

# CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS POSITIVE LEGISLATORS

## *A Comparative Law Study*

In all democratic states, constitutional courts, which are traditionally empowered to invalidate or to annul unconstitutional statutes, have the role of interpreting and applying the Constitution to preserve its supremacy and to ensure the prevalence of fundamental rights. In this sense, they were traditionally considered “negative legislators,” unable to substitute for the legislators or to enact legislative provisions that could not be deduced from the Constitution. During the past decade, the role of constitutional courts has dramatically changed, as their role is no longer limited to declaring the unconstitutionality of statutes or annulling them. Today, constitutional courts condition their decisions on the presumption of constitutionality of statutes, opting to interpret them according to or in harmony with the Constitution to preserve them, instead of deciding their annulment or declaring them unconstitutional. More frequently, constitutional courts, instead of dealing with existing legislation, assume the role of assistants or auxiliaries to the legislator, creating provisions they deduce from the Constitution when controlling the absence of legislation or legislative omissions. In some cases, they act as “positive legislators,” issuing temporary or provisional rules to be applied pending the enactment of legislation. This book analyzes this new role of the constitutional courts, conditioned by the principles of progressiveness and of prevalence of human rights, particularly regarding the important rediscovery of the right to equality and nondiscrimination.

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**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA  
[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107011656](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107011656)

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First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Brewer Carías, Allan-Randolph.  
Constitutional courts as positive legislators : a comparative law study / Allan Brewer-Carías.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-01165-6 (hardback)

1. Constitutional courts. 2. Legislative power. 3. Judicial review. 4. Comparative law.

I. Title.

K3370.B735 2011

347'.035-dc22 2011002968

ISBN 978-1-107-01165-6 Hardback

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# CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
<b>AUTHOR'S NOTE</b>	1
<b>PART ONE</b>	
<b>CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS POSITIVE LEGISLATORS IN COMPARATIVE LAW</b>	5
INTRODUCTION: HANS KELSEN, JUDICIAL REVIEW, AND THE NEGATIVE LEGISLATOR	5
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>JUDICIAL REVIEW OF LEGISLATION AND THE LEGISLATOR</b>	13
I. THE SYSTEMS OF JUDICIAL REVIEW AND THE ROLE OF CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS	13
II. CONTROL OF CONSTITUTIONALITY AND CONTROL OF CONVENTIONALITY	20
III. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSTITUTION AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS ON CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL REFORMS	29
IV. THE QUESTION OF CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS POSITIVE LEGISLATORS	31
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' INTERFERENCE WITH THE CONSTITUENT POWER</b>	41
I. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' RESOLUTION OF DISPUTES OF CONSTITUTIONAL RANK AND ENACTMENT OF CONSTITUTIONAL RULES	41
II. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AND JUDICIAL REVIEW OF PROVISIONS OF THE CONSTITUTION AND OF CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS AND AMENDMENTS	45

## CONTENTS

III. THE ROLE OF CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' ADAPTATION OF THE CONSTITUTION AND THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMATE CHANGES TO THE CONSTITUTION	50
1. <i>Adapting the Constitution on Matters of Fundamental Rights Guarantees</i>	51
2. <i>The Mutation of the Constitution on Institutional Matters</i>	65
IV. THE PROBLEM OF ILLEGITIMATE MUTATIONS OF THE CONSTITUTION	68
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
<b>CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' INTERFERENCE WITH THE LEGISLATOR ON EXISTING LEGISLATION</b>	73
I. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' INTERPRETATION OF STATUTES IN HARMONY WITH THE CONSTITUTION	73
II. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS COMPLEMENTING THE LEGISLATOR BY ADDING NEW RULES (AND NEW MEANING) TO AN EXISTING LEGISLATIVE PROVISION	79
III. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS COMPLEMENTING LEGISLATIVE FUNCTIONS BY INTERFERING WITH THE TEMPORAL EFFECTS OF LEGISLATION	94
1. <i>The Power of the Constitutional Court to Determine When Annulled Legislation Will Cease to Have Effects: Postponing the Effect of the Court's Ruling</i>	95
2. <i>The Power of the Constitutional Court to Determine When Annulled Legislation Will Cease to Have Effects: Retroactive or Nonretroactive Effects of Its Own Decisions</i>	103
A. The Possibility of Limiting the Retroactive <i>Ex Tunc</i> Effects Regarding Declarative Decisions	103
B. The Possibility of Retroactive Effects for <i>Ex Nunc</i> Constitutive Decisions	108
3. <i>The Power of Constitutional Courts to Revive Repealed Legislation</i>	114
IV. THE DEFORMATION OF THE INTERPRETATIVE PRINCIPLE: CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' REFORMING OF STATUTES AND INTERPRETING THEM WITHOUT INTERPRETING THE CONSTITUTION	115

**CHAPTER 4****CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' INTERFERENCE WITH THE LEGISLATOR REGARDING LEGISLATIVE OMISSIONS** 125

- I. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' FILLING THE GAP OF ABSOLUTE LEGISLATIVE OMISSIONS 126
  - 1. *Direct Action against Absolute Legislative Omissions* 126
  - 2. *The Protection of Fundamental Rights against Absolute Legislative Omissions by Means of Actions or Complaints for Their Protection* 135
- II. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS' FILLING THE GAP OF RELATIVE LEGISLATIVE OMISSIONS 148
  - 1. *Constitutional Courts and Equality Rights: Deciding on the Unconstitutionality of Statutes without Declaring Their Nullity* 149
  - 2. *Constitutional Courts' Issuing Nonbinding Directives to the Legislator* 153
  - 3. *Constitutional Courts' Issuing Binding Orders and Directives to the Legislator* 160
- III. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS PROVISIONAL LEGISLATORS 165

**CHAPTER 5****CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS LEGISLATORS ON MATTERS OF JUDICIAL REVIEW** 173

- I. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS CREATING THEIR OWN JUDICIAL REVIEW POWERS 173
    - 1. *The Judge-Made Law Regarding the Diffuse System of Judicial Review* 173
    - 2. *The Extension of Judicial Review Powers to Ensure the Protection of Fundamental Rights* 174
    - 3. *The Need for the Express Provision in the Constitution of Judicial Review Powers of the Constitutional Jurisdiction and Its Deviation* 178
  - II. CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS CREATING PROCEDURAL RULES ON JUDICIAL REVIEW PROCESSES 186
- FINAL REMARKS** 189

<b>PART TWO</b>	
<b>NATIONAL REPORTS</b>	193
<b>ARGENTINA: Alejandra Rodríguez Galán and Alfredo Mauricio Vítolo, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	195
I. REDUCTION OF THE SCOPE OF THE POLITICAL QUESTIONS DOCTRINE	199
II. RECOGNITION OF PROCEDURAL GUARANTEES IN THE ABSENCE OF LEGISLATION	200
III. STANDING	202
IV. <i>ACCIÓN DECLARATIVA DE CERTEZA</i> (DECLARATORY JUDGMENTS) AS A DIRECT FORM OF EXERCISE OF CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW	203
V. <i>SUA SPONTE</i> CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW	204
VI. <i>ERGA OMNES</i> EFFECT OF JUDICIAL DECISIONS	205
VII. ACTIVIST JURISPRUDENCE	205
1. <i>“Educating” Congress</i>	206
2. <i>Reconciling Internal Legislation with Human Rights Treaties by Means of Interpretation</i>	207
3. <i>Amending Political Will and Rewriting Statutes</i>	208
VIII. CONCLUSION	211
<b>AUSTRALIA: Cheryl Saunders, <i>Interpretation and Review</i></b>	213
I. FRAMEWORK	213
1. <i>Authority for Review</i>	213
2. <i>Jurisdiction</i>	215
3. <i>Concrete Review</i>	217
A. Advisory Opinions	217
B. Declarations of Incompatibility	219
4. <i>Standing</i>	220
II. APPROACH	223
1. <i>Phases</i>	224
A. 1903–1920	224
B. 1920–1944	225
C. 1944–1981	226
D. 1981–1998	228
E. 1998 to the Present	230

