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01 **Chapter**

02 **The Crisis of Democracy in Mexico:**
03 **Chronicling the Dismantling of**
04 **Democratic Institutions**

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06 **Abstract**

07 In recent years, Mexico has experienced significant transformations in the
08 structure and functioning of its democratic institutions. After decades of authoritari-
09 anism, the twenty-first century illuminated the regime with an incipient democracy
10 that was consolidated little by little. However, this process has been affected by the
11 current regime that threatens the main institutions that support Mexican democracy.
12 For this study, we will use a descriptive-explicative methodology by describing and
13 contextualizing the phenomenon of democratic regression and sociopolitical changes
14 in Mexico, seeking to explain the causal relationships and underlying dynamics
15 between the institutional dismantling created by President AMLO's regime and
16 Mexico's democratic decay that affect institutions, their functioning and the bal-
17 ance of powers among other aspects. The fundamental hypothesis is that for several
18 decades, the Mexican political system was building a set of institutions that allowed
19 an important democratic advance and that these institutions have been systemati-
20 cally dismantled since 2018, causing a regression of democracy in Mexico. The main
21 indicator of this evolution is the deterioration of the institutional framework that
22 has been violated and threatened in the last 5 years, according to the main evidence
23 described. Finally, some observations are made to avoid further affecting the demo-
24 cratic advance in Mexico.

25 **Keywords:** political system, democracy, government, institutions, Mexico

26 **1. Introduction**

27 The world is currently experiencing times of change, or even more so, a change
28 of epoch. We dare to call it that because it involves the metamorphosis of the social
29 system as a whole, that is, it implies severe alterations in the political subsystem,
30 the normative subsystem, the economic subsystem, and the cultural subsystem.
31 From the beginning of the seventies to date, we can notice structural changes in all
32 spheres of society, and therefore, the social sciences have the challenge of trying to
33 describe, explain, and predict these changes from each of their scientific perspectives.
34 Sociology, political science, international relations, political communication, and

01 economics, among other social disciplines, address an abundant agenda that offers
02 more questions than answers due to the complexity and speed of the changes gener-
03 ated around the world and in all areas.

04 Additionally, with the traumatic emergence and global spread of the COVID-19
05 pandemic in 2020, which accelerated and marked, in our opinion, a breaking point
06 in these processes of social transformation, we could affirm without a doubt, as the
07 political scientist Subirats (2016) points out, that we are indeed facing a change of era.
08 Precisely because of the magnitude and complexity of the changes, one of the central
09 problems of scholars of these issues is the lack of paradigms that allow us to glimpse
10 the viable paths to face the challenges of the conjuncture and the change of the era.

11 Transformations in the political sphere are multifactorial. On the one hand, from
12 a global perspective, the causes can be explained by various converging political
13 processes. Undoubtedly, the exhaustion of the welfare state model and the resurgence
14 of the neoliberal model at a global level, the modification of the correlation of forces
15 due to the weakening of the Soviet model and the emergence of China, the deteriora-
16 tion of democratic systems and the reappearance of populism and the extreme right
17 are some of the processes that illustrate these causes. To some extent, it is precisely the
18 process of globalization that triggers this transformation. It is a rupture that causes
19 the change of era. The fall of the Berlin Wall marked a milestone in world history
20 by symbolizing the collapse of communism and the victory of capitalism. From the
21 political perspective, it would seem the final triumph of liberalism over socialism, but
22 the consequences transcend the democratic model, calling into question this model of
23 political regime.

24 However, it gave rise to a sense of living a rupture of the world order that does not
25 seem to make sense. This is how an internationalist describes it (Laidi, 1997: p. 25),
26 when he affirms that, as a consequence of the end of the Cold War, the elements
27 that give meaning to world history are dislocated: foundations, unity, and purpose.
28 Apparently, he says, “market democracy triumphs, but it proves incapable of sustain-
29 ing the debate on its foundations. Political, economic and financial imbalances lend
30 themselves less and less to a common key interpretation.”

31 In this paper, we will focus on the crisis of one of the oldest paradigms of the
32 political field, which is democracy. Undoubtedly, democracy as a political regime at
33 the global level is going through a crisis with greater or lesser risk depending on the
34 geographical, economic, cultural and of course political context. For the study, a
35 qualitative methodology derived from an analysis of the information that considers
36 some of the most important references of recent years on the subject of democracy
37 has been used. In the same way, official reports were reviewed that help explain the
38 most important transformations in the field of the last 25 years. It is based on an
39 eminently political approach. A tour of recent changes in contemporary democracies
40 is made, and above all, it is applied to a specific case that is the incipient Mexican
41 democracy. To this end, emphasis will be placed on the deterioration of this democ-
42 racy in the period 2019–2023, considering the gradual institutional attack to which
43 it has been subjected during that period. Based on a theoretical delimitation, the
44 historical context of Mexico’s democratic transition during the past half century will
45 be placed and contrasted with recent evidence of the institutional evolution of vari-
46 ous fundamental elements of democratic systems. Subsequently, government actions
47 and decisions implemented in the last five years that substantially impact the func-
48 tioning of democracy and put at risk the political stability and democratic governance
49 of Mexico will be reviewed. Finally, some road maps will be pointed out to prevent the
50 institutional deterioration of Mexican democracy.

2. Theoretical framework of democracy as a form of government of a political regime

We will begin our conceptual delimitation by defining the political regime. According to Duverger and Bobbio (Cited by López: 2014, p. 212), the political regime is composed of a set of political institutions of a social system, according to the first, and a set of institutions that regulate the exercise of power and the values that animate the life of those institutions, according to the second. In both cases, we can notice the importance of institutions as determining elements of the political regime, and their specific character referred precisely to power.

