

Evolving Expectations of Public Office in Mexico: 1920-Present

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Expectations of Integrity

As the title of a session programmed for later today suggests, proverbs can function as a resource for thinking about public office and for shaping behaviour by “nudging” functionaries in positive directions. But proverbs can also have the opposite effect, contributing to a conventional wisdom that incentives negative behaviour. This becomes apparent when we examine expectations of conduct in public office in Mexico and how they have been moulded since the early 20th century by certain sayings, including declarations by prominent public figures, that have become proverbial.

One well-known saying, which arose in professional parlance after the Mexican Revolution of 1910-20, is the declaration “*La Revolución ma hará justicia*”: The Revolution will do me justice.¹ Those who had served as officers in the war, which ended the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz and established what has been called the world’s first socialist constitution (Feb. 1917), expected to find just reward during the peace that followed, either as a politician or as a bureaucrat. The post would be well-paid and it would afford ample opportunity for profiting from the position.² Of course, benefitting from public office has a history in Mexico dating back to the early colonial era, as Bárbara Zepeda has just described.³ Under the Habsburgs, 16th- and 17th-century officials were expected to complement low salaries (and, one should add, to pay off the loans they often had secured in order to buy their positions) by financially exploiting their office, a practice – along with embezzlement and nepotism – tolerated by the Spanish Crown.

¹ See e.g.: Ugo Pipitone, *Un eterno comienzo: La trampa circular del desarrollo mexicano* (Mexico City: Taurus, 2017), 54.

² Per our colleague Elijah Achoch, in Kenya the equivalent phrase was “eating the fruits of independence”.

³ Zepeda, “Remarks on the modern character of Spanish American bureaucracies in the colonial period”, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ehrc/events/constructionpublicoffice/mexico/scenarios/zepeda-the_construction_of_public_office_conference_paper_4jul2018.pdf.

The notion that the post-revolutionary regime might serve to “do me justice” – a locution that would come to be derided by critics – was later complemented with similar celebrated phrases. One of them, said to have been uttered on the campaign trail in 1969 by future State of Mexico governor Carlos Hank, was “*Un político pobre es un pobre político*”: A politician that’s poor is a poor politician. (For this and other shameless declarations of political entitlement, see the Introduction to my recent edited volume *Los gobernadores*.⁴) Such adages perpetuated a conventional wisdom among elected officials that to profit from their office was both just and sensible – sensible in the sense that only a *pendejo* (idiot) would refuse or prove unable to do so. And they perpetuated a conventional wisdom among the public that politicians are necessarily on the take, a state of affairs with which the average citizen was not always upset, for a brazen display of ill-gotten wealth could be viewed – according to the code of Mexican *machismo*, or conspicuous manliness – as daring, admirable, and to be emulated.

Another popular saying captured a variation on this self-interested way of perceiving public office: “*Vivir fuera del presupuesto es vivir en el error*”: To live outside the (public) payroll is to live in error. The dictum was coined by a politician from Veracruz state who flourished between the 1930s and 50s, César Garizurieta.⁵ But the phrase speaks to the benefits of obtaining any kind of public office. Since federal and state-level bureaucracies expanded vastly during the decades following the Revolution (and with particular rapidity during the 1930s and again in the 1970s), the phrase reflected a growing sense among the population that a post in the public sector was highly desirable. Such jobs were relatively well-paid, and in senior positions, *very* well paid. They came with a host of benefits, both formal, such as health insurance (in a country where most people lacked it), and informal, such as the ability to bequeath one’s post to a relative, or, for senior personnel, the ability to bring friends and family onto the payroll, often for sinecures or no-show assignments.⁶ They were often not particularly demanding. And the higher one rose, the greater were the opportunities for graft.

⁴ Andrew Paxman, ed., *Los gobernadores: Caciques del pasado y del presente* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2018), esp. 9-10.

⁵ Enrique Krauze, *Por una democracia sin adjetivos* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1986).

⁶ Holders of such posts are conventionally known in Mexico as *paracaidistas*, literally “parachutists”, the existence of the term attesting to the frequency of the phenomenon.