2.	<i>Legalism and Realism</i>	231
A.	Legalism	231
B.	Realism	232
C.	Realistic Legalism	234
3.	<i>Interpretation and Change</i>	236
A.	An Instrument of Government	236
B.	Relevance of the Framers	238
III.	SOURCES	240
1.	<i>Precedent</i>	240
2.	<i>Extrinsic Materials</i>	241
3.	<i>Foreign Law</i>	244
4.	<i>International Law</i>	246
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	249
	<b>AUSTRIA: Konrad Lachmayer, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	251
I.	INTRODUCTION: CONSTITUTIONAL JUSTICE IN AUSTRIA	251
II.	BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE JUDICIAL REVIEW METHOD APPLIED IN AUSTRIA	252
1.	<i>Introduction</i>	252
2.	<i>Access to Constitutional Justice</i>	254
III.	JUDICIAL QUESTIONS ON MATTERS OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	256
1.	<i>Judicial Decisions on Judicial Review</i>	256
2.	<i>Effects of Judicial Decisions on Constitutional Matters</i>	257
IV.	IMPORTANT DEVELOPMENTS AND DECISIONS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	258
1.	<i>Developing the Contents of the Fundamental Principles of the Austrian Constitution</i>	258
2.	<i>Concrete Guidelines for the Legislator</i>	259
3.	<i>Creating Constitutional Systems</i>	261
4.	<i>Principle of Equality</i>	262
V.	CONCLUSION – OPENING UP CONSTITUTIONAL POTENTIALS AND VALUE-BASED JUDGMENTS	263

<b>BELGIUM: Patricia Popelier, <i>The Belgian Constitutional Court as Positive Legislator: In Search of a Balance Between Rights Protection and Respect for Acts of Parliament</i></b>	265
INTRODUCTION	265
I. THE IMPACT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT ON CONSTITUTIONAL RELATIONS	266
II. LEGISLATIVE OMISSIONS IN THE CASE LAW OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	269
1. <i>Some Examples</i>	271
2. <i>Two Examples</i>	272
III. LEGAL FRAMEWORK	273
IV. CONSEQUENCES OF THE FINDING THAT A LEGISLATIVE LACUNA IS CONTRARY TO THE CONSTITUTION	275
CONCLUSIONS	279
<b>BRAZIL: Thomas Bustamante and Evanilda de Godoi Bustamante, <i>Constitutional Courts as Negative Legislators: The Brazilian Case</i></b>	283
INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS	283
I. THE DIFFUSE AND INCIDENTAL SYSTEM OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	285
II. THE CONCENTRATED SYSTEM OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	289
1. <i>Concentrated Constitutional Jurisdiction by Direct Actions</i>	289
A. The Direct Action of Unconstitutionality	290
B. The Declaratory Action of Constitutionality	292
C. The Direct Action against Unconstitutional Omissions	293
D. The Claim against the Disrespect to a Fundamental Precept	296
2. <i>Concentrated Constitutional Review by Concrete Claims</i>	298
A. <i>Mandado de Segurança</i> (When Used to Contest an Act within the Legislative Procedure)	299
B. The Writ of Injunction ( <i>Mandado de Injunção</i> )	300
C. Additive Decisions and the Writ of Injunction	302
III. EFFECTS OF THE JUDICIAL DECISIONS ON CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS	303
1. <i>Inter Partes and Erga Omnes Decisions</i>	303
2. <i>Binding and Nonbinding Decisions</i>	305
3. <i>The Scope of the Binding Effects of the Decisions of the Court</i>	306

4.	<i>Interpretative and Reductive Decisions by the Federal Supreme Court</i>	308
5.	<i>The Temporal Effects of the Decisions on Constitutional Matters (on Direct Actions of Unconstitutionality)</i>	310
6.	<i>The Temporal Effects of the Decisions on Constitutional Matters (on Diffuse Decisions on Constitutional Matters)</i>	311
7.	<i>Constitutional Mutations</i>	312
IV.	CONCLUSION: THE IDEA OF THE NEGATIVE LEGISLATOR	312
	<b>CANADA: Kent Roach, <i>The Canadian Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	315
	INTRODUCTION	315
I.	CANADA'S SYSTEM OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	317
1.	<i>Federalism and the Court as Negative Legislator</i>	317
2.	<i>The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms</i>	318
3.	<i>Negative and Positive Rights</i>	318
4.	<i>Charter Litigation</i>	319
5.	<i>Reference Cases</i>	319
6.	<i>Constitutional Remedies</i>	321
7.	<i>Positive Alternatives to Judicial Invalidation: Reading In or Judicial Amendments to Legislation</i>	322
8.	<i>Alternatives to Immediate Invalidation: Delayed Declarations of Invalidity and Reply Legislation</i>	324
	Summary	326
II.	CANADA'S EXPERIENCE WITH COURTS AS POSITIVE LEGISLATORS	328
1.	<i>Criminal Justice</i>	328
2.	<i>National Security</i>	329
3.	<i>Gay Rights</i>	331
4.	<i>Aboriginal and Treaty Rights</i>	333
5.	<i>Political Policy</i>	334
6.	<i>Minority-Language Policy</i>	335
7.	<i>Social and Economic Policy</i>	337
8.	<i>Labor Policy</i>	338
9.	<i>Health-Care Policy</i>	340
	CONCLUSION	342

<b>COLOMBIA: Germán Alfonso López Daza, <i>Le juge constitutionnel colombien, législateur-cadre positif: un gouvernement des juges</i></b>	345
INTRODUCTION	345
I. DYNAMISME DE LA COUR CONSTITUTIONNELLE COLOMBIENNE DANS SON RÔLE DE PROTECTRICE DE LA CONSTITUTION DE 1991	346
II. JUSTICE CONSTITUTIONNELLE VERSUS POUVOIR EXECUTIF-POUVOIR LEGISLATIF	348
III. LA COUR CONSTITUTIONNELLE COLOMBIENNE-LÉGISLATEUR CADRE POSITIF	350
1. <i>Sentences manipulatrices</i>	353
2. <i>Sentence substitutive</i>	353
3. <i>Sentences interprétatives ou conditionnées</i>	353
4. <i>Sentence additive ou d'intégration</i>	354
5. <i>Sentence de recommandation du législateur</i>	355
6. <i>Les sentences-lois</i>	355
7. <i>Les sentences à effet différé</i>	355
IV. CONSTRUCTION THÉORIQUE DU CONCEPT "GOUVERNEMENT DES JUGES"	356
BIBLIOGRAPHIE	359
<b>COLOMBIA: Sandra Morelli, <i>The Colombian Constitutional Court: From Institutional Leadership to Conceptual Audacity</i></b>	363
I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS	363
II. DISPLACEMENT IN COLOMBIA	366
1. <i>What Is the Unconstitutional State of Affairs?</i>	367
III. THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONTROL OF LAWS	378
1. <i>Warning</i>	378
2. <i>The Control of the Constitutionality of the Acts Amending the Constitution</i>	383
A. The Constitutional Control Limited to the Vices of Procedure	384
B. The Procedural Vices of the Law through Which a Constitutional Referendum Is Summoned	385
a. <i>The Power of the Congress of the Republic to Amend the Law Presented at the Request of a Popular Initiative</i>	386
b. <i>The Violation of the Law of Benches (Bancadas)</i>	386

<b>COSTA RICA: Rubén Hernández Valle, <i>The Normative Resolutions of the Constitutional Court</i></b>	389
I. TYPOLOGY OF FAVORABLE LEGAL REVIEW RESOLUTIONS	389
1. <i>Favorable Exhortative Resolutions</i>	389
2. <i>Simple Unconstitutionality Resolutions</i>	391
A. Simple Unconstitutionality Declaration of Partial Nature	391
B. Simple Unconstitutionality Declaration of Full Nature	391
3. <i>Interpretative Resolutions</i>	392
A. Unconstitutionality Due to Erroneous Interpretation or Misapplication of a Provision in a Specific Case	392
B. Unconstitutionality as a Result of the Effects of the Challenged Text or Provision	394
4. <i>Favorable Resolutions of Inapplicability</i>	395
5. <i>Normative Resolutions</i>	395
A. Favorable Additive Resolutions	396
B. Favorable Substitutive Resolutions	397
II. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF NORMATIVE RESOLUTIONS	401
1. <i>The Justification of Normative Resolutions</i>	401
2. <i>Criticism of Regulatory Resolutions</i>	402
III. REGULATORY RESOLUTIONS AND THE LIMITS TO CONSTITUTIONAL JURISDICTION	403
BIBLIOGRAPHY	406
<b>CROATIA: Sanja Barić and Petar Bačić, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	407
I. THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA: COMPOSITION, COMPETENCES, AND PROCEEDINGS	407
1. <i>Introduction</i>	407
2. <i>Composition and Terms of Duty</i>	409
3. <i>Competences of the Constitutional Court</i>	410
4. <i>Proceedings of the Constitutional Court</i>	411
5. <i>Abstract Review</i>	413
6. <i>Concrete Review</i>	415
7. <i>Effects of the Constitutional Court's Decision</i>	415

