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
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, 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.

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 recalculating 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 1 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.

### Mexican Government Debt as Percent of GDP

(Data: OECD; accessed 08-04-2017)

- **2000**: 38.0%
- **2002**: 41.9%
- **2004**: 44.1%
- **2006**: 46.3%
- **2008**: 49.7%
- **2010**: 51.5%
- **2012**: 53.5%
- **2014**: 54.6%
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 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 bead 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 appealing. 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 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
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 supports politicians 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.
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 about. Because of what she allowed to happen. Because of what she has been 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.

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 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, disenchanted, 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 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.

But 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.
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...
international experience has been inaugurating hotels celebrated by the Ku Klux Klan, a “negotiator” whose only that runs rampant among many of his followers. The first a half-visceral, half-vengeful temperament. Incapable whatever else pops into his or Steve Bannon’s head. All All Lambasting the media and the courts. Picking fights with to go along in certain areas as long as it gets tax cuts. Republican majority in control of Congress and willing to go along in certain areas as long as it gets tax cuts. security when it shouldn’t. torture, a military that is gradually taking over tasks of public judicial system that hasn’t been able to adapt to the demands demands and requirements of oral trials. A police force that was created be an instrument at the service of the powerful and not be an instrument at the service of the powerful and not a mechanism for the protection of citizens. Prosecutors who A sales display of Donald Trump piñatas in 2016. restive, a military that is gradually taking over tasks of public corruption and the justice system. We all know the reasons. 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. into a country of sewers. Cheating, lying, and stealing bladder 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. As David Remnick 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 they are ascribing moral equivalence between the Casa CroPPation and the justice system. We all know the reasons. 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. 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. 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. A sales display of Donald Trump piñatas in 2016. A sales display of Donald Trump piñatas in 2016.
Why Mexico Fell Apart

The verdict of the polls does not entail the suspension that Trump has invoked. Those who should not remain. Those who do not accept as “normal” the abnormality those who remain angry. Those who remain indignant. The probable results: a constitutional crisis; a confronted, by a cruel, divisive man and his dark cabal. And therein one underscores this fact. The U.S. is currently governed no conceivable negotiation. Every bad decision since Day one of Trump, someone we should all confront and criticize. And all of this happening — allegedly — because of Trump, many of them intelligent and valuable. Buy time for 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. To refuse collaboration on security and drug trafficking in exchange for the opportunity to carry and defend and expand the rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association; the right of choice in Mexico City; constitutional protections for ordinary citizens. 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 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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