

## **The Rise and Fall of Mexico's Green Movement**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

During the 1970s and 1980s, Latin America experienced several waves of social mobilization and popular protests as most countries in the region transitioned away from military dictatorships. As authoritarian regimes weakened and gave way to civilian rule, social movements became active political actors. In effect, it has been argued that social movements in Latin America played “the crucial role of pushing the transition further than it would have otherwise have gone” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 56). Not surprisingly, social movements attracted great scholarly attention, as exemplified by the voluminous literature devoted their study (Eckstein 1989; Mainwaring 1986; Mainwaring and Viola 1984; Slater 1985; Garretón 1996; Uritia et al 1985; Calderón and Jelin 1987; Hellman 1994; Latin American Perspectives 1994). Within this larger context of social mobilization, Latin America also experienced the mobilization of citizens demanding better environmental protection. As the environmental consequences of Green Revolutions and post-war industrialization became apparent by the early 1980s, an increasing number of Latin Americans organized and mobilized to demand that governments pay more attention to the protection of the region’s natural environment (Caruthers 2001, Hochsteler and Keck 2007; Hochsteler and Mumme 1998, Auer 2001; Díez 2006; , Forthcoming; Robert and Thanos 2003). By the time electoral democracy had been restored in the early 1990s, most countries in the region counted with some form of environmental movement. While their size and strength varied across the region, environmental activism in Latin America has resulted in the unprecedented establishment of national environmental agencies and the writing of general environmental laws (Hochsteler 2007).

Environmental mobilization has also taken place in Mexico. During the 1980s, the environmental repercussions of Mexico’s post-war development became apparent and, taking advantage of the new opportunities the country’s political opening offered, citizens began to organize and mobilize to demand better environmental protection. Mexico thus witnessed the emergence of an environmental movement which grew in size and strength and that, by the mid 1990s, had gained national visibility. More importantly, during a series of environmental reforms implemented during the 1990s, Mexican environmentalists were successful in influencing national environmental policy and achieved a series of significant policy triumphs (Díez 2006). In a relatively short period of time, then, Mexico’s green movement emerged and became an important political actor.

However, since the defeat of PRI in the general elections of 2000, Mexico’s environmentalists have been intriguingly much less visible in national politics and have been less influential in environmental policymaking. What accounts for this phenomenon? Work on social mobilization has advanced several possible explanations. One is that the return to electoral democracy generally leads to the demobilization of civil society. Because members of social movements do not have a single identifiable threat after authoritarian rule, they are no longer united with large segments of society (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986: 55-56). Others suggest that demobilization should be expected as the advent of democratic politics brings other channels of representation such as unions and political parties (Oxhorn 1999) and that democratic politics tends to fragment interests, thereby dividing individuals within movements (Törnquist 1999). However, most of this work that has primarily concentrated on cases in which transitions away from authoritarian rule occurred in a swifter manner and in which there was a clear break into

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<sup>1</sup> This paper draws from data collected during interviews conducted with 36 individuals during the summers of 2004 and 2005. These participants include members of ENGOs and government officials who worked for Mexico’s Environment Ministry as well as Members of Congress.

electoral democracy. Mexico's transition into democratic rule, on the other hand, has been a great deal more protracted and social movements have experienced cycles of mobilization and demobilization during this process (Williams 2001). Indeed, as the recent presidential elections demonstrated, Mexico's transition into democratic politics continues to unfold and the country is still experiencing strong mass mobilizations.

Another explanation for the demobilization of social movements regards their institutionalization. Research on social mobilization in Latin America suggests that the institutionalization of social movements leads to their demobilization. One of the most common ways in which social movements become institutionalized is through the formation of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Accordingly, it is argued that NGOs have a depoliticizing and deradicalizing effect on movement politics (Petras 1997, Ferguson 1994, Lang 1997, Pisano 1996). This perspective holds that, as members of social movements decide to institutionalize and professionalize their activities through the formation of NGOs, they tend to become less confrontational and attempt to influence politics and policy through state and non-state institutions, rather than through protests. The institutionalization of social movements, which has been referred to as their "NGOization" (Álvarez 1999), accelerated in the 1990s in Latin America as new funds from national and international donors, both public and private, became more available and as governments increasingly relied on NGOs to deliver social services which were previously under state control. This new reliance of Latin American governments on NGOs was largely encouraged by the neo-liberal state and pressure from international institutions (Alvarez et al 1998: 1).