## CONTENTS

8.	<i>Constitutional Complaint</i>	417
9.	<i>Other Competences</i>	420
A.	Jurisdictional Disputes	420
B.	Impeachment of the President of the Republic	420
C.	Supervision of the Constitutionality of Programs and Activities of Political Parties	420
D.	Control of the Constitutionality and Legality of the Elections and the National Referendum and the Electoral Disputes	421
E.	Constitutional Court Procedures of Appeal	421
F.	Monitoring the Execution of Constitutionality and Legality, and Supervisory Control over Passing Regulations for Executing the Constitution, Laws, and Other Regulations	422
II.	JUDICIAL ACTIVISM IN CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW DECISIONS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA	423
1.	<i>Judicial Activism versus the Legislative Branch</i>	424
2.	<i>Methodological Activism of the Constitutional Court – The Interpretation and Power of the Legal Argument</i>	428
3.	<i>Procedural Activism – Precedence of Form over Content</i>	431
4.	<i>Substantial Activism – Support for Democracy and Constitutional Rights</i>	433
III.	CONCLUSIONS ON THE ACTIVISM OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA	440
	<b>CZECH REPUBLIC: Zdenek Kühn, <i>Czech Constitutional Court as Positive Legislator?</i></b>	445
I.	THE HISTORY AND THE POWERS OF THE CZECH CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	446
II.	CONSTITUTIONAL COMPLAINTS AGAINST DECISIONS OF GENERAL COURTS	448
III.	INTERPRETATIVE DECISIONS IN ABSTRACT CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW: “SOFT CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW”	454
IV.	POSITIVE ASPECT OF NEGATIVE DECISIONS OF THE COURT	458

V. UNCONSTITUTIONAL GAPS IN THE LEGAL SYSTEM: PROVIDING CONSTITUTIONAL REMEDIES OR JUDICIAL SUBSTITUTION FOR THE LEGISLATOR?	461
VI. THE CZECH CONSTITUTIONAL COURT ACTING OPENLY AS POSITIVE LEGISLATOR – CASES OF CONSTITUTIONALITY OF AMENDMENTS TO THE LAW	466
VII. COURT’S SELF-PERCEPTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS	468
<b>FRANCE: Bertrand Mathieu, <i>Le Conseil constitutionnel “législateur positif.” Ou la question des interventions du juge constitutionnel français dans l’exercice de la fonction législative</i></b>	471
I. TITRE LIMINAIRE: ÉLÉMENTS D’ANALYSES SUR LE CONTRÔLE DE CONSTITUTIONNALITÉ EN FRANCE	472
II. LES INTERACTIONS ENTRE LA FONCTION JURIDICTIONNELLE DU CONSEIL CONSTITUTIONNEL ET LA FONCTION LÉGISLATIVE	478
1. <i>Les principes cadres</i>	478
2. <i>De quelques modalités d’intervention médiate du Conseil         constitutionnel</i>	479
- Les incidences sur la fabrication de la loi	479
- Les incidences sur les révisions constitutionnelles	479
- La question de la séparabilité des dispositions inconstitutionnelles	480
- Les conséquences tirées de l’inconstitutionnalité relevée	481
- L’outil de la proportionnalité	483
III. ANALYSE D’UNE MODALITÉ SPÉCIFIQUE D’INTERVENTION DU CONSEIL CONSTITUTIONNEL: LES RÉSERVES D’INTERPRÉTATION	484
1. <i>Éléments de définition et champ d’application</i>	484
2. <i>Les destinataires des réserves d’interprétation</i>	488
3. <i>La portée des réserves d’interprétation: essai de typologie</i>	489
-L’exclusion d’une interprétation inconstitutionnelle: le postulat du respect de la Constitution par le législateur	489
-L’argument de la maladresse du législateur	490
-La tentation de la réécriture	490
-La modification du champ d’application de la loi	492
-La paralysie de l’application de la loi	493
4. <i>Éléments statistiques sommaires</i>	494
EN GUISE DE CONCLUSION	495

<b>GERMANY: Ines Härtel, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	497
I. JUDICIAL MEANS FOR JUDICIAL REVIEW	498
1. <i>Civil Rights Injunctions</i>	498
2. <i>Direct Actions to Control the Constitutionality of Statutes</i>	499
3. <i>Direct Actions to Control the Constitutionality of Legislative Omissions</i>	500
4. <i>Ex Officio Powers of Constitutional Judges and of the Constitutional Court or Tribunals</i>	501
5. <i>Authority of the Supreme Court of Constitutional Courts to Remove and Take Over Cases from Lower Courts (Avocamiento)</i>	501
II. JUDICIAL DECISIONS ON JUDICIAL REVIEW	502
1. <i>Constitutional Interpretation</i>	502
2. <i>Declaration of the Unconstitutional Character of Statutes (Declaration of Incompatibility)</i>	503
3. <i>Annulment (Complete or Partial) of Unconstitutional Statutes</i>	506
4. <i>Influencing the Constitution</i>	509
5. <i>Decisions Including Legislative Structures</i>	510
6. <i>Additive Decisions Reforming Legislation</i>	513
7. <i>Admonitory Decisions</i>	514
8. <i>Judicial Replacement of the Legislator</i>	516
9. <i>Judicial Replacement of the Government in Policy-Making Processes</i>	517
III. EFFECTS OF JUDICIAL DECISIONS ON CONSTITUTIONAL MATTERS	518
<b>BELGIUM, FRANCE, GERMANY: Christian Behrendt, <i>L'activité du juge constitutionnel comme législateur-cadre positif</i></b>	521
INTRODUCTION	521
I. LA NOTION D'“INTERFÉRENCE”	525
II. LA CLASSIFICATION DES INTERFÉRENCES	527
III. L'IMPORTANCE QUANTITATIVE DES INTERFÉRENCES	529
1. <i>L'importance des lignes directrices</i>	530
2. <i>L'importance des injonctions</i>	531
IV. LE RECOURS À LA TECHNIQUE DES INTERFÉRENCES: UNE TENTATIVE D'ÉVALUATION	533
CONCLUSIONS	537

<b>GREECE: Julia Iliopoulos-Strangas and Stylianos-Ioannis G. Koutnatzis, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	539
I. THE SYSTEM OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	540
1. <i>Judicial Organization</i>	540
2. <i>Control of Legislative and Executive Acts</i>	541
A. Origins and Development of Judicial Review throughout Greece's Constitutional History	541
B. Judicial Review under the Greek Constitution of 1975	542
a. <i>Constitutional Basis of Judicial Review</i>	542
b. <i>Substantive and Procedural Constitutional Claims</i>	543
c. <i>Primary Features of Judicial Review</i>	544
d. <i>Means of Concentration of Review</i>	546
e. <i>The Proposal to Establish a Constitutional Court</i>	549
f. <i>Control of Conventionality</i>	552
g. <i>Control of Executive Acts</i>	553
h. <i>Control of Constitutional Amendments</i>	555
II. THE APPLICATION OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	555
1. <i>The Development of Constitutional Jurisprudence</i>	556
A. The Greek Courts' Deferential Tradition	556
B. Phases in the Judicial Implementation of the 1975 Constitution	558
2. <i>Positive Legislation through Constitutional Adjudication</i>	563
A. Extension of Preferential Treatment in Equality Principle Cases	563
B. The Council of State's Environmental Jurisprudence	567
a. <i>Constitutional Entrenchment of the Current Status of Environmental Protection</i>	568
b. <i>The Principle of Sustainable Development</i>	570
III. FINAL REMARKS	571
<b>HUNGARY, Lóránt Csink, József Petrétai, and Péter Tilk, <i>Constitutional Court as Positive Legislator</i></b>	575
I. ANTECEDENTS OF CONSTITUTIONAL ADJUDICATION	575
II. THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	576

