism has been able to re-invent itself: 'No reunimos los requisitos de una democracia, somos un país que flota entre el autoritarismo y una democracia estancada' (p. 268). As a public intellectual Aguayo refuses to accept this, and he ends the book with a chapter that lays out what politically motivated citizens can do about it.

In general terms, the seasoned Mexican political analysts in Rodríguez Araujo's volume *México. ¿Un nuevo régimen político?* subscribe to the thrust of Aguayo's arguments. Some chapters even take their critical interpretations further. In the concluding chapter, the editor himself argues that since the late 1980s a new political regime has been established in Mexico; it is not democratic but neoliberal and technocratic, and equally authoritarian as the previous one-party presidentialist regime. The evaluation of *foxismo* and the first years of the Calderón government is very critical. In an excessively long opening chapter, Alberto Aziz employs the work of O'Donnell, UNDP and the World Bank about democratization in Latin America as a lens to look at Mexico and concludes that '[E]l Estado mexicano está lejos de cumplir con la mayoría de referentes de un Estado democrático' (p. 58). In his view, the state has many holes, where particularism, clientelism, *cacicazgos*, and corporatism reign. Eduardo R. Huchim even applies the controversial concept of the failed state to particular regions in Mexico. In my reading, the general answer to the question in this volume's title is that a new political regime did consolidate in Mexico, but one that has little to do with a deep understanding of democracy. Alberto Aziz and Mauricio Merino stress the three-party regime that effectively dominates access to and exercise of power, leaving citizens empty handed. Merino's chapter on the 2007-2008 electoral reform, one of the volume's most refreshing, introduces the notion of a hybrid regime 'con una mezcla de elementos democráticos y autoritarios como una condición de su estabilidad y permanencia' (p. 244). A recurring theme in this volume is the reference to simulation, front stage and appearances, all intended to convey the idea that behind the visible shells of Mexico's electoral democracy are interests groups and informal arrangements that subvert its democratic potential. The clearest, albeit in many ways the least convincing, example is the chapter by Arnaldo Córdova that frames Mexico's political developments since 1988 as the outcome of a secret strategic rightwing

alliance forged by and during the presidency of Carlos Salinas (1988-1994) between the PRI and the neo-panistas to protect the interests of the political elite of both parties and the *haute bourgeoisie* against a possible take-over by the left. Everything else appears as epiphenomenal. The problem is that there is hardly any concrete evidence for the author's claims, or for his argument that the leader of the leftwing movement (Andrés Manuel López Obrador) has great mobilizational potential in view of the 2012 presidential elections. He may (or may not) have potential, but we are not given any empirical indicators.

Rodríguez Araujo has done an interesting job in bringing together a group of critical political analysts that present the reader with a grim picture of Mexico's current political regime on the basis of interesting conceptual frameworks. This volume and Aguayo's book form a powerful *Mexican* interpretation of what is happening in the country. But as editor he has not. Four chapters, including his own, recount the story of the *ancien régime*, the dismantling of one-party rule and the formation of a new regime that protects the interests of the Mexican oligarchy. Of course, there are (minor) interpretive differences, but the book becomes hopelessly repetitive when one reads for the fourth time about the crisis of 1968, the electoral reform of 1977, the stolen elections of 1988, the breakthrough reforms of 1996, the disenchantment with Fox and, finally, the polarization of the 2006 presidential elections.

