



ENFOQUE

Mexico's "Definitive" Electoral Reform

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Electoral reform, judicial restructuring, and federal-state government relations are crucial issues in the construction of democracy in Mexico. This issue of *Enfoque* provides an interim assessment of key initiatives by the Zedillo administration in these areas.

When Ernesto Zedillo took office on December 1, 1994, he called for a *definitive* electoral and political reform that would decidedly eliminate suspicion and recriminations from the electoral process. Because this is the fifth major electoral reform in ten years, many analysts hoped that the electoral system might finally settle at an equilibrium for the next several elections. This summer the four parties in Congress—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), National Action Party (PAN), Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and Labor Party (PT)—finally reached agreement on electoral reform. This reform, however, is far from definitive.

- On January 17, 1995, just after the current economic crisis began, Mexico's major parties signed a pact promising to pur-

sue political reform (just as Mexico's three major presidential candidates had signed a pact in early 1994 in the face of crisis—in that instance, the uprising in Chiapas). Beginning in May 1995, the two principal opposition parties (PAN and PRD) worked together with academics on a common reform initiative in the so-called Chapultepec Castle talks. The PRI eventually joined the discussions, and soon the talks were moved to the Ministry of the Interior and then to Congress. By the end of the year, it appeared that reform was just around the corner.

- However, the PAN quit the negotiating table in early spring of 1996 to protest irregularities in the municipal elections in Huejotzingo, Puebla. The PAN

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Mexican Politics in Transition

The New Federalism and Institutional Change in Mexico

Victor Alejandro Espinoza Valle

The Zedillo administration has made the “new federalism” the core of its efforts to reform the Mexican state, and it has identified decentralization as the pivotal element in this renewed federalism. The administration itself has openly acknowledged that the spirit driving this new federalism is a determination to overturn the centralization long looming over Mexico.

• What is truly new in this administration’s adoption of federalism as a governmental strategy is its resolve to go beyond simple administrative deconcentration. Even before the federal government undertook its reform program in 1982, there had been some transfer of administrative responsibilities to the states. But with the de la Madrid administration (1982–1988), and particularly with that of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994), a process of decentralization began that shifted federal assets to the state arena, targeting especially the areas of health services and education. Yet the shortcomings of the programs implemented under these presidencies were soon apparent: the states’ lack of authority over financial resources and the federal government’s continued hold on political power.

• In this light, state reform—implemented on the axis of

redimensioning public administration—can be characterized as a process of self-reform. The new federalist impetus of the Zedillo administration proposes to “construct federalism from the center.” This apparent contradiction underscores Mexico’s peculiar history of “centralist federalism.” The educational system is a case in point.

• The Zedillo administration’s adoption of renewed federalism as the center of its governmental strategy and its proposed implementation through decentralization is epitomized in its efforts to modernize, and especially to decentralize, education. In fact, the commencement of the Mexican state’s “new federalism” efforts can be dated from May 18, 1992, the day that the National Accord for the Modernization of Basic Education (ANMED) was signed.

• Now, four years after educational funding was transferred to Mexico’s thirty-one states, we can analyze the prevailing state of affairs for indications of success or lack thereof. The educational decentralization policy has been called double edged because, according to Carlos Ornelas, “on the one

hand, it is designed to increase legitimacy during a period of profound economic transformation and state reform, but on the other, it seeks to guarantee that there will be no loss of control over the national educational system. Thus the policy as implemented is an ‘intermediate model,’ lying somewhere between complete decentralization and the centralism prevailing before 1992”

“We are nearing the end of the cycle of regime democratization and commencing the federalist cycle, an institutional and political undertaking intertwined with regional development, a cycle that will be much more complex and no less turbulent.”

(*La descentralización de la educación en México* [CIDE, 1995, p. 287]).

• Another instrument of the new federalism was the transfer of funds from the federal expenditures budget to municipalities. Beginning in 1996, two-

thirds of social development funding (budget line 26)—between 7.3 and 11 billion pesos—was devolved to municipal coffers. These monies are an important contribution to municipal budgets, the majority of which are severely under-

funded. Nevertheless, as in the case of education, the transfers appear to be inadequate to compensate fully for local governments’ shortfalls—which stem largely from Mexico’s traditional pattern of fiscal centralization. (Total government receipts are divided as follows: 77 percent to the federal government; 18 percent to states; and 5 percent to local governments.)

• As envisioned by the executive, the new federalism will strengthen democracy because Mexico’s current form of government needs only to be consolidated. And the optimal path to achieve consolidation is via policies of decentralization.

According to the Zedillo administration, the new federalism will bolster democracy as the long-coming democratizing cycle reaches completion.

• A new cycle, the federalist cycle, is beginning. According to Luis Aguilar Villanueva, “We are nearing the end of the cycle of regime democratization and commencing the federalist cycle, an institutional and political undertaking intertwined with regional development, a cycle that will be much more complex and no less turbulent” (“El federalismo mexicano,” *Nuevo Federalismo*, Suplemento de *El Nacional*, May 7, 1995). Thus decentralization has become a political strategy of the first order.

• It would be difficult to refute the importance of, and need for, consolidating national development. However, the difficulty lies in the advisability



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