

Comparison of democracy in mexico and south africa politics essay



This research essay highlights the level of democracy in Mexico and in South Africa and to what extent they are democratic. In the first part, the concept of democracy and its measurement are outlined, as democracy has received several definitions and it would be helpful to be aware of the democratic characteristics to assess Mexico's and South Africa's level of democracy. In the second part, a general overview of the political situation in Mexico and in South Africa are mentioned, as well as whether political participation, civil and political rights are respected within the states. In the third part, a critical assessment of the level of democracy between Mexico and South Africa is outlined in terms of the characteristics mentioned above, according to the Freedom House Index and other indexes that measure the level of democracy. Both Mexico and South Africa no matter how different they are, they are both electoral democracies with South Africa being slightly better than Mexico, as the latter faces the problems of corruption, organized crime, drug trafficking within the government and officials. On the other hand, South Africa faces the problems of corruption and fraud but violence expressed by the police is a current challenge South Africa faces, as this outburst may lead to its following Mexico's steps.

Introduction

Before examining democracy in Mexico and South Africa and assess their level of democracy, there is an urgent need to define the concept of democracy and how it is measured. Democracy is a contested concept and has received different definitions over the years. Leonardo Morlino gives a minimal definition according to which:

“...such a regime has, at least, the following: universal, adult suffrage; recurring, free, competitive and fair elections; more than one political party; and more than one source of information. Among those that meet these minimum criteria, further empirical analysis is still necessary to detect the degree to which they have achieved the two main objectives of an ideal democracy: freedom and political equality” (Morlino, 2004: 10).

Democracy offers an open and accountable government which is characterized by responsiveness and commitment to the policies taken (this is the government’s legitimacy), as the citizens with their political, social and civil rights have the opportunity to criticize, approve or disapprove the existing policies while having free access to information. Civil society, pressure groups and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are free to operate as they seek to influence the decision-making without aspirations to public office. Additionally, freedom and equality are the prerequisites of democracy as, if it has not been for these values, citizens’ well-being and human dignity would not exist.

The concept of democracy is virtualized when it comes to its measurement. This is when a democratic state is examined whether it abides to the characteristics of democracy. According to David Beetham, the above characteristics (open and accountable government, free and fair elections and civil and political rights) “ are necessary to the whole and each should be examined in turn, to assess not only the effectiveness of popular control in practice, but also the political equality in each area” (Beetham, 1994: 30).

There are several indexes that assess the level of democracy within the states such as the Freedom House, the International Idea and the Polity IV <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-democracy-in-mexico-and-south-africa-politics-essay/>

Democracy score that take into account and measure the level of the above characteristics within a state.

More specifically, although both Mexico and S. Africa have many cultural differences, they also have many characteristics in common. They both made a transition to democracy the last few decades and they are electoral democracies. In the following parts, an attempt is made to highlight some characteristics like the existence of free and fair elections, the rule of law, the political participation, civil and political rights that constitute to democracy and how each state is accountable, legitimate and responsive to its citizens. Furthermore, an assessment of the level of democracy in these states is outlined as well as the challenges each state faces.

PART I

Conceptualizing democracy

Democracy has taken different definitions over the years but most of the political theorists have agreed towards the definition that “ a country is democratic to the extent that its government is held accountable to citizens by means of free and fair elections” (Bernhagen, 2009: 25). Joseph Schumpeter gives a minimalistic definition of democracy: “ in a democratic state there is ‘ free competition’ for a free vote” (Schumpeter cited in Rose, 2009: 12). The above definition indicates that the prerequisite of democracy is the rule of law, where the government is held responsible for the liability of the elections (government’s accountability and commitment) and the citizens have the right to vote and they are free to participate in the elections by taking part in the political procedure. Individuals have also the

right to oppose to the existing legislature, criticize or approve it; “ the role of citizens is largely restricted to electing representatives, to richer ones involving the active participation of citizens in decision-making” (Schumpeter cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 26), “ including the local level and the workplace” (Paterman cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 26), “ or by way of referendums” (Cronin cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 26) “ or deliberation in citizen juries or interactive polling” (Fishkin cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 26).