### **2006: contested elections, contrasting interpretations**

Aguayo makes the sensible argument that the contested 2006 federal elections are a product of deep shifts in the political economy of power and the state, not just an electoral conflict about margins and electoral regulations. They are rooted in the long history of electoral fraud in Mexico. What happened? The presidential elections started when Fox and his cronies launched an impeachment attempt in 2005 against the popular mayor of Mexico City, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, based on a legal technicality and so tried to prevent him from contending in the upcoming elections for the centre-left Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD). The manoeuvre failed miserably and instead produced a political ricochet. At the beginning of 2006, López Obrador possessed a huge lead in the polls over his rivals Felipe Calderón of the ruling PAN and Roberto Madrazo of the PRI. However, within a few months trends in the polls started to change as Calderón won terrain and López Obrador's popularity started to decline. Shortly after election day on 2 July 2006, it was announced that Calderón had edged out López Obrador with a razor-thin difference (less than 0.6 per cent of 42 million ballots) in what by then had become a two-horse race. López Obrador refused to accept the outcome and mobilized his followers in huge protest manifestations, occupied central Mexico City and demanded a total recount (on the role of mobilization in democratization, see the excellent analysis of John Ackerman in Selee and Peschard). The country became deeply divided. In September, the electoral tribunal legalized Calderón's victory and in December 2006 he was sworn in as president under chaotic circumstances. He started his presidency facing a huge deficit in legitimacy.

At the outset of his examination of the 2006 elections, Aguayo states that he accepts the legal truth of the federal electoral authorities recognizing Felipe Cal-

derón's victory, but insists on finding the 'historical truth'. To remain silent would be irresponsible politically speaking and unprofessional academically. *Vuelta en U* dedicates two chapters to the 2006 elections: the first one covers the negative campaign launched by Calderón in March 2006, widely presumed to be responsible for turning around electoral preferences, and the role of outgoing president Fox in the campaign. The negative *ad hominem* campaign portrayed López Obrador as a radical who constituted 'un peligro para México'. The end result would be, in Aguayo's words, the creation of a 'moral panic' and the symbolic assassination of the candidate of the left. The second chapter looks at other key players in the process, such as governors, big business, the church, the electoral institutions and the international community. Most important for an understanding of the political meanings of the 2006 elections is that, whatever one may think of different campaign tactics and of the rights of different social and political actors to voice their support for certain candidates, the 2006 Mexican electoral law clearly prohibited negative propaganda 'particularmente durante las campañas electorales' (Aguayo, 2010, 168).

While it is impossible to assess all of Aguayo's claims (especially his critique on the electoral authorities), his conclusions are worth quoting at length. In the 2006 elections there was 'intencionalidad, intensidad y coordinación tras acciones calificadas como ilegales por la autoridad' (p. 224). The outcome is formulated in a separate box on page 226: 'Con base en la información conocida, en los dictámenes de ilegalidad hechos por la autoridad electoral y, tomando en cuenta el escaso margen entre primero y segundo lugar, considero que de respetarse la ley, el ganador hubiera sido López Obrador, a pesar de los graves errores de campaña que comete'. Most importantly, 2006 is not an incident, but the manifestation of a systemic perversion of democracy! (p. 226). Some observers will probably want to dismiss these conclusions because of Aguayo's engagement in the López Obrador camp. My reading of this section of *Vuelta en U* is that it comes from a scholar – a politically committed one, certainly – but a scholar nevertheless, who wants to piece together the what, how and why of a 'complex and traumatic event' (pp. 205-6). It is worthwhile to add that John Ackerman's analysis of these elections is equally critical of the electoral authorities and concludes that '[E]lectoral authoritarianism continues to reign in Mexico' (p. 99).

What a contrast *Consolidating Mexico's Democracy* makes, starting from the very first word in the title! For Aguayo, Rodríguez Araujo and others, Mexican democracy is making a U-turn, for others that same democracy is consolidating! The Domínguez, Lawson and Moreno volume contains 15 chapters about campaigns and voting behaviour, all written by political scientists, most of them based in the US. Some of them have a considerable career and reputation in studying Mexican elections and politics, and most share a conceptual and methodological background that draws heavily on survey research and modelling. Apart from an introductory (Lawson) and concluding (Domínguez) chapter, the remaining 13 chapters are organized in three parts: one is about social 'cleavage structures', one about internal party dynamics and the last about changes among Mexican voters. This volume is the outcome of a major research project called the Mexico 2006 Panel Study, a three-wave survey among ordinary Mexicans conducted between October 2005 and July 2006. There is a lot of interesting and useful information in

this volume about key characteristics of the Mexican electorate in terms of class, region and education, the weight of ideology, candidate selection, campaign strategies, voter attitudes and evaluations of candidates and campaigning tactics, which are impossible to examine in detail here. Instead I would like to make a few general observations and illustrate them with references to specific chapters.