This process of NGOization has certainly affected environmental mobilization in Latin America. Similar to other social movements, Latin American environmentalism underwent a process of NGOization in the 1990s. While the return to democracy allowed societal groups to advance demands through the electoral arena, it has not been particularly beneficial in advancing environmental concerns given that the region's green parties and candidacies have generally been weak. Environmentalists have therefore found organizing through autonomous organizations, such as NGOs, as the most reliable way through which to bring issues to the political agenda (Hochsteler 2007). As a result, in many countries of the region there has been an unprecedented proliferation of Environmental NGOs (ENGOS). However, in the case of Mexico, as we shall see, the professionalization of the movement did not completely depoliticize the movement in the 1990s as it was able to mount several well organized environmental mobilizations, some of which resulted in significant government policy reversals. While the movement did become more 'NGOized,' it was able to maintain what Sonia Álvarez refers to as a 'double identity' (1999). That is, professional environmentalists, mostly well educated, middle class individuals, became the directors of ENGOS, but they managed to maintain linkages with the larger environmental movement. It is precisely because of these linkages that the movement kept a certain degree of politicization and was able to organize several successful campaigns during the 1990s. The weakening of the movement is more directly related to the manner in which the leadership of Mexico's environmental movement interacted with the state following the defeat of the PRI in 2000, rather than to its NGOization in the previous decade. The NGOization of the movement during the 1990s may not have completely depoliticized it, but it did facilitate the integration of its leadership into the new government. It is this phenomenon, I argue, that weakened the movement. The election of Fox allowed for the incorporation of a variety of sectoral leaders into the new government as he attempted to mark a departure from the past, and this included the environmental movement. Because the movement was highly

professionalized at the moment of transition and many of its leaders decided to forge a close relationship with the new regime and in many cases became part of it, it created a 'leadership vacuum.' Such process subsequently made it very difficult for Mexican environmentalists to apply pressure on the new government once it became evident that environmental issues did not figure high among the administration's priorities. This short paper will follow as follows. In a first section I trace the emergence of Mexico's contemporary environmental movement since the 1980s. In a subsequent section, I detail the institutionalization of the movement and the impact it had on the formation of the country's environmental policy regime. In the last section I present an analysis of the reasons behind the weakening of Mexico's environmental movement since 2000.

### **The Rise of Mexican Environmentalism**

The economic reform and the crises that Mexico underwent during the 1980s had important social repercussions. Unlike previous economic crises, the deterioration of socio-economic conditions of the 1980s affected severely various sectors of society, from the urban and rural poor to the middle classes. This unleashed general social discontent that contributed to the emergence of significant social mobilization, as new social groups began to bypass the corporatist structure in an attempt to place demands directly upon the state. This process accelerated with the 1985 earthquake. This powerful earthquake (7.6 in the Richter scale) hit Mexico City on September 13, 1985 and claimed the lives of approximately 20,000 residents.<sup>2</sup> The Mexican government proved highly inadequate in providing relief and assistance to the hundreds of thousands of victims and homeless people. Due to delayed government action and sheer incompetence, residents of Mexico City began to organize swiftly and in large numbers to provide food, water, shelter and medical supplies to the victims. Such social mobilization witnessed the formation of a significant number of social organizations, a phenomenon that is regarded as a catalyst in the crystallization of large-scale social movements in contemporary Mexico (Foweraker 1990). Vikram Chand has referred to this 'strengthening' of Mexican civil society as the country's contemporary 'political awakening' (2001).

It is against this backdrop of increased social mobilization during the 1980s that several catalytic events impelled the formation of the Mexican environmental movement. On November 1984, an extremely potent explosion at a gas plant run by the state-owned corporation Mexican Petroleum (PEMEX) in San Juan Ixhuatepec, outside Mexico City, killed over 500 people. The explosion not only caused outrage, but it heightened environmental sensibilities as the environmental damage it caused became evident through widespread television coverage. The 1985 earthquake also contributed to environmental mobilization; along with various kinds of NGOs that surged following the disaster, ENGOs were created as 'green brigades' to support people who, as a result of the earthquake, were living in squatter communities around the ruined homes and in the suburbs of Mexico City (González Martínez 1992).