## CONTENTS

III. THE LEGAL CHARACTER OF THE DECISIONS OF THE COURT	578
IV. THE MANIFESTATION OF POSITIVE LEGISLATION	579
1. <i>Constitutional Requirement</i>	579
2. <i>Mosaic Annulment</i>	581
3. <i>Role of the Court in the Examination of Omissions</i>	582
4. <i>Interpretation of the Constitution</i>	583
<b>INDIA: Surya Deva, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators: The Indian Experience</i></b>	587
INTRODUCTION	587
I. JUDICIAL REVIEW: CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISIONS AND JUDICIAL INTERPRETATION	588
1. <i>Judicial Review: The Provisions</i>	588
2. <i>Judicial Review: The Interpretation</i>	591
II. JUDICIARY BECOMING THE LEGISLATOR: SOME EXAMPLES	594
1. <i>Guidelines for Police Arrest and Detention: D K Basu v. State of West Bengal</i>	594
2. <i>Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace: Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan</i>	596
3. <i>Ragging Menace at Universities</i>	598
CONCLUSION	600
<b>ITALY: Giampaolo Parodi, <i>The Italian Constitutional Court as Positive Legislator</i></b>	603
BIBLIOGRAPHY	620
<b>MEXICO: Eduardo Ferrer Mac-Gregor, <i>The Mexican Supreme Court as Positive Legislator</i></b>	623
INTRODUCTION	623
I. THE SUPREME COURT AS A CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	624
1. <i>Brief Background</i>	624
2. <i>Constitutional Evolution</i>	625
3. <i>Powers</i>	625
A. <i>Constitutional Control</i>	625
B. <i>Other Jurisdiction and Powers</i>	627

II. THE SUPREME COURT AS A POSITIVE LEGISLATOR	627
1. <i>Amparo Proceedings (Specific Effects)</i>	628
2. <i>Abstract Unconstitutionality Cause of Action against General Norms (Laws and International Treaties) and Constitutional Controversies (Erga Omnes Effect)</i>	632
3. <i>Legislative Omissions</i>	639
CONCLUSIONS	642
<b>NETHERLANDS: Jerfi Uzman, Tom Barkhuysen, and Michiel L. van Emmerik, <i>The Dutch Supreme Court: A Reluctant Positive Legislator?</i></b>	645
INTRODUCTION	645
I. THE BAN ON JUDICIAL CONSTITUTIONALITY REVIEW AND ITS SCOPE	648
1. <i>Article 120 of the Dutch Constitution</i>	648
2. <i>Summary</i>	651
II. ENFORCING INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS LAW	652
1. <i>Introduction: Monism and Article 94 of the Constitution</i>	652
2. <i>“Eligible to Bind All Persons” and Judicial Lawmaking</i>	653
3. <i>The Increasing Role of the European Convention in National Case Law</i>	656
4. <i>Concluding Remarks</i>	660
III. THE LAWMAKING ROLE OF THE COURTS	661
1. <i>Introduction</i>	661
2. <i>Defining the Process of Lawmaking</i>	662
3. <i>The Case Law of the Supreme Court Concerning Its Lawmaking Role</i>	663
A. <i>The Dual Custody Case: Distinguishing Positive from Negative Lawmaking</i>	664
B. <i>The Dutch Citizenship Case: Avoiding Policy Decisions</i>	665
C. <i>The Spring Decisions: Judicial Activism or Prudent Lawmaking?</i>	667
D. <i>After the High-Water Mark: A Slow Retreat to Judicial Restraint</i>	667
E. <i>Toward a New Model: The 1999 Labour Expenses Deduction Judgment</i>	669
F. <i>The Exception to the Rule: European Union Law</i>	673
4. <i>Reactions of “La Doctrine” after 1999</i>	675

## CONTENTS

IV. MEANS AND EFFECTS OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	678
1. <i>Introduction</i>	678
2. <i>Procedures Available to Enforce Fundamental Rights Law</i>	678
3. <i>Remedies for Fundamental Rights Violations</i>	679
4. <i>Effects of Judgments</i>	681
5. <i>Mitigating the Temporal Effects of Judgments</i>	683
6. <i>Judicial Reforms</i>	685
SUMMARY	686
BIBLIOGRAPHY	688
<b>NORWAY: Eivind Smith, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	693
I. ON THE ORIGINS OF THE NORWEGIAN SYSTEM OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	693
II. ON THE CHARACTER OF THE NORWEGIAN SYSTEM OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	695
III. THE SUPREME COURT OF NORWAY AS A POSITIVE LEGISLATOR?	697
<b>POLAND: Marek Safjan, <i>The Constitutional Courts as a Positive Legislator</i></b>	701
I. PRELIMINARY REMARKS	701
II. WHAT IS THE FUNCTION OF THE COURT AS A POSITIVE LEGISLATOR?	703
III. INDIRECT, POSITIVE IMPACT – EFFECTS OF NEGATIVE LEGISLATION	703
IV. DIRECT FORMS OF IMPACT EXERTED BY THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS VERSUS NORMATIVE ACTS	708
1. <i>Interpretation of the Constitution</i>	708
2. <i>Interpretation of Laws: Interpretative Rulings</i>	714
3. <i>Signalization</i>	717
CONCLUSIONS	718
<b>PORTUGAL: Joaquim de Sousa Ribeiro and Esperança Mealha, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	721
I. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE JUDICIAL REVIEW METHOD APPLIED IN PORTUGAL	721

1.	<i>The Preemptive Control</i>	722
2.	<i>The Abstract Review and the Concrete Review of Legislation</i>	723
3.	<i>The Enforceability and Implementation of Decisions of the Constitutional Court</i>	723
II.	POWERS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	724
1.	<i>Portuguese Constitutional Court as a Negative Legislator</i>	724
2.	<i>Powers of the Court and Effects of Constitutional Review Decisions</i>	725
3.	<i>Interpretation of Statute in Harmony with the Constitution</i>	728
4.	<i>Manipulative and Additive Decisions</i>	729
5.	<i>The Impact of Constitutional Case Law</i>	730
	<b>SERBIA: Boško Tripković, <i>A Constitutional Court in Transition: Making Sense of Constitutional Adjudication in Postauthoritarian Serbia</i></b>	735
	INTRODUCTION	735
I.	NORMATIVE GOALS OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	736
II.	PERFORMANCE OF THE SERBIAN CONSTITUTIONAL COURT	741
1.	<i>General Features of the System of Judicial Review</i>	741
2.	<i>Constitutional Adjudication and Democratic Process</i>	747
	A. Representation	747
	B. Deliberation	753
3.	<i>Constitutional Court and Liberal Values</i>	757
	A. Direct Protection of Liberal Values	758
	B. Indirect Protection of Liberal Values	762
	CONCLUSION	764
	<b>SLOVAK REPUBLIC: Ján Svák and Lucia Berdisová, <i>Constitutional Court of the Slovak Republic as Positive Legislator via Application and Interpretation of the Constitution</i></b>	767
I.	INTERPRETATION OF THE CONSTITUTION	769
II.	ABSTRACT CONTROL OF CONSTITUTIONALITY	771
1.	<i>Effect of the Ruling of the Constitutional Court regarding the Unconformity Between Legal Regulations</i>	773
III.	CONCRETE CONTROL OF CONSTITUTIONALITY	775