Chappell Lawson's introductory chapter lays out the political context of the 2006 elections, the main events of the campaign, the consequences for Mexican democracy and the comparative significance of the study. In doing so, it provides the reader with yardsticks how and where to position this work. When Lawson speaks of Calderón's spectacular increase in electoral preferences, Madrazo's steady decline and López Obrador's steady loss relative to Calderón since March 2006, he points to four key factors behind the trends: candidate image, campaign strategy, evaluations of the Fox administration, and elite divisions within the PRI (p. 9). This volume moves within the sharply defined territory of data generated by the 2006 Panel Study. The different authors form part of a team, which gives the book coherence and consistency. Cross references among the chapters confirm this. But there is also a downside in that the approach to '2006' and especially its meaning for democratization in general is of a rather narrow political-electoral nature. The authors constantly refer to each other's works and on that basis construct a particular reality of Mexican democratization. They appear to form a relatively closed 'epistemic community'. In Andy Baker's contribution about regionalized voting behaviour all but one of the in-text bibliographic references about Mexico were written by members of the 2006 Panel Study team; almost all were contributors to this volume. This is not without consequences. Baker argues that Mexico's political landscape is dominated by a regional cleavage and that the reasons for this remain poorly understood, insofar as they can be grasped by survey research about individual traits or attitudes. The author then develops a so-called political discussion and social network approach to voting behaviour. An argument is constructed to 'resolve' a problem that arises entirely out of a particular conceptual and methodological context: 'I claim that social context...explains why individuals with identical traits and beliefs exhibit different voting behaviour patterns that correspond to their region of residence. *Voters do not decide which party to favor in a social vacuum*' (p. 76, my emphasis). However, this 'finding' only acquires meaning in the context of methodological individualism. What Baker is after is something like regional political histories and cultures, and for that he can consult the ample work of historians, anthropologists, political sociologists *and* political scientists. 'The potential omitted factor', Baker concludes, 'might be clientelism and local political machines,...' (p. 87) which are phenomena at the centre of qualitative research on regional politics and society. In other words, much of what Baker is looking for is less poorly understood than he suggests. He might start looking elsewhere. Whereas clientelism and political machines appear as 'residual' factors in Baker's analysis, Aguayo explicitly examines the controversial role of the corporatist political machine of teacher union leader Elba Esther Gordillo in influencing votes for Calderón. This might also help explain Francisco Flores-Macías's question (in Domínguez et al.) why so many Madrazo/PRI defectors voted for Calderón and not for López Obrador (p. 206). It may have something to do with their position on the ideological spectrum, as the author speculates, but what about the

teachers union and the bargaining of PRI governors intent on protecting their interests in the face of a hopelessly unpopular and dysfunctional PRI candidate and campaign?<sup>3</sup>

While *Consolidating Mexico's Democracy* hardly engages the work of scholars like Sergio Aguayo, Lorenzo Meyer, Octavio Rodríguez Araujo, and Alberto Aziz, it is only fair to say the Aguayo does not quote the work of Jorge Domínguez, Chappell Lawson, Joseph Klesner, Kenneth Greene, James McCann, Kathleen Bruhn and other members of the US political science community working on Mexico.<sup>4</sup> Both Lawson *cum suis* and Aguayo want to understand what happened in 2006 and why, but they do so from deeply contrasting analytical and methodological frameworks that appear to be unable to speak to each other. Whether this is mainly a question of epistemological incommensurability is doubtful. After all, there is another significant difference between them, one that has to do with the overall political or interpretative approach to the subject matter.

