Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, a founder and former member of Mexico’s Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD, Party of the Democratic Revolution), spoke at the Center for Latin American Studies about his newly announced movement, Por México Hoy. Cárdenas founded Por México Hoy to serve as a platform for economic and social reform. The need for reform is pressing, he explained, noting that an entire generation of Mexicans has experienced nothing but crisis.

Cárdenas’s long history in Mexican politics shapes his understanding of the origins of Mexico’s economic, social, and political troubles. His father, Lázaro Cárdenas, fought in the Mexican Revolution and was the President of Mexico from 1934 to 1940. Lázaro Cárdenas undertook sweeping land reform, transferring tracts from large commercial haciendas to peasant agrarian collectives or ejidos. He also nationalized critical industries and introduced various social and labor reforms. Lázaro Cárdenas was a member of the Partido Nacional Revolucionario (PNR, National Revolutionary Party), later called the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutional Revolutionary Party), which controlled the Mexican Presidency and political system for much of the 20th century.

After several decades in power, the PRI became notorious for corruption and electoral fraud. In the 1970s, rising oil prices led to a surge in revenue for the state oil monopoly, Pemex, much of which was squandered through graft. When this situation came to light during Mexico’s severe financial crisis in the early 1980s, the PRI faced backlash from the public as well as internal struggles. A group of technocrats within the party began to favor a pro-business, free-market platform in place of the party’s traditional populist agenda. They nominated Harvard-educated economist Carlos Salinas de Gortari as the 1988 presidential candidate, prompting Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas...
to break from the PRI and form a new coalition of leftist groups, labor unions, and ejido organizations.

Cárdenas ran against Salinas in the 1988 election, which Salinas won by a relatively small margin amid widespread charges of fraud. The next year, Cárdenas founded the PRD. He ran as their presidential candidate in 1994 and 2000, placing third both times. The Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party) ousted the PRI in 2000, winning the presidential election that year and again in 2006. The PRI has held the presidency since the 2012 election of Enrique Peña Nieto. Though Cárdenas never won the presidency, he served as mayor of Mexico City from 1997 to 2000 and has been recognized as a powerful moral force in Mexican political life.

Cárdenas continues to argue that the neoliberal economic policies instituted in the 1980s and 1990s under Salinas and other PRI technocrats have exacerbated Mexico’s economic and social problems. These policies were influenced by the “Washington Consensus,” a set of reforms advocated by the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the U.S. Treasury Department that were intended to help Latin American economies recover from the early 1980s financial crises. Cárdenas claims that the rise of neoliberal policies like deficit reduction, privatization, trade liberalization, and deregulation has caused macroeconomic and social conditions to deteriorate and violence, insecurity, and corruption to increase. He points to other Latin American countries that adopted similar neoliberal policies (like Uruguay, Brazil, Chile, and Bolivia), but later switched to more activist countercyclical policies to positive effect (see the figure, below), although Brazil’s earlier success has unraveled more recently.

Many of Mexico’s neoliberal policies were locked in by the North American Free Trade Agreement (Nafta), which brought Mexico into a commercial agreement with the United States and Canada in 1994. Nafta aimed to boost Mexican growth and development, but 20 years after its passage, the percentage of Mexicans living below the poverty line is almost unchanged at about 52 percent. Moreover, Mexico’s per-capita gross domestic product...
(GDP) growth from 1994–2013 averaged just 0.9 percent per year, ranking 18th out of 20 Latin American countries (Weisbrot, Lefebvre, and Sammut, 2014). Nafta also severely impacted agricultural employment, contributing to the large volume of migration to the United States, and made Mexico more sensitive to financial fluctuations in the United States.

Despite Cárdenas's generally negative view of the Mexican political and economic system in recent decades, he does point to some hopeful developments. First, he emphasizes the power of mobilization, as evidenced by the 1988 election in which the public recognized the potential of voting to effect positive change. The 1994 Zapatista Rebellion, political assassinations, and economic crisis provided a traumatic turning point that was followed by a rise in government accountability, fairer elections, and the strengthening of civil society. For example, the 1996 Federal Electoral Law instituted independent electoral institutions and granted public financing to political parties (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2011). The press opened to opposing opinions, election results are reported in the media, political leaders generally respect election outcomes, and certain regions have gained autonomy.

Still, there is much more to be done. While electoral democracy has seen a vast improvement over the last 20 years, Cárdenas emphasized that the current political elite has little interest in providing opportunities for the young or those in remote areas of the country, and the voices of these people cannot be heard in the political process under the current policies.

For example, Cárdenas believes that if the Mexican political process better represented the public, then the country would not have agreed to the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), which involves Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States, and Vietnam. Negotiations for the TPP were concluded on October 4, 2015. Its goals, according to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, include promoting each member country’s competitiveness, innovation, and economic growth. TPP has been criticized on many of the same grounds as Nafta. Opponents argue that it will put more power into the hands of international corporations and the United States (Grunwald, 2015). For example, the TPP will make patent protection last longer in order to protect branded products against generic competitors that are mostly produced in
poorer countries. TPP provisions also prevent any member country from approving generic drugs for the market if there are unresolved patent issues. Experts worry that this will not only financially harm pharmaceutical industries in developing countries and create further monopolies, but also decrease access to low-cost pharmaceutical products (Eggertson, 2013).