In a broad sense, the political regime can be defined (Gómez: 2018, p. 33) as the set of conditions that political interactions have, which is composed of: (1) Values: guiding principles of action, objectives to be achieved; (2) Standards: elements that explain which procedures are acceptable in the transformation and distribution of demands; and finally; (3) Authority structures: formal and informal models in which power is organized, exercised and distributed. In a strict sense, the political regime refers to the normative and constitutional distribution and hierarchy of the public powers of the State, as well as to the institutional and legal processes applicable to its renewal and operation. Therefore, while the classification of the political regime refers to the parliamentary or presidential model, the democratic character will be determined by the political system and its interrelation with the other economic, cultural, and normative aspects, which allows the classification of these systems as authoritarian, totalitarian, or democratic. As is evident, this conception transcends the political dimension. For this reason, democracy is conceived as a system of harmonious coexistence, an ideal of community life as proposed by the American philosopher John Dewey. This is how Aguilera explains it: “democracy is not for Dewey simply a form of government, but an ideal of community life, that ([1], p. 45), ([2], p. 86) *way of life* in which men enter into community, because actively, freely, reflectively, tolerantly and critically they communicate and participate in the direction of common affairs.”

Despite being a human invention that we inherited from Classical Greece with more than 2500 years of life, and being, without a doubt, the one that offers the greatest legitimacy to rulers in turn, it is still a fragile and vulnerable form of government due to its nature based on light and malleable citizen participation. Reflection on its meaning and scope has since been a constant task of political scientists, philosophers, and political actors of all times. A brief overview of its evolution will be provided below.

3. From ancient democracy to modern democracy

The reflection on democracy as a form of government was born to the Greeks, and its etymology derives precisely from two Greek words: *demos*, “people” and *cratos*, “power”. Therefore, democracy means the government of the people. In reality, it means that authority emanates from the people and that the will is constituted through the participation of the citizens who with their voice make the decisions of the polis, of the community. Evidently, this form of government is distinguished from others that have characteristics that can be considered perverse or corrupt, according to the ends pursued by the rulers. Aristotle, in his work *Polítique* [3], exposes his general theory of constitutions, where from an analysis of the concepts of city,

01 citizen, and political virtue, elaborates a classification with six possible forms of
02 government, good or corrupt, according to two variables: the number and virtue of
03 the members of the government. In this order of ideas, the three virtuous systems are
04 monarchy (government of one), aristocracy (government of a few), and democracy
05 (government of the people), while corrupt governments are tyranny, oligarchy, and
06 demagoguery, which are oriented to interests alien to the collectivity, and not to
07 the common well-being that is the ultimate goal of government. In this conception,
08 citizen participation is clear in the democratic model, a fundamental characteristic
09 that will be the cornerstone of the modern democratic model and that is based
10 on universal suffrage. However, beyond the democratic character of the electoral
11 process and in particular universal suffrage in modern democracy, any society must
12 have procedures for making decisions about the social roles that correspond to each,
13 rules of coexistence that must be respected, priority objectives of a collective nature,
14 strategies necessary to achieve these objectives, as well as institutions and procedures
15 through which these activities will be carried out, among other aspects. All these
16 elements make up the institutional framework of modern democracy. Therefore,
17 under a democratic government, the majority directly or indirectly makes and
18 confirms the laws and elects and confirms the government's officers and policies. But
19 the minority that today disagrees with those policies or laws can become tomorrow
20 the majority, from which derives the value of political alternation today. Therefore,
21 in a democratic political system, minorities must retain the freedom to express their
22 opinions, promote them, and organize and try to gain followers. In turn, minorities
23 must abide by the laws and submit to them and the government, so that the political
24 system can function and maintain the possibility of one day turning citizens into
25 rulers. For this reason, the following are assumed as democratic rules: the freedom to
26 criticize and oppose the government; protection of minorities; the loyalty of minori-
27 ties to the political community and its patterns of government. This means respecting
28 the constitutional and institutional framework of the political system to maintain
29 governability. In this regard, various political scientists of the twentieth and twenty-
30 first centuries have reflected extensively on these rules, providing sufficient criteria
31 to frame the modern democratic model, and establishing the premises of democratic
32 governance today ([3], p. CIII)¹.

33 In modern political systems, the main actors in the democratic process are politi-
34 cal parties, and the main way of doing politics for most members of the community
35 is through elections. The legitimacy of these actors depends on the consensus that
36 is verified in each election. In this sense, Bovero's definition of democracy as "the
37 institutionalization of public confrontation through which opinions and prefer-
38 ences cease to be private idiosyncrasies, can be nuanced and shaped by reciprocal
39 action, converge and regroup and thus constitute the basis of considered decisions"
40 is pertinent. It is therefore the political system that fulfills the function of producing
41 collective decisions with three attributes: maximum consensus; minimum taxation;
42 and serving as a mechanism for control over the behavior and decisions of rulers and
43 institutions ([4], p. 27), ([5], p. 56).

44 Robert Dahl ([6], p. 47), for his part, after mentioning that there are certain
45 criteria for a democratic government to be constituted as such, warns us about the
46 importance of citizen participation and, above all, of the final control that citizens
47 must maintain over the public agenda. Indeed, Dahl's approach draws attention to

¹ See: Robert Dahl, Giovanni Sartori, Umberto Cerroni, Norberto Bobbio, Michelangelo Bovero, among others.