Underneath many of the contributions to *Consolidating Mexico's Democracy*, I perceived a basic orientation that steers attention away from Aguayo's central concerns: Was there fraud? Who was responsible for the extreme polarization? This is partly explained by the volume's focus on and approach to campaigns and elections, but there is more to it. The language and the overall orientation differ fundamentally from Aguayo's and Rodríguez's views from Mexico. Flores-Macías studies electoral volatility in 2006 and argues that 'Calderón's narrow victory was the product of an *effective* campaign' (p. 193, my emphasis); Alejandro Moreno stresses that Calderón's campaign change entailed that 'economic reasoning was activated' (p. 225) and that politicians and voters learned to '*rationally*' use economic performance in elections (p. 228, my emphasis), which brought victory to the PAN; Kenneth Greene points out that '...the Calderón campaign *successfully* persuaded voters that he was more capable of dealing with these [pressing national, WP] problems and primed voters to think of candidate competence as more important in determining their vote choices' (p. 253, my emphasis); and Lawson speaks of an '*intelligent* change in strategy by Calderón' (p. 13, my emphasis). Speaking about the PAN's dirty campaign against López Obrador as effective, intelligent and rational tends to disconnect the campaign from the broader political context, from the untruthful assertions about the performance of the PRD candidate as mayor of Mexico City, and from the biased and radical framing of his economic policy orientations. Interestingly, the deceitful nature of the latter is made abundantly clear in Kathleen Bruhn's chapter in *Consolidating Mexico's Democracy*, which contends that López Obrador's policy positions 'put him squarely in the center of the political spectrum' (p. 172). How 'rational' can voting decisions and behaviour be if it is based on the dissemination of untruthful and deceitful information and images, especially in a context where 'images triumphed over issues' and 'perceptions of the candidates' capacities...were crucial factors in determining the election's outcome' (Greene, p. 265). Moreover, the 'intelligent' campaign change was illegal! Again, Kathleen Bruhn's chapter notes this explicitly, whereas other contributors tend to softly push the issue aside: 'Most of the tactics used by the PAN...would have been legal in the United States. [Might that be the reason why several of her US colleagues tend to gloss over it? WP] Nevertheless, they were either illegal or widely considered to be improper in Mexico, and the IFE [the fed-

eral electoral institute, WPJ] seemed unable or unwilling to enforce the law' (p. 183). She comes close to Aguayo's critical analysis of the politicization of the IFE, and the serious consequences for its authority and legitimacy. Lawson, on the other hand, puts his cards on the table in a stunning footnote in which he responds to 'allegations on the left that widespread irregularities had cost their candidate the election' (p. 13): 'As experts on Mexican politics...none of the contributors to this volume find reasonable grounds to dispute the official result.... After trailing for most of the race, Calderón eked out a narrow victory in a free, fair, and broadly inclusive contest' (p. 306). No room for widely recognized illegalities here, but instead lustre is added to a deeply tarnished process. We are also informed that Lawson observed the election in a small town in the Estado de México and did not see anything improper! This is perhaps no surprise since a few years before Lawson had already boasted a privileged counterfactual insight when he stated that 'had Calderón lost the election, there is no doubt that he would have accepted the result or challenged it through strictly constitutional channels'!<sup>5</sup> The problem is, of course, that Sergio Aguayo, Octavio Rodríguez and others are also experts on Mexican politics!

I cannot help but to draw a parallel with Aguayo's examination of the role of US diplomats and academics in 'polishing' political developments in Mexico during the 1950s. According to Aguayo, Robert Scott's *Mexican Government in Transition* (1959) 'se empeña en demostrar que aun cuando todavía no somos como Estados Unidos...vamos por muy buen camino' (p. 62). For Aguayo these interpretations were instrumental in condoning or denying deeply undemocratic practices during the heydays of the one-party regime. There is a strong tradition in US political science that prefers to see the Mexican glass half full rather than empty! Without wanting to overstate the case, *Consolidating Mexico's Democracy* fits an American tradition in political science with a strong institutional orientation, but with difficulties in accommodating more informal and coercive political mechanisms and practices (see also my reading of Steven Wuh's *Savage Democracy* below).

