

MEXICO

Why Mexico Fell Apart and How to Fix It

By Denise Dresser

El *Telepresidente* (TelePresident), *El Copetudo* (The Pompadour), *El Copetesaurio* (The Pompadinosaur) — these are some of the nicknames given to Enrique Peña Nieto, a president with a 6-percent approval rating, the lowest level of acceptance in 20 years. These are the epithets with which he has been baptized after promising to “Move Mexico,” and he has indeed done so, but in the wrong direction. The country has moved from delirium to disenchantment. From blissful honeymoon to acrimonious divorce. Where we no longer speak of the “Mexican Moment,” but rather of the “Mexican Morass.” Where the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party) can still win elections, but with declining margins and worse perceptions. An era of political regression and social resistance in the face of its implications.

Because the Peña Nieto project entailed only an attempt to recentralize power, but not an effort to reconstruct and remodel the state. An ambitious but ill-fated project based on reforms, but not enough of them; built upon corruption and undone by it. It didn’t seek to make the pie bigger, but to slice it up among party stalwarts and privileged contractors. It didn’t really seek more competition, but state-administered rent-seeking that ended up shoring up crony capitalism. It didn’t seek to combat impunity, but rather to take advantage of it.

Today, Mexico is saddled with a government that was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine as “Saving Mexico” with 11 structural reforms that were celebrated at the time of their approval, but diluted or sabotaged at the time of their implementation. These 11 structural reforms were approved by opposition parties that didn’t even read what they were approving, but bought into the Peña Nieto

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President Enrique Peña Nieto toasts the queen of Spain at a state dinner in 2014.
(Photo courtesy of Presidencia de la República Mexicana.)



A Mexico City monument to the 43 disappeared students from Ayotzinapa. Photo by Luis J. Romero

narrative because their survival seemed to be at stake. Accepting top-down reforms without seeking bottom-up consensus. In the case of energy and telecommunications reform, accepting a regulatory framework that is too weak to contain the voracity of participating consortiums. In the case of education reform, accepting a rollout that didn't consider the views of entrenched unions unable to comprehend what the reform entailed.

And then came the summary executions by the military in Tlatlaya. The disappearance of 43 students in Ayotzinapa and the involvement of the municipal, state, and federal police in a case that to this day remains unsolved. The corruption and conflict of interest revealed by the Casa Blanca — and the houses in Malinalco and Ixtapan de la Sal — and the OHL scandal. The massacre of civilians by the federal police in Tanhuato. Growth estimates that are falling and homicide rates that are rising. The recent and fundamental report on inequality written by Gerardo Esquivel, which shows how 16 Mexican multimillionaires have a fortune equivalent to 9 percent of the country's GDP. The liberalization of gasoline prices, at a time of economic anxiety, coupled with the devaluation of the *peso*, a psychological measurement of the stability of the country for many.

And in the face of the crisis of impunity, insecurity, and inequality, the response from those who work at Los Pinos, the presidential residence, is to feel misunderstood. To argue that they have encountered a strong “resistance” from Mexico's veto centers and vested interests, when it is precisely those vested interests that propelled Peña Nieto to power. The select beneficiaries of government contracts and bids and largesse. The select beneficiaries of a president who vowed to be a reformer on paper, but failed to be one fully in practice. In a recent closed-door meeting with a handful of journalists, Peña Nieto refused to accept that his government was corrupt and attributed the dramatic decline in his popularity to a worldwide phenomenon in which social media fuels anti-systemic views.

Today, he is the lamest of all lame ducks. A duck that limps, painfully, slowly, on one foot. With two long years remaining in his term. Two years that most Mexicans view as without hope, without leadership, without exit. Disapproved by public opinion and the international press. A failed presidency at the helm of a state that cannot fulfill its primordial duties to assure security, stability, growth, human rights, equality, the rule of law. July 2017 was the most violent month in Mexico's history.

And it's not just a question of society's “bad mood,” as the president has argued. The numbers don't lie. The data doesn't lie. Look at the downgrading of Mexico by Moody's and Standard & Poor's. The level of indebtedness that former Minister of Finance and current Minister of Foreign Affairs Luis Videgaray promoted. The head of the Central Bank's resignation in the face of an impending crisis of the sort we endured at the end of the Salinas term in 1994.

It is true that part of the problem is not Peña Nieto's own doing. Not the fall in the price of oil nor the uncertainty created by the election of Donald Trump and his expressed intention to use Mexico as a whipping boy. But the Peña Nieto administration is responsible for permitting Mexico's internal debt to grow to 50 percent of GDP, for allowing government spending to be channeled — in an opaque fashion — to salaries for high-level bureaucrats, to electoral cycles, to corrupt deals, to the intense promotion of his own image. The Mexican government spent, but the economy didn't grow. The Mexican government spent, not on public investment, but rather on state-sponsored cronyism.