his repeated warning for the control of the public agenda by citizens as a permanent participatory mechanism to guarantee the effective representativeness of the interests of society. For this reason, he insists on analyzing and controlling certain aspects that prevent the risks of degeneration of the democratic system to an oligarchic system. These aspects that Dahl points out are (1) the stabilization of social inequalities; (2) the formation of civic awareness; (3) the distortion of the public agenda by rulers; and (4) the usurpation of ultimate control over politics. As we can see, this approach goes beyond the electoral sphere and is placed in a more participatory environment. In this order of ideas, we can affirm that the development of democracy must be measured by the increase of spaces for participation. If we add to this Bovero, the fundamental thing is debate, that is, he conceives democracy in terms of public reasoning with due opportunity for debate as well as interactive participation and reasoned encounter. So, we have that the cornerstone of participatory democracy is precisely citizen inclusion and control of the public agenda that Dahl proposes. In this, we distinguish then, the presence of social demands that contribute to objective and just discernment, such as the incorporation of relevant information, the plurality of points of view, discussions, and open public debate. With these elements, we are in the presence of constructive and effective reasoning typical of social capital, which in our opinion forms the focus of John Dewey's democratic model. For this American thinker, democracy is a tireless struggle for freedom and equality. That is why he understands participatory democracy from an approach that has to do with the ethics of the citizen and the development of social capital. From practices of plural and peaceful coexistence, it is possible to build a mature and solid system of public decisions, which is effective in the conduct of community life. In this context, Aguilera clearly describes the value of social capital in this philosopher's democratic model by stating, "Dewey sees in moral democracy demands that bind individuals and groups. Society is a network of intersubjective relations where individuals are results, products, and participating agents of this social swarm. In this way, individuals can be required to participate according to their capacity and needs in the activity and values of the group." Later, he states the specific value of the ethical categories that identify social capital, such as civility, solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, and tolerance, and that are part of the civic education that democracy requires. The moral significance of democracy, Dewey tells us, "establishes that the supreme test of all political institutions and all devices of industry is in the contribution of each of them to the final development of each of the members of society." We can conclude with Dewey that democracy must facilitate participation, involving not only individuals but also emphasizing the role of social groups. In this way, social capital contributes in two ways. On one hand, individuals must participate according to their capacity in the activity and values of the group, and, on the other, groups must liberate and help develop all potentialities of individuals in accordance with community interest, which builds democratic republican life. Below, we will briefly describe the democratic transition of the Mexican political system ([6], p. 47), ([7], p. 64).

4. The democratic transition in Mexico

The Constitution of the United Mexican States, originally approved by the Constituent Assembly of 1917 in its article 40, states that it is the will of the Mexican people to constitute itself as a representative, democratic, secular, and federal

01 Republic. However, this democratic character became an ideal arising precisely from
02 the demand for effective suffrage and not reelection that gave rise to the Mexican
03 Revolution.

04 Indeed, the demand for democracy in our country has a long history. Since the
05 Mexican Revolution, with Francisco Madero's aforementioned motto of effective
06 suffrage and not reelection, the people of Mexico have fought tirelessly to establish
07 a democratic model that gives the qualities required of this system of government to
08 our political institutions. It should be said that, although in the very conception of
09 democracy, substantial differences can be found when considering it as a reality or as
10 an ideal, as Robert Dahl points out, it is difficult to categorically place the beginning
11 of the democratic transition in the Mexican political system at a certain moment.
12 We can affirm that there is consensus among political scientists and historians in
13 the sense that the post-revolutionary Mexican political system was characterized
14 by authoritarian and populist practices with certain democratic features that failed
15 to qualify the regime as democratic. An example of this is the student movement
16 that began in May 68 and the violent repression to which civil society was subjected
17 on October 2 of that year, with hundreds of deaths, murders, and disappearances.
18 Another example of authoritarian repression was the attack by paramilitary forces
19 on civilian groups perpetrated by the government of Mexico City on June 10, 1971,
20 an event known as the "*Halconazo*", and which also counted dozens of dead and
21 disappeared. These two events reflected the imperative to open the system to civilian
22 forces and support that would give legitimacy to governments. To this end, President
23 Echeverría opted for a populist policy that only accentuated the demand of the political
24 forces.

25 For this reason and considering the structural transformations that have taken
26 place in Mexico during the last quarter of a century and the present, we can conventionally
27 place very important democratic advances, especially since 1977, when Jesús
28 Reyes Heróles, a distinguished jurist and ideologue member of the ruling party at
29 the time, the PRI, promoted an electoral reform that would detonate the democratic
30 transition in Mexico. In 1976, Reyes Heróles, with a strong ideology of social liberalism,
31 was appointed Minister of the Interior during the administration of the President
32 of Mexico at the time, José López Portillo. As head of this office, he promoted the
33 creation of the Federal Law on Political Organizations and Electoral Procedures
34 (LFOPPE), approved in 1977, a mechanism that sought to democratize the electoral
35 system by allowing the participation of partisan minorities in Congress ([8], p. 33).

36 With this legislation, he detonated a fundamental advance toward the democracy
37 of a hegemonic and rigid system, which would take decades to finalize in true plurality
38 of political ideas and a desired transition to democracy. The main contributions
39 of this were: (1) That political parties were defined as entities of public interest with
40 equal right of access to the media, (2) The validity of their registrations was established
41 according to the electoral results, and (3) The number of representatives in
42 the Cámara de Diputados (Chamber of Deputies) was expanded from three hundred
43 to four hundred—where three hundred would be elected by relative majority and
44 one hundred based on the principle of proportional representation. This change in
45 the legal framework would not be enough to promote political transition if citizen
46 social movements, which were decisive in the transition, were not promoted. This
47 is explained on the basis of two intense political processes. In the first place, by
48 the spontaneous citizen organization that caused the Mexico City's earthquake in
49 September 1985, before the immobility and ineffectiveness of the authorities to attend
50 the emergency, and secondly, and more specifically, in the political system with the

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01 process of effervescence of political participation during the electoral process that
02 took place in 1988 and that saw the birth of a political force of alternative national
03 scope to the two parties that traditionally disputed elections in Mexico, the PRI and
04 the PAN. This third force was precisely the Frente Democrático Nacional (FDN)
05 which would later become the PRD. Then, we place the main democratic advances
06 from this date and that the political institutions were configuring an institutional
07 system much more in line with what is conventionally understood by democracy,
08 opening new spaces for participation and institutions that guarantee this participa-
09 tion and a greater balance of powers. Thus, during the nineties, the Legislative
10 Assembly of the Distrito Federal was established, the Proportional Representation in
11 the Senate, the creation (1991) and later in 1996, the citizenization of the Instituto
12 Federal Electoral (IFE), the creation of the Federal Electoral Court, the election of the
13 Head of Government of the Distrito Federal, and the reform of the Judiciary, among
14 other factors that represented democratic progress. All these institutions derive from
15 structural reforms of the political system that had paid favorably to give institutional-
16 ity to democracy in our country. The Auditoría Superior de la Federación was also
17 created in 1999, and in 2002, the Instituto de Transparencia y Acceso a la Información
18 (INAI) and all this contributed to an institutional architecture that gave strength to
19 the balance of powers and, above all, to citizen empowerment. By 1997, the Cámara de
20 Diputados (Chamber of Deputies) no longer had a majority of the official party, and
21 3 years later, we would have a president emanating from the opposition ([9], p. 161).