Two months after the earthquake, and in an attempt to coordinate efforts and share information, fourteen civil associations called for the first National Meeting of Ecologists in Mexico City. The meeting was attended by representatives of more than 300 regional groups, civil associations and scout groups, which discussed a wide variety of themes. At this meeting participants created Mexico's first network of ENGOs, the Pact of Ecologist Groups (PGE). The PGE brought together 50 organizations and established ten working commissions that dealt with issues that ranged from pollution in the Valley of Mexico to deforestation. The foundation of the

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<sup>2</sup> Mexican officials placed the number at 10, 000, but this figure is widely believed to be an underestimate.

PGE was a rather important development as it was the first time ENGOs became organized under a formal structure within a larger network. It also played a pivotal role in organizing and amalgamating opposition to the government's nuclear-energy programme shortly after the network was formed. The PGE's anti-nuclear campaign contributed further to the strengthening of the environmental movement in Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

Two events at the beginning of the 1990s added further momentum to the movement: the preparatory discussions for the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio Summit); and the joint declaration by Presidents Carlos Salinas and George Bush Sr. (1988-1992), on June 1990, that their respective administrations planned to undertake discussions to draft a free-trade agreement. Environmental activism before the Rio Summit was mostly spurred by the fact that Mexican NGOs did not believe they had sufficient discussion space during the official preparatory meetings (Umlas 1996: 97 – 99). Twelve NGOs and networks called thus a meeting – entitled First National Forum of Civil and Social Associations of Environment and Development – seeking to open discussions on alternative development models and to promote interest in participating at a parallel summit, the Global Forum. The meeting resulted in the formation of the Mexican Civil Society Forum for Rio 92 (FOROMEX), which, at one point, incorporated 103 organizations.

The prospects of signing a free-trade agreement with the United States, and eventually with Canada, also strengthened the environmental movement and increased ENGO activity. Firstly, there was a galvanization of public opinion in Mexico with regard to the benefits of free trade. Media coverage of the national debate increased considerably, with some sectors of society, such as PRI supporters and business, strongly supporting the agreement. Opposition to the agreement came mostly from Mexican environmentalists, who were opposed mainly because it ignored sustainable development and environmental protection. There was a concern that free trade would further degrade Mexico's national resources and increase pollution levels (Peña 1993: 124). Environmentalists saw thus the need to organize and collaborate in order to oppose the agreement, and various networks, working groups and associations were created, such as the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC). These networks encouraged the creation and registration of NGOs (Hogenboom 1998; Ávila 1997).

Secondly, because the Bush-Salinas declaration was unprecedented, there was little information on the effects that free trade would have on the environment. Consequently, national and international collaboration among environmentalists increased due to the necessity to share information.<sup>4</sup> In effect, prior to NAFTA, US NGOs had hardly dealt with Mexico, had little knowledge of Mexico, and had few contacts with Mexican NGOs (Fox 2003: 363). Barbara Hogenboom points out that: “within three years (from the summer of 1990 to the summer of 1993) many contacts were established [between U.S. and Mexican NGOs], information shared

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<sup>3</sup> The PGE's opposition began to brew in September of 1986, eight months after the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl, when President de la Madrid announced that the project to build a nuclear-power plant in Laguna Verde, in the Gulf state of Veracruz, was to go ahead. Although he eventually decided to build the plant in 1988, the anti-nuclear campaign was successful in bringing together a large number of environmental groups, in raising awareness further and, ultimately, in opposing and defying the government through actions such as highway blockades. In effect, the Laguna-Verde mobilization is considered to be one of the watershed events of Mexico's environmental movement (Berlin 1988; Payá Porres 1994; García-Gorena 1999).

<sup>4</sup> For example, in October of 1990, 35 Mexican and 30 Canadian ENGOs held a two-day meeting in Mexico City to exchange information. Then, in January of 1991, a tri-national forum on agricultural, environmental and labour issues was held on Capitol Hill attracting more than 400 ENGOs from the three countries. The purpose of the meeting was to stimulate debate and share information on social and environmental issues.

and experience gained” (1998: 151). All these factors contributed significantly to the strengthening of the environmental movement in Mexico. By the mid 1990s, environmental issues had gained national attention and that this was in great part the result of increased environmental activism.