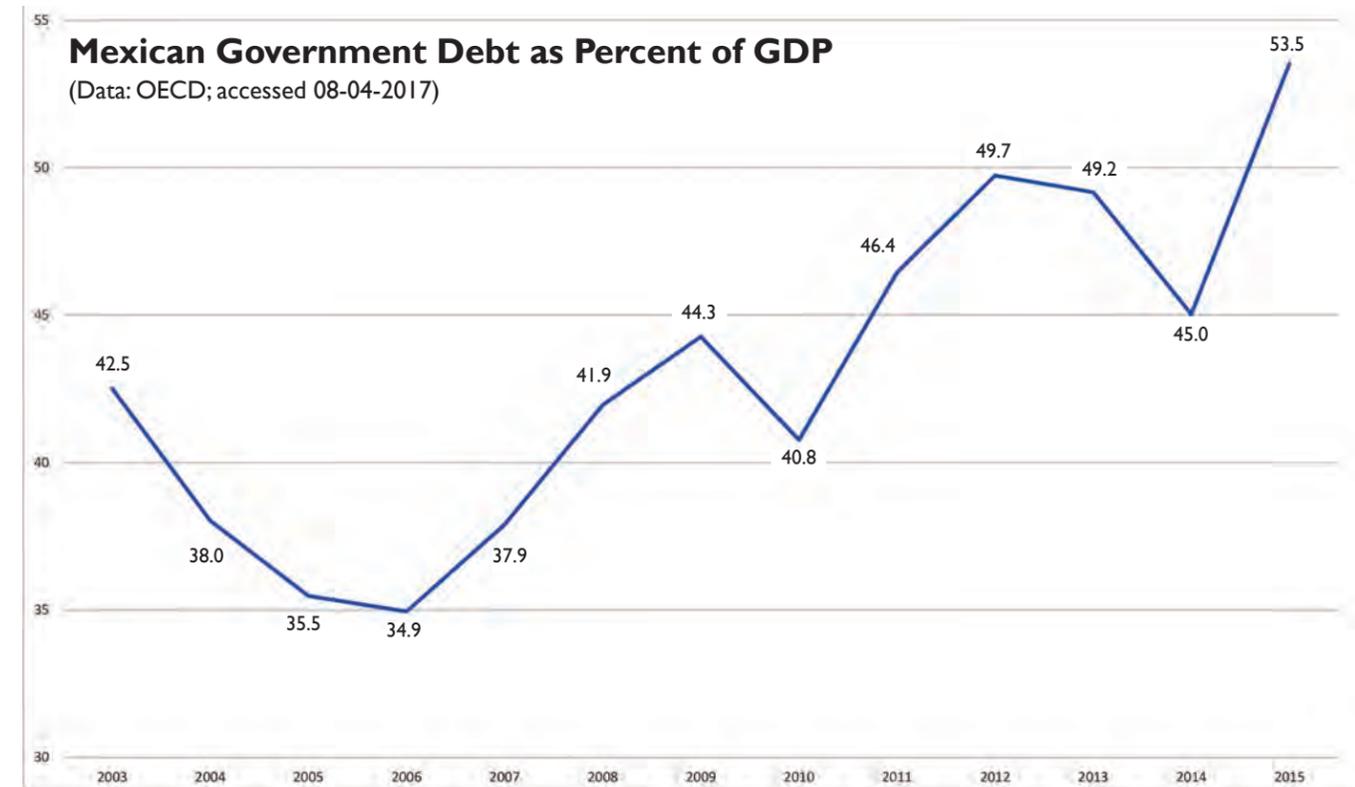
Mexico's problems have been compounded by the global context, yet a large part of the blame resides on economic mismanagement by Videgaray and his team, who never fulfilled their promises to rationalize public spending. Who reneged on their commitment to maintain

a balanced budget. Who with their actions — politically and clientelistically motivated — increased the debt in an irresponsible fashion. Who by doing so generated a level of distrust that undermined investor confidence in structural reforms. Who by their decisions and omissions produced a deficit of credibility among domestic and international investors that led to capital flight and speculation against the currency.

Thus, they have exacerbated the recalcitrant reality of a country with one of the highest levels of inequality in the world. A country with a permanent subclass of 50 million people who live below the poverty line. A country saddled with alarming figures. The wealthiest 1 percent receives 21 percent of the income. The wealthiest 21 percent concentrates 64.4 percent of the country's total wealth. The wealth of the 16 richest Mexicans grew 32 percent between 2007 and 2012, and this growth exceeds that of many other fortunes across the globe. In 2002, their wealth represented 2 percent of GDP; in 2014, it was equivalent to 9 percent of GDP. And in the first four places are men who have made their fortunes in sectors regulated by the state. They are “creatures of the state,” which they are subsequently able to capture due to lack of regulation or an excess of fiscal privileges. While GDP per capita grows 1 percent annually, the fortune of the 16 wealthiest Mexicans multiplies by five.

