Mexico at bay?
Corrupt crossroads

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Abstract

Inquiring into the length, breadth, and depth of corruption in Mexico, this piece examines historical, institutional, and cultural contexts for an answer, only to find it in the overlap of all three domains: a discursive Iberian inheritance that elevates friendship-based over pragmatic governance, a truncated institutional setting whose reform measures easily get trumped by idiosyncratic interventions, and an extended-family cluster of cultural values more receptive to subjective than objective dispensation. The net result not only worsens Mexico's corruption ranking each year, but also threatens to spread beyond its borders.

3 Introduction

Not a newcomer to the corruption literature, Mexico also carries the dubious distinction of getting better at whatever constitutes corruption. In Transparency International's (TI's) 2013 Corruption Perception Index, for example, with a score of 34, out of 100, Mexico ranked 106th along with Argentina and Bolivia from Latin America—sliding eight positions down from a previous TI survey, which was also the worst ranking Mexico had had in this century (Camp, 2014: 314).

Of the 177 countries tabulated for 2013, Denmark, with a 91 score, topped the ranking while Somalia, managing a paltry score of 8, came across as the most corrupted country on this planet. More significantly, between Mexico and Somalia, there were only seven other Latin countries: Dominican Republic (123rd with a 29 score), Guatemala (also 123rd: 29); Nicaragua (127th: 28), Honduras (140th: 26), Paraguay (150th: 24), Venezuela (160th: 20), and Haiti (163rd: 19)—dubious company indeed for one of the most irreversibly democratized Latin countries.

Contrasting these countries with those ranked between Denmark and Mexico offers a clearer distinction between the frying pan and fire allegories. In this second TI list, we will find Barbados (ranked 15th with a 75 score), the Bahamas (22nd: 71), Chile (22nd: 71), Puerto Rico (33rd: 62), Costa Rica (48th: 53), Brazil (72nd: 42), El Salvador (83rd: 38), Peru (83rd: 38), Ecuador (102nd: 35), and Panama (102nd: 35). Improvements appear more likely than not over time in this group, but it is the absence of a Damoclean Sword over countries in this group that distinguishes it most from countries in the first group.

Corruption may be more than Mexico's Damoclean Sword. How it is nibbling away at some giant economic strides the country has taken since Latin America's lost decade (1980s) ultimately threatens to undermine its neighbors.

3.1 Questions & Concerns

How is corruption being defined in this discussion? What is at stake? Where can remedial work begin?

How corruption is being defined might matter. Webster's Third New International Dictionary offers a fairly neutral and widely referenced definition: that it refers to "inducement . . . by means of improper considerations . . . to commit a violation of duty" (from Klitgaard, 1988: 21, but see 21-4). Social corruption, for example, boils down to favoritism ("in favor of family members" or "diverting resources to friends and associates"), or clientelism (to "distribute public resources or prevent violence to those who provide favors or contributions") (Asch, Burger, and Fu, 2011: 30, 30fn).

Within the context of development, several different corruption types have been squeezed out: administrative, petty corruption, graft, influence, bureaucratic, political, political influence, patronage, state capture (privately paid money to public officials), and high-level corruption (misuse of public resources) (Bracking, 2007: 6-7; and Brooks, et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, we will find all of these in play, as evident in some of the measurement yardsticks used for global comparisons. For instance, the Heritage Foundation ranked Mexico as having the 55th freest economy at the start of 2014 on the basis of 10 indicators, grouped under rule of law (property rights and freedom from corruption), government limitation (government spending and fiscal freedom), regulating efficiency (business freedom, labor freedom, and monetary freedom), and open markets (trade freedom, investment freedom, and financial freedom). With very high marks in virtually all arenas, Mexico was eventually stumped by the two rule of law determinants (and labor freedom). The report goes on to note corruption being "deeply embedded culturally," remaining "pervasive," as one might expect, "at all levels of society," and fed by "the power of monopolists, party bosses, and other mafias" (Heritage Foundation, 2014).

Writing for Forbes on December 16, 2013, Dolia Estevez's appraisal is even more blunt with Mexico (Estevez, December 2013). Finding Mexico as "one of the two most corrupt countries in Latin America" during 2013 (Argentina was the only other; on the other hand, Transparency International found seven more corrupt countries in Latin America), she isolated four areas of Mexican weaknesses, as expressed in a survey spanning 107 countries and seeking to identify the institutional sources of corruption: political parties (91 percent thought so), police (90), legislature (83), and judiciary (80)—in other words, along the very backbone of the country's political culture.