Better mobilization of the public, Cárdenas believes, will lead to pressure on political leaders to act on public demands. This is why he has created Por México Hoy, which hopes to connect people from multiple different social classes in Mexico to move towards a better civil society. Por México Hoy is not a political party — Cárdenas himself left the political party he founded to become an independent in 2014 — but rather, the movement actively engages in the political dialogue between politics and the public. The movement calls for a new set of policies in the areas of health, education, and international affairs and government commitment to increasing living standards of all citizens. One of the primary goals of the movement is to change Mexico’s constitution to reflect the needs of its citizens.

Por México Hoy is not the first effort to institute major reforms by transcending party politics. The Pacto por México — signed in December 2012 by leaders of the three largest political parties at the time — aimed to overcome political gridlock to accomplish reforms in five main categories: democratic governance; transparency, accountability, and combating corruption; rights and liberties; security and justice; and economic growth, employment, and competitiveness (Sada, 2013). The Pacto constitution mandated secular education in both private and public schools, set the foundation for land reform by granting every citizen the right to own land, and designed several reforms aimed at empowering the labor sector. The constitution also gave unmarried women the right to own land, abolished child labor, limited rents to 0.5 percent of the property value per month, made employers responsible for preventing accidents in the workplace, recognized the right to strike, established early copyright law, granted freedom of religion, guaranteed minimum wage, and limited overtime work.

Cárdenas recognizes the need to update this document to guarantee the rights of citizens in the 21st century, and achieved some initial successes, including education, legal, and telecom reform bills. However, it has been criticized for working through back-room negotiations among politicians, often reflecting corporate or personal interests, instead of public debate (Ackerman, 2012).

Aside from referring to the need for constitutional changes that will enable politicians to implement new social and political policies, Cárdenas discussed few practical details of his movement. He stated his respect for the original text of the Mexican Constitution of 1917, published after a convention that amended and rewrote the 1857 Constitution. The process was led by Venustiano Carranza, a leader of the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and later the President of Mexico (1917–1920), with the goal of giving political legitimacy to the new regime. It was the first document of its kind to involve social reforms, calling for the end of economic and social slavery and the establishment of harmony and peace in the state. The
he believes that some amendments to the constitution contradict the original text. While the articles of the constitution promised progressive governance of the country, some are not enforced today, especially with regard to protection of workers’ rights, including the right to strike and to organize in independent unions (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The official website of Por México Hoy mentions the desire to change the following articles of the constitution:

- Article 25 makes sealed correspondence exempt from search.
- Article 27 declares land expropriation by the state to be always possible in the name of “public interest.”
- Article 28 prohibits monopoly, except for industries such as mail, radiotelegraphy, electricity, and oil.

The Por México Hoy website also expresses the desire for regional and local governments to guarantee safety and minimum living standards for those who migrate, in agreement with basic human rights. Reforms to the education system, the protection of natural resources, and transparency in the regulation of energy production and prices are also emphasized.

A measure of Por México Hoy’s success will be whether it can successfully reduce public sector corruption. Cárdenas remarked that “when corruption occurs, there is always somebody inside the government and somebody outside the government, so you have to attack on both sides.” Corruption leads to decreased macroeconomic stability, reduced foreign investment, harm to the poor and small business owners, and environmental degradation (World Bank, n.d.). A May 2015 report found that only 27 percent of Mexicans say they are satisfied with their country’s democracy, 91 percent do not trust political parties, 83 percent do not trust legislators, and 80 percent do not trust the judicial system (Casar, 2015). The report also revealed that the vast majority of Mexicans consider corruption a major problem that has grown in the past two years. The results of this study lend credence to Cárdenas’s contention that rampant corruption has resulted in institutional discredit and erosion of the moral authority of public officials. The government’s credibility crisis intensified with the disappearance of 43 students in Guerrero in September 2014, a tragedy that continues to draw attention to the urgent need for reform.

The Por México Hoy movement recognizes that functional democracy requires more than just the right to vote or even high voter turnout. Mexican voter turnout today is actually quite high in comparison with other Latin American countries and the United States (Desilver, 2015). In the most recent presidential elections, 63 percent of the voting-age population voted, compared to just 54 percent in the United States and 46 percent in Chile. Yet Mexican democracy is far from flourishing, as evidenced by survey findings that Mexicans have the highest levels of disillusionment with democracy in all of Latin America. Only 37 percent prefer democracy to other forms of government, compared to 56 percent in Latin America as a whole (Lagos, 2014). Civil society, while growing, remains weak in comparison to the region, after a long history of co-option and repression by authoritarian regimes (O’Neil, 2011).

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was a presidential candidate in Mexico’s 1988, 1994, and 2000 elections. He spoke for CLAS on October 22, 2015.

Carola Binder is an Assistant Professor of Economics at Haverford College. She received her Ph.D. in Economics from U.C. Berkeley in May 2015. Zuzana Manhartova is a senior Economics major at Haverford College. Diana Schoder is a junior Economics major at Haverford College.

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