

PARADOXES OF PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM: THE MEXICAN EXPERIENCE (2000-2007)¹

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INTRODUCTION

During the last few years, many public sector reform efforts have taken place in Mexico. Without question, President Vicente Fox's government (2000-2006) has been one of the most active administrative reformers in the history of our country (Pardo, 1991, 2007; Sánchez, 2006). The 2001-2006 National Program Against Corruption and for Transparency and Administrative Development (NPCT), and the Good Government Agenda (GGA) set a wide range of reform issues in the public sector agenda. These sought to change the structures, procedures and technologies of public organizations, as well as the behaviors and ethical standards of federal public servants. Besides, compared to previous modernization programs, it could be said that this six-year long reform agenda did not stay just as a collection of good wishes. On the contrary, during the last presidential term, numerous and diverse actions focused on building a more professional, honest, transparent, digitalized, and top-qualified government were implemented (Pardo, 2007). The question to be answered in the following years will be related to the adequacy and outcomes of these reform efforts.

The following pages attempt to recount some "paradoxes" that seemed to have emerged during the implementation of President Fox's administrative reform agenda. Although the article has taken into account the relevant literature that has been produced by Mexican scholars during the last few years, it should be said that is mostly based on the author's professional experience in the period 2004-2007. Therefore, this is not a systematic and methodologically rigorous assessment, such as the kind of studies that academics might probably develop in the near future; nor is it a judgment of the appropriateness of the reform strategies which were proposed at their time. On the contrary, the essay simply seeks to offer some thoughts, which might be helpful as an

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input for future debates on the reform of Mexican public administration, or in other developing countries as well.

The essay is divided into four sections. Firstly, a brief conceptual discussion on the topic of administrative reforms is presented. Secondly, some “paradoxes” that have emerged in recent international experiences are described (Hood and Peters,). Thirdly, I try to explain some of the paradoxes that I think appeared during the implementation of President Fox’s reform agenda. Finally, as a *post scriptum*, I will attempt to offer some reflections on the current public sector reform efforts that are taking place under President Felipe Calderón’s government (2006-2012), with a special focus again on some paradoxes that seem to be emerging.

ON ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

During the last 30 years, many administrative reforms have been designed and implemented all over the world³. Although at the very beginning, Anglo-Saxon countries were at the center of the so-called “Global Public Management Revolution” (Kettl, 2005), in fact many developed countries, as well as a wide number of developing/transitional countries, also began setting in motion substantial administrative changes (Suleiman, 2003; McCourt & Minogue, 2001). Thus, along with the transformations driven under the New Public Management (NPM) label, many national (and local) governments have been implementing several programs of territorial decentralization, anti-corruption strategies, creation of accountability institutions, freedom of information laws, establishment of meritbased civil services, Europeanization of policies. In short, for the last decades we have lived the “age of administrative reforms”, as Sabino Cassese (2003) puts it.

At a first glance, administrative reforms are (in the simplest and most basic sense of the term) a deliberated and programmed effort led by a governing group to change the public administration’s structures, proceedings, values, standards, and objectives (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000). But beyond this, administrative reforms are more than just plans or programs for change. They emerge from situations which may seem problematic to some people; however, the framing of these problematic situations is not only based on concepts, terms, and “better practices” of Public Administration. It is also based on values and personal priorities. In that sense, administrative reforms respond to certain ideologies, intellectual referents, and value judgments, from which the desire to improving the *status quo* arises.

At the same time, administrative reforms are symbolic promises. When a governmental reform is promoted, it implicitly carries the promise of changing established routines, leaving behind old habits, modifying the *status quo*. And all in search of a supposedly superior administrative system: better government, more efficiency, more quality, less corruption. The GGA and the NPCT were in this sense promises made by President Fox’s government to the Mexican society: a promise to transform public institutions in

³ Some of the ideas of this section come from Theo Toonen (2003a, 2003b).

order to make them work better. They were as well a symbolic complement to the democratization process of Mexico's public life.

Administrative reforms are also political reforms. They alter the political game rules (codes, laws, norms, procedures), and thus they redistribute power between bureaucratic and legislative actors who participate in the governing process. The creation of the Mexico's federal Freedom of Information Act, for example, limited the federal public servant's discretion, by giving society an institutional mechanism to have permanent access to government information (accompanied also by the creation of the Federal Institute of Access to Information, which is an oversight body). Similarly, the implementation of the Professional Civil Service (PCS) and its new merit-based subsystems for hiring public officials diminished the bureaucratic power that certain actors previously had (i.e., the heads of job-vacancies, who were able to appoint whoever they wanted). The merit-system reform also brought to this power game certain actors that were formerly ignored (e.g. Human Resources departments at the federal ministries), or did not even exist (the newly created Professional Civil Service Unit of the Ministry of Public Administration).