## CONTENTS

<b>SWITZERLAND: Tobias Jaag, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	783
I. INTRODUCTION	783
1. <i>Courts as Legislators in General</i>	783
2. <i>The Federal Supreme Court as a Constitutional Court</i>	784
A. Judicial Review in General	784
B. Limitations on Judicial Review	785
3. <i>The Federal Supreme Court as Legislator</i>	786
A. Negative Legislation	786
B. Positive Legislation	788
4. <i>Federal and Cantonal Law</i>	788
II. REFUSAL OF THE FEDERAL SUPREME COURT TO ACT AS POSITIVE LEGISLATOR	789
1. <i>Principle</i>	789
2. <i>Examples</i>	789
III. THE FEDERAL SUPREME COURT AS POSITIVE LEGISLATOR	791
1. <i>In General</i>	791
2. <i>Fundamental Rights</i>	791
A. New Fundamental Rights	791
B. Interpretation and Substantiation of Fundamental Rights	793
3. <i>Political Rights</i>	793
4. <i>Procedural Guarantees</i>	795
5. <i>Federal Conflicts</i>	796
6. <i>Compensation for Infringement of Property Rights</i>	797
7. <i>Further Examples</i>	798
CONCLUSIONS	798
BIBLIOGRAPHY	800
ABBREVIATIONS	802
<b>UNITED KINGDOM: John Bell, <i>Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators</i></b>	803
INTRODUCTION AND TERMINOLOGY	803
I. CONSTITUTIONAL (JUDICIAL) REVIEW, CONCENTRATED OR DISTRIBUTED	806
II. SPECIFIC ISSUES	807

1.	<i>Constitutional Review Procedures</i>	807
2.	<i>Judicial Decisions</i>	808
	A. Human Rights and Judicial Activism	809
	B. Judicial Substitution	811
3.	<i>Effect of Decisions</i>	813

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: Laurence Claus and Richard S. Kay, *Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators in the United States*** 815

I.	LEGISLATORS AND POSITIVE LEGISLATORS	815
II.	HOW AMERICAN COURTS LEGISLATE THROUGH CONSTITUTIONAL ADJUDICATION	820
III.	ENFORCING JUDICIAL LEGISLATION	829

**VENEZUELA: Daniela Urosa Maggi, *Constitutional Courts as Positive Legislators: The Venezuelan Experience*** 843

I.	THE NORMATIVE JURISDICTION ACCORDING TO THE JURISPRUDENCE OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHAMBER	846
II.	CASES WHERE THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHAMBER HAS EXTENDED ITS OWN COMPETENCIES THROUGH THE PRACTICING OF THE NORMATIVE JURISDICTION	847
	1. <i>Competencies in Constitutional Amparo Matters</i>	848
	A. Modification of the Competencies to Hear the Amparo Claims	849
	B. Modification of the Procedure of the Constitutional Amparo Claim	849
	2. <i>Competencies in the Special Recourse to Review Decisions</i>	850
	3. <i>Competencies to Hear the Interpretation of the Constitution Recourse</i>	852
	4. <i>Competencies in Matters of Concentrated Control of the Constitutionality of Statutes and Other Acts Having Rank of Law</i>	855
	A. Jurisprudential Inclusion of the Competency of Incidental Control over Statutes	855
	B. Modification of the Procedure of the Nullity Cases	857
	5. <i>Competencies in Matters of Control over Unconstitutionality for Omission</i>	858

## CONTENTS

6.	<i>Competency in Matters of Claims for Protection of Diffuse and Collective Interests</i>	859
A.	Creation of a Claim for Protection of Diffuse and Collective Interests	859
B.	Procedure to Be Followed and Legitimacy in Claims for Protection of Diffuse and Collective Interests	860
7.	<i>Competencies in Matters of Habeas Data</i>	860
III.	CASES OF JUDICIAL ACTIVISM ON MATTERS OF CONSTITUTIONAL INTERPRETATION: THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHAMBER AS POSITIVE CONSTITUENT	862
1.	<i>Decisions No. 6 of January 27, 2000 (case Milagros Gómez et al.) and No. 180 of March 28, 2000 (case Allan Brewer-Carías et al.): Legitimization of the Constitutional Transition Regime Approved by the National Constituent Assembly on December 1999 and Legitimization of the Acts Performed by Such Assembly in the Execution of Such Transition Regime.</i>	863
2.	<i>Decision No. 34 of January 26, 2004 (case Vestalia Araujo): Interpretation of Article 203 of the Constitution</i>	864
3.	<i>Decision No. 565 of April 15, 2008 (case Attorney General of the Republic): Interpretation of Article 164.10, of the 1999 Constitution</i>	865
IV.	PRECEDENTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHAMBER IN WHICH IT ACTED AS POSITIVE LEGISLATOR FOR ADDING TO THE LEGAL SYSTEM REGULATORY PRINCIPLES THAT DID NOT EXIST BEFORE	867
1.	<i>Decision No. 1013 of June 12, 2001 (case Elias Santana): Interpretation and Limitation of Rights Related to Freedom of Expression and Right to Rebuttal</i>	867
2.	<i>Decision No. 978 of April 30, 2003 (case Bolívar Banco): Resolution of the Method and Opportunity for Exercising the State Tax Authority on Tax Stamp Matters Pending the Issuing of the Relevant National Legislation</i>	868
3.	<i>Decision No. 511 of April 5, 2004 (case Maira Rincón Lugo): Decision on the Taking over Proceeding of Cases from Lower Courts (Avocamiento), Having Binding Nature for All Other Courts of the Supreme Tribunal of Justice</i>	869

4.	<i>Decision No. 1682 of July 15, 2005 (case Carmela Manpieri): Interpretation of Article 77 of the Constitution – Comparison between Men and Women De Facto and Men and Women Marriage – and the Praetorian Development of Its Legal Regime</i>	870
5.	<i>Decision No. 1456 of July 27, 2006 (case Yamilex Núñez de Godoy) and the Praetorian Development of the Legal Regime of Assisted Reproduction</i>	871
V.	PRECEDENTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL COURT THAT ACTS AS POSITIVE LEGISLATOR TO MODIFY PREEXISTING LAWS	872
1.	<i>Decisions That Modify Legal Rules through Substitutive Decisions on No Prior Declaration of Annulment of the Rule</i>	872
A.	Decision No. 2855 of November 20, 2002 (case <i>FEDENAGA</i> ): Constitutionality of Articles 40 and 43 of the Decree with Force of Law on Rural Lands and Agrarian Development	873
B.	Decision No. 2560 of August 5, 2005 (case <i>Rómulo Pacheco</i> ): Modification of Article 172 of the Organic Code of Criminal Procedure	874
C.	Decision No. 301 of February 27, 2007 (case <i>Adriana Vigilancia</i> ): Modification of the Sense and Scope of Article 31 of the Income Tax Law	875
2.	<i>Decisions of the Constitutional Chamber That Annulled and Established the New Wording of Legal Provisions</i>	877
A.	Decision no. 80 of February 1, 2001 (Case of Procedural Terms): Modification of Article 197 of the Civil Procedure Code Regarding the Calculation of Procedural Terms	877
B.	Decision No. 1264 of June 11, 2002 (case <i>Jesús Rendón</i> ): Partial Annulment of Article 201 of the Civil Procedure Code That Governs Judicial Holidays	878
C.	Decision No. 2241 of September 24, 2002 (case <i>Andrés Velázquez</i> ): Partial Annulment of Article 80 of the Organic Law on the Financial Administration of the Public Sector	879
D.	Decision No. 3241 of December 12, 2002 (case <i>COVEIN</i> ): Partial Annulment of Article 1 of the Ordinance on the Industry and Commerce License Tax of the Bolívar Municipality of the Anzoátegui State	880

## CONTENTS

E.	Decision No. 865 of April 22, 2003 (case <i>Ernesto José Rodríguez Casares</i> ): Annulment of Article 48 of the Ordinance on Urban and Rural Common and Personal Lands for the Bolívar District of the Zulia State	881
F.	Decision No. 1104 of May 23, 2006 (case <i>Carlos Brender</i> ): Partial Annulment of Article 90 of the Organic Law of the Attorney General of the Republic	882
G.	Decision No. 163 of February 28, 2008 (case <i>Ciro Ramón Araujo</i> ): Partial Annulment of the Organic Law of Public Defense	883
a.	<i>Partial Annulment and Modification of the Text of Article 3 of the Organic Law of Public Defense</i>	883
b.	<i>Partial Annulment and Modification of Articles 11, 12, and 13 of the Organic Law of Public Defense</i>	883
c.	<i>Partial Annulment and Modification of Article 15 of the Organic Law of Public Defense</i>	884
VI.	BRIEF CONCLUSIONS REGARDING THE UNCONSTITUTIONALITY OF THE EXERCISE OF THE NORMATIVE POWERS BY THE CONSTITUTIONAL CHAMBER OF THE SUPREME CHAMBER OF JUSTICE	885