22 However, the collective imagination conceived that the alternation that meant the
23 arrival of another party to the Presidency of the Republic in the year 2000, different
24 from the one that had held power for just over 70 years, was precisely the culmination
25 of the democratic transition. In reality, the democratic advance and not the culmina-
26 tion consisted rather in the fact that the balance of powers was strengthened by being
27 the party of the Executive, not a majority in Congress from then on. We had citizen
28 institutions, but it was limited to the electoral. For this reason, since 2000, we have
29 witnessed a strong Congress opposing the Executive, limiting the public agenda, and
30 thus favoring democratic processes. However, it should be noted that the unfortunate
31 intervention of the IFE during the electoral process of 2006 meant a very severe dele-
32 gitimization of all institutional progress that until then had been achieved, especially
33 in the electoral field. Despite this, until 2015 there was consensus among political
34 scientists and political actors on the democratic transition in Mexico, although faced
35 with failures and risks. As a natural consequence of this, there was the unprecedented
36 presidential election of 2018 that gave a wide triumph of around 30 million votes
37 to the supposed representative of the Mexican left, Andrés Manuel López Obrador.
38 Although there were great expectations regarding the reconstruction of the social
39 fabric and the recovery of citizen legitimacy after decades of simulations, party-
40 ocracy, corrupt governments, and a serious deterioration of governability, resulting
41 from an increase of power of organized crime. Contrary to expectations, even before
42 formally starting his term, decisions began to be made that did not correspond to
43 a government program or to a technical rationality. That is when the institutional
44 dismantling that has caused the gradual deterioration of democracy in Mexico begins
45 to take shape.

46 Based on the above, we will describe the main actions that affected the inflec-
47 tion of the democratic transition prior to 2018 in Mexico and gradually have come
48 to dismantle the most important institutions that safeguard the incipient Mexican
49 democracy and have affected democratic governance. To do this, we will first describe
50 the global context of the crisis of democracy around the world.

01 **5. Democracy in crisis: a global phenomenon**

02 It is important to mention that the current democratic crisis is not exclusive to the
03 Mexican case, nor to the Latin American region. Analyzing the European case, it is
04 observed that the creation of the European Union followed a technocratic design of
05 decision-making without promoting direct citizen participation, which resulted in
06 a democratic deficit. This deficit has contributed to strengthening successful anti-
07 European Union positions, such as Brexit, which contribute to political instability in
08 the region [10].

09 Likewise, in southern Europe and after one of the most relevant events of the
10 last decades in terms of democracy such as the Arab Spring, there is evidence of an
11 autocratic advance in the North African region, reaching talk of the existence of a
12 model of “competitive autocracy” [11].

13 On the other hand, Asia, although it has solid democracies such as Japan and South
14 Korea, is home to the most powerful autocracy in the world, China, which is increas-
15 ing its influence in the Far East. In addition, there is concern about a democratic
16 regression in India [12].

17 As can be seen, the democratic crisis is a global phenomenon. According to the
18 V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, the level of democracy enjoyed
19 by the average citizen is at 1986 levels, wiping out any progress made in 35 years. In
20 addition, an estimated 5.7 billion people live in autocracies in 2022, representing 72%
21 of the world’s population (Papada et al., [13]).

22 This is not only a political challenge, given that the global economy is also
23 affected. In 2022, the economies of autocratic countries accounted for 46% of
24 global gross domestic product, making evident the strengthening of these regimes
25 (Papada et al., [13]).

26 Latin America reproduces this trend. Following the methodology of The
27 Economist’s Democracy Index, which measures variables such as electoral pro-
28 cesses and pluralism, functioning of government, political participation, political
29 culture, and civil liberties, the region has suffered the largest democratic regres-
30 sion recorded in the last 20 years among all the regions studied (The Economist
31 Intelligence Unit, [14]).

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32 The Mexican case is no exception. According to the aforementioned Index, Mexico
33 registers the second largest decline in the Index rating in the region after Haiti and
34 El Salvador, autocratic nations, ranking as a hybrid regime in 89th place out of 167
35 countries [14].

36 According to Latinobarómetro, this situation worsens when it is detected
37 that there is no widespread rejection of authoritarianism in the opinion of the
38 population. For example, from 2020 to 2023, support for authoritarianism
39 increased from 22–33%, while in the same period, support for democracy fell from
40 43–35% [15].

41 **6. Democratic regression**

42 The emergence and proliferation of the phenomenon known as democratic regres-
43 sion raises a series of fundamental questions about the robustness, stability, and,
44 more intrinsically, the essence of contemporary democracy. Understanding the nature
45 of democratic regression is inherently multifaceted, requiring deep consideration of
46 its multiple dimensions, mechanisms, and manifestations.

01 Diamond [16] outlines a scenario where the “incremental strangulation” of
02 democracy prevails, emphasizing a process in which elected leaders, often rooted
03 in populist tendencies, erect a methodology of regression that is characterized by
04 the gradual decomposition of democratic institutions and values. This dismantling
05 is neither abrupt nor immediate; it is a meticulous erosion of institutional checks
06 and balances, the weakening of independent media, and the suppression of political
07 opposition. The gradual nature of this process allows these alterations, although sig-
08 nificant, too often go unnoticed or be trivialized until the damage to the democratic
09 structure becomes palpable and, in some cases, irreversible.

10 Contrasting this approach, Gerschewski [17] introduces a conceptual duality in
11 which he distinguishes between “erosion” and “decay” in the realm of democratic
12 regression. “Erosion,” according to Gerschewski, is an exogenously fueled phenom-
13 enon, likening it to the way natural elements, such as wind or water, gradually erode a
14 physical structure. External factors, which may include international pressures, global
15 economic crises, or geopolitical influences, erode the foundations of democracy in
16 ways that can be subtle and long-lasting. On the other hand, “decay” is conceptualized
17 as an endogenous process, similar to nuclear decay, where internal elements, such as
18 corruption, nepotism, and the erosion of democratic norms, act as catalysts for demo-
19 cratic degeneration from within.