Finally, administrative reforms are quite an active and even profitable industry for some actors. Around the world, there are many "gurus", international consultants, academics, and former government officials devoted to debate and analyze, but above all, to spread and sell ideas, strategies, tools, and proposals for administrative modernization. In addition to them, there are international organizations and aid agencies, which in their attempts to strengthening the new democracies' governance frameworks, actively promote (finance) the implementation of administrative reforms considered appropriate for developing countries. (Mexico, for example, has received support and financial aid from American, British, Spanish, and Canadian agencies, among others).

Taking into account these factors, what in principle seemed to be just a simple exercise of imagination and administrative rationality, reflection and governmental selfcriticism, in fact turns out to be a walk through a winding road, full of uncertainties and actors interested in slowing down/accelerating/adjusting the modernization proposals. A process in which, sometimes even without noticing it, diverse, ambiguous or even contradictory administrative principles and practices are advanced (innovation *vs.* stability; citizen's participation *vs.* timely response; new technology *vs.* savings). For all these reasons, administrative reforms are complex, problematic, contradictory, and even paradoxical, as has been shown by some recent international experiences.

ON THE PARADOXES OF INTERNATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

In a very interesting book, coordinated by Joachim Jens Hesse, Christopher Hood, and B. Guy Peters (2003), a group of international scholars recently analyzed administrative reform processes from a particular perspective: the paradoxes that have emerged during the implementation of the reforms, or as a consequence of them⁴. While other recent

⁴ It should be noted that, as these authors mention, the paradox perspective is not completely new. An earlier work that perfectly exemplifies the usefulness of this perspective for analyzing administrative

studies have attempted to analyze international trends of government modernization (OECD, 2005), or have tried to assess the impact of administrative reforms (Wollman, 2003), Hesse, Hood, and Peters' book focuses on describing paradoxical situations, which are "apparent contradictions", the emergence of ironic, unintended, or unexpected consequences that diverse national governments have faced when trying to reform their administrative systems (see also Hood and Peters, 2004).

A first paradox, which can be observed when tacking stock of the administrative reforms of the last decades, is that most of the more reformist countries already had very efficient government structures (Wright, 1998). For example, it can hardly be said that the United Kingdom and Canada had inefficient governments, and yet both countries have been in the frontline of modernization practices and doctrines. On the other hand, other countries that have traditionally had less effective public administrations (Italy is frequently mentioned, but many Latin American countries could be mentioned as well), have remained relatively passive regarding reforms.

Two other paradoxes could be noticed in the light of the efficiency and results-oriented spirit of NPM-based reform projects. For a long time, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank stated that building more efficient governments should be a priority. These institutions also commonly understood efficiency as the possibility of obtaining savings (both in time and money) in daily government operation. Nevertheless, when reviewing recent reform processes, it could be noticed that efforts to change governmental structures and proceedings, can be a very expensive task (both in time and money!) (Pollitt, 2003). First, because public institutions and civil servants must invest many resources: training hours; design and purchase of new technologies; development of more complex monitoring mechanisms, etc. Second, because opportunity costs must be added to the quantifiable ones, that is, the costs of leaving aside organizational activities or functions during reform time.

At the same time, neo-managerial reforms have emphasized the importance of setting objectives, measuring achievements, designing indicators, and evaluating impacts in order to achieve best results. Paradoxically, nowadays there are but a few academic or official evaluations about the impacts, achievements, weaknesses, and unexpected effects of administrative reforms undertaken around the world. At the same time, it is just in recent years that the production of assessment methodologies, which allow us to know about changes attributed to administrative reform, has begun (Boyne, Farrell, Law, Powell, & Walker 2003).

Finally, perhaps the most evident paradox throughout these thirty years of administrative reforms is that, on the one hand, the ultimate objective of reforms is to improve the working of public administrations. Yet on the other hand, reforms also generate new problems for government's daily functioning (Wright, 1998). So it seems that administrative reforms are endless, continuous, and that each reform's consequences and effects (beyond their real positive aspects and concrete benefits), produce a new and indispensable process of government modernization.

reforms is that of the late Vincent Wright (1998).

ON THE MEXICAN ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM AND ITS PARADOXES

As it has happened in several international cases, when looking at the administrative reforms undertaken during President Fox's six-year term, it is possible to discover some paradoxical situations. Obviously, as Hesse, Hood, and Peters say, the definition of what is or is not a paradox depends to a great extent on what the observer points at as such. In this sense, the five paradoxes described in the following lines are a personal proposal, which may not be portraying the most important aspects of this government's modernization policy.

First Paradox

A first paradox of the administrative reform of the Fox administration has to do with the following issue: by promoting such an ambitious and wide reformist agenda (which certainly includes important topics such as tackling corruption, professionalizing the civil service, transparency and freedom of information, e-government, deregulation), reformers might have put at risk the success and perdurability of the changes they wanted to pursue...