Mexico’s environmental movement also benefited hugely from the increased interaction between Mexican environmentalists and their international counterparts. Indeed, the internationalization of the movement has been a contributor to its institutionalization. During the NAFTA negotiations, there was an unprecedented increase in funding for Mexican ENGOs from international organizations. Organizations, such as the National Audubon Society, the Natural Defence Council, the National Wildlife Federation, the World Wildlife Fund, and the Action Canada Network, made funds available to Mexican ENGOs (Hogenboom 1998).

Moreover, several U.S. conservation organizations, such as the World Wildlife Fund and Conservation International, received substantial financial aid from the U.S. government to promote the park approach to biodiversity conservation in Mexico, and they collaborated with their Mexican counterparts to channel donations from the Global Environment Facility to manage Natural Protected Areas (ANPs) (Fox 2003: 363).<sup>5</sup> Access to financial resources from international organizations greatly contributed to the formation of Mexican ENGOs as well as to the establishment of offices in Mexico of some of these international organizations (Hogenboom 1998; Gallardo 1997; 1999; Torres 1997; Gilbreath 2003).

### **The Institutionalization and Growing Influence of the Movement**

The increased and sustained interaction members of the movement have had with their international counterparts has resulted in the institutionalization, or NGOization, of Mexican environmentalism. The integration of Mexico into the North American economic market has been central to this phenomenon. The debate over the effects of NAFTA created an opportunity to encourage the interaction between national and international ENGOs, but that interaction was sustained and contributed to the proliferation and strengthening of Mexican ENGOs. Indeed, during the 1990s Mexico experienced an unprecedented increase in the number of ENGOs; whereas in 1985 there were no more than 30 registered ENGOs, their number had increased to approximately 500 by 1997. By the late 1990s, moreover, approximately 5% of Mexicans belonged to an ENGO (Díez 2006: 33).

Most of the ENGOs in Mexico have received most, and in certain cases all, of their funding from international NGOs, especially from the US, and they have benefited from the transfer of knowledge and expertise. Such transfer has greatly contributed to the professionalization of ENGO members and to the institutionalization of the activities, which helped them significantly in their activities and interaction with the government. However, this growing institutionalization did not render Mexican ENGOs completely depoliticized. The most active and visible ENGOs became staffed with prominent Mexican environmentalists, most of whom are middle-class, highly qualified individuals, usually with advanced degrees in the natural sciences. These individuals gradually became the representatives of the newly formed ENGOs and the primary interlocutors through which most environmentalists interacted with the government. But, even as they became leaders of these highly professionalized organizations, most of them retained links with broader movements and they relied upon these links to forge alliances with the broader environmental movement. In effect, it is because of their continued

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<sup>5</sup> The donations have been administered by a newly-created organization, the Mexican National Conservation Fund.

contact and interaction with other environmentalists in the country, some of whom worked at the grassroots level, that they contributed to the organization of several successful environmental mobilizations campaigns to stop a number of projects that would have had important environmental repercussions in the 1990s.

The first one relates to the Tepoztlán campaign. In 1995 a coalition of local activists and the most prominent national ENGOs mobilized to halt the construction of a 478 million-dollar project to build a development complex consisting of a golf course a hotel and 880 houses in the city of Tepoztlán, south of Mexico City (Stolle-McAllister 2005: 143-154, Díez 2006: 83-84). In the same year, another coalition formed by ENGOs, local residents and municipal councillors successfully stopped the establishment of a toxic-waste treatment in the northern city of Guadalcázar by the California-based Metclad Corporation. The project was personally supported by the president and federal environmental authorities, but strong environmental mobilization was successful in convincing the municipal government to deny the issuance of the permit to allow construction (Ugalde Saldaña 2001, Borja Tamayo 2001). A third, and perhaps most notable, successful campaign relates to the cancellation of a project to build the world's largest salt mine in the state of Baja California Sur. On March 2, 2000, President Zedillo made the unexpected announcement that his government had decided to cancel the project to expand the operations of a company in the San Juan Lagoon, a lagoon that serves as a sanctuary for whales that migrate from Alaska and British Columbia in the winter. The cancellation of the project represented the culmination of a very successful five-year long campaign wage by a coalition of Mexican and international ENGOs and was a definite triumph for Mexico's environmental movement.<sup>6</sup>