20 This distinction between internal and external causes is essential to understand
21 the roots of democratic regression and, consequently, to formulate prevention
22 and mitigation strategies. The internal causes, associated with decline, require an
23 intervention approach that seeks to strengthen institutions from within, promoting
24 transparency, accountability, and active citizen participation. In contrast, external
25 causes, linked to erosion, could require a diplomatic and cooperative strategy, in
26 which democracies come together to resist common pressures and threats.

27 Integrating these perspectives offers a lens through which democratic regression
28 can be viewed as a process that can be simultaneously insidious and abrupt, subtle
29 and overt, depending on a confluence of factors and actors. Democracies, therefore,
30 must be vigilant and proactive, not only in protecting against external threats but
31 also in preserving the internal integrity of their institutions and values. The creation
32 of resilience mechanisms, both internally and externally, stands as an imperative
33 to safeguard democracies from the often imperceptible waves of regression and
34 deterioration.

35 Democratic regression, a phenomenon that has permeated various democratic
36 spheres around the world, is not an autonomous or automatic process. Rather, it is
37 driven, cultivated and, in many cases, meticulously orchestrated by specific actors
38 who navigate the political fabric of a nation. In this context, political leaders and gov-
39 ernment executives emerge as central actors, whose actions, ideologies, and strategies
40 are intrinsically intertwined with the processes of democratic regression.

41 Benasaglio and Kellam [18] provide a penetrating analysis of the role of leaders
42 and executives, especially those steeped in populist ideology, in facilitating and per-
43 petuating democratic regression. Populist ideology, which frequently pivots around a
44 narrative of “the people” against “the elites” and favors a concentration of power in a
45 charismatic leader, creates a breeding ground for democratic deterioration. Populist
46 leaders, under the cloak of popular will, may seek to dismantle democratic safeguards
47 and concentrate power, under the pretext of protecting and promoting the interests
48 of the people.

49 This role of leaders and executives in regression becomes even more critical when
50 examined through the lens of “incremental strangling” proposed by Larry Diamond.

01 Leaders, especially those with authoritarian or populist leanings, can employ subtle
02 but persistent strategies to undermine democratic institutions. Through the erosion
03 of checks and balances, the repression of opposition, and the manipulation of the
04 media, leaders can, step by step, degrade the democratic essence of a nation without
05 necessarily inciting immediate alarm or resistance.

06 The duality of populist leaders as presidents and executives is also crucial to
07 understanding the dynamics of regression. Presidents, as symbolic and functional
08 figures in government, have the power to influence the national narrative and guide
09 public policy. When this influence is combined with a populist ideology, presidents
10 can use their position to further the consolidation of power and the erosion of demo-
11 cratic norms. On the other hand, dominant executives, especially in systems where
12 institutional controls are fragile and the opposition is weak, may deploy an amalgam
13 of tactics to increase their authority and decrease political plurality.

14 The degradation of democracies does not unfold in a vacuum but is intricately
15 intertwined with a confluence of factors that converge to feed and perpetuate the
16 process of regression. The elements, whether internal or external, economic, social or
17 political, come together to create a scenario where democratic regression can flourish.
18 This network of factors converges not only to catalyze but also to shape the nature,
19 trajectory, and eventually, the impacts of democratic regression.

20 Diamond [16] highlights the importance of international factors in the dynam-
21 ics of democratic regression. The foreign policy of influential states and the global
22 balance of power emerge as significant variables that have the potential to influence,
23 either directly or indirectly, democracies worldwide. In a globalized environment,
24 where nations are intrinsically interconnected through economic, political, and social
25 networks, the decisions and actions of powerful states can reverberate across borders,
26 impacting the stability and quality of democracies in other regions.

27 Likewise, economic and social tensions, exacerbated by international factors, are
28 also distilled as crucial elements in the process of democratic regression. Challenges
29 such as economic inequality, corruption, and social instability can not only serve
30 as catalysts for regression but can also be used by populist and authoritarian leaders
31 as justification to consolidate power and erode democratic institutions in the name of
32 democracy, stability, and order.

33 Wunsch and Blanchard [19] highlight the diversity and variability in regression
34 processes, where converging factors can crystallize in a variety of forms and mani-
35 festations. Democracies can experience setbacks that are varied not only in terms of
36 their depth and form but also in their duration and persistence. This phenomenon is
37 not rigid and occurs in a wide range of modalities, from the gradual erosion of civil
38 liberties to the abrupt usurpation of power by autocratic leaders.

39 The multitude of underlying causes is also fundamental in understanding demo-
40 cratic regression. While some democracies may regress due to internal factors, such
41 as autocratic leadership and corruption, others may be precipitated into regression by
42 external factors, such as international pressure or global economic crises. This diver-
43 sity in the causes and manifestations of regression requires an analytical approach
44 that is equally diverse and nuanced, recognizing the multiple pathways through which
45 democracies can degenerate and regress.

46 The diversity in regression processes, highlighted by Wunsch and Blanchard, also
47 mentions the need to recognize the variability in the trajectories of democratic regres-
48 sion. Depending on the political, social, and economic context, democracies can
49 experience regression through different paths and processes. For example, while some
50 democracies may experience a rapid and profound retreat, others may experience a

01 gradual and subtle process. Underlying factors, whether internal, such as corruption
02 and autocratic leadership, or external, such as international pressure and economic
03 crises, can significantly influence the form and depth of regression.

04 Furthermore, it is vital to recognize that regression processes can be both direct
05 and indirect. In some contexts, regression can be evident and overt, as in the case of
06 military coups or autocratic usurpations of power. In others, it may be more subtle
07 and covert, manifesting itself through the gradual erosion of democratic norms and
08 the weakening of institutions from within.

09 The narrative of democratic regression is articulated through multiple strategies,
10 each deploying its own set of challenges and responses. In Gerschewski's perspective
11 [17], regression scenarios emerge through both direct and indirect strategies, each
12 with its own characteristics and threat profiles to democracy.