Her list of the 10 most corrupt Mexicans bore this out: eight of them were former politicians (seven of whom were state governors), another was Elba Esther Gordillo, who used to head the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE, in Spanish), while the last was Carlos Romero Deschamps, the worker's union leader of the nationalized oil corporation, Pemex. Both major political parties—Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI, and the Partido Acción Nacional, or PAN—were deeply implicated. We notice political institutions wrapped up in a corporatist pattern of interest intermediation, the one favoring "a limited number of singular, compulsory, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and functionally differentiated categories"—such as the teacher's union and oil-worker's union, molded as they were in accordance with the PRI political apparatus.

Lawrence Weiner, who reduces political culture to similar monopolistic instincts, behavior, attitudes, and expectations identifies Mexican monopolies at the top of the corruption league (Weiner, June 2013).

These include Telmex, the telephone and telecommunication giant whose owner, Carlos Slim, is among the world's top-three billionaires; Cemex, the world's third largest cement companies under the current chairmanship of Lorenzo Zambrano; Grupo Televisa, Mexico's dominant television broadcaster, cable operator, and magazine publisher founded by Emilio Azcarraga Vidaurreta in the early 1950s; Modelo, the beer giant; Ocesa, a subsidiary of Corporación Interamericana de Entretraiment, the entertainment conglomerate owning Palacios de Los Deportes, among other sporting venues, with Alejandro Soberon Kuri as the current chief executive officer; Femsa, the largest Coca Cola bottler and owner of OXXO chain of convenience stores; and Pemex, the public sector oil monopolist; among others.

Monopolies constitute "the kind of a goose," Weiner posited, "that has laid golden eggs for so long," facilitated by the political environment and parties. "The PRI and PAN parties are largely responsible for preserving Mexican monopolies," one journalist observed, "as their owners are both associates and campaign backers" (ibid.).

Not a word, one will notice, has been said about Mexico's drug cartels thus far. Widely seen as a synonym of Mexican corruption today, their impulse is recent, not historical—and we would miss some of the other causal factors. After all, cartels themselves reflect monopolistic behavior, and though the past three decades have seen one or another cartel in a brutal war with the government, several examples of high governmental officials working with cartels depict the very opposite—of a cozy relationship: as high up a politician as the former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's brother, Raul, was incarcerated by the Swiss authorities in 1995 for possessing too huge accounts that even his privileged political position would not have been able to provide; and as high up a military officer as General Jose de Jesus Gutierrez Rebello who was imprisoned in 1996 for facilitating cocaine flows of the "Lord of the Sky," a nickname given Amado Carrillo Fuentes of the Juárez Cartel for the way he used military helicopters to facilitate his cocaine shipments.

In reviewing Anibel Hernandez's Narcoland: The Mexican Drug Lords and their Godfathers (Verso Press, 2013), Phillip Smith spells out what he calls "the layers of corruption and complicity surrounding the drug trade in Mexico." These include "the state police force, the ever mutating federal police forces, the military, or the high ministries." That he found their inter-associations to be also "long-held and well-founded," reiterates the point being made of Mexico's political culture being intrinsically involved (Phillip Smith, 2014).

Phillip Smith's skillful elaboration of Hernandez's testimony tells us more, especially against the May 2014 background arrest of Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera, head of the powerful and ecliptic Sinaloa Cartel. Erstwhile President Felipe Calderon Hinojosa, she argued, adopted an anti-drug strategy that "was designed to favor El Chapo Guzman and his main partners," and Calderon's Secretary for Public Safety, Genero Garcia Luna (one of Estevez's 10 most corrupt Mexicans), as being "deep in El Chapo's pocket," even deploying "Mexican state security forces on his behalf."

Clearly, then, Mexican corruption extends far beyond institutional settings into cultural confines, and routine daily activities that perpetrators take to be normal when, in fact, they remain part and parcel of what constitutes corruption. Given the deeper interest in reforming corruption, how can such a peripatetic beast be profiled so as to both expose the equally stern reform measures needed, the sooner the better, and draw a balance sheet capable of predicting future trends?