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Mexican government debt has jumped to more than 50 percent of gross domestic product.



Inequality and excessive concentration of wealth are structural problems that have grown over time. They are systemic problems because rent-seeking and the permissiveness of fiscal policy have been rules, not exceptions. This is not a tale of rapacious neoliberal markets, but instead of manipulated, inefficient markets. Growth cannot take place within the context of a state that lacks the credibility to provide equity, regulate monopolies, and assure accountability regarding the Casa Blanca corruption scandal and so many other instances of crony capitalism. Mexico's lackluster performance, coupled with corruption, has led to the emergence of widespread social discontent headed by independent journalists like Carmen Aristegui, by human rights defenders, by activists who are calling for the decriminalization of marijuana and the end of the war on drugs, by students, and by those who decry the *gasolinazo*, a 20-percent increase in state-set fuel prices for the many, accompanied by the preservation of privileges for the few.

This was the state of affairs when Peña Nieto extended the ill-fated invitation to Donald Trump to visit Mexico prior to the United States' elections. When the Mexican president became responsible for what I deemed "humillación a domicilio." This public humiliation was

Enrique Peña Nieto hosts then-Republican presidential nominee Donald J. Trump in August 2016.



Photo by Dario Lopez-Mills/Associated Press.

accentuated by Trump's announcement at their joint conference that the wall would be built, and Peña Nieto simply stood by in sullen silence. Accentuated by his subsequent tweet, arguing that Mexico would not pay for the wall, and that he had insisted upon it in private. Accentuated by the fact that only six hours after saying that he liked Mexicans a lot and we were wonderful people, Trump stabbed us in the back by giving a virulent anti-immigrant speech in Arizona. And confronted by this turn of events, Peña Nieto has often seemed weak, pusillanimous, lost.

As Slate magazine wrote, perhaps a president with such low approval ratings truly doesn't know what he's doing. A head of state who invites a bully to his home and puts out a welcome mat. A leader who, instead of growing in the face of a dangerous external threat, has shrunk. By appeasing. By staying silent. By not putting all of Mexico's negotiating chips — and it has many — on the table from the very beginning, clearly, strongly, and firmly.

Along with this dismal state of affairs in terms of the bilateral relationship, the population of Mexico has witnessed a growing deterioration at home. Selective austerity with large cuts to education, justice, public investment, the fight against corruption, and programs to



Photo by Alan Zablitzky.

Everyday corruption: Mexican police often expect free goods from local merchants.

prevent violence, but increases in the budget for Congress and the judiciary. A historic level of government revenue via taxation and a government that continues to spend so much and so badly that it must resort to taxing gasoline to support its profligate behavior. With cuts that aren't focused where they should be, and thus, the belt-tightening seems like a demand that the political class places on the population, but not on itself. The Peña Nieto administration and political parties that still support it don't have enough resources for bridges or schools or ports or hospitals or highways, but do have enough funds to provide the Senate with a 7.6-percent increase in its budget.

In other latitudes, governments have fallen and for much less. For less grievous mistakes, for less blatant corruption. But Mexico doesn't have a mechanism for impeachment or removal, so the best that we can aspire to is damage control until the next presidential election in July 2018.

It's the Corruption, Stupid

And the root of this implosion is largely corruption. Conflicts of interest, covered up. Private enrichment with public goods, allowed. The illegal and unconstitutional actions of the army vis-à-vis civilians and human rights violations, permitted. And such behavior is due to the

following paradox: democracy in Mexico has not meant more controls but more corruption. "Alternancia," the rotation of different political parties in power, has not stopped abuses; it has exacerbated them, normalized them. Today, 78 out of 100 Mexicans believe that corruption will increase this year.

Because pluralism and "alternancia" do not combat corruption per se. Democratization in Mexico has led to the dispersion of power and the opening of many windows to do business with public resources. A weak rule of law allows it. Greater decentralization of the budget entails greater discretion in its use. More influence of Congress over the disbursement of the budget entails a higher probability of payoffs — *moches* — for public works. National and local legislative bodies are not a check and balance for corruption, but rather part of the machinery that makes it possible. And then there are 32 governors with a great deal of money and zero accountability.

All these political players are beneficiaries of the enormous cash liquidity in the national economy with few fiscal controls. Beneficiaries of the increase in public spending and of what the Minister of Finance has channeled into public works. Of the bags of cash to pay for political campaigns. Of the cartloads of money that flow from the president's office to political parties and the media. Along

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Photo by Moises Castillo/Associated Press.