### PART THREE

	<b>SYNTHESIS REPORT: CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS POSITIVE LEGISLATORS IN COMPARATIVE LAW</b>	889
	PRELIMINARY REMARKS	889
1.	<i>The Subordination of Constitutional Courts to the Constitution</i>	889
2.	<i>New Role of Constitutional Courts and the Question of Acting as Positive Legislators</i>	891
	FIRST TREND: CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS INTERFERING WITH THE CONSTITUENT POWER	893
1.	<i>Constitutional Courts Resolving Constitutional Federal Disputes and Enacting Constitutional Rules</i>	893
2.	<i>Constitutional Courts Exercising Judicial Review on Constitutional Provisions</i>	894
3.	<i>Constitutional Courts Exercising Judicial Review on Constitutional Reforms and Amendments</i>	894
4.	<i>The Role of Constitutional Courts Adapting the Constitution on Matters of Fundamental Rights</i>	896
5.	<i>The Mutation of the Constitution on Institutional Matters</i>	897

SECOND TREND: CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS INTERFERING WITH EXISTING LEGISLATION	899
1. <i>Constitutional Courts Complementing Legislative Functions by Interpreting Statutes in Harmony with the Constitution</i>	899
2. <i>Constitutional Courts Complementing the Legislator by Adding New Rules (and a New Meaning) to the Existing Legislative Provision</i>	900
3. <i>Constitutional Courts Complementing Legislative Functions by Interfering with the Temporal Effects of Legislation</i>	902
A. The Power of the Constitutional Courts to Determine When Annulled Legislation Will Cease to Have Effect: Postponing the Effect of the Courts' Ruling	903
B. The Power of the Constitutional Courts to Determine When Annulled Legislation Will Cease to Have Effects: The Retroactive or Nonretroactive Effects of Their Own Decisions	904
a. <i>The Possibility of Limiting the Retroactive Ex Tunc             Effects of Declarative Decisions</i>	905
b. <i>The Possibility of Retroactive Effects for Ex Nunc             Constitutive Decisions</i>	906
4. <i>The Power of Constitutional Courts to Revive Repealed     Legislation</i>	907
THIRD TREND: CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS INTERFERING WITH THE ABSENCE OF LEGISLATION OR WITH LEGISLATIVE OMISSIONS	907
1. <i>Constitutional Courts Filling In Absolute Legislative     Omissions</i>	907
A. The Direct Action against Absolute Legislative Omissions	908
B. The Protection of Fundamental Rights from Absolute Legislative Omissions by Means of Actions or Complaints for Their Protection	909
2. <i>Constitutional Courts Filling In the Gap of Relative Legislative     Omissions</i>	912
A. Constitutional Courts' Issuing of Nonbinding Directives to the Legislator	913
B. Constitutional Courts' Issuing of Binding Orders and Directives to the Legislator	914
3. <i>Constitutional Courts as Provisional Legislators</i>	915

CONTENTS

FOURTH TREND: CONSTITUTIONAL COURTS AS LEGISLATORS ON MATTERS OF JUDICIAL REVIEW	917
1. <i>Constitutional Courts' Creating of Their Own Judicial Review Powers</i>	917
A. The Judge-Made Law on the Diffuse System of Judicial Review	917
B. The Extension of Judicial Review Powers to Ensure the Protection of Fundamental Rights	918
2. <i>The Need for the Express Provision in the Constitution of Judicial Review Powers of the Constitutional Jurisdiction and Its Deviation</i>	919
3. <i>Constitutional Courts' Creation of Procedural Rules on Judicial Review</i>	920
FINAL REMARKS	921
<b>APPENDIX</b>	925
<b>INDEX</b>	929

## MEXICO

# THE MEXICAN SUPREME COURT AS POSITIVE LEGISLATOR

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## INTRODUCTION

From a material point of view, the Mexican Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (hereinafter, SC) has evolved from an appeals court into a constitutional court, specifically since the constitutional reform of December 31, 1994. From that date, its composition decreased from twenty-six to eleven Justices, and it was empowered to pronounce the invalidity of norms with future *erga omnes* effects through two mechanisms: the abstract unconstitutionality cause of action and constitutional controversies.

These powers are exclusive to the SC. As such, the best doctrine has considered it a real constitutional court, although it still presides over matters inherent to a legality court, as it is at the top of the federal judicial branch. Because of its dual duties (constitutional and legal), it has been deemed that the system controlling constitutionality in Mexico has a mixed nature, to the extent that it has European or centralized control features and some aspects of the diffuse or American system, as the SC also presides over amparo

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proceedings<sup>1</sup> (on review),<sup>2</sup> in which it may declare only the inapplicability of an unconstitutional norm to a specific case.

The full exercise of these constitutional powers has led the SC to evolve the type of decisions it issues. In this manner, it has left behind the conceptualization of the famous Viennese jurist Kelsen because it has ceased to be a simple negative legislator, having progressed to what may be considered a true positive legislator in line with certain evolving constitutional court trends.<sup>3</sup>

To justify the foregoing, I herein briefly analyze the SC as a constitutional court, as well as the effects of its decisions and, specifically, the cases that allow us to observe its active and law-creating role.

## I. THE SUPREME COURT AS A CONSTITUTIONAL COURT

### 1. *Brief Background*

The oldest background on the SC is found in the Real Audience of Mexico, established on November 29, 1527, as the highest judicial instance at the time of New Spain (1521–1821).

During the time of the fight for independence (1810–21), there operated what has been considered the first federal court: the Supreme Court of Justice of Mexican America, located in Ario de Rosales, Michoacán (1815).

However, the SC was formally regulated by the first Constitution in force in the independent Mexico. The Federal Constitution of the United Mexican States, enacted on October 4, 1824, organized the judicial branch in its article 123, which bestowed said power on the Supreme Court of Justice.

Subsequently, centralist constitutional codes (the Seven Laws of 1836 and the Organic Bases of the Mexican Republic of 1843) also regulated the SC.

Commencing with the enactment of the Federal Constitution dated February 5, 1857, the SC obtained constitutional control powers defined

<sup>1</sup> Under Mexican law, *amparo* literally means “shelter” and is legally defined as providing the complainant with shelter and protection of the Federal Justice System as the result of a favorable *amparo* proceeding. The *amparo* proceeding challenges the constitutionality of the act of a governmental authority, thereby forestalling the enforceability of the authority’s act if the *amparo* court rules in the complainant’s favor.

<sup>2</sup> The SC can act as a court of appeals when a first judgment is challenged and it regards the constitutionality of laws or other general rules, or when it comes to a very important case, using a sort of *certiorari* power.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. FERRER MAC-GREGOR, Eduardo (coord.), *Crónica de tribunales constitucionales en Iberoamérica*, Buenos Aires/Madrid, Marcial Pons, 2009.

through the amparo proceedings. This instrument over the course of the late nineteenth century evolved the particular nature that it has today, which was defined in the Federal Constitution of 1917 in force.

## 2. *Constitutional Evolution*

For the purposes here, the two most important constitutional judicial reforms, and specifically those regarding the SC transformation into a constitutional court, took place in the years 1987 and 1994.

(1) The purpose of the constitutional reform dated August 29, 1987, was to turn the Court into a specialized court of a constitutional nature, as expressly set forth in the reform's statutory purpose. In this manner, the mere legality control previously presided over by the SC transferred to the Collegiate Circuit Courts.

(2) Six years later, the most important constitutional judicial reform of the past years appeared. The reform of December 31, 1994, encompassed a total of twenty-seven substantive articles and twelve transitory provisions. The relevance of the same is divided into two fundamental aspects: the SC's organic composition (reduced from twenty-six members to eleven) and the creation of a complete constitutional control system, which considerably approaches the European constitutional courts.

## 3. *Powers*

### A. *Constitutional Control.*

The SC presides essentially over three constitutional control instruments: (1) the abstract unconstitutionality cause of action, (2) constitutional controversies (jurisdictional or power conflicts between State bodies and branches), and (3) amparo proceedings.

(a) *Abstract unconstitutionality cause of action.* This power is exclusive to the SC by means of the unconstitutionality cause of action, a mechanism regulated by article 105, section II, of the Federal Constitution.