Mexican ENGOs were also successful in influencing environmental policymaking during a series of reforms that were implemented in the 1990s. In 1996 and 1997, the Environment Minister launched a reform of the Environmental Protection Law and the Forestry Law. These reforms were significant as they introduced numerous legal mechanisms intended to reduce environmental degradation. The reform of the Environmental Protection Law, for example, increased the number of activities for which Environmental Impact Assessments are required, decentralized environmental responsibilities to sub-national levels of governments, increased environmental penalties and enhanced the notion of 'environmental responsibility' whereby every party that contaminates is legally liable and must repair the damage. The reform of the Forestry Law was also important. During the early 1990s, and within the overall context of economic liberalization, the forestry sector had been liberalized through a dismantling of the regulatory system established in the 1980s. The 1997 reform of the law introduced a new regulatory framework intended to reduce deforestation levels. Central to this effort was the introduction of the requirement to prove that timber that is transported or stored be accompanied with documentation establishing that it comes from areas in which logging has been allowed, making it a crime not to comply.

In early 2000, the ministry also enacted Mexico's first Law on Wildlife. The new legislation established a Council of Wildlife (National Technical Council on Wildlife) with the responsibility to develop and manage the National List of Endangered Species and oversee the various policies implemented for their protection. Moreover, it instituted the National Commission for Protected Areas with the mandate to administered the country's National Protected Areas (ANPs), whose number increased dramatically during her administration: by

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<sup>6</sup> For a more in depth analysis of these mobilizations, see Díez 2006: 83-89.

2000, Zedillo had established 30 new ANPs, bringing the total number of hectares from over 10 million to close to 16 million (an increase of approximately 60%) (INE 2000).

NGOs not only applied strong pressure on the Environment Minister to undertake these reforms, but they were very active participants in the reform processes, having in fact had significant input. Indeed, one of the most distinctive characteristics of environmental reform during the administration of Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000) was the significant and rather unprecedented influence NGOs had on environmental policymaking and the participatory nature of the process. The 1996 reform of the Environmental Protection Law, for example, was a very open process that lasted 19 months to complete and in which representatives of more than 108 NGOs participated. Most of these NGOs declared, at the end of the reform process, that they were highly satisfied with the final bill, which was unanimously passed through Congress (Díez 2006).

Such participatory process was to a great extent due to the opening created by a reformist Environment Minister who believed strongly in the inclusion of civil society groups in the formulation of environmental policy. But it was also the result of international factors; environmental reform in Latin American is considered part of what has been termed 'second-generation reforms. These reforms followed the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and were more inclusive than previous economic reform programmes introduced in the region. International organizations, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, began to call for the inclusion of civil-society actors in the formulation, implementation and delivery of government policies and services by the mid 1990s.

There is no doubt that NGO influence was also largely due to the level of organization and expertise many of these organizations possessed. The transfer of resources, both technical and financial, and expertise from international actors allowed them to present well-crafted proposals during the reform process. This was especially the case with those NGOs which pursue issues relating to conservation and bio-diversity. By the late 1990s, then, the environmental movement had not only become highly visible in Mexico, but it could claim several important victories.

### **The Decline of Mexico's Environmental Movement**

Mexico's green movement has been notably less visible in the country's national social and political stage since the defeat of the PRI in 2000. Whereas in the 1990s they held several national campaigns and held numerous protests and demonstrations, they have not been as active after Fox came into power. Unlike the previous decade, Mexico has not experienced any national environmental campaigns to stop projects and demonstrations have been limited to activities held during World Earth Day. Indeed, during the first three years of Fox's administration (2000-2006), not a single demonstration was held outside Mexico's Environment Ministry, a common occurrence since the ministry was first established in 1994. More importantly, they have also been less influential in environmental policymaking. This not to say that they have not had any influence at all; in effect, NGOs were very active in the establishment of the Pollution Release and Transfer Registry (*Registro de Emisiones y Transferencia de Contaminantes*, RETC) in 2002. The RETC, similar to the U.S. Toxics Release Inventory, requires firms to submit information to a registry on the type, location and quantity of pollutants released on site and transferred off-site by industrial facilities. Fierce opposition from industry had previously resulted in a limited version whereby industry agreed to release information of pollutants on a voluntary basis. The RETC makes this obligatory, and it is accessible by the public. The



establishment of the registry had been long overdue given the international commitments Mexico had made,<sup>7</sup> but it was heavily influenced by pressure exerted by ENGOs (Pacheco-Vega 2005). However, this policy change was the only significant policy achievement of ENGOs.