As Herbert Simon (1997) said more than 50 years ago, civil servants live in a world of bounded rationality: the information they can compile; the time they have available for decision-making; their capacity to process demands and opinions; and the attention they can pay to each issue are limited. Taking into account this institutional setting –which perfectly reflects Mexican federal bureaucracies– the administrative reform proposals have faced a double challenge. First, the government's modernization agenda had to compete with other public policy issues; each agency's institutional missions; and even the political priorities of top-level federal public servants. Reforming the federal government's machine was a clear priority for the Presidential Office for Government Innovation (particularly created with that purpose in mind), and also for the Ministry of Public Administration, which historically has been the agency in charge of tackling corruption and improving performance governmentwide. Nevertheless, it was hard to expect that all other federal institutions (e.g., those which deal with poverty reduction, health and pandemics, road-construction) could dedicate the same attention to the matter. (Specially, in the case of small agencies, which also have very limited administrative support.)

At the same time, the administrative reform initiatives had to compete against themselves. While institutions and civil servants can only devote limited time, resources, and efforts to modernizing government, the available attention was further divided among reform priorities such as the implementation of the new professional civil service; the establishment of the also new freedom of information act's procedures; the design and monitoring of Citizens' Charters; the implementation of ISO 9000 regulations; the introduction of newly designed corruption control mechanisms, etc. While not every federal agency had to implement all these reform topics at the same time, they did have to report on most of them through various systems coordinated by

both the Presidential Office for Government Innovation, and the Ministry of Public Administration⁵.

Finally, the width and diversity of themes was not only a challenge at an institutional level, but also at an individual one. In the first place, those public officials that were responsible for guiding the implementation of the administrative reforms at each institution also kept their original agency responsibilities. In the second place, it was impossible that those civil servants could become experts in every topic in such a short timeframe. Each one of these reform topics has its own logic, terminology, and “operationalization”, and many of them are normatively and conceptually complex.

Thus, at the end of the day, the wide range of government reform issues faced a competition of priorities; limited time and attention; and organizations and civil servants that were kind of exhausted because of the multiple reform processes in which they had to participate. Under these conditions, instead of becoming institutional routines, the federal government modernizing principles and values faced the risk of simply getting “bureaucratized”; that is, in many occasions they ended up just as data included in progress reports required by the central agencies.

Second paradox

The Good Government Agenda, central piece of the administrative reform process from 2000 to 2006, was built around six reform strategies: “honest and transparent government”; “digital government”; “government that costs less”; “quality government”; “deregulated government”; and “professional government”. In this sense, an apparent second paradox that seemed to emerge in the past years was that these “strategic reform lines” were not as strategically coordinated as they should have been. On the contrary, at some points they were confusing and sent mixed signals to public institutions. Let us review an example.

One of the main problems that the GGA intended to solve was the excess of regulations, which prevents the federal government from performing in a flexible and innovative way. This excess of regulations was perceived both as a barrier for economic competitiveness and as a source for corruption. In order to deregulate and simplify the language used in official documents, some actions were introduced under this reform strategy: the creation of Agency Committees for Regulatory Improvement (comites the mejora regulatoria, or COMERIS); the “Lenguaje Ciudadano” (plain language) Program; and the deregulation of several public services procedures.

At the same time, the “quality government” reform strategy promoted, among other actions, ISO 9000 certification for federal offices. Even though ISO 9000 certifications are designed to standardize processes, and to build schemes of continuous improvement, their introduction in government areas (especially in those which do not offer direct services, and whose processes and products are not easy to standardize) actually generates internal overregulation. That is, exactly the opposite effect of the one the

⁵ This was particularly the case for the “Sistema de Metas Presidenciales” (Presidential Goals System), periodically assessed by the Presidential Office of Government Innovation. However, several areas within the Ministry of Public Administration also designed systems for following up on their particular topics.

“deregulated government” reform line was looking for. ISO 9000 systems are based in the development and writing of procedures, quality manuals and formats through which routines, predictability, and quality of services/products might be assured. At the same time, public organizations’ performance (in Mexico as in other places around the world) is based in a broad set of norms, procedures, acts and rules, which intend to assure a predictable and regular performance of the bureaucratic machinery. Thus, when introducing ISO9000 management systems there is a risk that problematic and paradoxical effects will arise: to the already broad number of internal regulations that exist in the government, more requirements, norms, and rules will be added. In other words, with the ISO 9000 quality certification process, the Mexican federal bureaucracies faced the danger of becoming even more bureaucratized. Consequently, the attempt to achieve a quality government apparently clashed with the hope of achieving a deregulated government.