### **Towards a hegemonic system of parties**

'Los hijos predilectos y malcriados de la transición son los partidos políticos', writes Sergio Aguayo (2010, 235). Political parties in Mexico receive massive amounts of resources from the state. Between 2000 and 2009 more than 5 billion dollars flowed directly to the parties, almost a third of all public resources dedicated to electoral processes, one of the most expensive in the world (even excluding illegal campaign money). No wonder, as Jean-François Prud'homme argues (in Selee and Peschard 2010, 55-6), that despite their differences, Mexico's three main parties manage to control the conditions for competition, access to political representation, and thus to generous cash flows. At the same time, as Mariclaire Acosta explains (in Selee and Peschard), political parties have weakened the role of civil society and NGOs in particular, insofar as they marginalized them politically and made them vulnerable. On a similar note, David Ayón demonstrates how another possible source of civic engagement, i.e. transnational migrant political activism, was effectively deflected by the Mexican state (in Selee and Peschard).

For Aguayo, political parties have been spoilt by money since it undermines

their relationships with voters, corrupts those with the media, and negatively affects internal party life. Present partisan politics in Mexico is more about fierce disputes concerning '*puestos*', budgets and political control, and less about ideological debate, the formation of citizens or the recruitment of talented leaders. A party like the *Partido Verde Ecologista* is best seen as a lucrative family business. Political parties have become a 'burden for democracy' (Aguayo 2010, 240).

Interestingly, Steven Wuhs' *Savage Democracy. Institutional Change and Party Development in Mexico* reaches a similar conclusion: the longevity of Mexico's democratic experiment may be under threat 'by undervaluing party membership, undercutting representation, and undermining the institutionalization of the party system' (2008, 138). However, it does so on the basis of an entirely different approach and methodology. Wuhs specifically examines the role of internal institutions of the PAN and the PRD (candidate selection, party professionalization and strategies of linking to civil society) and their wider implications for political representation and democracy. His central argument is that both parties were conceived, in contradistinction to the PRI, by the double democratic imperative of internal party democracy and regime democratization. However, the actual process of democratization involves difficult trade-offs between external electoral pressures and internal partisan democracy, frequently generating 'counter-democratic practices', i.e. savage democracy. But why bother about principled militants in a time (2008) when only 2.3 per cent of party income depends on them, and all the rest is a function of electoral performance and *Realpolitik* (Aguayo 2010, 239). The main theoretical argument Wuhs makes is that choices of party leaders are not only shaped by environmental shifts and veto players, but also by a wide array of party internal institutions. The primary data for this study come from interviews and party documents.

This study contributes to explaining the ambiguities of democracy from the particular perspective of foundational partisan documents and frames constructed by party elites. But this perspective also causes its major weak point. Although it recognizes the importance of rising state funding for key decisions in party organization and development, the overall tendency is to emphasize the power of ideas, party platforms, and elite views over actual political practices. According to Wuhs, these ideas, documents and views are steeped in the foundational identities of the PAN and the PRD as harbingers of democracy, and as anti-PRI parties. This creates an almost 'pure democratic benchmark' for the PAN and PRD. But is it surprising that party elites and their documents stress a 'genuine commitment' to democratic principles? And are the views of party elites the best methodological instrument to find out about party decision making and about what actually happens on the ground? When Wuhs deals with the choices parties face about links to organized civil society, he especially stresses the PAN's commitment (more than the PRD's) to the autonomy of parties and social organizations, the rejection of corporatism, and the promotion of liberal democracy and individualist linking efforts. It is easy to imagine party leaders speaking in these terms, but how can we explain that such a party established an alliance with *the* prototypical embodiment of undemocratic *Ur-priísta* corporatism, i.e. the national teachers union, and, for that matter, with profoundly corrupt PRI governors, in order to win the 2006 presidential elections? An overly 'clinical' analysis of values, ideas and elite views that

glosses over the practices of dirty quotidian (power) politics will inevitably encounter explanatory limitations. A pragmatic political cultural approach to party institutions and development in Mexico would have less difficulty in accommodating similarities between the ways power is and was exercised by the PAN, PRD and PRI.