Robert Dahl identifies five dimensional criteria of democracy. First of all, “ an effective participation” where citizens have the opportunity to express their preferences towards the political system and a “ voting equality” which enables them to take part in the policy-making by opposing or approving the existing policy. Additionally, citizens have free access to information, the diffusion of ideas that constitute to the transparency of the government (“ enlightened understanding”). By these means they have the power to change the existing policy and criticize it as they have the “ control of the agenda” and the “ inclusion, to enjoy the full rights of citizenship” (Dahl cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 27).

The above definitions and dimensions of democracy outline the importance of the state’s accountability, liability and commitment and the citizens’ civil, social and political rights; from the right to express their voice (freedom of expression), their taking part in the elections and to criticize and influence the existing policies, to the right to a free access to information without the existence of censorship. These characteristics are mentioned in Amartya Sen’s definition of democracy:

“ democracy is something more than the majority rule. It has complex demands which include voting and respect for election results but it also requires the protection of liberties and freedoms, respect for legal entitlements and the guaranteeing of free discussion and uncensored distribution of news and fair comment” (Sen, 1999: 9-10)

Measuring Democracy

As it was indicated previously, democracy assures citizens for free and fair elections, an inclusive suffrage, the elected political officials, the right to run a public office, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information and an associational autonomy (the freedom to form organizations) (Dahl cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 29).

In order to measure democracy, political scientists and theorists concentrate on different democracy indicators. For instance, the Bollen’s Index of Political Democracy focuses on the notion of “ political sovereignty” and the one of “ political liberty” (Bollen cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 29). Mark Gasiorowski refers to civil rights, competition, and political participation as he defines a democratic state when

“ meaningful and extensive competition exists among individuals and organized groups for all effective positions of government power at regular intervals and excluding the use of force, a highly inclusive level of political participation exists in the selection of leaders and policies such that no major (adult) social group is excluded, and a sufficient level of civil and political liberties exists to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation” (Gasiorowski cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 29).

Additionally, the Monty Marshall's and Keith Jagger's Polity IV Index focuses on the " executive recruitment", the " political competition and opposition" and the independence of executive authority" (Marshall and Jagger cited in Bernhagen, 2009: 29). Last but not least, the Freedom House Index concentrates on the citizens' freedom of political and civil liberties, the opportunity to participate in free and fair elections and to express their beliefs and disapproval when it comes to the government's policies and decision-making. More specifically, the electoral process is rated as well as the political pluralism and participation in the context of political rights, not to mention the freedom of expression and belief, the associational and organizational rights, the rule of law, personal autonomy and individual rights in the context of civil liberties.

The above democracy indicators will be used to assess the level of democracy in comparison between Mexico and South Africa. Democracy outlines the importance of government's accountability and the means of free and fair elections in contrary to economic growth, capitalism, the freedom of religion, socio-economic equality and peace. On the other hand, democracy's bedrocks, as mentioned above, are the freedom of expression, the freedom of the press, the freedom of association the civil and political liberties.

PART II

Democracy in Mexico

General overview

Since 1810, Mexico has been independent from Spain and twelve years later it was considered as a republic. After the Revolution of 1910 it was established as a federal republic (1917) while till 2000 it was dominated through corruption, patronage, repression and arbitrary power, instead of the rule of law by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In December 2000, Vicente Fox Quesada of the National Action Party (PAN) came in power capturing 42.5 percent of the vote; “The victory of a party other than PRI essentially stood the Mexican political model on its head, destroying permanently the incestuous, monopolistic relationship between state and party” (Camp, 2007: 213). He planned to fight against corruption, inefficient law enforcement agencies and promoted human rights. Among his achievements there is “his defeat of the long-ruling PRI, providing for more open and accountable government, and arresting some leaders of the country’s vicious drug cartels” (Freedom House, 2009), whereas the areas of organized crime, corruption, poverty and unemployment stayed stable. On the other hand, presidency of Fox resulted in empowering the individuals’ rights as Loaeza argues: “the most important consequence of Fox’s presidential style was the extension of the individual’s qualities and shortcomings to the presidential institution itself” (Loaeza, 2006: 30). In July’s 2006 presidential elections, the results were very close as Felipe Calderon of PAN tried to influence public’s opinion by accusing the PRD’s Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador of being “a dangerous populist” in the mode

of Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez (Freedom House, 2009). Calderon's votes were prevailing by a mere 244,000 votes in the initial count something that made Lopez Obrador to question the transparent outcome of the elections. International observers though, did not take into account neither the evidence of fraud by PRD's behalf, nor the Lopez Obrador's lack of respect for the Mexican Institutions and Calderon was declared the winner of the elections. However, the following years social unrest occurred and as a result, conflicts between the police and protesters in the town of San Salvador Atenco, in Oaxaca occurred. In 2007 Calderon tried to pass pension tax and electoral and judicial reforms but as there was a reform of the petroleum sector, an existing crime wave and close congressional elections in 2009, these reforms did not bear fruit.

The main characteristics of the Mexican state are violence with organized crime, drug trafficking, homicides, kidnappings, extortion and other crimes as many police officials were accused of passing the information to traffickers and helping them or being involved themselves.

Political participation and civil and political rights

Mexico is an electoral democracy where there are three political parties: the National Action Party (PAN), the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) something that constitutes to pluralism. The president cannot be reelected as he is elected for a six-year term. The bicameral Congress consists of the 128-member Senate which is elected for six years by a direct and proportional representation; at least one senator from each state is elected and within the Chamber of Deputies, 300 are elected directly and 200 proportionally for three-year terms.

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The 2006 elections were free and fair thanks to the Mexico's Federal Electoral Institute (IFE), which supervises the electoral process as well as enforces political party laws. Since the supervision of the electoral process by international organizations, from the European Union for example, that sent observers to Mexico the elections results were accepted as valid. Nevertheless, the congressional midterm elections of 2009 raised again the problem of fraud.

The institutionalization of the Mexican army and its attachment to the government to fight against the drug cartels resulted in its being even more corrupt. According to Bertelsmann Stiftung, "this poses a very serious threat to the Mexican state and to the government and the police should be reformed in order to do this job" (Bertelsmann, 2010: 8). Official corruption is a serious problem and there is a serious possibility that drug money affect not only the governments but local levels as well: "Mexico was ranked 72 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index" (Freedom House, 2009). Corruption is a serious problem to the less developed countries causing problems in their democratic transition. As a result, corruption within the Mexican government "undermines substantive democracy in the DF because the police department and prosecution system are corrupt, crime is rampant and citizens with financial resources buy favorable treatment in the criminal system" (Wirth, 2006: 173). As Bailey and Paras highlight,

"the impeding of corruption in a more inclusive context of 'public security' and the efforts to clarify concepts and improve operational measures are

worthwhile contributions to a discussion of one of the most important issues in quality of democracy” (Bailey and Paras, 2006: 80).

The army constitutes one of the democratic institutions as its goal is to illuminate drug trafficking and is subordinate to the civilian authorities. Additionally, the parties are democratic but as they are based on clientele relations and face election problems internally (the PRD and the PRI for example), there is a fear of their not being efficient enough. Interest groups such as trade unions are dependent to the PRI or even the PRD, due to their clientelistic relationship. The powerful interest groups within the Mexican state are big economic groups and media companies that control the regulatory agencies even though the latter were supposed to control them.

The police and the judiciary system are corrupt and violate civil rights, abusing preferably the poorest citizens. Even though the Federal Judicial Council (Consejo de la Juriscatura Federal) was created, its autonomy in relation to drug cartels and other gangs does not allow it to be effective. Corruption is present in local levels as well among the police and the judges.

