

NEW RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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This article is a reflection on civil society's participation in the public arena, as well as the necessity of gaining presence as a leading actor in the democratic process the political life in our country.

Mexican society has lived under an authoritarian regime, based on *corporativism*¹ and the patronage system. This is an obscure relationship where authorities and officials feel they own the public space, and the citizens are considered a statistical number, only useful to vote and give governments certain legality. Such dynamics created spaces in which citizens are considered objects of the governors.

That is why the relationship between civil society and the Mexican government is asymmetric, where the governor has a concession attitude towards the citizens, who become only the receptors of the gifts or good intentions from the people that govern.

Citizens who look for alternatives or different ways to proposed by the authorities had, essentially, two ways out: to be punished and persecuted, and seen as people with obscure intentions, in disagreement with the "wise national politics"; or to be co-opted by government gifts and prerogatives. Let's remember the phrase: "he who doesn't live from the budget, lives in a mistake".

However, this despite dominating culture some of the most important social and civil movements emerged in the last two decades. In permanent struggle for recog-

nition of our autonomy, in opposition to government and political parties, sometimes exerting pressure, always with a positive attitude, we have been struggling to achieve recognition as social and civil actors with the right to demand our own rules, proposals and projects concerning social, civil and political issues.

At the same time, facing the actions of the country's social and civil groups, an economic process began, in which the government lost more and more of its capacity to satisfy the different social demands. A new economic model was created, changing from the "welfare state" to the neoliberal state.

This situation caused that the social and civil actors had to fight for political openness, to achieve recognition of our economic, social, cultural, political and civil rights. One of the central issues of this struggle was the recognition of our citizenship *status* as a right not only to vote and being voted, but to be considered with the right to participate in the design, execution, monitoring and evaluation of public programs and politics.

This strategy of participation of the social and civil actors was created from the territorial to influence in public policies proposals at local, regional, national and international level.

In the tone of the struggle for political openness, we promoted civil initiatives along with the opposition political parties. For example electoral observation, use of pub-

lic resources monitoring, as well as law initiatives, at local and federal level, in order to gain recognition as social actors and as being part of the public sphere.

Today we still fight for political openness, for being considered not as part of the problem but as part of the solution over public issues, with the government, the political parties and the popular representatives.

Increasingly, social and civil movement's central axis is the construction of citizen politics under the logic of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights.

The building of citizen politics demands the achievement of economic, social, cultural and environmental rights not only as an individual matter, but as rights for the different identities and collectivities that live in our country.

The relationship between civil movements and the authorities must evolve from one in which we are considered as second class citizens, and a statistical number, to one based on the recognition of the citizen's rights and obligations.

We have conquered our recognition *de facto*, because of our capacities and our struggle in assuming the social, economic and political causes. from our communities to national and international contexts. The strength of social and civil movements has been a constructive factor to propose suc-

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¹ The term in Spanish *corporativismo* refers to the act of being co-opted and controlled by the government.

successful projects with great consistency and sustainability, according to our professional capacities and abilities.

That is the reason why we are building a relationship that no longer comes from corruption, nor the logics where "the boss is the one who pays", but from mutual responsibility between civil society organizations and our government. This relationship between government and civil society organizations must have a critical and self-critical attitude, based on mutual respect and collaboration so that each part builds social, economic and political projects in such way that everybody is included as part of the solution of our national problems.

We have learned that the best way to work and build up relationships is based on trust and includes transparency and accountability. This will help us coordinate and add collective efforts to find solutions to the problems of our communities.

Another aspect that must be used to optimize the relationship between government and civil society is the mass media, which allows not only the spread of ideas, but also the collaboration between organizations that share goals. It can be very useful to influence and lobby both the government and international organizations.

There is no solution for public problems if there is no interaction between the government and the community, where we can truly build the public sphere, where everybody is part of it and each sector assumes its own responsibility.

Building new relationships between civil society organizations, government and popular representatives is a challenge to promote a new governability. One that allows us to learn, coordinate and build collective efforts, so that the results have the brand of mutual responsibility, transparency, accountability and tolerance, both from social and civil

organizations as well as governments and public officials.

This new relationship must have the brand we are looking for, quality democracy, where all public actions must include both parts: government and civil society.

It is very important that a respectful attitude exists in all public spaces, towards all sectors of society. We have to learn that public actions are intersectorial actions, that there is no democracy if there are no actions between sectors to build the public space and where the common interest is the will to be co-responsible.

These social processes have obtained achievements; one of them is the Federal Law of Promotion of the Activities of Civil Society Organizations (LFFAROSC), that after many years of lobbying and promotion finally passed in February 2004.

One of the important attributes of this Law is its federal character, which establishes guidelines and criteria for the government to promote civil society organizations' activities, respecting their internal life.

It establishes the basis and criteria to support civil and social organizations, at the same time points out the obligations and rights from the federal government and the organizations. Another important aspect to underline is the inclusion of transparency and accountability, because it forces organizations to be transparent about their activities, public resources and impacts of their projects, so that not only the activities developed by the government are transparent but also the ones from civil society achieve transparency, so demanded to the authorities.

There are also some sectors of civil society organizations and government resisting to open spaces for dialogue between the different agents of national politics, causing distrust in openness and

dialogue. Let us remember that despite the steps forward, our Mexican society is still very state centered.

It is urgent to go beyond the remainings of an asymmetric relationship, where the government considers civil society organization as promoters of obscure proselytizing politics, while civil society sees authorities as rhetorical, repressive and conservative of an unfair status quo.

The final point is that society and government share desires and processes to improve quality of life and to achieve a participative democracy for the joint construction of new citizen politics culture.

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