At the same time, the GGA pursued to build a “government that costs less” (as in the reinvention efforts of the nineties). However, quality certification processes have important economic and opportunity costs, to the extent that audits and pre-certifications imply an additional budgetary expenditure for federal agencies. Besides, they also consume time and public resources, since public officers and institutions have to pay attention to other things instead of their work and other substantive duties. This means that the “quality government” reform strategy, as followed in the case of ISO 9000 certification, was not necessarily compatible with the “government that costs less” reform strategy. Yet an even more important matter was that, when inserting new procedures, norms and standards, public servants were prone to commit mistakes or simply behave in a contradictory way, since they had to follow two normative universes (administrative law *vs.* ISO certification), which were not harmonized. At this point, paradoxically, the attempt to build a quality government was probably diminishing the quality of governmental performance.

Third paradox

A third paradox of the Mexican administrative reform agenda of the previous years, and may be one of the most remarkable, had to do with the establishment of the new Professional Civil Service (PCS). Among the number of issues that were debated in the last thirty years, the implementation of a merit-based civil service system was probably one of the few that were permanently supported by political, academic, and governmental sectors. Nevertheless, as of today it would seem that the PCS is paradoxically one of the administrative reform strategies with less support everywhere (Martínez Puón, 2007).

In the academic area, the need to implement a merit-based civil service in the federal government (and of course, equivalent systems at other levels of government) was highlighted, again and again, by Mexican Public Administration scholars. María del Carmen Pardo referred to the topic as an “imperative to the country’s modernization”; Mauricio Merino emphasized how important it was to pass from “individual loyalties to public responsibilities”; José Luis Méndez underlined that “it seemed that we were vainly waiting for the professionalization Godot” (Méndez, 2000). For this reason, when the Professional Civil Service Act was passed in 2003, expressions of support flooded in among academic groups and the so-called “opinion leaders”. These were

accompanied by a myriad of articles in journals and papers in which the historical relevance of the issue was emphasized (Dussauge, 2005).

In the political arena, the interest to professionalize the public administrations was explicit from years ago. For instance, during the presidential campaign of 2000, every party and presidential candidate's platform emphasized how important it was to create a federal merit-based civil service. In 2003, when a proposed Civil Service Act was presented to the legislative power, all political forces unanimously voted in favour of it. This was an unusual achievement for President Fox's government, and was hardly repeated during his presidential term.

Finally, within the Federal government, the new merit-based system was warmly welcomed by most public servants. For some of them, the newly created PCS meant the arrival of an old wish. For many others, it simply implied the open possibility to develop an administrative career based on their own performance and merits, and not on their personal loyalties or political links with the governing elite.

At the end of President Fox's term, and with only little more than three years after its establishment, one could hardly think that the PCS faced a similar situation⁶. Academics and public opinion leaders' confidence and support vanished, partly because of the Civil Service Unit's lack of interest to publicly explaining the implementation process, or debating with subject-matter experts the alternatives that existed to solve some initial issues. Meanwhile, political parties and legislators also hardly criticised the new merit system. They argued that the system had shown significant failures, especially in the hiring subsystem, which was still perceived as highly politicized by both legislators and job applicants. Finally, the support from current public servants also diminished. For those who coordinated the implementation of the new system in each federal agency, the process had been non-transparent and extremely centralized by the Civil Service Unit, causing delays and conflicts. And for those public servants who wanted to pass from their non-tenured status to a "career civil servant" status one, the procedures to be followed were generally perceived as confusing, tedious, and not reliable.

Perhaps the clearest (and for some the saddest) evidence of this paradox lied in a situation faced in the administration's last year. At the end of 2005, a major political party submitted to the Congress a proposal to reform the PCS Act. The proposal lacked conceptual coherence and had a clear political objective: for all practical purposes, it sought to reinstate patronage over the appointment and dismissal of federal public servants. Despite this, there were only a few voices (both inside and outside the government) that tried to defend the new merit system; and the legal reform proposal was blocked just by a miracle and some last minute negotiations between the Ministry of Public Administration and the Congressmen.

⁶ The Civil Service regulations were significantly reformed in September, 2007, partly because of this early "crisis of legitimacy" of the merit system. The final section of this article offers some comments on the nature of this reform.

Fourth paradox

Although related to the previous one, the fourth paradox deserves to be treated independently: the initial model of administrative professionalization was clearly based in a set of managerial skills (leadership, team work, negotiation, results-orientation, strategic management), which obviously are also a set of interpersonal skills. However, the model was mainly implemented through an e-training system (“@Campus Mexico”). That is, through an impersonal (“virtual education”) learning system.

There is no doubt that on-line training programs can be really helpful. In fact, in our times, this kind of education/training might even be essential. When there is the need to communicate technical knowledge, homogeneous data, or information that anyone could find in a book, on-line education will probably be more efficient than other training mechanisms. Besides, taking into account the thousands of public servants that potentially can be part of the new merit system (about 42,000), the “@Campus Mexico” system might well be one of the few viable options (in both logistical and economic terms) to offer the same knowledge basis to all tenured civil servants.