The weakening of Mexico's green movement is largely due to the manner in which Mexico's environmental leaders decided to engage the new administration during the transition away from PRI rule. Fox campaigned under the banner of 'change,' arguing that his election would bring about the end of authoritarianism in the country. Once elected, he began fulfilling his promise by appointing a cabinet whose composition was unlike those of any his predecessors. Reflecting his professional development in the private sector,<sup>8</sup> and arguing that increased accountability required a managerial style of politics,<sup>9</sup> he recruited a significant number of individuals from the private sector: two-thirds of his newly appointed ministers had pursued careers in the private sector in the past and nearly half of them owned a private firm or held a high-level management post at the time of their appointment. The recruitment of a cabinet with experience in the private sector was in stark contrast with appointments in previous administrations under PRI rule, in which all of the cabinet ministers emanated from the public sector or academia. Fox also diversified the recruitment process by selecting individuals from different career backgrounds and political persuasions, some of whom were in fact selected by professional headhunters.<sup>10</sup> His cabinet – to which he referred as a *gabinetazo*, or top-flight cabinet – reflected thus more heterogeneity than previous ones.

In regard to the environment portfolio, Fox appointed Victor Lichtinger Waisman as his Minister of the Environment. Lichtinger was a respected environmentalist, not only in Mexico but internationally; he earned the respect of environmentalists in North America through his performance as the first Executive Director of the North American Commission for Environmental Co-operation (NACEC) (1994-1998), when he agreed to take on controversial cases and challenge governments. Of particular importance was the Cozumel case, in which he proceeded to issue a factual report stating that environmental regulations had not been respected by the Mexican authorities in the authorization of the construction of a port for cruise ships.

Lichtinger was not only a respected environmentalist, but, prior to his appointment, he belonged to a group made up of the most renowned environmentalists in the country: the *Grupo de Reflexión 25* (G-25). Created in November of 1999, the G-25 was a political coalition of 25

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<sup>7</sup> As a signatory of North American Agreement of Environmental Cooperation, Mexico agreed to resolution 97-04, which encourages the three countries toward the adoption of comparable registries. Also, as a member of the OECD, Mexico agreed to harmonize its registry with all member states. The establishment of the registry is also in line with commitments made to Agenda 21, whose principle 10 stipulates that states should facilitate and encourage the dissemination of information.

<sup>8</sup> Fox joined Coca-Cola of Mexico soon after he finished his studies in 1965 and left the company in 1979 as the CEO. He then managed his frozen foods export firm, Grupo Fox, until he decided to run for political office in 1988, when he was elected as Member of Congress and, eventually, governor of the state of Guanajuato. Fox can be considered an 'outsider' to Mexican politics. Not only was he the first president since 1929 to have emerged from the private sector, but he did not have a strong relationship with the PAN; he joined the party in 1987, only 13 years before becoming president.

<sup>9</sup> Fox declared publicly that he would apply to politics the various skills he had acquired as CEO of Coca Cola Mexico.

<sup>10</sup> These included individuals from the international institutional community, such as Julio Frenk, who worked for the World Health Organization and became Health Minister; Jorge Castañeda, who had been a cofounder of the Mexican Socialist Party and very influential in the 1994 campaign of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and was appointed Foreign Affairs Minister; and the intellectual and former independent Senator Adolfo Aguilar Zinser, who became Fox's co-ordinator of his security cabinet.

professional environmentalists who worked on a series of reform proposals prior to the 2000 election, proposals that they expected the new government to adopt. Most of these individuals had been part of the country's green movement since its emergence in the mid 1980s and became the leaders of the most prominent ENGOs during the 1990s, when they were formed. They included Regina Barba, founder of Union of Environmentalist Groups (UGAM), Martha Delgado, president of UGAM, and Gustavo Alanis, director of the Mexican Environmental Law centre (CEMDA). The group published a document before the election, in which they advanced criticisms of the environmental positions of the main political contenders and outlined their policy reform proposals.<sup>11</sup>

