

Fox squandered opportunities

Mexico hardly changed despite the president's charisma

He came in like a breath of fresh air only five years ago, blowing away all the fog of corruption and historic authoritarianism. Tall and handsome, he was the Mr. Coca-Cola of

Mexico, a wealthy rancher and a modern candidate.

He not only defeated the Institutional Revolutionary Party (the infamous PRI), which had ruled the country with a world-class talent

for nepotism for 71 years, he defeated the corrupt and class-ridden past of Mexico. Everybody believed that Mexico would finally become a modern country.

But as Vicente Fox prepares to leave the presidency next July he is not so much a man



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working pretty well. This is important because it will

micro level, where reforms are so necessary, there is literally nothing. In old Mexico, where there is little between the state oil revenues of \$27 billion and remittances sent back home by the millions of Mexicans in the States, \$18 billion – statism is all too alive and well.

It is still next to impossible, for instance, to start a small business in Mexico. On every level, initiative is something you take with you by escaping to the United States.

There is still virtually no civic involvement on the part of the Mexican people, no voluntary organizations, no family foundations – and thus no accountability, allowing corruption to flourish. Forty families still own 60 percent of Mexico, and the old dependency culture, plus the famous culture of impunity thrives.

One political/diplomatic source tied in well with the government comments: There is more introspection, more attempts to find out what is wrong inside. But government leaders just don't know how to take a dysfunctional political system and transform it into a workable modern state. Fox started the process of defining a modern Mexico, but that definition has not yet been turned into action.

has become a specialist on



Georgie Anne Geyer

pointment as a mystery. What happened to the hero that he made so few reforms amid such unique opportunity? What happened to the man on the white charger in a naturally rich country where half the population still rides on donkeys?

The president himself, in a comprehensive summing up last week, made two major statements. His intention, he told the board of the daily Universal, was to leave a country with a solid economy, without devaluations or monetary crises, and in this manner to carry through an electoral process that is democratic and fulfilling (*alegre*) for the people.

As for the United States, he dismissed the early hope of rapprochements with the Bush administration and said only that he would "never tolerate violations of the human and labor rights of Mexicans [in America] or violence on the border."

That odd mixture of traditional economics without reform and typically baseless, paranoid resentment of El Norte only confused people still further.

"A lot has happened," Dr. Jorge Shabat, a leading political scientist associated with the Center for Research and Teaching in Economics, commented to me over lunch. "It's just not exactly what we expected. The president has consolidated a free press." You can find total freedom even in the electronic media.

Related to that, the biggest reform is in access to public information. Today, anybody can request information from any government office, and it's

spark many other changes. Knowing everything can be published is a way to dissuade corruption.

"Then there is a law establishing a professional public service," Shabat said, "so people are chosen because of content and not loyalty to party."

Shabat paused. "That's it," he summed up.

Young journalists like the TV analyst Gabriel Guerra feel that "President Fox has failed on every level, because the administration let so many opportunities pass and didn't do anything with the window of political time they had.

"You can blame Congress all you want for the mistakes, but so many things could make a difference that don't require constitutional or parliamentary action. They had this opportunity – and they squandered it. Things like reducing the bureaucracy, simplifying the tax collection, upgrading the infrastructure.

Functioning government

"To their credit," Guerra said, "the macro-economic side is stable, and they resisted the temptation to be authoritarian. Perhaps that's the final legacy – they've proved to us that a country can function without a strong civil government."

Fredo Arias-King, a respected analyst who worked closely with Fox in his cam-

transitions from authoritarian to democratic regimes, complains that President Fox could have "reinvented the country dramatically with what are called second-generation reforms," such as the transitions in Eastern Europe. "He could have cut the Gordian knot of bureaucratic red tape, monopolies, obstacles to foreign investment, the Byzantine tax code, criminal networks in government, a bloated public sector and the lack of property rights.

"Instead," Arias-King told me, "the elites won't let the pie grow, and the economy is still choked by monopolies and oligopolies."

To those still willing to give the president the benefit of any doubt at all, Fox has done well on a few levels. He is an honest man and he cares about his country. He has begun changing some of the suffocating old statist structures. Congress has learned to work together somewhat better. The judiciary is emerging as a somewhat independent force. And everyone expects that next July will see a real and transparent presidential race.

Poverty is down, but nobody knows how much. NAFTA has doubled trade with the United States in 10 years, but no one really knows what it has or hasn't accomplished.

On the other hand, on the

When the presidential elections come next July, there will be three candidates – from the center-right party of Fox, from a center-left party and from the old PRI. But Vicente Fox is leaving a disappointed people wondering: If the transitional steps toward modernization could not be accomplished by this gifted man, can they or will they be achieved by anybody?

Contact Georgie Anne Geyer at Universal Press Syndicate, 4520 Main St., Kansas City, MO 64111.

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