3.2 Theoretical Terrain

3.2.1 The Institution-Culture Embrace

At stake is not only a tension between the divergent institutional and cultural interpretations of corruption in the relevant literatures, but also a historical setting that might help describe and diagnose the problem. Not always will we find all these three strands addressing each other or even simultaneously in the same scholarly work, but distinguishing them helps us to (a) comprehend why Mexico's corruption climate is worsening even as it is registering economic strides; and (b) broaden Mexico-based observations to shed more Latin light. Discussions begin with the historical setting before turning to the institutional and cultural in this section, before examining some empirical cases in the next.

3.3 Historical Setting

Very much like a large swathe of Latin America, Mexico's socio-cultural and politico-economic development were anchored upon Iberian practices, specifically Portugal's and Spain's.

At the time of their Latin conquests, and for a long period thereafter, neither Portugal nor Spain had experienced anything like the Reformation in certain other parts of West Europe, like England. Consequently, a "pragmatic" bureaucratic tradition that originated in West Europe's Protestant countries and spread elsewhere through colonialism, never really happened wherever Portugal and Spain extended their own influences. Instead, a "discursive" alternative so typical of Europe's Catholic countries took hold. Whereas the former introduced a "formal, legal order," the latter continues to rely on "clientelism, personal loyalty, and favors" (Morris, 2009: ch. 8). By trumping legality, loyalty in Mexico helps "provide support, career mobility and improved communications," in addition to being able to "unite individuals within one agency against encroachment by another" (Bailey, 1988: 76-7; and Grindle, 1977: 40-69).

On the one hand, whereas a "government based on law," in Protestant Europe, opened space to combat all forms of corruption, a "government based on friendship," in Catholic Europe, only invited more corruption—so much so that causal factors get obscured, ultimately thwarting even sincere reform measures. On the other, any conflict between the two becomes an echternach waltz: as in a popular Luxembourg dance, the players begin by moving three steps forward, then two steps backward, with varying results depending on how the two dance segments are interpreted. If the three-step forward represents reform and the two-step backward depicts corruption, there is a chance over the long-run to conquer the beast—perhaps the description fitting the list of Latin countries ranked between Denmark and Mexico in the 2013 TI list; but if the three-step forward represents corruption and the two-step backward reform, then the future looks very bleak and irremediable. Mexico arguably belongs to this second group, along with all those other Latin countries in this dubious list: they have nothing but a Damoclean Sword hanging over their democratization and liberalization efforts, given the length, breadth, and depth of their corrupt practices, institutions, and instincts.

Arguably Mexico has been at some kind of a corruption crossroads for far too long to suddenly expect past patterns to change. Is the problem institutional, cultural, or both? Let's consider the propositions of both before seeking evidence.

3.4 Institutional Expectations

Corruption, from this view, boils down to how state and society have institutionalized relations with each other, reflected largely in the strength of checks and balances against discretionary executive power (Morris, 1991: ch. 3). Given Mexico's historical backdrop, this executive power was Spain's monarch, evolving not only into today's presidential rule, but also a "power elite" of "common social origin" (Peter Smith, 1977: 133-8). While the shift from one to the other was sanctioned by the slow and stuttering embrace of popular elections (given the frequent accusations of fraud), the absolutism of that power did not wane by much. One way to curb that power was to restrict the president to a single term. As we shall see, this perpetuates corruption in a different way by stepping outside institutional settings into legitimate cultural practices.

Those dynamics have been put into the following equation: C=M+D-A, where C stands for corruption, M monopoly power, D discretionary authority, and A accountability (Klitgaard, 1988: 75, but see 74-93). We can be deceived into believing, since the corruption springboard is reduced to institutional relations, cure must also be sought through institutional reforms.

A subsequent discussion points out the inherent fallacy, but one cannot help noticing how the 10 Heritage Foundation indicators measuring corruption epitomizes, as a large body of comparative works on corruption also does today, the institutional approach as a hallowed pathway. It is a necessary but not sufficient diagnosis and prescription.

It is necessary since it provides objective criteria for comparisons; and especially, since corruption rankings today increasingly influence policy preferences of other countries, we can utilize it as a fairly workable yardstick. Yet, we cannot capture the full picture since not all dynamics are institutional: there are private, personal relations, particularly traced back to the Catholic duality separating the private from the public. We need the cultural complement.