However, there seems to be at least two contradictions in the way this professionalization model (based on the development of managerial skills) has been implemented. The first one has to do with a simple fact: not all public servants have to learn “managerial skills”. Certainly, those who are in the highest reaches of government (in positions which we could call “managerial”), or those who manage people and projects obviously require to improve their interpersonal and managerial skills, so that they can keep their offices on track. Yet not every member of the PCS is in a managerial position. On the contrary, most of them are in middle level, professional/technical offices, and have no staff to manage.

A second contradiction of the e-training system is the following: let us think about a public servant at a management level position, who really needs to develop leadership skills to appropriately manage her tasks and lead her staff’s performance. Under current circumstances, this public servant must turn to on-line courses from “@Campus Mexico”, which only offers some tips and theoretical information on leadership. Yet she will not have the option to participate in practical trainings. Similarly, a public servant who is at a middle level position and must acquire team-work skills (or needs to develop negotiation skills) will have to do it by himself, in his office, in front of his PC. And here is where the paradox becomes clearly evident: public servants must develop interpersonal skills in an absolutely impersonal environment.

Fifth paradox

The last paradox to be remarked in these pages is the following one: President Fox’s government is certainly the one that historically has set forth a greater number of initiatives to strengthen transparency, preventing and reducing corruption, and reinforcing accountability in the federal government. However, after those six years of continuous reforms, it resulted hard to objectively know whether the federal government was doing better than before on these topics. At the same time, it would seem as if the public opinion just thought exactly the opposite.

At the very beginning of his administration, President Fox created the Interagency Commission for Transparency and Anti-Corruption in the federal government (December 4th, 2000). This Interagency Commission apparently succeeded in setting the fight against corruption as a permanent topic in almost all federal agencies' agendas, and not only as the Ministry of Public Administration's sole responsibility, as it was formerly the case. Furthermore, by means of its interagency (transversal) agreements and the agency-specific operational programmes, the Commission has implemented actions that probably allowed to preventing and tackling the various types of corruption that affect the federal government.

The "Rendición de Cuentas" (accountability) program; the "Blindaje Electoral" program (a policy developed to prevent the electoral use of public resources); and the social controllership program are other good examples of how the former government sought to transform administrative routines. Regarding the first case, it would be hard to say that any previous government attempted to prepare, organize, and publish so many "white papers" and complementary documents, so that the new administration could have all relevant information about public programs in order to smoothly begin its duties; and society could have full access to information on government's programs and policies. In the case of the "Blindaje Electoral" program, the federal government developed (for the first time in Mexico's history) a complete, coherent policy to protect social programs and public resources from electoral and political interests (Díaz de León and Dussauge, 2006). In the third case, federal agencies were continuously in touch with several NGOs and academic institutions, and invited them to monitor the performance of public sector organizations. This government-led effort to promote social controllership and government accountability would have hardly happened in previous administrations.

Finally, in 2002 a new federal Freedom of Information Act was published, with the federal government being one of its main designers and advocates. Furthermore, towards the end of the administration, it seemed as if the majority of federal agencies had fulfilled their responsibilities in terms of the new transparency law: they had published through the internet all the information they are required by Article 7 of the law; and they had timely replied citizens' access to information requests. (A revealing fact was that, from the total of government replies, only 5% had been submitted for revision to the Federal Institute of Access to Public Information, created as an independent institution responsible for resolving disputes between citizens and government institutions in FOI matters).

Despite all of these actions and changes, it is not easy to know whether corruption levels diminished during the past presidential term or not. Firstly, because measuring levels of corruption is not an easy task, and the tools that are currently available may not be appropriate for it yet (Sampford, Shacklock, Connors & Galtung, 2006). Secondly, and partially derived from the latter point, because there are no assessment methodologies yet that may allow us to learn about the effectiveness of our anticorruption policies. Thirdly, because the available information for the Mexican case sends mixed signals: Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index says that the levels of perceived corruption in Mexico have not really changed throughout the last 10 years. Transparencia Mexicana's Corruption and Good Government Survey shows that national levels of corruption were significantly reduced from 2001 to 2003, but then went up again in 2005 to the original 2001 levels. The Governance and

Business Performance Survey (conducted by two Mexican private institutions) seemed to show that there was a 50% decrease from 2002 to 2005, in the number of bribes paid both by national and foreign enterprises to public officials in order to influence the design and implementation of laws and regulations⁷.