Mexico saw a massive expansion of the public sector in general as of the 1930s, when the oil industry was nationalized (many other sectors followed, such as electricity, film exhibition, tobacco cultivation, even shrimp packing). The country also saw a rapid increase in university enrolments as of the 1950s. Hence the middle class and those hoping to enter it via a free college education viewed Mexico's mammoth state as an inviting employer and a ticket to a better life. Such expectations, coupled with the proverbiality of the above-mentioned declarations, were not conducive to professional integrity, selflessness, or efficiency.

Since 1934, Mexico's bureaucracy has run in six-yearly cycles, or *sexenios*, as presidents have come and gone, their ministers and senior officials then stepping down, leaving mid-level employees to jostle for new appointments in the incoming administration, frequently in another ministry or state-run company. (Presidents serve a single six-year term, with re-election forbidden by the Constitution.⁷) In other words, Mexico has largely lacked the equivalent of a UK-style professional civil service whose functionaries continue to serve in the same department, regardless of changes of government. This cycle has long fed the notion that a bureaucratic appointment is a six-year license to get out of it what one can, as there is no guarantee that as beneficial a post will be had in the next *sexenio*.

Historically, anecdotal evidence of such thinking abounds, particularly at the start of each cycle, as newly-appointed officials arrived at their offices to find their predecessors had made off with everything, from the departmental budget surplus to the typewriters. Similar evidence abounded during the privatization spree of the early 1990s under President Carlos Salinas, as the new private owners of former parastate companies took the reins. After Ricardo Salinas Pliego bought the public broadcaster TV Azteca in 1993, his employees found offices stripped of tables, chairs, even lightbulbs.

Furthermore, in a country in which government was often regarded with suspicion – because politicians were “crooks” and because big-state inefficiencies abounded – stealing from the government was long regarded as “not really stealing”.

⁷ Similar dynamics and rules apply in the provinces. However, Mexico's states have their own constitutions, and most switched from a 4-year to a 6-year gubernatorial term in the mid-1940s.

Expectations regarding Advancement

A relationship long found within both private and public sectors is that of the *protector* and the *protegido* (literally, the protector and the protected). While the recruitment and mentoring of junior employees by senior ones is common across all cultures, in Mexico the relationship is of pronounced frequency and importance. This is partly because hiring has long been relatively relationship-based, as opposed to meritocratic, competitive, and supervised-by-committee, although the latter practice has grown much more common since Mexico began in 1990 to negotiate its accession to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); the coming and commencement of NAFTA elicited a great influx of US, Japanese, and European managers and encouraged Mexican companies to list on international stock exchanges and thus report to shareholders. The frequency of the *protector-protegido* dynamic also owes to an organizational tradition whereby senior personnel built their own *camarillas* or *cotos de poder* (power cliques): these afforded them a band of loyalists who could help promote their professional interests, while giving junior personnel a potential fast track to promotion, as they sought to rise on the coattails of their protector.⁸

In the public sector, loyalty has often necessitated switching places of work; for example, when a senior official moves between federal ministries, taking his entourage with him (or her). Loyalty may well also run counter to efficiency. As my CIDE colleague Mauricio Merino has observed, the primary expected function of many junior public employees is to satisfy their protector, irrespective of ethics and even to the extent of breaking the law; fulfilling their job description comes second.⁹

Further, regarding the relative importance of judgement (or initiative) in decision-making, the *protector-protegido* relationship has undoubtedly contributed to a strong tradition of following the rules. Junior employees are often reluctant to stick their necks out, for fear of being scapegoated or even fired should something go wrong. Standard operating procedure tends to deference to the “*Licenciado*” (literally, the man with the

⁸ I describe how *cotos de poder* operated within the dominant TV company Telesistema Mexicano in the 1960s in Claudia Fernández & Andrew Paxman, *El Tigre: Emilio Azcárraga y su imperio Televisa* (Mexico City: Grijalbo, 2013): 90-99.