3.5 Cultural Expectations

Some authors invoke morality to explain corruption (the more corruption, the lower the moral factor) (Nooan, 1984), others see it in the clash between modernizing forces and traditional practices (universalism, legalism, rational behavior representing the former, ascription, hierarchy, and patronage characterizing the latter) (Nef, 2001: 54-68). The persistent Manichaen worldview of "myself" against "you" does not beget an "us" identity because a number of cultural traits get in the way (Lipset, 2000: 12-24): extended family loyalty, solidarity, particularism, formalism, favoritism, corporatism, patrimonialism, among others. Modernization and new functional institutions (a judiciary; elected offices, like the legislature; and so forth), continue to clash and intertwine with past behaviors and instincts to the detriment of the common welfare—due mostly to the ravaging effects of corruption.

1.6 Mexico

"So Far From God . . . ". . . but also Corruption Reforms

Porfírio Díaz, who institutionalized corruption during his tenure (1876-1911) more than any other Mexican leader, is well-known for perpetually lamenting how his country was too far from God by being too near the United States—even though his own policies shifted Mexico from an European orientation irreversibly towards the United States. He might have been closer to reality had he acknowledged that the farther Mexico was from God, the nearer it was to not only corruption but also consummating corruption. Both institutions and culture depict the depth of the accumulating and multiplying corruption.

3.7 Institutional Realities

The automatic starting point to examine Mexican corruption is, of course, the dominant political institutions—with the political parties at the apex. Party positions and performances have, over time, strengthened the executive over the legislature. Though this is only expected in presidential systems, as seasoned Latin experts inform us, it weakens the institutional infrastructure and prevents "horizontal accountability"—that is, "the relationship among separate branches of government"—thus lowering the "downward accountability" of the president and the quality of democracy itself (O'Donnell, 1994; and Beer, 2003: 30-1).

Although it would be very unfair to blame the entirety of a corrupt tradition to the PRI for having governed Mexico in one straight stretch of 70 years since 1929, Mario Llosa Vargas's encapsulated labeling of the party as "the perfect dictatorship" becomes very relevant for at least two reasons: (a) it recognizes the party, or group, setting from which corruption springs; and (b) it confirms why there is no easy exit for Mexico from the second, lower-ranked list of Latin countries in the 2013 Transparency International survey.Without delving into party history, the salient features aiding and abetting corruption should be clearly identified. These include (a) the continuation of military domination from the Porfiriato years (1876-1911); (b) the unwitting consequences of a single-term presidency; (c) the growing financial/political gap between Mexico City and the countryside; and (d) the independently emerging cash-flow, that is, the drug trade lubricating corruption by intertwining inextricably with political institutions.

Although Lázaro Cárdenas is widely considered the most popular PRI president, he continued a long tradition of military leadership (and he would, in fact, become the last military-trained president). In and of itself, military rule is not an automatic corruption springboard: we have seen in many other parts of the world how a military intervention becomes necessary to prevent endemic corruption (Pakistan's history is littered with examples, from military generals Ayub Khan to Ziaul Huq and Pervez Musharraf). Mexico's leadership, including the military until World War II, became a vehicle for corruption in at least two ways.First, it repeatedly kept postponing a legitimate conversation with civil society whereby checks and balances could be introduced and adversarial legislative politics could take root—so much so that political commentators, by and large, really see the 2000 electoral defeat of the PRI by PAN as the country's first democratic election (Acosta, 2010: 268).

Second, without a state-society rapprochement, at least two consequences of a socially divided Mexico become relevant to this discussion. On the one hand, social division helps divert resources/dividends towards the upper echelon within what might still be called a feudal order in the absence of a more appropriate term: historically, pitting land-owners against peasants until ejidos, or collective farms for primarily indigenous groups, were established by the 1917 Constitution; and today, including owners of capital against low-wage workers, typified by the maquiladoras. Both historically and currently, one of the hard-core features of Mexico's social fabric has been the man-servant relationship, both inside the house and outside, reflecting a caste orientation, and perpetuating the patron-client syndrome, and squarely at odds with functional democracy.

On the other, this socially divided setting necessitated armed groups for protection. Beginning with the state, these armed groups became the police force, of which several variations exist, but largely along a federated scheme (federal, state, municipal)—each one of them with the power and impunity to impose penalties upon real or imaginary offenders, not necessarily to fill the public coffers with as much as to add to their personal accounts. Without checks and balances, practices of this sort only became institutionalized. Yet, the state was not the only agency seeking protection. These sprung up even at the bottom of the social ladder, for example, the Zapatistas, forcefully exposing the unfinished task of social accommodation that follows typical independence wars. Mexico's independence war became amazingly "of the few, by the few, and for the few," but it was stretched out long enough so that it could eventually claim inclusiveness. Patronization, a form of corruption, was part and parcel of fulfilling that task.

