



May 10, 2009

The Crisis Came. Mexico Didn't Fail. Surprised?

By [LARRY ROHTER](#)

MEXICO CITY — Just for argument's sake, let's compare Mexico's management of the [swine flu](#) epidemic that broke out here last month with China's handling of SARS in 2002. The Chinese initially tried to deny there was an outbreak, were slow to combat its spread and resisted cooperation with foreign investigators. By the time SARS was brought under control, more than 700 people had died.

Mexico's conduct has been different. The authorities may have been slow to identify the threat, but once they did, they quickly notified international health agencies, acted efficiently to prevent the epidemic from mushrooming, and began working closely with the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) in the United States. As of Friday, the death toll was 45.

That response flies in the face of recent descriptions of Mexico as a "failed state" that is "on the verge of civil war" — phrases that seem a staple on American talk radio, cable television and political blogs. Apocalyptic language like that is based on the violence of Mexico's battles with the drug cartels that supply the American market, and with the severity of its economic downturn, which has been complicated by the fact that more than 80 percent of its trade is with the United States.

Both trends are indeed playing out, but what they mean for Mexico's future is far from certain. At any rate, they stand in contrast to a number of fundamental changes that I have seen here over the last month — my first extended stay in this country since a four-year stint as The New York Times bureau chief here ended in July 1990.

For example: In contrast to the secretive, suspicious one-party state I left behind, the Mexico on view today is clearly a democracy — flawed and fractious, but up and running. Many Mexicans, especially young people and artists with whom I spent time, also seemed more comfortable with their identity as a people and nation than their counterparts in the 1980s, when intellectuals focused relentlessly on grievances against the United States.

Such shifts in attitude are matters of degree, of course, and have their limits. "There have been transformations," Lorenzo Mayer, a historian at the Colegio de México, said in an interview. "But a true transition, we haven't had that yet. There are many things from your time that continue the same."

Still, it is worth recalling how insular Mexico could be. There was, for instance, the official response to the last crisis that nature inflicted on the country: a September 1985 earthquake here. That disaster, which I helped cover, killed at least 5,000 people, but the exact number will never be known, in part because of the government's reaction. President Miguel de la Madrid declared a news blackout, and the Foreign Ministry didn't just refrain from seeking assistance from abroad; it turned down an aid offer from the United States.

Just before [President Obama](#) visited here on April 16, in contrast, the Mexican Senate approved a request by the government of President [Felipe Calderón](#) to allow the Mexican [Navy](#) to participate, for the first time, in annual exercises with the United States and other nearby countries. During Mr. Obama's trip, Mr. Calderón even briefly addressed Mr. Obama in English in public at the Mexican White House; that was

something that Mexican presidents always avoided in my day, for reasons of sovereignty, self-image and the very complicated history of American-Mexican relations.

None of this suggests that Mexico has become a model state. Far from it: Even though more than 70 years of one-party rule have ended, corruption and impunity continue to be huge problems. The state and privileged interest groups are still very cozy, with the teachers' union replacing the oil workers' union as the current favorite. And television is still dominated by two networks that seem very deferential to the government — a more conservative one than the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which ruled when Mexico was my beat.

“We're stuck in the worst of all worlds, because even though there are now more players in the political game, the game itself is pretty much the same one, of elite rotation,” said Denise Dresser, a political science professor here. “What you've created is a perverse system of oligopolistic elites with vested interests and a willingness to use their veto power to prevent the changes that are needed but which they don't want.”

Mr. Calderón also seems to have fallen victim to a tradition that Mexican presidents, who are limited to a single six-year term, make some grand gesture to differentiate themselves from their predecessors. He decided to confront the drug cartels head on, only to discover that he may have bitten off more than he can chew; that partly accounts for the dead bodies frequently turning up in parts of the country where that conflict is playing out — and for the fears up north.

The violence has, indeed, sometimes been dramatic and it is often cited by the same doomsayers in the United States who point to a recent United States Joint Command report that identifies Pakistan and Mexico as candidates for “rapid and sudden collapse.” But that Pentagon assessment is a reminder of testimony by Gen. Paul Gorman, then the head of the United States Southern Command, to Congress in 1984. Over the next decade, he warned then, Mexico could become the United States' “number one security problem.” That is not what happened.

Many of the changes I noticed here, both positive and negative, are clearly a result of the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#), which took effect in 1994. That accord has resulted in epochal changes for Mexico, including the virtual disappearance of the ejido, a communitarian system of landholding that many Mexicans once regarded with almost mystical nostalgia.

“Mexico has become a de facto economic colony of the United States,” Joseph Contreras, a correspondent here for [Newsweek](#) magazine in the 1980s and again this decade, writes in “In the Shadow of the Giant,” a new book that examines the recent evolution of the relationship between the two countries. “The Americanization of modern Mexico transcends mere dollars and cents. It can be seen in the influence of American traditions, resources and values on Mexico's social mores, foreign policy, consumer tastes, health problems and even everyday language.”

Today, like it or not, the two countries are bound together inextricably in ways that would have been unthinkable during my time here. There is an old expression here, originally applied to economics and trade, that says “when the United States sneezes, Mexico catches cold.” The events of the last month suggest that the reverse may also be literally true. Or, as Jorge Castañeda, a former foreign minister who now teaches at [New York University](#), put it: When it comes to living together, “Mexico has no choice, and Washington has no choice, period.”

Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)