Those entitled to file the action are 33 percent of the members of (federal or state) legislative bodies; the Attorney General of the Republic; political parties; and the Human Rights Commissions (ombudsmen), whether at the National or State level.

As I mention herein, a supramajority vote is necessary to declare generally effective invalidity, that is to say, when eight (of eleven) votes are obtained. Should there be a simple majority (five, six, or seven votes), the action is

held nonjusticiable (dismissed) and the action has no effect (*improcedente*). This supramajority requirement has been criticized by doctrinaires, and there exist proposals to withdraw it.

(b) *Specific control*. This takes place through two instruments: constitutional controversies and amparo proceedings. Unlike the abstract unconstitutionality cause of action, to have standing to sue in these proceedings, the plaintiff must have suffered some specific affectation of legal or legitimate interests; otherwise, the constitutional suit is inadmissible.

(i) *Constitutional controversies* (jurisdictional or power conflicts). Article 105, section I, provides eleven subsections that may be classified in three categories: (1) conflicts between different legal orders due to the legality or constitutionality of a general norm or an act (e.g., the Federation and a State and the Federal District, the Federation and a State); (2) conflicts between bodies of different legal orders due to the legality or constitutionality of general norms or of acts (e.g., the Executive Branch and the Congress of the Union); and (3) conflicts between bodies of the same legal order due to the constitutionality of general norms or of acts (e.g., between two branches of a state, between a state and a municipality of the same state).<sup>4</sup>

This constitutional process is exclusive to the SC. Resolutions may produce future general effects with the same supramajority vote requirement of eight justices. However, unlike the unconstitutionality cause of action, if there exists a relative majority, the resolution of the constitutional controversies produces *inter partes* effects.

(ii) *Amparo proceedings*. Regulated by constitutional articles 103 and 107, this is the most deeply rooted constitutional control mechanism in Mexico, not only because it has a centenarian tradition but also because it represented the sole effective constitutional protection mechanism up to the oft-cited 1994 constitutional reform.

One of its characteristics is that decisions pronounced in amparo proceedings provide protection only *inter partes*; that is, the challenged law is inapplicable to a specific case and to the amparo plaintiff (*quejoso*), although it is still valid for anyone else. Nevertheless, in December 2010, the Congress of the Union approved a constitutional amendment which allows a general declaration of unconstitutionality with *erga omnes* effects solely in the so called “Amparo against laws”. In this case, when an indirect amparo trial deals for the second time with the unconstitutionality of a general norm,

<sup>4</sup> Cf. COSSÍO DÍAZ, José Ramón, “Artículo 105 constitucional,” in FERRER MAC-GREGOR, Eduardo (coord.), 5th ed., Mexico City, Porrúa, 2006, Volume II, pp. 957–999, at p. 982.

the Supreme Court will inform the authoritative legislative body. If the problem persists for 90 calendar days, the Supreme Court will issue (if approved by at least 8 votes) the general declaration of unconstitutionality, in which the Court will determine its reach and the conditions in terms of the statutory law.

## B. Other Jurisdiction and Powers

In addition to those three constitutional powers, the SC has other special constitutional jurisdiction as well as multiple jurisdictions of different kinds that are more like those of an appeals court, thus distancing itself as a constitutional court. Among the most important powers are the investigation procedure of the SC, which allows the SC to investigate possible serious individual rights violations, regulated by the second paragraph of article 97 of the Mexican Constitution; the power of preemption to preside over those amparo proceedings that originally correspond to Collegiate Circuit Courts or to Unitary Circuit Courts on appeal of ordinary trials in which the Federation is a party and when it is warranted due to the interest and relevance of the matter; the resolution of contradiction between precedents and of jurisdictional conflicts between Collegiate Circuit Courts; the presiding over of determined administrative claims remedies; and deciding on the removal of authorities as a result of violation of amparo decisions.

## II. THE SUPREME COURT AS A POSITIVE LEGISLATOR

The nullification of a law is essentially produced by applying the norms of the Constitution. Free creation which is a characteristic of legislation is virtually absent in a nullification. While the legislator is not bound by the Constitution except in regards to procedure and only exceptionally in regards to the contents of laws that they shall enact – and this, only by general principles or directions – the activity of the negative legislator, that is, constitutional jurisdictional activity, to the contrary, is absolutely determined by the Constitution. Specifically for this reason, its duties are similar to those of any other court in general, and said duties mainly constitute application of the Law and, only to a lesser extent, creation of Law. Therefore, its duties are truly jurisdictional.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> KELSEN, Hans, “La garantía jurisdiccional de la Constitución (la justicia constitucional),” *Revista Iberoamericana de Derecho Procesal Constitucional*, Mexico City, n° 10, July–December 2008, pp. 3–46, at p. 25.

The conception of the famous jurist Hans Kelsen was such that when he wrote the preliminary draft of the Constitution of Austria of 1920, he created for the first time a specialized constitutional regulatory control body: the Constitutional Court. This Court narrowed its duties to constitutionality analysis and, in the applicable case, proceeded to declare invalid the norm challenged.

As I illustrate herein, the tasks of the modern constitutional courts have surpassed the sole nullification of laws. Constitutional justice challenges are increasingly complex and need a much more participative intervention by constitutional judges. Thus, they have advanced into territory that, for Kelsen, was unthinkable and probably undesirable. Along these lines, problems of unconstitutionality incite the creative role of the constitutional judge, who must bring into action all the legal tools within his or her reach, combined with sensitivity, prudence, and self-control.

I hereafter discuss my ideas on the decisions issued by the SC acting as a Constitutional Court, and I then reflect on complex cases in which the constitutional response has gone beyond a simple negative legislator.

To determine the effects and contents of constitutional decisions issued by the SC (and to comment on exceptional cases), it is necessary to distinguish between the three constitutional control mechanisms, as each has different characteristics.

### 1. *Amparo Proceedings (Specific Effects)*

Beginning with the 1847 Constitution, the rulings issued by the Supreme Court of Justice in amparo matters have been limited to protection in a specific case, in compliance with the traditional principle of relativity of decisions. I deem that this situation must be overcome to include the general declaration of unconstitutionality, at least in the “amparo against laws” sector.

This has caused the result that “favorable”<sup>6</sup> amparo constitutional decisions are limited to solely protecting the petitioner, even though their effects, unlike other constitutional proceedings, are retroactive to the time the violation was committed (*ex tunc*), in compliance with article 80 of the Amparo Law: “The purpose of a decision granting amparo is that of restoring to the petitioner full entitlement of the individual right violated,

<sup>6</sup> The original Spanish uses the words *estimatoria* and *desestimatoria* to denote those decisions that have been upheld and those decisions that have been overruled, respectively. For the purpose of clarity and emphasis, I use *favorable* and *unfavorable* as approximations to those.

reestablishing the state of things as they were before the violation, when the act challenged is positive in nature; and if act is negative in nature, the effect of the amparo shall be to obligate the challenged authority to act so as to respect the right in question and to itself comply with what the right demands.”

As a matter of fact, the Amparo Law provides that the effects of decisions under this constitutional right are retroactive; however, SC jurisprudence has advanced to also granting future or *ex nunc* effects to favorable *amparo* decisions and not only retroactive or *ex tunc* effects. This advancement is meaningful because it breaks the authority’s practice of reapplying the same provision that had been the object of protection, thereby preventing the petitioner from bearing the burden of lodging new amparo proceedings against future application of similar acts of the authority. In keeping with the *res judicata* principle, the temporary effects of a favorable decision consist not only of restoring the petitioner’s rights to the state in which they were found before contravention of their fundamental rights took place, by acting backward by destroying application of the act that resulted in the amparo proceeding lodged, but also of the application acts that, in the applicable case, have arisen during the integration of the proceeding – but said effects also act forward, which implies that the effect of the amparo is to prevent the norm that has been declared unconstitutional from being subsequently applied to the petitioner or offended party.<sup>7</sup>

In jurisprudential terms, the limited specific effects of amparo decisions have been broadening in such a manner that, in determined cases, protection has been extended to individuals other than the amparo petitioner. This happens, for instance, when the effects are extended to the petitioner’s codefendants, which without filing the corresponding constitutional action, if the procedural record proves that there exists necessary joinder of defendants between said codefendants or that the situation of the joint defendants is identical, similar or common to that of the individual who did lodge the amparo proceedings, as the effects of the aforementioned joinder of defendants are produced only within the corresponding proceeding; thus, they may be transferred to the constitutional proceeding.<sup>8</sup>