Mexico is positioned at the corruption crossroads through the confluence of corrupt law enforces and growing public demand for accountability and democracy-based transparency. Every elected president (or any other elected official) must now publicly announce anti-corruption measures—on the one hand, to make domestic leeway at election time, on the others to convey to other countries, as well as agencies, like Transparency International, but most importantly, the United States, that corruption would be grappled with by the horns. One very recent offshoot of this was the 2007 Merida Initiative with the United States—a mirror image of Plan Colombia whereby drug-trafficking was fought by training policemen and equipping them with the necessary tools. A growing literature on the subject conveys the unfolding outcome reflecting more failures than successes.

Yet, incremental progress in institutional cleansing has indeed been recorded in the 21st Century, though the seeds were sown in the 1990s.

Genuine police reforms began with the shoe-shiner-turned-president, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de Léon, who was also responsible for staging the country's first democratic election in 2000 (by not choosing his successor—a tradition called el dedazo, discussed later—thus alienating himself from his own corrupted, sclerotic, and sinking party for the greater glory of the country).

His creation of the federal preventive force (Policía Federal Preventivá—PFP) and the federal police force (Policía Judicial Federal—PJF) spun into action a reform mindedness that not only created a "new police model," but also produced relatively encouraging news. Police reforms went the extra yard in 2009 when the PFP was upgraded into the Police Force—PF—and PJF into the Policía Federal Ministerial—PMF. One rigorous study of these reforms concludes that "although overall corruption shows an upward trend, corruption for activities associated with the police or security services do not" (Asch, Burger, & Fu, 2011: 32).

Feeding precisely into the city-country divide alluded to previously, its measurement of various indicators show PF bribe-rates falling from 4.8 percent in 2005 to 4.5 in 2009, and from 6.1 percent to 5.9 for the state-level judicial and ministerial police. On the other hand, municipal-level police corruption increased from 8.8 in 2005 to 10.9 four years later, while transit police were even worse, depicting 2005 figures of 22.1 percent spiking to 28.4 in 2009 (ibid., 34).Cultural factors might help explain the uneven reform outcomes, but before elaborating further, the other three factors aiding and abetting corruption in Mexico that was listed previously, demand some discussion.

Mexico's president cannot be re-elected, serving as each one does, a six-year term. In fact, until 2000, each was chosen by the outgoing president, a process involving both tapadismo (to involve a successor) and el dedazo (to literally finger-point out the chosen successor), but illustrating the essence of that "perfect dictatorship": power would remain concentrated in the very, very few, while all others would follow the leader—the perfect road-map for institutionalized corruption, so much so that "perfect dictatorship' has often been called "presidential despotism" (Hodges and Gandy, 2002:13).To be fair, one of the original el dedazo purposes was to prevent the chief executive, that is, the "perfect" dictators between 1929 to 2000 from becoming as overbearing as the dictators before them, dating back to 1811, and even before, to the Spanish monarch. Yet this produced quite a perverted long-term consequence while also depicting very clearly the intertwining relationship between institutional and cultural expectations/realities. To better understand the problem, one must bear in mind that Mexico has not fully transformed its bureaucracy into the kind of a "pragmatic" body that contemporary democratization needs.

As mentioned at the outset, the colonial inheritance of "government based on friendship," together with "clientelism, personal loyalty, and favors" still overshadows a "government based on law" with a "formal legal order" in the recruitment process, especially in the bureaucracy, but also going up the chain of command, through el dedazo, to the president.Presidential election is quickly followed by a sweeping change of personnel, especially in the civil services and bureaucracies.

New entrants, by and large, commence their public duties with a predator dictum: how much can I usurp public finances during my six years? With this mind-set, corruption trickles from the very top down to the very bottom—every level of leadership joining in the loot. Here is one opportunity where, by introducing re-election, uninterrupted corruption can be halted, even if temporarily, as the accountability ledger becomes relevant. With the advent of an oil-exporting Mexico, a third factor compounded the loot: public sectors not only sprung to address the new policy-making domains and resource-exploitation just before World War II, but, very much like the feudal lords in colonial times, they concentrated more in the cities than in the countryside—with the result that, as Mexico City became the financial and political hub, the gap with the countryside only widened.