As long as the women in power in the Mexican political system is concerned, several attempts to increase pluralism were made but they did not bear fruit. According to the International IDEA’s report on Mexico,

“ in 2002 the Congress of the Union approved reforms to COFIPE (Commission on Gender and Equality and on Government and Constitutional Matters) that require political parties to guarantee that women constitute at least 30% of candidates to the Senate and to the Chamber of Deputies, or, more specifically, that lists for PR and constituency elections do not have
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more than 70% candidates and substitutes of the same sex. This legislation requires that parties include this principle in their party constitutions”

(International IDEA, 2006)

Civic organizations and institutions exist as well to put pressure on the government’s policies and to check its liability, its responsiveness and the transparency of the use of public resources. Nevertheless, the rule of law is undermined as there are not sufficient mechanisms to prosecute the perpetrators as “ governors have to be impeached by their local congresses or by the federal Senate, but their congress and their party usually protects them in the Senate” (Bertelsmann, 2010: 10).

The 2000 federal elections empowered the institutions (the presidency, the political parties and the electoral institutions) resulting to its transition to democratization. On the other hand, as indicated in the forum of the Journal of Mexican Studies, the challenges

“ that pre-date the current administration, such as citizen perceptions of corruption, fiscal federalism and distribution of governmental resources, the judicial and political status of Mexico’s indigenous citizens and Mexico’s city place within the federal framework” (2006: 1)

must be taken into account in improving the quality of the democracy in the state. Additionally, the Mexican state’s concern was to create social change but it has neglected to give power to the public opinion to chose its own political leaders; “ Mexican presidents and the PRI have been creating symbols of democracy to obscure the reality of presidential authority” (De la

Isla and Wirth, 2001: 38). To strengthen the electoral process, the parties
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should institutionalize their respective places and strengthen the political system generally by opening the participation of candidate selection. Whether freedom of the press and individual rights are strengthened, democracy's quality will be improved; "open rules also increase populism and individualism and empower the mass media" (Rahat and Hazan cited in Wuhs, 2006: 53).

Freedom of expression is another component of democracy and highly controversial in the Mexican State. This is because even though the mass media are free and citizens and journalists can speak freely as "the media have played a vital role in criticizing the non-democratic aspects of FD governance and promoting democratic reform" (Wirth, 2006: 166), the security environment of journalists is in question. Press has been announcing to the public about the corruption officials, the organized crime and the drug cartels, but after several incidents like the assassination of nine journalists and two disappearances during 2008, self-censorship was increased and journalists no longer published stories about organized crime.

"According to the International Press Institute, Mexico is the second most dangerous place to exercise the profession of journalist. With respect to liberty of expression, Mexico is rated by the France-based Reporters without Frontiers at 149th place out of 173 countries" (Bertelsmann, 2010: 9).

Democracy in S. Africa

General overview

Since 1910, the Union of South Africa was declared as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, while the Afrikaner-dominated National Party

(NP) came in power to maintain the white minority rule or the “ apartheid”. Its formal independence was declared in 1961 and the NP governed the state for decades. International pressure towards the apartheid resulted in the legalization of the antiapartheid African National Congress (ANC) with leader Nelson Mandela, who was kept in prison. The ANC came into power in the 1994 elections, among the constitutions of the NP and the Zulu-nationalist Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). In December 2006, the ANC stayed in power with Thabo Mbeki, the successor of Nelson Mandela, as its leader. In the elections of 2004 the ANC party won the seventy percent of the vote and 279 of the 400 seats in the National Assembly. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP) were criticizing ANC’s policies putting pressure for land reforms, the delivery of public services and policies concerning the treatment for HIV/AIDS. For example, “ in may 2007, COSATU led a four-week strike by some 500, 000 public sector workers to demand higher pay” as indicated in the Freedom House 2009 report for S. Africa (Freedom House, 2009). Zuma defeated Mbeki in the party presidency at the ANC’s national conference in December 2007 whereas ANC’s national committee put pressure for his resignation because of his involvement in corruption and prosecutorial conduct. After Mbeki’s resignation, Mosiuoa Lekota quit from the ANC and created an new party, the Congress of the People (COPE).