Mexico's former governor of Veracruz, Javier Duarte, is led to an extradition hearing in Guatemala.

with the national and local media — full of government-sponsored fake news — publishing stories and photos of governors inaugurating clinics packed with hugging indigenous women. Corruption in Mexico is a mechanism of mutual protection. And opposition parties don't denounce corruption as vehemently or as consistently as they should, because instead of avoiding the PRI's behavior, they have emulated it.

Governors have perfected the state-by-state model for pillaging. Take the case of Veracruz and its governor, Javier Duarte, who fled the country and was caught in Guatemala. Veracruz is a microcosm of how an omnipotent governor could become a despoiler. The governor handed over millions of pesos to 73 apocryphal companies to buy blankets, medicine, school supplies, and shoes. These resources and goods never reached their avowed destination due to an elaborate system designed to create “partnerships” so that Duarte and his team could channel public money into private hands. The Veracruz model is also the Mexican model. The PRI's standard operating procedure for creating fake businesses, channeling money to them, and closing them later. What no longer surprises, but does cause indignation, is the indifference of the authorities. The lackadaisical attitude of the Attorney

General's Office, that had received 32 official complaints from the Federal Audits Office but never acted on them, probably because Duarte had funneled money into Peña Nieto's presidential campaign and other elections. As was the case with so many other governors, Duarte stands accused, but a full investigation and trial remain pending.

And while the PRI waits for the Duarte storm to pass and for the scandal of this week to cover up the scandal of last week, the PRI's modus operandi is becoming increasingly obvious: turning the country's fragile democracy into a partisan kleptocracy and using its time in government to squeeze those who finance it via their taxes. The PRI is used to stealing, and the population is used to being ripped off. Mexico was the birthplace of the perfect dictatorship, and now it is the home of the perfect pillage.

Analyst Edgardo Buscaglia is right: organized crime in Mexico is frequently in the government itself. At the state level. Among government ministers. Among municipal presidents. Among those who enabled drug kingpin “El Chapo” Guzmán to escape not once, but twice. That's why it's not surprising that so many governors are in hiding or have been able to escape prosecution. Because in Mexico, the judicial system doesn't prosecute thieves, it protects them.

The 2018 Election

Today, the words used to describe the Mexican political system are “disappointment,” “incomplete democracy,” “truncated transition,” “failed representation,” “institutionalized impunity,” “simulation,” and “regression.” Instead of responding to public interests, the political class promotes private ones. Instead of resolving problems, the institutional framework kicks them forward. Instead of generating incentives for representation, current rules impede it from happening. Instead of empowering citizens, the transition has ended up strengthening oligarchs.

Applauded but incomplete rules for electoral competition only perpetuate the rotation of party stalwarts, inaugurated by the PRI but emulated by other parties, thus creating a skin-deep democracy that preserves the privileges of a political elite that jumps from post to post, without ever having to be accountable. Perhaps that explains why only 4 percent of the population trusts political parties and only 10 percent of the electorate believes that legislators legislate in their name. Mexicans look at political parties and see a story of “PRIzation,” of organizations that promised to embody something

different but ended up acting the same way. Mexicans see parties with some differences in what they offer, but many similarities in how they behave. They see pluralism in terms of political promises, but unilateralism in how they govern. They see political parties that are corrupt, that refuse to be accountable, that refuse to reduce outrageously high public financing for themselves, that instead of combatting impunity, too often benefit from it.

Mexico's dysfunctional democracy was created to assure elite rotation, but not citizen representation. It was created to promote competition among parties, but not to hold them accountable. It was instituted to achieve the sharing of power, but not to hold that power up to public scrutiny. The many electoral reforms that accompanied the transition have produced political parties that are like cartels and operate as such. They have become employment agencies for a political class financed by citizens, but impermeable to their demands. Today, 60 percent of Mexicans do not know who to vote for or if they will. This is the context in which the 2018 presidential election will take place, with opposition leaders in the lead in current polls, including Margarita Zavala and Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

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Cash found in the office of an assistant to the governor of Tabasco in 2013.



Photo by America Rocio/Associated Press.

Dignified, irreproachable, respected — that is how Margarita Zavala, the probable candidate of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party), was viewed as First Lady during her husband's tenure. Always with the precise word, the perfect gesture, the proper tone. Always with the sensibility that her husband so frequently seemed to lack. Margarita was and has been that. The discreet wife. The loyal wife. The “Good Wife” as in the television series of the same name.

But that position of unconditional loyalty towards her husband is what might make her presidential bid unviable. Because of what she knew and did not speak up about. Because of what she allowed to happen. Because of the failure of the PAN over 12 years. She is not just any ordinary citizen, a political *tabula rasa*. She cannot be an option that denounces the Establishment because she has been part of it. She was a collaborator, an accomplice, a co-conspirator of Felipe Calderón's government. She listened, counseled, applauded. She wasn't simply a spectator; she's too smart for that. But precisely because she wasn't simply a passer-by, the questions and criticism about her husband's tenure need to be directed at her, too.

