

3. Mexico's Systemic Transition

Mexico is presently undergoing a profound political and economic transition from a longstanding post-revolutionary order to a still incomplete new system. Since 1982, many of the economic foundations of a new order have been laid thanks to economic liberalization, particularly during the Salinas *sexenio*. Nevertheless, the corresponding political and social institutions remain largely undefined. A *modus vivendi* remains elusive.

3.1 The Logic of the Post-Revolutionary Order¹⁰

It took nineteen years for order to be reestablished after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 and its bloody aftermath. In 1929, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was founded by the previously feuding elites of the country and over the next decade the institutional foundations and a social contract for the new political system were set.¹¹ The formula that its founders concocted has kept it in power ever since.

After years of debilitating inner-elite struggle, the birth of the PRI was a deliberate attempt to bury the hatchet and get the country's competing power interests to agree to a standard set of rules of the game. Rather than continue to fight over the economic pie of the country's wealth, the new agreement was to share it. The construction of a national governing party was meant to internalize distributive conflict among contending actors; party loyalty would be rewarded by patronage and governmental favour. Political stability would pave the way for more than a generation of impressive economic growth, low inflation and a stable currency.

The new order rested on seven key cornerstones. First, it was characterized by strong **presidentialism**. Just like the colours of the Mexican flag that adorned his ceremonial sash, the president was the embodiment of the nation and its finest traditions. In the tradition of Spanish kings and Aztec monarchs, he was revered and reified above all others. The president enjoyed a vast array of prerogatives: the exclusive right to select his cabinet, appoint candidates for elected posts, governors,

¹⁰For further reading on the basic tenets of the Mexican political system, see Roderic Ai Camp, **Politics in Mexico** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). One of the most enjoyable and insightful reads on Mexican political culture by a foreigner is Alan Riding, **Distant Neighbours: A Portrait of the Mexicans** (New York: Vintage Books, 1989 [1984]).

¹¹The original name of the PRI was the National Revolutionary Party (NRP). In 1938, the NRP was renamed the Party of the Mexican Revolution, which in 1946 became the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the name the party has kept until the present.