Problems concerning the frequent “ xenophobic” attacks on African migrants, drew the international attention of many civil society groups and UN officials to provide shelters to the foreigners, especially to the Zimbabweans, or help them return to their homes. These assassinations

were classified from the government as “killings as ordinary criminal cases” (Freedom House, 2009). On the other hand, the problem of infection of HIV/AIDS, as approximately 12 percent of the population was infected, put pressure on the government to fight against it by providing an ARV treatment that has been increased in December 2008 by the new government with deputy Kgalema Motlanthe, elected by the National Assembly, whose term was ended in 2009.

Political participation and civil and political rights

South Africa is an electoral democracy where the 90 members of the National Council of Provinces are selected by the provincial legislatures. The 400-seat National Assembly is determined by party-list proportional representation and elects the president for a five-year term. The African National Congress (ANC) is the party that has gained the majority for decades with its opposition party the Democratic Alliance (DA), followed by the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP), and the new-created Congress of the People (COPE). The electoral process is characterized as free and fair despite the accusation of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) of giving bias in favor of the ANC party. Several outbursts of political violence took place as

“the stabbing at an ANC conference in Western Cape province and the intimidation by ANC supporters at several gatherings of the splinter group that became COPE. In June, ANC Youth League and COSATU leaders said their groups were prepared to take up arms and kill for ANC president Jacob Zuma” (Freedom House, 2009),

while enforcement of eliminating official corruption remained inadequate. At this point, it would be meaningful to mention the reason why Jacob Zuma was accused of fraud and official corruption; he was accused of exposing rifts not only to the governing alliance, but also within the ANC (this is why he was sacked by Mbeki in 2005). Accusations also concerned the raping of a family friend of his.

Democratic governance is not affected as the South African executive has the power to govern the state and the army, businesses, trade unions and social groups within the ANC support the democratic principles. Despite police's accusations of overreacting to illegal demonstrations there is a freedom of association and assembly and they are generally respected. Civil society, NGO's and pressure groups can operate by criticizing and proposing new improved policies and trade unions can operate without restrictions from the government and the citizens are free to participate. Civil society is proposed by Friedman as

“ a realm of freedom and social progress rather than of inequality and partial interests, a development helped by the role that it played as a driving force in transitions from authoritarianism to democracy” (Friedman, 2004: 252)

As the rule of law is concerned, the constitution has established a separation of powers offering S. Africa a parliamentary system of government, having a convergence between the parliamentary majority and the executive.

Financial accountability of the parliament constitutes to its weakness compared to the executive system of government. The judicial system operate independently with its Constitutional Court and the Supreme Court

without the government's interference while at the same time, judges cannot be members of the parliament. Nevertheless, debates have taken place in regard to Zuma's case: "judges that have ruled against Zuma have, for example, been accused of being elitist, 'counterrevolutionary' and disinterested in the plight of ordinary citizens" (Bertelsmann, 2010: 10).

Democratic institutions are performing efficiently, the electoral system in particular but sometimes it is made in order to gain political support. An example of these kinds of acts is outlined in the BTI report for South Africa: "one of Zuma's most ardent supporters, Julius Malema, leader of the ANC Youth League, indicated in a public platform at the end of 2008 that he would 'kill' for Zuma" (Bertelsmann, 2010: 11). According to Bola Dauda, political and economic institutions

"sustain the rule of law, guarantee inalienable human rights and redress violation of such rights as freedom of speech, religion, employment and movement. Hence taking democracy seriously implies an evolution or institutionalization of a generally accepted legitimate means of mobilizing Africans to participate in deciding matters that affect them" (Dauda, 1991: 53)

In South Africa, women hold 131 of 400 seats in the National Assembly, and head 12 of 28 ministries and 4 of 9 provincial governments. In 2005, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka was appointed as a deputy president with Mbeki's political party, but they resigned in 2008 with Mbeki's resignation. According to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance

(International IDEA) 's 2006 report for South Africa, in the 1994 first democratic elections,

“ the ANC adopted a 30% quota for women increased from below 3% to 27% in one election in 1994. In the 1999 election, women were placed in every third position on the national party list. At the local level (with a mixed electoral system) the ANC has adopted a 50% quota for women on party lists” (International IDEA, 2006).

