

## MEXICO: REFORMS AND BLOCK-HEADS

*Frank Priess*

After nearly eighteen months in office, the image projected by the Mexican government under Felipe Calderón is one of unity and efficiency. However, the devotion to duty of its ministers is not least among the reasons why they are hardly known to the general public and rarely hit the headlines. It was to re-establish himself and his team in the minds of the Mexican population that the President initiated a spectacular cabinet reshuffle a short while ago.

Thus, Francisco Ramírez Acuña was replaced as Minister of the Interior by Juan Camilo Mouriño, whose former office in the Presidential palace is now held by Gerardo Ruiz Mateos, one-time head of the Presidential staff of advisors. The function of manager of the resident's office was upgraded. The current incumbent, Cesar Nava, as well as the head of communications, Maximiliano Cortázar, now report directly to the President. The ministers for public and social affairs, Germán Martínez and Beatriz Zavala, have resigned. Mrs Zavala will now devote herself to cultivating relations between the party executive and the government. Agustín Carstens Carstens, the Minister of Finance who successfully implemented the tax reform, now faces the challenge of piloting the Mexican economy at a time when the global economy is flagging. The limelight shines as brightly on him as on Genaro García Luna, the Security Minister, and Eduardo Medina Mora, the Attorney General, both leading figures in the war against the drug mafia. While the Foreign Secretary, Patricia Espinosa, is not so well known, she is working hard for a reconciliation between her country and Latin America, especially Cuba. In March, she visited the latter country to clear away older disputes and revive economic relations between the two countries. In the recent conflict between Colombia and Ecuador, Mexico endeavoured to effect a reconciliation of interests, being mainly anxious to maintain quiet on the foreign-policy front.

The paramount challenge that confronts the PAN now is to succeed in the elections to the House of Representatives scheduled for 2009. While the PAN is the strongest parliamentary party at the moment, its majority is not absolute. Having recently lost a number of important regional elections, the party does not stand much of a chance. In 2007, Calderón fielded his old comrade Germán Martínez as candidate for the PAN chairmanship. Having emerged victorious, he has now established his confidants in all major party functions. Yet the PAN proved unable to improve its position in the local and parliamentary elections in Quintana Roo and Baja California Sur. Nor do its chances look too good in the elections in Nayarit, Coahuila, and Guerrero which will follow this year.

The PRI, on the other hand, is now stronger than before. Voted out of office in 2000 after decades of absolute rule, it now holds around two thirds of the Mexican federal states and about 1500 local governments. It is true that the PRI and its candidate, Roberto Madrazo, only came in third in the elections of 2006, but it benefited from the role which it played afterwards, which was to tip the scales and campaign for more funds for the federal states. Moreover, the public were impressed when it reconquered the governorship of Yucatán which it had lost before.

The left-wing camp looks desolate. Late in 2007, the PRD Presidential candidate, López Obrador, entered the struggle for the chairmanship of the party, only to be defeated by Alejandro Encina Rodríguez. It was then that the PRD showed its true colours: Having accused the National Electoral Institute IFE of manipulation, it then turned to abstracting ballot boxes and forging electoral lists. And when it came to announcing the electoral results, it infringed its own rules again. Although voter preference keeps declining, the party thrashes out its internal conflicts noisily and publicly, resulting in a series of electoral disasters that is unbroken save for a few exceptions. A modern social democratic party the PRD is certainly not. Its own attitude towards violence is moot, and 'all forms of struggling' against existing conditions are held to be legitimate. What is more, there is no tradition of compromise and coalition in Mexico. Instead, the country favours 'strong men' such as López Obrador – figures who embody the archetypal Latin American caudillo.

At the moment, Mexico is increasingly focusing on the USA with which the country maintains an intense exchange of goods. People believe that a decline in the US economy would hit their own country hardest. The Calderón government is making soothing noises, saying that the country is well prepared because of its oil revenues and the booming domestic economy is capable of cushioning any negative effects. Nevertheless, the Ministry of Finance reduced its growth forecast in January, and even the National Bank has changed its tune, predicting a growth rate of no more than 3.25 percent. Yet there are positive things to report as well: Mexico's inflation rate was 3.76 percent at the end of 2007 and unemployment stood at 3.72 percent for the year. Lastly, the government announced a ten-part programme to counter any recession in the USA.

The current economic debate shows how urgently reforms are needed in Mexico. Having set itself a correspondingly ambitious agenda, the government began by implementing a tax reform in 2007, followed by a judiciary reform in February 2008. Moreover, the country is having problems with human rights. Related figures published by national and international commissions are alarming despite the fact that the government has signed all international human-rights conventions and has been cooperating with the global

community in this regard. Not least among the items of concern in this respect is the situation of media representatives in Mexico.

Reforming the energy sector and the national oil company, PEMEX, ranks top in priority. As regards the latter, the government will only be able to implement proposals that do not involve changing the constitution, as national ownership of the enterprise is regarded as inviolable by everyone. Believing that any increase in efficiency necessarily entails redundancies, the PEMEX trade union is against any reform whatsoever. The facts could not be clearer: Oil production is down to 1.6 million barrels a day, and it keeps declining. Developing new oil fields is expensive in terms of time and money, and the requisite technology is lacking. The pipeline grid is susceptible to terrorist attacks. And the country's export structure is a wilful mechanism: Instead of building new refineries, Mexico imports 40 percent of its fuel from the USA. What is more, charges of nepotism are being levelled against minister Mouriño who is said to have handed out favours to members of his family when he was an under-secretary in the Energy Ministry. Even the PRI rejects him as representative of the government in charge of the debate about reforming the energy sector. Thus, there is no way of knowing whether the government will be strong enough to implement changes in the petroleum sector that are worthy of the name, particularly as the 'window of opportunity' will be closing soon.

Against the background of the struggle against organized drug crime, human rights are a sensitive issue in Mexico today. Although both the police and the military are engaged, the effect is questionable. Concerns are being raised not only by the infiltration of the judiciary and the corruption of the police but also by the fact that several police organizations exist side by side, mostly manned by badly trained officers who are underpaid and therefore anxious for some 'extra income'. Nor are the military units properly trained to handle the imminent problems. Reforms of the police system are urgently needed but difficult to implement. It would be important to break up the networks of police, military, and government officials that protect the drug cartels. The situation is drastic: Every day, at least ten people fall victim to drug-related crimes and the struggle to suppress them. Tourism is foremost among the industries that suffer from all this. Visitors from the USA especially feel hemmed in by violence, road blocks, and other measures. At the same time, the country's citizens are affected as well. Their fear of falling victim to some crime is growing while their confidence in the police keeps declining.

Looking anxiously towards the USA, Mexicans are currently asking themselves which of the Presidential candidates there might be the better option for their own country. While McCain endorses integrated migration regulations, both Clinton and Obama at least intend to legalize the status of the

Mexicans who live in the USA without proper documents. Although campaigns in the north target voters with a Latino background, Latin America itself is of no importance. Yet there are 29.3 million people living in the USA who come from Mexico alone. While eleven million are Mexican citizens, about 6.2 million are living in the country illegally. In 2007 alone, around 850,000 people were arrested at the US border, and almost every day someone dies in the attempt to cross it. Moreover, the sums remitted home by expatriate Mexicans are greater than ever. On the other hand, the recession looming in the USA is causing, so it is said, 1000 Mexicans to return home every day.

Lastly, Mexico's record in the matter of migration is anything but lily-white. In 2006 alone, the country is said to have expelled about 192,000 people across its southern border, mainly Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorians. This was reason enough for Guatemala's government to call upon its neighbour in the north to desist from criminalizing the migrants.

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