Beyond this debate on whether levels of corruption were really reduced or not, mass media, civil organizations, and the public opinion in general would seem to think as if opacity and corruption had in fact increased, as shown by recent research conducted by Miguel Basáñez (2006). This could be attributed to many things: the publicly broadcasted images in which (former) local public servants appear to be committing corrupt acts; some reports in which federal agencies were blamed of classifying public information in an incorrect way, or of not having provided the requested information; the supposedly inappropriate participation of President Fox in the past federal elections. Apparently, all of this seemed to weigh more on the social imaginary than the transparency, accountability, and anticorruption policies pursued in the last six years.

As Ivan Krastev (2004) would say, perhaps what was happening in Mexico towards the end of the Fox presidency is not that corruption was at higher levels than before. It may well just be that present political conditions allowed the media and citizens in general to be more and better informed about corruption cases. And it could seem paradoxical that this was due, at least to some extent, to the transparency reforms promoted during those years.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The previous pages have attempted to highlight some contradictions that appeared during the implementation of President Fox's administrative reform agenda. Though a systematic assessment of these and other questions will need to be done in the following years, this overview allows considering some relevant points on the kind of topics and strategies that should be considered in the short term.

The new government of President Felipe Calderón (2006-2012) will face the challenge of designing its own administrative reform agenda. Although the natural trend is to set a clear difference with respect to the actions that were carried out in the previous administration, a more adequate option would be to firstly analyze in detail which achievements have been accomplished to this day. This is because of two reasons. First, when comparing the reform strategies and topics of the Mexican government with the international trends of reforms, it would seem that there are no huge differences. There are obviously different priorities and levels of consolidation, according to each country's context. But most of the issues promoted in Mexico have been present also in other countries, including the most developed ones (OCDE, 2005). Secondly, some of the reform efforts pursued during the Fox government were designed with a long term perspective. In this sense, these administrative reforms (for instance, the creation of a merit-based civil service) should not be seen as the triumph of a particular government.

⁷ For obtaining the exact numbers for each of these surveys, see www.transparency.org; www.tm.org.mx; and www.funcionpublica.gob.mx

On the contrary, they should be seen as a victory for the whole Mexican society; and they should be understood as State institutions that need to be consolidated for the sake of all.

This does not imply that the new government has to keep in its reform agenda the same issues as its predecessor. In the upcoming assessment, some topics might endure (*e. g.*, transparency, the fight against corruption, professionalization); others might be left aside; and newer proposals might also be included, such as the design of better policy evaluation systems; the establishment of more inter-agency coordination channels, as a means to increase policy coherence; and the development of modern mechanisms to invigorate the advantages of public-private partnerships, as well as the creation of policy design/policy-implementation networks, all of which are essential to modern democratic governance (Aguilar, 2006; Pierre & Peters, 2000). In the end, what will be important is that, beyond its specific initiatives, the new government does not throw away all past efforts, but carefully takes advantage of the achievements.

Furthermore, the new government will also have the challenge of thinking about the specific strategies to be followed when implementing the government reform agenda. In this sense, the paradoxes discussed here may provide some lessons. In the first place, it is clear that the new government should focus the administrative reform agenda in just a few issues. This will allow it to make good use of available resources and better monitor/assess the proposed transformations.

Secondly, the new agenda should be more strategic than the previous one, at least in five ways: establishing clear priorities since the beginning; setting forth a logical implementation sequence to prevent overlaps and competition among reform topics; adapting proposals to each ministry's context and institutions; inserting new information technologies as a complementary tool for administrative efficiency and professionalization, and not as magic solutions; and timely making adjustments to the reform agenda when they are needed.

Third, it will be necessary for those leading the administrative reform to have a closer relationship with stakeholders (academics, public opinion leaders, and legislators) since the beginning. Although establishing a dialogue with these actors may be difficult and costly, their opinion, advice, and even their critiques will be a helpful information source to improve the design and implementation of any reform. Besides, creating and strengthening spaces for dialogue can be politically profitable, to the extent that having the stakeholders' support will be probably useful more than once.

POST-SCRIPTUM.

THE UPCOMING ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM AGENDA:

THE BEGINNING OF YET ANOTHER ROUND OF PARADOXES?

In December 2006, President Felipe Calderón began his administration for the period 2006- 2012. While up to September 2007, the new government's administrative reform project had yet to be officially launched, it is possible to briefly analyze some initiatives that had already been advanced. Therefore, this post-scriptum (it was written a few months after finishing up the review of President Fox's initiatives) will attempt to provide an overview of these initial actions and ideas, paying particular attention to both their paradoxical aspects and (probable) unintended effects.

The first measure taken by President Calderón was the publication (in December, 4th, 2006) of an "Austerity Decree" (Decreto de Austeridad, 2006). The Austerity Decree's main explicit goal is to reach budgetary savings for 25,500 millions of pesos in 2007, "which will allow to maintain, improve, and intensify social programmes that have been effective for combating extreme poverty, given that social expenditure is the instrument that allow to Mexican people the universal access to health services, to quality public education, and to a life that is accord to their dignity" (p.1).