Schoolgirls get a visit from Margarita Zavala, former First Lady of Mexico and current frontrunner for the PAN nomination.



Photo by editorialtriphie.

From a privileged vantage point, she saw the mistakes that Calderón made, and yet, she has not acknowledged them nor distanced herself from them. And therefore, she has not been able to develop an independent position that explains why and for what purpose she wants to be president. For many, she is offering a facsimile version of her husband's time in office. She still doesn't understand this. She believes that Peña Nieto is so reviled that Felipe Calderón will be revalued, but she is mistaken. Yes, in contrast with the current government, Calderón's administration isn't remembered for the corruption that it encouraged, but condemned for the violence it produced. The selective application of the rule of law it allowed. Calderón is criticized for the insecurity, the violence, and the counterproductive war on drugs he launched.

Therefore, to win and govern successfully, prudence, tact, amiability, and a *rebozo* won't be enough. Margarita lacks a vision for Mexico capable of generating fire in the belly, indignation with the status quo, trust in public policies that can shake up a disillusioned, disenchanting, divided country. And that will not be achieved with what we have seen from her campaign up to now: small proposals, with little boldness and scant imagination. If Margarita wants



Photo by Marco Ugras/Associated Press.

A crowd gathered in Mexico City to support Andrés Manuel López Obrador's resistance to the declared results of the 2006 election.

to transcend, she should learn from Alicia Florrick, the protagonist of the “Good Wife.” In the end, she didn't care about being a loyal spouse, but about being a winner.

And the current frontrunner in the polls? Andrés Manuel López Obrador, running for the third time, seems to be transitioning from the rancorous Republic to the amorous Republic. From the raised fist to the extended hand. From the Tropical Messiah to the pragmatic politician. That is how he is trying to reinvent himself, reposition himself. No longer the provocateur who is going to ignite the prairie, but the politician who promises to put out the fire. No longer the rabble-rouser who damned the institutions to hell, but the realist who seeks to remodel them. The preacher is ceding terrain to the conciliator. The social leader wants to become the professional politician.

All this would be good, if it were a sign of political learning. If López Obrador's shifting stance demonstrated that he has finally recognized the mistaken decisions he has made since the 2006 presidential race. Back then, his maximalist position provoked a political diaspora towards his rival Felipe Calderón and later led to the PRI's restoration to power, due to the conservatism he inspired,

due to the rejection by political moderates that ensued. By acting as he did, by taking hold of the Paseo de la Reforma for months, by inaugurating his parallel “legitimate” presidency, by embracing a conservative populist agenda, López Obrador resurrected the traditional stereotypes associated with the Mexican left. The Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD, Party of the Democratic Revolution) and the Movimiento Regeneración Nacional (Morena, National Regeneration Movement) viewed as the parties of the angry, of the recalcitrant. A left that is too fiery and, thus, unelectable.

Now, in his third bid to win the presidency, perhaps the conditions — and López Obrador himself — have changed. The candidate who was once deemed “a danger for Mexico” is trying to reinvent himself as the only man who can save it. Helped by president Peña Nieto's lack of popularity and the corruption he does not combat. Helped by an electorate that largely hates the PRI, distrusts the PAN, and seems willing to give López Obrador a chance. Meanwhile, he is attempting to slide towards the center of the political spectrum to position himself to finally head a successful presidential race.

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Dresser on Mexico

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Photo by Dr. Carlos Lomeli.

Andrés Manuel López Obrador campaigns in Guadalajara in 2016.

To achieve this goal, López Obrador would have to understand that the national project he has offered has been too narrow, too monochromatic, and that if he wants to govern, he cannot do so only for the poor. He will need to address the needs of the middle class and explain how he will promote its expansion. He will have to state how he will alleviate poverty and create wealth. And that would entail the transformation of historic grievances into practical proposals, the reinvention of resentment into policy, and views on how to combat inequality while assuring prosperity. Up to now, López Obrador has not been able or has not wanted to think in this fashion. He has insisted on making history instead of playing politics.

And engaging in politics would mean listening and building bridges and modernizing his views and accepting pluralism in his own party. It would entail devising a cabinet that included the best people and not those who are unconditionally loyal. It would entail moving beyond the close-knit circle that surrounds him, where many questionable allies remain. It would entail offering convincing policy proposals and not just impulsive

occurrences. He would have to leave behind the rhetoric of constant confrontation and incessant division. If he doesn't domesticate himself, the Establishment will either support a PRI candidate or will close ranks behind Margarita Zavala to stop him, as it did with her husband in 2006.

Therefore, if "AMLO" wants to reinvent himself, he will have to go beyond his conventional position, wherein more than offering something, he blocks everything. He will need to develop a constructive agenda that transcends mere hatred of the established system. An agenda that heeds grievances and doesn't just capitalize on them. An agenda that is based on policy analysis and policy prescriptions. An agenda capable of establishing him and his team as political actors that want to reconcile and modernize the country, not the opposite.