### **Federalism, governors and political fragmentation**

Not only Mexico's party system is experiencing changes as a consequence of electoral democratization and the concomitant repositioning of different institutional actors. Selee and Peschard's interesting and thoughtful *Mexico's Democratic Challenges* contains several chapters about 'institutions in transition'. The overall picture that emerges is that of a multiplication of political and institutional actors, an 'autonomization' of their role and influence, and hence of increasing political and administrative complexity, sometimes bordering on new forms of fragmentation, instability and insecurity, not particularly conducive to improving the quality of democracy. Peschard's analysis shows how state-level electoral legislations and institutions have evolved in a fragmented way, due to the influence of regional interest groups and bossism (see also Eduardo Huchim in the Rodríguez volume, pp. 182-4). Political alternation is no guarantee for new patterns of decision making and the elimination of traditional political behaviour. Mará Amparo Casar for example examines the new protagonism of the federal legislative after the consolidation of a multiparty system of congressional representation and the phenomenon of divided government. The consequences of a more autonomous congress are diverse; most importantly it has affected executive-legislative relations, especially during the Zedillo and Fox presidencies when key pieces of executive legislation were blocked. The degree in which opposition parties in congress increased their bargaining (and veto) power has certainly not led to more efficient law- and policy-making.

The overall social and political dynamics set in motion by democratization also affect civil-military relations. Raúl Benítez points to the (continued) autonomy of the armed forces in combination with a lack of transparency and accountability. At the same time, a weakening of political control mechanisms, persistently inefficient civilian security forces and a new aggressiveness of organized crime have produced a more public role of the armed forces in national life and enhanced its veto power. Unfortunately (and inexplicably for a volume published in 2010), Benítez does not extend his analysis beyond the Fox presidency, but one can assume that the risks involved in the paradox of the armed forces' lack of accountability and public 'overexposure' have also multiplied. The degree of militarization reached under Calderón was simply unimaginable at the end of 2006. By now, the precarious security situation has become a major threat to democratic legitimacy and rule of law. As I observed before, the deeper consequences have not been accommodated in the publications under review here.

One of most significant shifts in Mexico's power structure during the last 15 years has to do with federalism and, more precisely, the new role of governors. In an interesting chapter, Tonatiuh Guillén López (in Selee and Peschard) examines the relationships between democratization and federalism. Carlos Martínez Assad

investigates the governors' new political role from a fiscal perspective (in the Rodríguez volume). In Guillén's view, 'by breaking the chains of the presidentialist and centralized system, the democratic transition also brought about a long-delayed transition to federalism' (2010, 192-3). Originally set in motion by local and regional electoral competition, the consequences go beyond partisan rivalries. After all, the emergence of municipalities and states as new political and institutional actors profoundly affects the dynamics of political power and intergovernmental relations. The most significant expression of new intergovernmental dynamics is the strong political protagonism of governors, who formally created the Conferencia Nacional de Gobernadores (CONAGO) in 2002. For Guillén this has meant a qualitatively new and more complex political and administrative playing field. He sees opportunities for 'creating a true path to an authentic federal system' and achieving 'true federalism', because subnational actors have moved from 'subordination to political autonomy' (2010, 189-90). Although Guillén discerns certain risks, in general he understands democratic transition and federalism as mutually reinforcing processes.

The book *El centro dividido. La nueva autonomía de los gobernadores* by political scientist Rogelio Hernández begins and ends with an entirely different perspective. For him, the history of the relationships between state governors and the federal government 'puede ser reconstruida como una larga batalla no por el centralismo sino para vencer los excesos locales' (p. 13). In other words, Mexican centralism was primarily a response to the autonomous and caciquista ambitions of governors and their incapacity to construct a national project. Hernández first examines the (informal) rules that organized the relations between the different levels of government during the decades of one party rule when governors accepted the president's political authority. During the 1980s, this arrangement started to disintegrate due to the combined effects of electoral and political competition, the rise to power of a technocratic elite, and the financial and administrative strengthening of state governments. The presidency of Salinas de Gortari played a key role in dismantling the original arrangement, although he intended otherwise. Hernández critically judges Salinas de Gortari's record of ridding himself of 12 governors: his arbitrary and extreme presidentialism harmed institutions, broke with control mechanisms and fractured previous institutional equilibria. During the last PRI presidency, the governors, especially those of the PRI, struck back and ended up appropriating the political power left (and then lost) by the PRI. They could do so because state governments substantially increased their budgets and policy autonomy with deepening decentralization (especially after 1997).