13 Direct strategies manifest themselves as notorious acts, where the usurpation
14 of power and the subversion of democracy are carried out in an open and, at times,
15 violent manner. Scenarios of military coups can be envisioned, where the armed
16 forces, motivated by a combination of discontent, conflict, and threat perceptions,
17 assume power by force, immediately overshadowing the democratic structure and
18 establishing a new order. Acts of usurpation of power can also be observed, where
19 leaders, through illicit means or exploitation of legal loopholes, seize and nullify the
20 democratic will, sometimes invalidating electoral results or modifying constitutions
21 to consolidate their position.

22 On the other hand, indirect strategies slip discreetly through the cracks of democ-
23 racy, eroding and weakening its foundations in ways that often go unnoticed until the
24 damage is palpable. In this context, the erosion of democratic norms is slowly infiltra-
25 ting the social and political fabric, with leaders employing tactics such as disseminating
26 disinformation, suppressing critics, and implementing laws that restrict freedom of
27 expression, all with the objective of weakening the foundations on which democracy
28 rests. This erosion is complemented by the weakening of institutions, where entities
29 that once served as pillars of democracy are manipulated, co-opted, and deprived of
30 their autonomy and ability to act as effective counterweights to the executive branch.

31 Using this analytical framework, the following section will present the political
32 context that originated the democratic regression in Mexico that has led to the institu-
33 tional dismantling that can be seen in the government regime in mid-2023.

34 **7. The institutional dismantling of democracy in Mexico**

35 As mentioned in the previous section, Mexico is experiencing a process of
36 democratic regression derived from an institutional dismantling carried out by the
37 ruling elite. As a starting point, it is pertinent to define the concept of institution.
38 Although it may be used as a synonym for “organization”, for this section, a broader
39 definition will be taken, such as that used by North, where institutions are under-
40 stood as the set of rules of the game accepted by society. In this way, when we speak of
41 institutional dismantling, we refer to the systematic violation of norms accepted in a
42 legal-political framework (1990).

43 To know the depth of this phenomenon, it is convenient to specify the Mexican
44 political context that gave rise to this democratic setback. The democratic transition
45 in Mexico is recent. Only in 2000 the opposition, represented by the PAN (National
46 Action Party), won the presidential election, after 70 years of a hegemonic party
47 regime, as was that of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party).

01 The long stay in power of the PRI regime caused trust in the institutions to be lost.
02 Faced with this phenomenon, an institutional framework was created that sought
03 to decentralize the political power of a preponderant executive for an institutional
04 redesign that favored the strengthening of the autonomy of its counterweights. For
05 this, autonomous bodies were created in key areas for democratic consolidation, such
06 as those in charge of organizing the elections and those responsible for implementing
07 the transparency policy of the Mexican State; both social demands derived from a
08 regime accused of perpetuating itself in power and to act discretionally.

09 The Mexican democratic transition was crowned with the victory of Vicente Fox,
10 presidential candidate of the PAN, in 2000, being the first president to come from
11 a party other than the PRI. This election was seen as a milestone in Mexico's politi-
12 cal history, as it meant a transition toward a more plural democracy. Later, Felipe
13 Calderón, also a PAN candidate, was elected in the 2006 presidential elections.
14 However, the short margin of just 0.56% of the votes with which Felipe Calderón
15 surpassed the candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador significantly diminished the
16 legitimacy of his government, giving rise to severe protests on the part of the latter.

17 After a 6-year term marked by a governance crisis in the country, 2012 saw the
18 return of the PRI, under the candidacy of Enrique Peña Nieto. During his term, Peña
19 Nieto implemented several structural reforms in areas such as energy, education,
20 and telecommunications. However, his administration also faced criticism in public
21 security, human rights (Ayotzinapa), and corruption scandals. This explains the
22 significant increase of almost 15% in the vote that went from 38.21 to 53.19, surpassing
23 the political participation in the election of Vicente Fox, which was the highest of the
24 three previous processes.

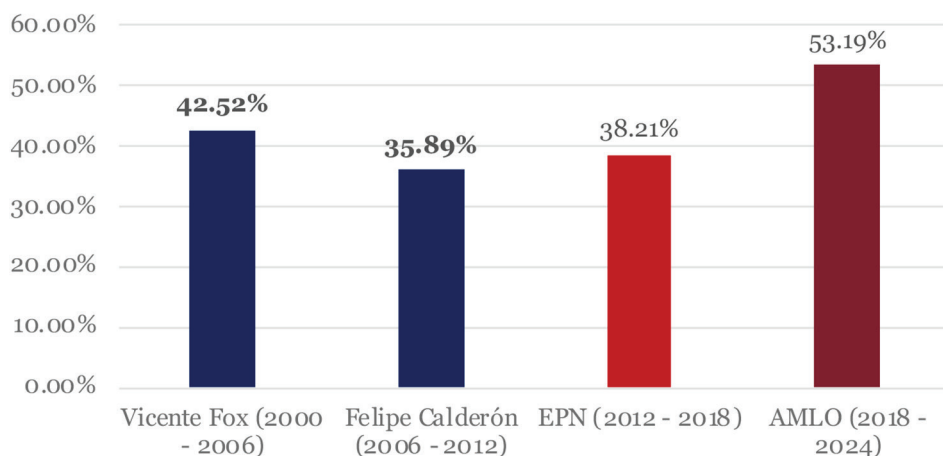
25 Although the above helped to the democratic strengthening of the country, the
26 growing unpopularity of the economic policy adopted by Mexico since the eighties
27 and multiple cases of corruption in the government contributed to creating a breed-
28 ing ground for the polarization of society. After participating in two presidential elec-
29 tions where he did not win, now President Andrés Manuel López Obrador managed
30 to channel popular disillusionment into a political project that brought him to power
31 in 2018, with a majority never seen since the democratic transition in Mexico, win-
32 ning with 53% of the votes in the presidential election and with political participation
33 greater than 63% of the registered electorate (see **Figure 1**).

34 As mentioned by Sánchez-Talanquer and Greene [24], this historic victory could
35 be seen as a decisive step toward the internalization of democratic norms across
36 the political spectrum, given that candidates from all major partisan blocs had won
37 the presidency, and state institutions proved capable of representing the will of the
38 electorate without bias.