⁹ Mauricio Merino, “Los funcionarios públicos”, paper presented at the Warwick/AHRC symposium “La construcción del cargo público”, CIDE, Mexico City, 6 Nov. 2017.

college degree, but a synonym for the office boss), who may in turn defer to *his* superior, thereby worsening the decision-making bottleneck. This helps explain why Mexican bureaucracy has often moved very slowly.

Whether female public employees have engaged in *camarilla*-building or -joining to the same extent as males, I am not equipped to say, although I think it unlikely as women only began to enter senior or mid-level posts in numbers in the 1990s, at which time the “NAFTA effect” was encouraging a more meritocratic culture to take hold in the public as well as private sector. To cite a specific example of the male domination of public office, Mexico’s first female cabinet minister was not appointed until 1980 – Rosa Luz Alegría, who was Minister of Tourism under José López Portillo – compared with 1929 in the United Kingdom (Margaret Bondfield) and 1933 in the United States (Frances Perkins). That said, one of the most conspicuous *camarillas* of recent times was built by Elba Esther Gordillo, who from 1989 to 2013 led the National Education Workers Syndicate (SNTE), Mexico’s largest union, and for much of that period she simultaneously held senior posts within and elected offices on behalf of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).¹⁰

Women seeking employment and advancement in both public and private sectors in Mexico have long been subjected to sexual harassment, in the sense of being promised positions as reward for sexual favours. This phenomenon broadly persists today. The frequency of the practice is again attested to by the existence of a term for it: *cuerpomático*, a punning fusion of the words for “body” and “cash dispenser” (*cuervo + cajero automático*). Indeed, the above-mentioned Rosa Luz Alegría gained her cabinet post after first serving as the president’s mistress.¹¹ Only in recent years have many public institutions created codes of ethics and supervisory committees specifically to combat gender discrimination. My own employer, the CIDE, did not do so until 2017.

Returning to more general expectations regarding advancement, and also to proverbial phrases, the most often-heard saying that both justifies and encourages everyday corruption is the rhyme “*Él que no transa, no avanza*”: He who does no cheat does not get ahead (less often it is rendered in the positive: *Él que transa, avanza*). The phrase is equally

¹⁰ Ricardo Raphael, *Los socios de Elba Esther* (Mexico City: Planeta, 2007).

¹¹ Alan Riding, *Distant Neighbors: A Portrait of the Mexicans* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1984]), 128.

applicable to such mundane actions as driving through a traffic light that has just turned red as to white-collar fraud or embezzlement. That it was first recorded in writing in the early 1980s (at least, according to Google Books), suggests its popularization occurred as a response to the deep economic crisis of that time, which in the minds of most Mexicans was brought about either by the corruption of the López Portillo regime, or, per the claims of that president's final address to the nation, the corruption of the country's bankers. In other words: if we're all suffering because the elites have screwed us, we might as well cheat too.

However, the popularity of the *transa* phrase appears recently to have waned, as public impatience with corruption has grown. The roots of this mood shift, which accelerated under the PRI president Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-18), date back a quarter-century. A freer press, owing to public reforms and private initiatives in the early 1990s, has made corruption more of a matter to be reviled (online and radio reporting over the last decade has been bold on this matter). Transparency International set up a Mexico office in 1999 and began publishing reports that independent newspapers like *Reforma* and *La Jornada* eagerly publicized. Films and TV series have dealt more openly with graft, starting with *La ley de Herodes*, a satire about a corrupt PRI politician, which was a box-office hit in 2000. As of the presidency of Vicente Fox (2000-06), Mexico's first president from the National Action Party (PAN), outrage has steadily grown in the provinces at the corrupt conduct of many state governors, a phenomenon instigated in part by federal reforms and political shifts that granted them greater autonomy and bigger budgets. By 2017, no fewer than 17 recently-departed governors were under criminal investigation.¹²