The internal challenges are great; the external dangers are omnipresent. Because now we know that Donald Trump is not a "normal" politician who will moderate himself, but rather an autocrat who will empower himself. We have witnessed the arrival into the Oval Office of a man without any sort of experience in public office, with

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Photo by Torbak Hepper.

A sales display of Donald Trump piñatas in 2016.

a half-visceral, half-vengeful temperament. Incapable of controlling his impulses on Twitter, incapable of addressing the xenophobia, racism, and anti-Semitism that runs rampant among many of his followers. The first presidential candidate to win despite being a chronic liar, sexual predator, tax evader, and racist whose triumph was celebrated by the Ku Klux Klan, a “negotiator” whose only international experience has been inaugurating hotels and golf clubs. As David Remnick wrote in *The New Yorker*, “The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency is nothing less than a tragedy for the American republic.”

Now Trump will misgovern as we have seen in the past month, with weakened checks and balances, with a Republican majority in control of Congress and willing to go along in certain areas as long as it gets tax cuts. Lambasting the media and the courts. Picking fights with allies that are unnecessarily turning into enemies. Using dominant party rule to unleash the Mexicanization of American politics. Using unrestrained presidential power to deport millions of undocumented immigrants, endanger trade agreements, defund culture and the arts, reject global warming, deregulate Wall Street, and do whatever else pops into his or Steve Bannon’s head. All that and more. Because there is no reason to believe that

the delirious Trump of the campaign trail will eventually become the reasonable politician of the Oval Office. On the contrary.

What to Do?

Many in Mexico are bewildered, anxious, afraid. They are overwhelmed by the feeling that — in the current context — the country has no remedy or solution or path or horizon or salvation. Yet, the real answer is there. It lies in using this internal and external jolt to clean our house and strengthen its walls. It lies in understanding the foundational problems of corruption and impunity.

Corruption has led to growing, harmful, paralyzing costs. It is the main obstacle for the competitiveness of the country. It has created incentives for those in power — the most opaque and prone to cheating — to spend more resources on construction projects. It leads to the discrediting of institutions allegedly in charge of combatting it, including prosecutor’s offices and the courts. It leads to investment decisions that don’t produce social benefits, but rather rent-seeking. Corruption distorts the economy by inhibiting innovation, competition, and risk-taking, because who you know matters more than how talented you are. Corruption has turned Mexico

into a country of sewers. Cheating, lying, and stealing have become Mexico’s number one enemies, the biggest impediment to the economic evolution of the country.

The World Justice Project recently published its comparative Rule of Law Index, and the results for Mexico are disheartening. We fell nine places in the last year, to the 88th spot among 113 countries. Below Burkina Faso, Zambia, Tanzania, and Iran. And the worst indicators are related to corruption and the justice system. We all know the reasons. A political class regardless of ideological stripe that does not want to lose accumulated privileges and assured impunity. A National Anticorruption System that has started off very slowly and will require autonomous prosecutors. A rotten judicial system that hasn’t been able to adapt to the demands and requirements of oral trials. A police force that was created to be an instrument at the service of the powerful and not a mechanism for the protection of citizens. Prosecutors who don’t investigate, judges who close their eyes in the face of torture, a military that is gradually taking over tasks of public security when it shouldn’t.

But worse still, an anesthetized society for whom these wounds don’t hurt as much as they should, and therefore, intermittent demands from below don’t create the necessary pressure. Because too many Mexicans believe that the root cause of Mexico’s stasis is cultural.

Even the president insists this is the case. However, this way of thinking and justifying the unjustifiable is profoundly damaging to the country and its citizens because it suggests that Mexico is corrupt due to tradition, habits of the heart, DNA, history.