39 However, far from using the legitimacy given by the electoral result to strengthen
40 Mexican democratic institutions, their dismantling began. The first case is found
41 with the cancelation of the project of the New International Airport of Mexico
42 City, the main project of the presidency of his predecessor, Enrique Peña Nieto.
43 Citing environmental concerns and alleged corruption in the awarding of contracts,
44 the then president-elect called for a referendum to decide whether to continue
45 with the NAIM project in Texcoco or start the construction of a new airport at the
46 Santa Lucía military base in conjunction with the expansion of the Benito Juárez
47 International Airport. The referendum resulted in the cancelation of the NAIM in
48 Texcoco.

49 Nevertheless, this apparently democratic exercise represents a violation of estab-
50 lished rules since, in the first place, his capacity as president-elect did not empower

Percentage of Obtained Votes to Win the Presidential Election.



01 **Figure 1.**
02 *Source: Based on data from the Instituto Nacional electoral [20–23].*

03 him to make any executive decision. There is also an established legal framework for
04 holding referendums involving the constituted powers and the National Electoral
05 Institute, which was not respected. It should be noted that this referendum was
06 used to legitimize the cancellation of the NAIM in Texcoco, which was already under
07 construction, leading to the cancellation of awarded contracts, which caused concern
08 in international markets regarding the already vulnerable Mexican rule of law.

09 It can be observed that decisions made by this administration are generally made
10 with a political rationality rather than a technical one. A clear example of this is found
11 in the National Development Plan 2019–2024. The importance of this document lies
12 in that there are expressed guidelines for policy to be followed during the administra-
13 tion, so the Ley de Planeación (Planning Law) establishes technical requirements such
14 as objectives, strategies, and indicators to ensure the viability of government actions.
15 However, the current National Development Plan resembles more a political mani-
16 festo against the neoliberal model than a programmatic document, which represents a
17 breach of the Constitution and the Law.

18 Likewise, there is a presidential contempt for institutions that serve as
19 balances, such as the Judiciary. López Obrador's statements against various judges,
20 magistrates, or Supreme Court Justices are common, assuring that there is a mafia
21 in this branch, questioning its legitimacy, and going so far as to propose that the
22 Judiciary be elected by direct vote.

23 In the same way, a delegitimization from the Executive against technical agen-
24 cies is seen. An example of this is the legislative initiative that reforms articles 25, 27,
25 and 28 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States, related to energy,
26 presented to the Congress of the Union in October 2021, where the disappearance
27 of the Energy Regulatory Commission and the National Hydrocarbons Commission
28 is proposed, key regulatory bodies for the operation of the Energy Reform of 2013,
29 under the argument that they only represent the interests of private actors.

30 Besides, there's a rocky relationship with constitutionally autonomous bodies,
like the National Institute of Access to Information, responsible for implementing

01 the transparency policy of the Mexican State. For most of 2023, this collegiate body
02 has not been able to meet due to a lack of legal quorum due to the lack of appoint-
03 ment of Commissioners, a process that is frozen in the Chamber of Senators, where
04 there is a majority of the president's party. The president's reluctance to comply with
05 the requests of the INAI has reached the point of declaring the Tren Maya a national
06 security project, in order to not make information public, by Presidential Decree.

07 One of the most worrying conflicts for the democratic life of the country is the attack
08 of the Executive against the National Electoral Institute, the body in charge of elections.

09 Underlining the relevance of this entity leads us to highlight the reason for its
10 founding and its trajectory throughout history. Before 1988, the Ministry of the
11 Interior was responsible for organizing the elections, which generated widespread
12 mistrust regarding the legitimacy of the elections, since it was suspected that the PRI
13 used the Mexican State itself to remain in power under this institutional structure.

14 Consequently, following a democratic crisis derived from the 1988 elections, in
15 which the Ministry of the Interior was accused of simulating a failure in the vote-
16 counting system to benefit the official candidate, the first precedent of an electoral
17 entity with certain separation of the Executive Branch occurred with the establish-
18 ment of the Federal Electoral Institute in 1990. Although the Secretary of the Interior
19 continued to be the president of the General Council, the process of administrative
20 autonomy began [25].

21 Although some electoral reforms were carried out between 1990 and 1996, it was
22 in this last year that the existence of a truly autonomous electoral body materialized,
23 since the Secretary of the Interior ceased to be part of the General Council, which
24 since then would be made up of party-unaffiliated citizens [25].

25 Likewise, in 2014, the Federal Electoral Institute was transformed into the
26 National Electoral Institute. The electoral reform of that year sought to establish
27 coexistence in the electoral sphere, while some functions of the local electoral bodies
28 were centralized, such as the appointment of their members [26]. It is evident that
29 the institutional evolution of the National Electoral Institute is a crucial pillar in the
30 democratic consolidation of Mexico, so any attempt by those in power to minimize
31 the influence of an impartial referee generates some opposition.

32 In addition to the common disqualification of the Institute by the president,
33 there have been legal actions to seek its disappearance. In April 2022, a Presidential
34 Initiative was presented to the Congress of the Union that sought to reform the
35 Constitution to, among other matters, replace the INE with the Institute of Elections
36 and Consultations, as well as to eliminate the legislative seats of proportional repre-
37 sentation. This rule change would eliminate the representation of minority parties,
38 strengthening the presence of the president's party.

39 However, this constitutional reform, called Plan A, was not approved in Congress.
40 We must mention that for a constitutional reform to be approved in Mexico, it must
41 pass two filters: the approval of two-thirds of Congress and the approval of the major-
42 ity of the Legislative Powers of the Federal Entities. In this case, Plan A did not pass
43 the first filter.

44 It is necessary to mention that Congress, since 2018, has been complicit in this
45 institutional dismantling. Since the democratic transition of 2000, we have observed
46 a change of parliamentary composition where it went from a bipartisan Congress in
47 the period 2000–2006, to one with the representation of three main political forces
48 from 2006, until 2018, where the coalition “*Juntos Haremos Historia*”, formed by
49 MORENA, the PVEM, and the Partido del Trabajo represent the majority of seats,
50 which facilitates the approval of the presidential agenda in the Legislative branch.