In order to reach that goal, the Austerity Decree established a set of administrative measures to be implemented governmentwide. In the first place, the decree reduced in 10% the wages of all senior level officials (most of them political appointees), including the President, State Secretaries and Undersecretaries, and the Heads of all federal agencies. In the second place, the decree established a 5% cut in FY2007 budget for all federal agencies (with the exception of national security agencies). In the third place, the decree also establishes additional measures that agencies should follow, such as reducing as much as possible all costs associated with membership to international organizations; promoting the consolidated acquisition of office materials, furniture, and IT services; and the implementation of new IT systems for management control, as well as new IT networks for internal communication. In the fourth place, according to the decree, all these administrative measures would need to be associated to the federal government's new Programme for Management Improvement. Finally, it is stated that both the Ministry of Public Finances and the Ministry of Public Administration are responsible for preparing further implementing regulations.

Although it is not clear yet whether the decree will reach its goal or not, a few points about its potentially problematic and paradoxical effects could be raised. To begin with, even if the Austerity Decree is basically a long list of proposed administrative changes, which seek to improve the management and control of budgetary and human resources, as well as the general management of public organizations, it could be said that it is mainly a political response to the highly contested 2006 presidential elections. In other words, despite its administrative content and implications, it would seem as though the decree's main purpose was to positively impact public opinion, rather than to improve the internal working of the federal bureaucratic machine or even that of social policy programmes.

On the one hand, for the last few years some academics have raised the issue that the salary levels for senior public servants are too high for Mexico's socioeconomic conditions, even when compared with salary levels in developed countries (Carrillo & Guerrero, 2002). Also, it is true that the overall management of the federal bureaucracy can still be improved, and that important long-term savings may be generated if newer, more efficient control and IT systems are put in place. On the other hand, some of the main contents of the decree are remarkably similar to those advocated by another former presidential candidate, whom announced that in the case of winning the presidency, he would cut government salaries, reduce government spending, and increase the funding for social programmes. In this sense, the Austerity decree looks more like a policy oriented to reduce the political polarization caused by the 2006 electoral process, or an effort to approach President Calderón's administration to left-wing political groups (or both), than a clear set of measures for saving taxpayer's money, improving bureaucratic performance, or obtaining additional resources for funding social policy programmes.

A clearly paradoxical aspect of the Austerity Decree has to do with the implementation of new IT systems and networks. While the decree's main goal is to produce savings (and better IT technologies could be certainly helpful for that), it is also true that the design and implementation of newer IT solutions tends to be very costly in several ways, at least in the short term. Thus, as it happened with some of President Fox's Good Government Agenda's strategic lines, the decree's objective and its proposed actions in the IT field seem to be running in opposite ways, and some of the proposed savings might risk being cancelled out if the IT solutions are implemented.

Similarly, an unintended effect, that partly arose as a consequence of the Austerity Decree's implementation, is related to the way human resources are managed inside the federal government. As it has been mentioned before, the decree seeks to produce savings by improving internal control systems, including those for managing HR. But, for all practical purposes, this has basically meant that most middle-level civil service positions (those below the level of Deputy Director-General) that became vacant during FY2007, would be kept in that status until obtaining the Ministry of Public Finance's clearance. The implicit argument for so doing was that, as long as there were vacancies, the government would be saving money for those salaries that were not being paid.

However, this action did not necessarily take into account that understaffed agencies might not work as efficiently as it is needed, since some public goods and services may be underprovided; or public servants might simply become more prone to commit mistakes because of higher stress conditions and/or increased daily workloads. In this scenario, the government would be generating some monetary savings, but at the same time it might also be incurring into other non-quantifiable, non-visible expenditures. Above all, the underlying logic of the Austerity Decree revived the old idea in Mexico's public administration that job vacancies should be kept in that status for as long as it is possible. In this perspective, human resources are a cost to be reduced, and not the indispensable asset that high-performing organizations require for providing high-quality public services (Dussauge, 2004), as the creation of the Professional Civil Service in 2003 would imply.

A second important initiative that has taken place during President Calderón's first year is the publication (September, 6th, 2007) of a new set of rules for managing the

Professional Civil Service (Reglamento del Servicio Profesional de Carrera, 2007). This new regulatory framework attempts to decentralize the management of most HR systems to federal agencies that are part of the PCS system. From the Ministry's perspective, this will provide agencies with increased flexibility for speeding up hiring procedures, as well as for better adapting training, developing, and appraising methods to each agency's requirements. For balancing the decentralization measures, the new regulations also give the Ministry of Public Administration additional supervising authorities, in order to regularly check and assess the way in which agencies are recruiting and managing their personnel.

