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LADB Staff

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Interview: Jorge Castañeda's Analysis of Recent Events in Mexico

by LADB Staff

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On April 8-9, Jorge Castaneda visited the University of New Mexico (UNM), where he spoke in two public addresses about current economic, social, and political affairs in Mexico and Latin America. Castaneda was born and raised in Mexico City. He received his B.A. from Princeton University and his Ph.D. from the University of Paris. He has been a professor of economics and of international affairs at the National Autonomous University of Mexico since 1978. He has also been a Senior Associate of the Carnegie Institute for International Peace in Washington, and a visiting professor at Princeton University and the University of California at Berkeley. Among the six books he has authored or co-authored is "Utopia Unarmed: The Latin American Left After the Cold War" (1993). He is a regular columnist for the Los Angeles Times, Newsweek International, and the Mexican weekly Proceso.

While at UNM, Castaneda spoke privately with LADB about current affairs in Mexico and Latin America. In the following interview, Castaneda analyzed, among other things, the prospects for political and electoral reform in Mexico, the potential influence of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in national politics, and the future role of Mexico's three large political parties: Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), and Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). Part II of LADB's interview with Castaneda, which covers current affairs in the rest of Latin America, will appear in the April 19, 1996, edition of NotiSur - Latin American Political Affairs. Castaneda was interviewed by LADB Managing Editor Kevin Robinson and LADB Political Affairs Editor Patricia Hynds.

LADB: President Ernesto Zedillo has taken some token steps to promote political and electoral reforms in Mexico. Given that many members of the governing PRI oppose any major changes in the system, is real reform of the Mexican political system possible?

Jorge Castaneda: There will be electoral reform, and it will probably be ready in time to be applicable to next year's legislative elections and for the election of the mayor of Mexico City, which will take place for the first time next year. There will be significant electoral reform, but it will not go beyond electoral reform. It will be limited to improving the rules of the game whereby the same actors contend for elections. That's all that there will be. There will be no significant reform of the PRI, meaning that it will not split up, meaning that you'll have the same three parties consolidating their monopoly on electoral representation in Mexico. There will be no reform of the labor movement, meaning that there will be no social actors involved in all of this. There will be no reform of the media beyond access to the media during campaigns, which is important but really is much less important than the broader issue of opening up the mass media Televisa in particular. There will be no reform of civil society in terms of making it easier for women's groups, student groups, regional groups, indigenous groups, whatever, to organize, receive funding, and be present in elections. There will be no reform of the distribution of power among the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judiciary. There will be no real redistribution of resources in that way. So,

what we will have is a significant but very narrowly defined electoral reform, which is what probably would have been adequate, sufficient, and even very important five years ago, but which at this stage is really too little too late.

LADB: Then what options does Mexico have? How do you see the future?

Castaneda: It doesn't have any options. That's it. That's all that there will be because there is a strange dynamic going on whereby the only forces who want any kind of reform want no more reform than that. The government's basic interlocutors on the reform process have ended up being just the political parties, and the three parties are interested in only having an electoral reform that consolidates their lock on electoral representation. Even the PRD, which is more open about it than others. But basically it's also weaker. While the PRD would be perhaps the most amenable to broader reform, it doesn't have the votes. And even it doesn't get too excited about the idea either. If you really look at it closely, it's not terribly excited about breaking up the whole system. The PRD is now receiving several million dollars a year in government funding. It doesn't see any good reason why it should share that with anybody else. I think that's quite logical. So the only people who are involved in the reform are those sectors that want to limit it in size and scope. So, there really is no option. There isn't any grassroots pressure for political reform in Mexico. It's not there. I'm not sure it ever was there but I know it's not there now, probably because of the economic and social crisis, probably because there's no elections. Those are good reasons for there not being any grassroots pressure. There isn't any, and the elites don't really care either. It's not their problem. They still have ways of getting access to the government, to power, to resources. So there's no agency for broad political reform. There's agency for narrow electoral reform. That will happen, but that's all there will be.

LADB: What about the role of the Zapatistas? Do they have any role, do they have any clout in national politics?

Castaneda: They have in a sense negative clout. Every time the government wants to do anything to them, they can raise hell all over the world quickly, and basically have a veto over any repressive government policy. But they can't do anything more than that. They have no power. I am increasingly convinced they never did. I have greater and greater doubts about whether they ever were an armed movement. I think there was an enormous amount of bluff involved in that, which was an extraordinarily talented bluff. They got a tremendous amount of mileage out of nothing. At some point the chickens had to come home to roost. They didn't have the fire power. And when the government called their bluff they were sunk. That's basically what happened.