Even though the group was formed primarily to advance policy proposals for the new government, some of its members decided to collaborate with it during the transition. Once elected, and until he was invested as president on December 1 2000, Fox formed a transition team to formulate his government policies. This team was composed of his close advisers, established figures from his own party and individuals with expertise in various policy areas. He invited several members of the G-25 to work on his environmental policy agenda, including Lichtinger. It was while working on the new policy agenda that Fox asked Lichtinger to become his Environment Minister. When Lichtinger took up the post, he in turn appointed individuals with environmental expertise, most of whom belonged to the G-25, to key positions within his ministry. These include Rodolfo Lacy as his Chief of Staff, Francisco Székely as Under-Minister of Planning, Cassio Luisselli as Under-Minister of Regulation, Ignacio Campillo as head of the Environmental Protection Office, Rayo Angulo as Director General of the Strategy and Financing Unit; Olga Ojeda as Director of International Affairs Co-ordination Unit; Fernando Ortiz Monasterio as Executive Secretary of the Inter-Ministerial Commission for Biosecurity and Genetically Modified Organism, Tiahoga Ruge as Co-ordinator of the Centre of Education and Training for Sustainable Development, Sergio Sánchez as Director General of the Unit for Air Quality Management; and Regina Baraba as Director of the Unit for Social Participation and Transparency. In interviews, several of these individuals stated that their decision to these positions with the new administration because it represented a new opportunity to advance their policy objectives given that the Fox's election marked a clear break from the past. Importantly, many of these individuals positioned themselves on the left of the political spectrum, but decided to join a right-leaning government because they believed they would be able to contribute to a new phase in Mexican politics in which environmental concerns figured prominently.

The appointment of these individuals to important positions weakened the movement. Because numerous prominent environmentalists became part of government, ENGOs suffered in turn a weakening in their leadership, or what the minister himself referred to as a "leadership vacuum." One interviewee referred to the 'beheading' of the movement. Lichtinger stated in our interview that, in hindsight, this was a grave mistake as it reduced the vibrancy of ENGOs.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that all the leaders of the most prominent ENGOs joined the environment ministry. Indeed, several did not, such as Gustavo Alanis, director of the renowned ENGO CEMDA. However, because the Environment Minister had been a participant in the movement, he was considered an ally within the administration adopting several of the proposals advanced by the G-25, and, hence, there was no need to take a confrontational approach.

The weakening of the movement, through the incorporation of its leaders into government, became evident throughout the Fox administration as environmental issues dropped

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<sup>11</sup> See Grupo de Reflexión 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Victor Lichtinger, Environment Minister (2000-2003), Mexico City, June 24, 2005.

in importance and environmentalists were unable to mobilize. Despite the declarations Fox made during his campaign regarding the importance of environmental issues for his government, it became clear that the environment was not atop his agenda. In our interview, Lichtinger stated: “Fox became upset when I spoke about the environment at cabinet meetings. He argued that economic growth and environmental protection were not compatible. At first I thought that I could educate him, well, ‘de-educate’ him, but it soon became apparent that it was not the case. He had a personal prejudice against the environment.” Another cabinet minister in turn commented “the environment is certainly not important for Fox. He relied heavily on focus groups to make decisions, with his idea of running government like a business and being accountable to clients. Because environmental issues were not among the five most important issues with the Mexican population, he simply dropped the environmental portfolio to the bottom of the agenda.” Because the environmental portfolio was not an important one for the Fox administration, the environment minister was weak within cabinet and unable to advance his policy objectives. Paradoxically, the environment minister in fact stated that he would have liked to have seen a more vociferous movement as it would have given him more leverage vis-à-vis cabinet and the president to accomplish more of his policy objectives. Such ministerial weakness, combined with the decline of the environment as a national priority, meant that, despite the inclusion of environmentalist into the new government, ENGOs were unable to influence policy to the same degree that they had done in the 1990s. Indeed, with the exception of one interviewee, all others stated that the environment dropped in level of priority from the previous administration and they believe that there had been a *retroceso* (a step backward) in environmental policy.