01 An illustrative case of this is found in the approval of Plan B against the INE.
02 Given the rejection of Plan A mentioned above, it was decided to present a reform
03 to secondary laws, given that its approval only needs a simple majority, in order to
04 reduce the operational capacities of the INE, under the argument that its operation
05 represents a high cost for public finances. This reform was approved in Congress
06 and promulgated; however, it was declared invalid by the Supreme Court, under
07 the premise that there was no true democratic deliberation, which represents an
08 unconstitutionality.

09 Analyzing the cases presented in the light of the theoretical framework presented,
10 it is seen that the actions of the government of President López Obrador comply with
11 the constitutive elements of a democratic regression.

12 As a first point, it is found that there is an incremental strangulation of democracy,
13 where an elected leader, in this case, President López Obrador, with populist tenden-
14 cies, has carried out a regression of institutional checks and balances, such as those
15 carried out against the Supreme Court of Justice and constitutionally autonomous
16 bodies, such as the INE and the INAI. Furthermore, the presidential initiatives to
17 modify the electoral body, in their terms, would contribute to the institutional sup-
18 pression of the political opposition in the Legislature, which would translate into a
19 setback of at least 40 years of democratic progress.

20 Following Gerschewski's framework [17], the democratic regression caused by the
21 institutional dismantling carried out by the current regime is an endogenous process
22 where the erosion of democratic norms carried out by the executive and the legisla-
23 tive majority of the Party in government, act as catalysts of democratic decline. Clear
24 examples are observed in the process described to cancel the NAIM, the creation
25 of the National Development Plan, and the legislative process of Plan B, where the
26 Supreme Court itself ruled the unconstitutionality of the project for not respecting
27 due legislative process.

28 An example of this can be seen in the Rule of Law Index of the World Justice
29 Project [27], where since 2019 the loss of one annual percentage point has been
30 recorded in the Constraints on Government Powers component, a factor that
31 measures the extent to which those who govern are bound by law, going from 0.47
32 in 2019 to 0.44 in 2022, which speaks of a systemic violation of democratic norms
33 from power.

34 Likewise, President López Obrador has resorted to populism to legitimize this
35 democratic dismantling. Alluding to a dynamic of confrontation between the "good
36 people" and the "fifis" (the elites), it has favored a concentration of power, seeking to
37 weaken democratic safeguards such as autonomous bodies and the Supreme Court,
38 under the argument of protecting the well-being of the town, following what was
39 pointed out by Benasaglio and Kellam [18].

40 In this way, it can be noted that the president has contributed to the erosion of
41 democratic norms, which infiltrated the entire social and political fabric of the coun-
42 try. The cases presented here allow us to perceive a weakening of the institutions with
43 the aim of undermining their autonomy by depriving them of serving as an effective
44 counterweight to the executive, resulting in a clear democratic regression.

45 **8. Conclusions**

46 As can be seen, the decline of democracy caused by the excesses of an autocratic
47 exercise of power in the Presidency of the Republic by López Obrador, has meant a

01 clear setback of democratic life in Mexico and a threat to the main institutions that the
02 incipient Mexican democracy had put into operation.

03 Based on the theoretical approaches presented above by Diamond and
04 Gerschewski, we are undoubtedly facing a democratic regression in Mexico in view
05 of the continuous dismantling of institutional checks and balances, evidenced by
06 the reforms proposed to eliminate the INE and the INAI, for example, the systematic
07 disqualification of the media and the judiciary, the use of official means (daily morn-
08 ing conference) to attack the neoliberal opposition that is the cause of all the country's
09 ills. Coinciding with the diagnoses of *The Economist* magazine, the decline of democ-
10 racy in Mexico is evident, and it is not, as Gerschewski warns, an erosion but a mainly
11 endogenous phenomenon that subtly socializes the transformation of the democratic
12 regime into an authoritarian one using the leading role of the populist leader who
13 personifies the messiah who frees the people from their exploitation by the "conserva-
14 tive" elites Benasaglio and Kellam [18]. The leadership of President López Obrador
15 has favored him to maintain his charisma and his narrative to concentrate power and
16 discredit any dissidence and opposition to his will. This has allowed it to control and
17 manipulate the legislative power and use it to prevent the functioning of institutions
18 built to strengthen democracy such as the INE, the INAI, and the electoral courts,
19 among other affected institutions.

20 The policy of centralization of power carried out by the regime in office has also
21 permeated at the subnational level. The creation of the Delegaciones Estatales de
22 Programas para el Desarrollo, which replaced the Delegations that each Secretariat
23 had in the Federative Entities, centralized federal representation in the same person.
24 This contributes to strengthening political profiles at the local level that can use
25 electoral clientelism for their benefit, which may explain the drastic change of the
26 local political map, where MORENA went from governing 5 Federal Entities in 2018
27 to 22 in 2023.

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28 This situation represents a complicated scenario for Mexican democracy. The
29 institutional dismantling that seeks to centralize power through the use of the major-
30 ity as an instrument of pressure coupled with the advance of autocratic ideas in the
31 citizenry, force us to think about an institutional redesign that strengthens the system
32 of checks and balances in the Mexican State, promoting the legitimization of the
33 democratic political system.

34 In this sense, in the route of action to save democracy we agree with the Mexican
35 political scientist Arnaldo Córdova when he affirms that the democratic transition
36 requires three premises: (1) respect for democratic rules; (2) The debate and scrutiny
37 of major national problems before deciding, and finally; (3) Consensus is privileged
38 and the disqualification and elimination of dissidents are eliminated ([28], p. 119).


39 On the threshold of an unprecedented electoral process, with a participation of
40 civil society never before imagined and a public agenda saturated with unsatisfied
41 demands and social demands, the federal and local elections of 2024 mean a great
42 challenge for the survival of Mexican democracy. The greatest challenge lies in respect
43 for institutions by political actors and the rule of law. Only in this way will Mexico's
44 democratic crisis be overcome.

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