LADB: In recent public engagements you mentioned that in rural areas one can see the first seeds of an indigenous and grassroots movement in Mexico. What role could the Zapatistas play vis-a-vis other movements in the aftermath of the 1994 uprising, and what future do you see for incipient grassroots organizing in the countryside?

Castaneda: My impression is that it's really not linked in any way to the Zapatistas. It's mostly just peasants taking over the land that happen to be indigenous peasants because they are the poorest ones in those areas. My sense is that the Zapatistas are really out of that. In a sense they have squandered a lot of the political capital that they had and which could have allowed them now, maybe, to play a role in that. They never made up their mind whether they wanted to play the

role of an interest group within the indigenous community in Chiapas and elsewhere and stick to that, or have a national agenda. Marcos is extraordinarily talented and could make up a thousand stories about how one can and has to go with the other, that you need one if you want the other, but at the end of the day you still have to choose, and he never chose. Or rather, he chose to have more of a national agenda. By the time he eventually figured out that he wanted to emphasize the indigenous agenda it was too late. He no longer was able to become a representative of the indigenous communities.

LADB: Notwithstanding the seeds of an indigenous or campesino movement in some areas, you've also pointed out in the past that at the national level there really has not been any major opposition movement in response to the current economic crisis gripping the country. Why is that?

Castaneda: There is no movement because, first of all, it is a vicious cycle. Political parties have no constituency for a movement of that sort, and a movement can't exist without some sort of leadership. There's no one to lead it, no one to channel it, no one to give it form. Second, people with jobs don't want to lose them, and people who are without jobs and with debts just don't have the time, the energy, or the will to get involved in anything like that. Third, the government is still skillful at buying people off, dividing people, a little bit of repression here and there, and that makes a difference. Finally, there is obviously something about Mexico that it works this way, that people don't know how to fight. This is a real problem. They just do not know how to fight back. The intellectuals don't know, the peasants don't know, the workers don't know, nobody knows. The last time they did it was 80 years ago and again it's hard to figure out exactly how that happened. There's a real problem there. Why that is the case I honestly don't know. But there is something in society whereby people just don't fight back.

LADB: In your opinion has the PAN become a true opposition party, or is there still too much accommodation with the PRI?

Castaneda: I think there is a question of perception and there is a question of reality. Most people perceive the PAN to be an opposition party. They see it as something different, different enough to vote for, and it's very difficult to go against that perception even if you happen to have your doubts about how much of an opposition they really represent. My impression is that, other than a few more socially rooted sections of the PAN, social Christian or Christian democratic sectors of it, it is not really in substance a significant opposition party. Basically what it wants is the same thing, just a little more honestly. We all think that they would govern a little more honestly. On the other hand, they've never had a chance to put their hands in the till. When they do, we'll see. I think the real problem with the PAN is that it has no agenda.

LADB: In your opinion, does the PRD have any real future in the political scene in Mexico?

Castaneda: I don't think the PRD has a future. I think it's a failure. It's a failure basically because the attempt to achieve coexistence, or cohabitation, of the extreme left and of the soft left within the same party didn't work. The country needs a hard left from the southeast, from the countryside, from the church, etc. It needs a hard left, and it needs a soft left from Mexico City, from the north, from urban areas, from the middle classes, from the intellectuals to win the votes. Cardenas thought in 1988 that because of his own charisma and because of his own prospects for victory that he could bring these two sectors into the same party and keep them there. It was a good try but it failed, and

it is now totally impossible. Instead of each one supporting the other, each one weakens the other. The people who are supposed to vote don't vote for the soft left because they're scared of the hard left. And the people who are supposed to mobilize and defend the hard left don't mobilize and defend the PRD because they don't like the soft left, because they're a bunch of reformists. It just doesn't work.

LADB: Any thoughts on the presidential election in the year 2000?

LADB: That's a long time away. You can speculate endlessly. I don't think there's anything right now that you can say that is terribly intelligent about the year 2000, other than that if it's just the same three parties and the three candidates it is not at all impossible that the result will be similar to 1994. The PRI will win with a smaller margin. In a three-person race and only one election, in other words no runoff, you can win with 35% of the vote, and the PRI has 35% of the vote.

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