The last part of this important study examines the key consequences and manifestations of what Hernández sees as a profound shift in political relations since the mid-1990s. His analysis of different regional political crises (Tabasco, Puebla and Guerrero) as well as of the experiences of PAN and PRD governors demonstrates the depth of political change in the country. The book's major conclusion is that nowadays governors 'pueden disponer sin limitaciones de las atribuciones que históricamente la Constitución les otorga...' (p. 268), and since they are mainly concerned about their own fiscal and political interests, the risks and negative consequences can be seen everywhere: political fragmentation, instability, arbitrary behaviour, and new cacicazgos. Peschard appears to agree when she indicates that

formally autonomous electoral organs have often been a ‘cover-up for governors’...interference in the selection of the electoral councillors and their decisions’ (p. 81). In other words, *de facto* new federalism does not necessarily enhance democratic consolidation. Worst of all, Hernández warns, the new gubernatorial autonomy may endanger national unity itself! (p. 321). At least some of these self-serving governors capitalized on their political, financial and administrative powers ‘para vender lo que tengan’ to Calderón during the 2006 election.<sup>6</sup> On top of these political effects, Benítez has pointed out that the ‘new federalism’ has substantially increased security risks as organized crime readily moved into these spaces (in Selee and Peschard, 168-9).

The question raised in the title of this review essay is still not easy to answer. There is no interpretative or conceptual agreement (alternation, transition, or regime change). Method appears to matter much. However, the bulk of the work reviewed here identifies a whole range of risks, shortcomings, simulations and outright contradictions in Mexico’s last decade of political change (independently of the conceptual framing). In this sense, the glass would probably be half empty. Moreover, many are pointing to the troublesome direction that change is taking. Institutional and political fragmentation, instability, violence, polarization and deep concerns about state capacity, legitimacy and rule of law are frequently mentioned. Even Jesús Silva Herzog-Márquez, a renowned law professor and political analyst, speaks of a ‘broken state’ (in Selee and Peschard, 301). For most authors, Mexico has a democracy with many adjectives (‘estancada’, ‘incipiente’, and, most appropriately ‘lastimada’). Silva Herzog describes the first years of Mexico’s democracy as a ‘cold civil war’. The question gripping Mexico now is what will happen to it in the face of a deepening and extremely violent ‘hot’ war.

\* \* \*

**Wil Pansters** is professor of Latin American Studies at the University of Groningen and associate professor at Utrecht University. <w.g.pansters@uu.nl>

## Notes

1. Aaron W. Navarro convincingly demonstrates how electoral management by the PRM/PRI evolved and changed. See his *Political Intelligence and the Creation of Modern Mexico, 1938-1952* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).
2. For ‘special interests’ see World Bank, *Democratic Governance in Mexico: Beyond State Capture and Social Polarization*, Washington: World Bank, 2007.
3. There is the infamous incident during election day of the telephone conversation between Gordillo and the governor of Tamaulipas – later made public by López Obrador –, in which she suggests to the latter to ‘sell’ votes to Calderón in view of the fact that ‘Buena, ya se cayó el PRI, eh?’. The episode also appears in Aguayo, *Vuelta en U* (p. 193).
4. The most important exception is the work of Alejandro Moreno, who co-edited *Consolidating Mexico’s Democracy*.
5. See ‘How did we get here? Mexican Democracy after the 2006 Elections’, in *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40 no. 1, January 2007, p. 47.
6. See note 3.