Civil rights are protected by legislatures and by the constitutions as they have established several institutions to monitor and criticize the decision-making for their improvement. Additionally, civil rights are widely supported and civil groups tend to put pressure on the government to be more efficient in the police's treatment towards the prisoners, and the violence expressed towards the immigrants so that they are protected against xenophobic violence. Pressure is also put to the administration's efficiency and funding for the treatment of HIV/AIDS, by which a large proportion of the population is infected. Property rights are also protected by the law, with a legislature protecting African citizens from arbitrary deprivation of their property.

Freedom of expression and of the media and press are protected by the law and every citizen is free to approve, disapprove, criticize and protest for the existing policies; “ only ‘ hate speech’ is prosecuted by law” (Bertelsmann, 2010: 8) something that contributes to the media's independence. By these means, whether criticism towards an official and his policies is made, government officials are likely to change their attitudes and policies as every democratic state proposes. Additionally,

“ most South Africans receive the news via radio outlets, a majority of which are controlled by the SABC. The SABC also dominates the television market, but two commercial stations are expanding their reach. Internet access is unrestricted and growing rapidly, although many South Africans cannot afford the service free” (Freedom House, 2009)

PART III

General assessment of the level of democracy between Mexico and S. Africa

Both Mexico and S. Africa are electoral democracies and the elections conducted are considered as free and fair no matter the accusations of fraud (Mexico) and citizens' misleading bias (S. Africa). Official corruption is a common problem, especially in Mexico, as it affects the government, the judicial system, the army and police as there is an outburst of violence, organized crime and drug trafficking. Corruption in S. Africa exists in lowest rates within the government, as for example the case of Jacob Zuma; the army is governed by the executive system resulting in its being independent from corruption. Nevertheless, incidents of police's violence has been reported as migrants were killed by police members in S. Africa.

Democratic institutions play a major role in the democratic transition and democratization of these states as it empowers the rule of law, the policy-making and the policy implementing while at the same time, promote the civil and political rights. Mexico's institutions are losing their power because of the existing corruption, while in S. Africa are performing efficiently gaining political support. Additionally, the protection of civil rights is weak in Mexico, as organized crime and corruption is put at first sight. In comparison to <https://assignbuster.com/comparison-of-democracy-in-mexico-and-south-africa-politics-essay/>

Mexico, civil rights are protected by the government and by the law and they are widely supported by pressure groups that can operate independently in S. Africa.

The role of women in politics is legislated in both states, covering the 30% of the candidates. Last but not least, freedom of expression in Mexico exists but the organized crime leads to several journalists' and citizens' self-censorship whereas in S. Africa can operate freely.

The Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index of 2006 states both S. Africa and Mexico as "flawed" democracies, ranking the first 29th with overall score 7.91 and Mexico 53rd among 167 countries with overall score 6.67 (full democracies score of 8-10, flawed democracies of 6 to 7.9, hybrid regimes of 4 to 5.9 and authoritarian regimes score below 4). Additionally, the Transformation Index of 2010 (BTI) indicated that considering democracy, Mexico scores 35 of 128 states with overall score 7.25 of 10 (where 10 is considered the highest score and 1 the lowest), and S. Africa scores 7.60 of 10 and is 31 of 128 in the country rankings. In the Polity IV Index, Mexico scores 8 in the 2006 and 2007 reports, considering itself a democracy as democracies are +6 to +10, and S. Africa scores 9. Last but not least, both nations are considered democratic with a free status as indicated by Freedom House; Mexico has taken a political rights score of 2 and a civil liberties score of 3 out of 7 and S. Africa 2 of 7 as political rights are concerned, and 2 in civil liberties score, where 7 is considered to be the lowest level of freedom and 1 the highest.

Conclusion

In order to assess the level of democracy in Mexico and S. Africa, the definition of democracy and how it is measured should be taken into consideration. Democracy is a widely contested concept but one of its characteristics are the accountability, commitment and responsiveness of the government, the protection of civil and political rights, the freedom of expression of the media and of the people who can criticize, appro