Lichtinger’s position of weakness vis-à-vis the president culminated with the ‘dirty beaches’ controversy, which would ultimately result in his dismissal. On February 10, 2003, the Environmental Protection Office released the results of academic studies revealing very high levels of pollution in beaches around the country, 16 of which had shown levels that posed a serious threat to human health (*Reforma*, February 11, 2003). The following day, the Minister declared the need to inform tourists of the high levels of pollution, and said that a detailed official report would be released in the forthcoming days along with a ‘clean beaches’ program. The Minister’s declaration prompted strong reactions from hoteliers and governors of states that depended heavily on tourism. Miguel Torruco, President of the National Hotel Chamber (*Asociación Mexicana de Hoteles y Moteles*), and the governors of the states of Guerrero, Nayarit and Quintana Roo urged the Environment Minister not to release the report (*Reforma, La Jornada*, April 11, 2003). Lichtinger decided nonetheless to release the results and, on April 9, he announced the launch of a monitoring program to supervise pollution in the beaches as part of a clean beach program, declaring seven beaches to be on a red-flag pollution alert. Lichtinger’s decision to launch the monitoring program despite strong opposition from the National Hotel Chamber, the Ministry of Tourism, and several state governors angered Fox and, on September 2, Lichtinger learned from media reports that the president had asked him for his resignation. Lichtinger left his position on the following day with almost everyone of his team.

If the environmental agenda dropped in its level of priority after 2000, it took a precipitous dive after Lichtinger’s resignation in 2003. With the resignation of the Environment Minister on September 2, 2003, Lichtinger’s team, who had environmental expertise, was replaced with *políticos* from the PAN and close to the president. On his first day on the job, the new environment minister hosted a breakfast at the official presidential residence, *Los Pinos*, with the 40 most prominent national and international tourism investors. At the event, Fox promised that

in the new phase of the ministry, investors would be treated ‘with a sense of urgency’ as they sought to overcome ‘bureaucratic hurdles’ (*Reforma*, Spetember 4, 2003). Adolfo Fastlicht, president of the Association of Developers (*Asociación de Desarrolladores*), declared after the breakfast: “the President has given us the assurance that in the second half of his *sexenio* there will be an environmental policy that promotes investment” (*Reforma*, Spetember 4, 2003). On the second day on the job, the minister accepted the resignations of the environmentalists who had worked under Lichtinger and appointed mostly either *panistas* or business people to senior positions. Environmentalists naturally opposed these changes, declaring that they represented the most severe step backward on environmental policy in 15 years.<sup>13</sup> However, the weakness of the movement had become such by this point that this chain of events was treated by official declarations and not mobilization.

## Conclusion

As the environmental consequences of Mexico’s post-war development became apparent by the mid 1980s, and within the broader context of general social mobilization, Mexicans began to organize and mobilize to demands better environmental protection from the regime. Propelled by a series of catalytic events during the mid 1980s, Mexico’s green movement thus emerged and strengthened. By the mid 1990s, the movement had gained visibility in national politics. Importantly, beyond visibility, Mexico’s environmentalists were able to advance successfully demands and include them into environmental policy during a series of reforms that were implemented during the 1990s.

The strengthening of Mexico’s green movement during the 1990s unfolded concurrently with its institutionalization. The interaction Mexican environmentalists had with their North American counterparts through discussions held during the advent of NAFTA and the availability of international funds directed for environmental protection encouraged the NGOization of Mexico’s green movement during the decade. As a result, the country witnessed an unprecedented proliferation in NGOs devoted to environmental protection. However, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, such institutionalization of the movement did not lead to its depolitization as environmentalists managed to organize, mobilize and mount a series of important campaigns which subsequently resulted in significant policy triumphs.

Nevertheless, this process of NGOization facilitated the incorporation of the movement’s leadership into the government as the country transited into a new regime. As this paper has attempted to demonstrate, this process had an effect on the strength of the movement as it created a leadership vacuum. Such process subsequently made it very difficult for Mexican environmentalists to apply pressure on the new government once it became evident that environmental issues did not figure high among the administration’s priorities.

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<sup>13</sup> See the report in *Reforma* of September 3, 2003 “Reprueban ONG relevo en la Semarnat.”

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