At first glance, the reform sounds appropriate for at least two reasons. As it was mentioned above, the initial implementation of the PCS had been highly problematic, partially due to the Ministry of Public Administration's tendency to over-centralize and over-regulate HR tools and activities (particularly those involved in hiring new civil servants) (Martínez Puón, 2006). In this sense, the new rules are certainly closer to the original intent of the Civil Service Law, which seek a more decentralized framework than the one that has been working during the past three years. And from an international perspective, the newer regulations look also adequate, as they are in tune with HRM decentralization trends that had been in vogue around the world for the last two decades (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000; Suleiman, 2003).

Yet, the recent experience in Mexico may also suggest that the outcomes of this reform might differ from those expected. In the first place, because some agencies have already shown (at least in some cases) their willingness and ability to avoid central controls, in order to influence the hiring process and benefit certain applicants (Ramos, 2007; Solís, 2007; Martínez Puón, 2007). Therefore, by decentralizing hiring authorities in a cultural environment that has not evolved as quickly as the institutional (legal) framework, the civil service reform may not only increase HR flexibility, and speed up recruitment and selection procedures; it might also pose the risk of returning to patronagebased appointments, even if that is done after (supposedly) following merit-based procedures (Méndez, 2007).

In the second place, in the last three years the Ministry of Public Administration (particularly its Civil Service Unit) has not adequately performed its overseeing role on agencies' implementation of civil service procedures. Therefore, it would seem unlikely that this condition might radically change in the short term. By just increasing the supervisory authorities without looking at other current structural limitations (lack of personnel, adequate training, ill-designed organizational routines, contradictory instructions), the reform may simply overwhelm the Ministry of Public Administration's staff with additional guidelines and bureaucratic activities, which may further decrease the effectiveness of the general control systems (Olsen, 2007; Dussauge, forthcoming).

A third and final initiative that could be briefly discussed is the Programme for Management Improvement, PMI, which is based on the Chilean administrative reform experience (Programa de Mejoramiento de la Gestión, 2007). While the PMI is still at its final planning/design stages, it has already been under discussion with most federal agencies and the federal legislature. The PMI will probably become the most important administrative reform strategy of President Calderón's term, equivalent to President Fox's Good Government Agenda discussed above. It attempts to develop "medium term

(administrative) improvements that systematically orient the management of public organizations towards results achievement". The PMI's main objective is to "contribute with information about institutional performance and management, both for budgetary decision-making and for improving policies and programmes and accountability, with an objective assessment of both achieved and expected results of institutional activities. The focus of the program is to strengthen, gradually, institutional competencies and capacities, pushing for the adoption of this framework and leading public servants towards the achievement of impacts and results that have value for citizens" (p. 10).

As in the case of the other initiatives, it could be argued that the PMI also comes with its own paradoxical aspects. Firstly, it is very clear that the PMI underlines the importance of results, performance, and programme evaluation as key components of effective public management. However, the design and future implementation of the PMI does not seem to have been preceded by a (more or less) rigorous assessment of the former Good Government Agenda's achievements, failures, and unintended consequences. Similarly, it is not clear either whether the Mexican government chose the Chilean reform experience as a model after having assessed its performance "pros and cons" (including also an evaluation of other relevant international models of administrative reform and management for results [Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000]). Because of all this, the Mexican government might be facing the risk of repeating some of the mistakes and limitations incurred by former administrative reform efforts in both Mexico and Chile.

Secondly, by attempting to link performance, results, and evaluation with budgetary decisions, the PMI may well just end up as another failed reform effort. Because of its budgetary implications, the PMI (as well as the Austerity Decree discussed above) has put the Ministry of Finance back in the table of administrative reform discussions, jointly with the Ministry of Public Administration. While this is not necessarily a bad idea, it certainly comes with some risks. In the short term, the involvement of these two ministries (which clearly have different reform priorities/perspectives/values), may attract most of their attention into negotiating reform procedures, logistics, implementation details, and coordination issues. For an initiative as the PMI, which is built around the importance of outputs and outcomes, this strong focus on processes is a bit paradoxical, if not frankly problematic.

In the longer term, the joint participation of these two agencies in designing and implementing the PMI may get even riskier, as shown by recent history. During the nineties, both ministries struggled around the issue of which of them should hold leadership and control over the administrative reform agenda. As a consequence, the development and implementation of a merit-based system for the federal government, which was part of President Ernesto Zedillo's modernization agenda, remained stalled for the whole 1994-2000 presidential term (Guerrero, 1998; Arellano and Guerrero, 2000). With the two ministries sharing again the design and implementation of the key administrative reform initiatives, one can only wonder whether the past (bad) experiences will happen again.

But let us hope they will not. For there would not be a worse paradox for a reform initiative like the PMI, focused on performance and results, than to remain as yet another wishful thinking about how to reform the Mexican public sector.

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