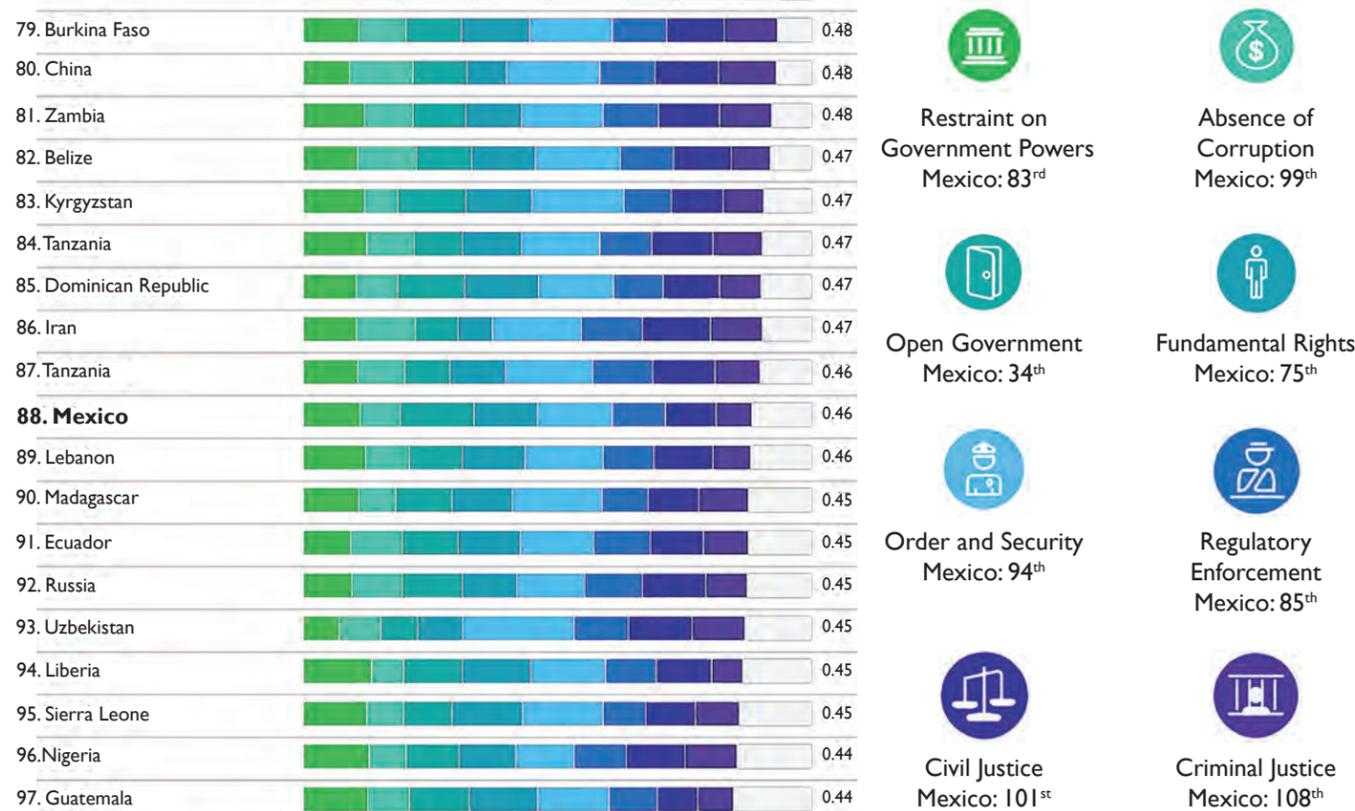
But if all Mexicans are corrupt by nature, it means that the country has no way out. The problem has no solution. The problem doesn’t have identifiable culprits or an institutional root. When the president and the political class argue that in Mexico, corruption is everybody’s fault, they are ascribing moral equivalence between the Casa Blanca scandal and the woman who steals fruit in the market to feed her family. Given that “everybody is bad,” what is bad cannot be identified or combatted, beyond appealing to social decency and a return to moral values.

But as James Madison famously wrote, “if men were angels, no government would be necessary.” The root of corruption in Mexico — in government and society — isn’t cultural but institutional. It’s not a question of habits, but of incentives. It is not about what society allows, but what government doesn’t sanction. Citizens are corrupt because politicians have created laws to allow corruption, to make it a necessary condition to assure the survival of the current political and economic system based on cronyism. A predatory state creates a predatory society. A state that

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Mexico ranks 88th of 113 countries in the World Justice Project’s 2016 Rule of Law index.

(Data and graphics from the World Justice Project. On the right, each icon notes Mexico’s ranking for that indicator.)



breaks laws produces citizens who disobey them, not the other way around.

Because what would happen if the contractor who used influence peddling to obtain contracts (as was the case of Casa Blanca) ended up in jail along with his partner in crime in the government? If Casa Blanca had led to the removal of Peña Nieto from office? If the corrupt person — under the law — lost everything? That is where we need to go as a country, and therefore, the fight against corruption does not take place only through the government's exhortation for citizens to behave like angels, it necessarily entails a process of institutional renovation that includes investigation, sanctions, and jail time for little and big fish alike.

The new anti-corruption system is a small first step to de-normalize what so many do and so few pay for. It will require an autonomous attorney general, an autonomous anti-corruption prosecutor, sufficient budget, specialized tribunals, and public pressure that does not melt away. Otherwise Peña Nieto and all of those who benefit from corruption will have triumphed, by making Mexicans believe that they are as corrupt as the people who govern them.

Time for Militant Disobedience

Given these cloudy times — these “*tiempos nublados*,” as Octavio Paz would have called them — many in Mexico are calling for unity, for patriotism. Calling to close ranks and use lovely words and emblems and national hymns to confront harsh realities: the reality of free trade, endangered; the bilateral relationship, threatened; a neighbor gone wild. The dream that was North America, coming to an end. The forced “*Mexit*” that is happening at our expense.