This was one of the reasons why the ejidos, meant originally to bridge that gap, broke down in the 1980s, resulting in the Zapatista uprisings of the 1990s. It reaffirms the reason why every group also seeks protection through a militia—the state, against the Zapatista, engaging both the military and police; indigenous farmers turn to Zapatista-like armed outfits; and typical countryside-dwellers find solace and rewards in cartel groups as they increasingly provided the kind of monetary and material welfare the government was supposed to provide but usually did not (and one reason why cartel leaders are so hard to track down in any hunt even though the relevant public knows where they are).

All in all, local power-centers mushroomed by the 1990s. This was as much evident in the geographical zones claimed by each of Mexico's narco-trafficking cartels as it was in the centers of legitimate authority—the governors.

Among the drug cartels, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman Loera's Sinaloa outfit controls the north part of Mexico's west coast, just like the Los Zetas control the east coast along the Gulf of Mexico; a narrow strip of the east coast, from Matamoros to Ciudad Victoria, is controlled by the Gulf Cartel, to which Los Zetas were once belonged.

The Cartel de Jalisco Nueva Generación also wields power over Jalisco province, with Guadalajara as its key metropolitan, while further north, and in conflict with the Sinaloan cartel is the Beltrán Leyva Cartel, leaving the adjacent state of Michoacan in the hand of the La Familia. Previously dominant cartels, Tijuana and Juárez, controlled the cities they are named for, though their power has diminished significantly once their leaders were captured or killed. That is still a large list of illegitimate actors to permit functional democracy.

Among only the recent governors charged with corruption (in many cases through drug-cartel alignments) are Coahuila's Humberto Moreira, Mexico State's Arturo Montiel (he is, in fact, an uncle of the present president, Enrique Peña Nieto), Quintana Roo's Mario Villanueva, Tabasco's Andreas Granier, Tamaulipas's Manuel Cavazos lerma, Tomas Yarrington, and Eugenio Hernandez (astonishingly three consecutive governors), and Veracruz's Fidel Herrera—quite a lengthy list for so short a duration.

We now have a better understanding why Dolia Estevez's top-ten corrupt Mexicans (or even Forbes's similar 2013 list) is dominated by past governors. A final factor contributing to making corruption a high-stakes game in Mexico is in fact drug-trafficking. By the 1990s, the amount of money involved simply sky-rocketed as the trafficking of Colombian cocaine to the United States shifted from the Gulf of Mexico (and highlighted by the television serial, Miami Vice, starring Don Johnson) to overland routes. Overnight Mexico was riddled with powerful cartels, the two most newsworthy then being the Juárez Cartel led by Amado Fuentes Carillo and the Tijuana Cartel led by a number of Felix brothers and one sister (Benjamin, Ramón, Javier, and Eduardo brothers, with sister Enedina). How they penetrated every segment of public life at all levels of policy-making is a story that will be told for a long time to come, if not already through the anecdotes and ballads the people talk about or hum openly out of admiration/inspiration.

3.8 Cultural Realities

One pre-eminent cultural trait parallels the "perfect dictatorship" model just presented: a patrimonial society. An innocuous setting, Mexico's patrimonial society unwittingly feeds into a corrupt climate, but even more, it is a tough nut to crack for reform.

A patrimonial society often goes hand-in-hand with an extended-family social structure. It existed even before Spain set foot in the country and the continent, but in conjunction with Iberian patterns, it has prevailed in Mexican and Latin societies even to this day against the twin modernization challenges of a nuclear family and the democratization-induced individualism. The corruption upshot is straightforward. The dominant male, determined usually by age, becomes the "perfect" dictator analogue: he sits at the head of the dining table, bequeaths the knowledge and wisdom he has been taught by his father to his son(s), and, when in a position of power or privilege within society or in a government office, carries all the rights to give his kith, kin, and children all the privileges and pecuniary benefits permissible. In fact, this has become the sine qua non of Mexican family life: privilege-extension begins at home, and once the entire extended household has been catered to can the patronizing arm extend outside. In and of itself, patrimonialism need not necessarily be treated as a source of corruption. Yet, within the context of dictatorships, or any form of government in which accountability, checks, and balances remain absent or fragile, it becomes the handmaiden of corruption—until it gets to a point when it has been so institutionalized that it looks too normal to be dubbed something as coarse as corruption, thereby defying any reversion.