More recently, newfound local NGOs, notably the well-financed Mexicanos Contra la Corrupción y la Impunidad (MCCI), have investigated and exposed corrupt practices in the public sphere, sometimes in partnership with the cutting-edge news portal Animal Político. A slew of general-market books – some of them exposés or analyses of malpractice (e.g. various works by Diego Enrique Osorno and Humberto Padgett; Jenaro Villamil, *Cleptocracia*, 2018; my own *Los gobernadores*), some of them humorous (e.g. Alejandro Legorreta & Gustavo Rivera Loret de Mola, *Corrupcionario mexicano*, 2016; José Luis Guzmán, *100 frases deplorables de los políticos mexicanos* 2017) – have all fed

¹² Paxman, *Los gobernadores*, 11-14.

the perception that something needs to be done. One tangible product of the public mood shift that owed to this combination of factors was the broad rejection of both the PRI (which won a mere 16% of the vote) and the PAN (just 22%) in the presidential election of July 2018, in favour of upstart party Morena (53%).

What next? Public Office and the Fourth Transformation...

Newly-elected president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, popularly known as AMLO, made combatting public corruption a central plank of Morena's platform. Tackling the problem in a more determined fashion than any previous administration would contribute to what AMLO heralded as a "Fourth Transformation" of Mexico, following the Independence Wars, the Reform era of the 1850s/60s, and the Revolution (the 1910-20 war and the twenty years of largely socialist policies that followed it).

One obstacle that the new regime must overcome is institutional inertia: Mexicans have heard such promises, and been disappointed by a lack of sustained follow-up, many times before. Every president since at least 1952, when Adolfo Ruiz Cortines succeeded the notoriously self-enriching and crony-caressing Miguel Alemán Valdés, has taken office promising to battle graft.¹³ The unusually austere Ruiz Cortines may have spoken and acted in earnest, but his project stumbled when it came up against the interests of political and business elites. Less moralistic successors would make a show of jailing one or two of the most conspicuously corrupt, while often doing less to tackle the issue concertedly. In 2014, Peña Nieto declared that "corruption is a cultural matter", by which he meant that Mexican graft was so deep-rooted it would be difficult to eradicate. The president drew great flak for the assertion, since it seemed to imply a pre-emptive denial of responsibility for any failings of a proposed National Anticorruption Commission. Perhaps, however, he was offering a historically-minded view of the limits of good intentions. Renamed the National Anticorruption System (SNA), the body that resulted – though formalized in 2016 – has still to become fully operational due to resistance in the Senate and the states.

¹³ Stephen Morris, *Corruption and Politics in Contemporary Mexico* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1991), 77; Paul Gillingham, "Corruption in the Formation of the Modern Mexican State", paper presented at the Warwick/AHRC symposium "La construcción del cargo público", CIDE, Mexico City, 6 Nov. 2017, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/ehrc/events/constructionpublicoffice/mexico/scenarios/corruption_consult_in_the_formation_of_the_pri_gillingham.pdf.

Another problem is that of AMLO's tendency to make utopian promises and be dismissive of institutions, as though all that matters going forward is his own indomitable will. I close with two illustrations. At a campaign event in Mexico City's National Auditorium in November 2017, when addressing the plague of gubernatorial abuse of office, the candidate declared: "We are going to eliminate corruption. If the president is honest, the governors will have to be honest..."¹⁴ In May 2018, AMLO was quoted as saying "Do you know of anything that those on the Supreme Court have done to the benefit of the Mexican people? ... Nothing!"¹⁵

What the Fourth Transformation means in terms of expectations of public office is hard to say at this stage, beyond a new rhetorical impulse towards selfless service among bureaucrats, many of whom, according to AMLO's pronouncements, will be expected to take a pay cut (*sic*). AMLO is good at political symbolism (flying economy class; shunning limousines for a Jetta; declining to live in the presidential palace); he is rather less good at the likely consequences of policy. And history shows that, in the domain of public service, uplifting rhetoric carries only so far; cynical rhetoric tends to carry further.

¹⁴ Jo Tuckman, "Tres veces AMLO", Vice, 27 Feb. 2018, www.vice.com/es_mx/article/qveen7/vice-news-tres-veces-amlo-una-carrera-de-fondo-por-la-presidencia-de-mexico.

¹⁵ *Reforma*, 28 May 2018.