And all of this happening — allegedly — because of Trump, someone we should all confront and criticize daily, not only because of his policies, but because of his temperament. Our point of departure should be the argument that “normalization” and appeasement will not stop a pathological narcissist who has put his country and the world at risk. There will be no possible domestication, no conceivable negotiation. Every bad decision since Day One underscores this fact. The U.S. is currently governed by a cruel, divisive man and his dark cabal. And therein the probable results: a constitutional crisis; a confronted, polarized society; a breakdown of international alliances; a possible impeachment, or if not, a great deal of damage.

The only ones capable of containing this damage are those who remain angry. Those who remain indignant. Those who do not accept as “normal” the abnormality that Trump has invoked. Those who should not remain calm, because as Simon Schama has written, “accepting the verdict of the polls does not entail the suspension

of dissent.” For all of us, this is a clarion call to defend and give weight to words that are being lost: liberal democracy, due process, pluralism. We simply cannot allow the return of barbarism, the end of so much that was fought for and won — including equality for women and the LGBT community — the end of an era that was not a mess, but that did ignore deep inequality and profound resentment from those left behind. We will have to be militantly disobedient, with civil actions that articulate the dignity of the citizen, of women, of Muslims, of African Americans, of Jews, of Latinos, of immigrants from all walks of life. A united front against 21st-century Ku Klux Klanism.

As for Mexico, the country will have to prepare itself for the uncertainty to come with an even keel, with patience, with vision. We will have to bring together the best minds and sit them down at the table, because the situation today is as critical as 1994, if not more so. That was the year we lived dangerously, the year in which the presidential candidate was assassinated, the Chiapas rebellion took place, and devaluation wrought havoc on the country's economy. In 1994, instability gave way to unity, polarization led to negotiation, and partisan squabbles were replaced by path-breaking electoral reforms. Saving Mexico mattered more than the struggle to rule over it. The country stepped back from the edge of the cliff via foundational pacts that led to the democratic transition. Today, circumstances are more urgent, more threatening. The danger is larger, and the political class is worse.

There are proposals regarding what to do vis-à-vis Trump, many of them intelligent and valuable. Buy time and give him enough rope so that he ends up hanging himself, while Mexico seeks other partners, other markets. Prepare to renegotiate Nafta and play hardball while doing so. Allow the U.S. to unilaterally withdraw from the free trade agreement and be governed by the rules of the WTO. Refuse collaboration on security and drug trafficking in exchange for what we really do want to preserve in our trade relationship with the U.S.

But, fundamentally, what to do depends on what type of country we want to be. A Mexico united around a model of economic and social development geared towards growing, competing, educating, democratizing, becoming more equal, becoming more transparent. Or a country “united” behind a historic pattern that places us in an unfavorable situation, time and again. The Mexican model based on extraction over inclusion, rent-seeking over innovation, cronyism that splits the pie instead of making it bigger. Those are the true walls Mexico has built, created

by Slim and his monopolies, by the PRI and its corruption, by political parties and their lack of representativeness.

So, unity by all means, but around a Mexico that internal and external blows will force us to recreate. Unity to demand transparency of government spending in light of the *gasolinazo*. Unity to reduce party financing by 50 percent. Unity to fight corruption, even if it is in Los Pinos. Unity to create a rule of law that actually works for ordinary citizens. Unity around a political class willing to reform itself and not just protect itself. Because Trump may kick and humiliate us, but we can and will resist if we act like true patriots. Those who defend their country from foreign enemies, but also from bad governments. The true patriots as Mark Twain described them: those who are loyal their country all the time and to their government when it deserves it.

Finally, a word of warning for my fellow Mexicans. These are not times for providential saviors or conservative nationalists or proto-populists or amiable wives of former presidents. As a wise friend told me: these are times for citizens, for rebels, for women, for students, for movements against the status quo. Let us all contribute to the honest, energetic, pungent debate that we need and deserve as a country, motivated by a

Mexicans sign a petition supporting the Ley 3de3 anti-corruption measure in Cholula.



Photo courtesy of Gobierno Cholula.

phrase from Václav Havel that resonated with me since I first read it: an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.

The opportunity to carry and defend and expand what we have achieved from below. Marching. Mobilizing. Resisting. Lobbying. Drafting legislation. So that more Mexicans can stand tall, having achieved what we had never thought possible before: the National Institute for Transparency (INAI); the right to freedom of choice in Mexico City; constitutional protections for same-sex marriage; the “*Ley 3de3*”; the National Anti-Corruption System; oral trials; independent journalism; the movement to create an independent judiciary. The modest, indirect, long-term changes that are changing how power is exercised in Mexico, these are the achievements of our time. This where I am inviting you to stand, defending them as we continue the fight.

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