This last point where the "discursive" trumps "pragmatism" may easily become the source of confusion and anger: no one taking patrimonialism beyond certain pecuniary limits, not even those benefiting from this opportunity, has any reason to believe corruption is in the making; and especially, when others from a more "pragmatic" society, in which "discursive" elements do not intervene in selection and reward processes, hint at corruption taking place, clashing perceptions often do more damage to reforming corruption than identifying corruption. A "culture clash" involving corruption may be emerging as the final straw against reform (Klitgaard, op. cit, ch. 6). As the essay has often pointed out, the divisive Mexican social history, the tendency to be closeted within one's clan, even better, one's family, has served as a sine qua non of Mexican life: the family has been the best historical protector of one's values, therefore it cannot fall under any corruption scrutiny or charge. Yet, as the detached observer notices, some of the most rampant cases of corruption in Mexico, whether in routine politics or in cartels, have been family-based directly: the Salinas family politically, on the one hand, the Felix brothers as traffickers, on the other. When a direct nuclear family passage is not possible, the extended family enters the picture, as with Amado Carrillo Fuentes's Juárez Cartel; and when even that is not possible, bonds of brotherhood step in, as with the emergence of the Los Zetas. Corruption, then, begins at home—a place too sacrosanct and far too numerous for public policy to enter for reform purposes.

3.9 Conclusions

The essay began by locating Mexico on the 2013 Transparency International list, then arguing that Mexico is more likely to join the seven Latin countries with a worse corruption record than the ten Latin countries with a better corruption record. At stake is not just the institutional malaise wrought by corruption, nor simply certain cultural patterns, but the admixture of both—that too, in such a way that, even after genuine reforms have been registered with key institutions, the country still falls backward owing to the sometimes unwitting intervention of facilitative cultural patterns.

Mexico has been stranded, as if permanently, at the crossroads of corruption precisely because of this circumstance: its European inheritance mirrored the pre-colonial "discursive" lifestyle, rather than "pragmatic," and thereby strengthened the private domain more than the public in a society that was never fully integrated before the Spanish conquest, and perhaps even more bitterly divided thereafter.

Reforming perverted institutions may be more palatable even in a society riddled with them than reforming cultural traits exposed as misfits under modernizing pressures. Mexico's attempts at institutional reform have been held hostage to both unsuspected cultural patterns and such exogenous/circumstantial factors as the size of drug-trafficking pay-offs. Even if it conquers its legacy as a "perfect dictatorship", it is far too big to streamline its culture with institutional reforms, and far too near the United States to be able to quickly abandon drug-trafficking. The net result: a dismal Transparency International ranking predicted to continue worsening—and yes, of course, moving even farther from the God Porfirio Díaz revered. One other finding sheds light on the broader Latin American picture. Since the best two corruption index scores belong to Barbados and the Bahamas—two areas where the "pragmatic" government "based on law" was nurtured by Great Britain—mainland Latin America, nurtured under Portuguese and Spanish "discursive" government "based on friendship," expose corruption to have not just institutional and cultural springboards, but also civilizational. Here might be a model for mainland Latin America to follow, as some countries like Costa Rica have earnestly sought to. Yet, the corruption tide is such that, in a variation of Gresham's economic law that bad money drives good money away, bad behavior is more likely to drive good behavior away—country by country, from bad to good country, ultimately more from Mexico than the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras, Paraguay, Venezuela, and Haiti to Barbados, the Bahamas, Chile, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, Brazil, El Salvador, Peru, Ecuador, and Panama—ultimately even to the United States and Canada, given the migration and drug-trafficking flows.

The corruption Catch-22 becomes most manifest in reforming the institutional way, which will fall far short of the cultural adaptation desperately needed. That, the world's 10th largest economy and 11th by population size, is not prepared to do. One astute observation posited that "most Latin American countries have spotty historical democratic rule," and, as if to drive the nail home, "Mexico ranks low even within this group" (Levy and Bruhn, 2006: 35). Mexicans increasingly need Porfirio's God to reform corruption, since they have been simply unable to do so themselves: perhaps a faith-driven distinction between what is "right" and what is "wrong" that places what is universally claimed as corruption in the "wrong" bracket.

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