Regarding the binding effects of jurisprudence, it should be highlighted that administrative authorities are not yet bound to apply them in the grounds

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the following jurisprudence theses: *GSJF*, 8th Epoch, Plenary, April–June 1989; *SJFG*, Plenary, Volume IV, November 1996, p. 135; and *SJFG*, Plenary, Volume X, November 1999, p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. P.J.9/96, *SJFG*, Plenary, Volume III, February 1996, p. 78.

and reason for their resolutions (this aspect should be changed in the future). However, the Federal Court of Tax and Administrative Justice, though a formally administrative body, performs materially jurisdictional duties and is obligated to apply jurisprudence declaring a law unconstitutional. The latter does not imply a pronouncement of a constitutional nature because it is restricted to the application of the jurisprudence; that is, it should only verify the appropriateness of its application to the specific case, as inferred from the criteria upheld in jurisprudential theses 2a./J. 38/2002 and P./J. 38/2002.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the foregoing jurisprudence, it must be pointed out that the Second Chamber of the SC established its criterion, also of jurisprudential nature, stating that, even though the administrative authorities are not bound to apply jurisprudence declaring a law unconstitutional, they must comply with decisions issued by the Federal Court of Tax and Administrative Justice that declare a resolution null and void on the basis of such type of jurisprudence.<sup>10</sup>

The obligatory nature of jurisprudence declaring a law unconstitutional has a wider scope if one abides by the principle of amendment of defects in the complaint contained in article 76 *bis*, section I, of the Amparo Law. The purpose of the amendment of defects in the complaint is to efficiently control the constitutionality of the laws so that the Constitution prevails as the Supreme Law, which does not imply avoiding the appropriateness of amparo proceedings, as expressed in the jurisprudential thesis P./J. 7/2006 of the Plenary Court.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the amendment of the complaint applies to questions of legal merits once the amparo proceeding is appropriate regarding the law or act challenged.

The amendment of the complaint on such terms is appropriate and is not hindered by a claim against the first or subsequent application acts of the laws that have been declared unconstitutional by jurisprudence of the Highest Court, as learned from jurisprudence P./J. 8/2006.<sup>12</sup> The foregoing does not mean that the causes of inappropriateness derived from the express or tacit consent of the law referred to by sections XI and XII of article 73 of the Amparo Law are invalid. This is so because, if these causes take place, they shall operate to the extent permitted by law; however, the dismissal of the proceedings regarding the application acts is not admissible but, instead

<sup>9</sup> 2nd./J. 38/2002, *SGFG*, Ninth Epoch, Volume. XV, May 2002, p. 175; and P./J. 38/2002, *SJFG*, Ninth Epoch, Volume XVI, August 2002, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> 2a./J. 89/2004, *SJFG*, Ninth Epoch, Volume XX, July 2004, p. 281.

<sup>11</sup> T. XXIII, Plenary, *SGFJ*, February 2006, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> T. XXIII, Ninth Epoch, *SJFG*, February 2006, p. 9.

in regard to the acts, the amparo shall be appropriately granted if said acts are grounded in any law that has been declared unconstitutional by jurisprudence. It should be taken into consideration that, on the terms of article 80 of the aforementioned law, amparo has restitution with nonretroactive effects; therefore, the granting of the amparo may not include prior acts but only present and future acts, as specified in the resolution issued by the Plenary Court upon resolving jurisprudential thesis 54/2004-PL.<sup>13</sup> The benefit of the amendment of complaint defects is applicable not only to direct amparo proceedings but also to indirect amparo proceedings, at the trial or review stages, as determined by plenary jurisprudence P./J. 6/2006.<sup>14</sup>

The expansive strength of jurisprudence is made clear with the Plenary's determination to create jurisprudence in generic or thematic matters, which implies their mandatory application by Federal Judicial Branch judges and courts in amparo proceedings for all the cases encompassed by the same or analogous cases even though different legal norms are involved (but have identical or similar content). The preceding is set forth in plenary jurisprudence P./J. 104/2007.<sup>15</sup>

Using as a point of departure the greater strength of jurisprudence by establishing general or thematic jurisprudence, the jurisprudential thesis established by the Plenary Session of the Highest Court acquires special relevance. This precedent states that, what is important for setting jurisprudence by reiteration, is that there is a common criterion applicable to various cases even though the specific circumstances of the analyzed norms vary (e.g., enforceability, issuing authorities, article number). Thus, the possibility of establishing thematic jurisprudence eases and expedites the definition of jurisprudential guidelines that must be obligatorily applied, because, regardless of whether the cases are identical, there may be defined therein the criterion that reestablishes constitutional order to similar cases, thereby increasing its effectiveness.<sup>16</sup>

Last, it is important to emphasize that in some decisions that grant amparo, directly related to unjust treatment under the norm, it has been determined that their effect is to recognize the petitioner's incorrectly denied right. The preceding makes evident the broadening of the protective mantle.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Decision published in the *SJFG*, Ninth Epoch, Volume XXIII, February 2006.

<sup>14</sup> T XXIII, Ninth Epoch, *SJFG*, February 2006, p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> T. XXVI, Ninth Epoch, *SJFG*, December 2007, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Thesis P. XVI/94, published in the *GSJF*, Eighth Epoch, 77, May 1994, p. 38.

<sup>17</sup> Thesis P. 93/2009, CT. 61/2009, *SJFG*, XXX, Ninth Epoch, August 2009, p. 175.

Aside from these jurisprudential criteria, which in some way attempt to broaden the efficacy of favorable amparo decisions for the effects of time and personal scope, it is recommendable that the constitutional and legal reforms that have been submitted since 2001 to the Congress of the Union be approved. Specifically, the draft of the constitutional reform and the new Amparo Law, which among its relevant aspects are the following: surpassing the individual effect of amparo decisions through a general statement of unconstitutionality in cases of amparo proceedings against laws; the substitution of the antiquated concept of legal standing that is still being applied in this area by a broader legitimation concept, defined as legitimate interest; the extension of the scope of protection to those human rights provided for in international treaties duly incorporated into the Mexican system; the restriction of the so-called *amparo para efectos* so as to avoid unnecessary returns to lower courts as a result of violations of form; and progress toward new conceptions of what constitutes an authority so that an amparo is appropriate, overcoming a formalistic criteria, as there exists a clear comparative law trend toward horizontal protection of fundamental rights (*drittwirkung*).

2. *Abstract Unconstitutionality Cause of Action against General Norms (Laws and International Treaties) and Constitutional Controversies (Erga Omnes Effect)*

The subject of the effects of constitutional decisions attains greater dynamism when it deals with abstract unconstitutionality cause of actions and constitutional controversies referred to in sections I and II of constitutional article 105. This is so because the decisions issued in the constitutional proceedings may be generally applicable, that is, *erga omnes*, in those predicates established in the same Constitution and its regulatory law. This means that, in those cases of supramajority favorable decisions (voting by at least eight of the eleven Justices who make up the full SC bench), it is sometimes necessary to attenuate the effects of the ruling. In these instances, the constitutional control body has flexible powers to determine the date and application conditions of the constitutional decisions, as it is necessary to mitigate the possible negative effects of the legislative vacuum produced by nullification of the legal norm, the text of which has been declared unconstitutional. Hence, the SC possesses broad powers to determine the effects and other conditions of enforceability of the favorable decisions it issues, as article 41, section IV, of the Regulatory Law referring to the contents that should be expressed in the decisions states as a requirement that a decision must demarcate “The scope and effect of the

decision, precisely expressing, if applicable, the bodies obligated to abide by the decision, the general norms or acts regarding which it applies and all of those elements necessary for its full effect within the corresponding scope.”<sup>18</sup>

This broad power granted to the SC enables it to determine in each case the scope and effect of favorable decisions, especially when a supramajority vote is obtained so as to declare invalidity in general terms, extending the effects of the decision to others norms whose validity depends on the very norm invalidated, regardless of whether the norm in question has an identical or lesser hierarchy as the challenged norm. The interdependency relationship existing between the norms determines, because of the same invalidating defect, their contraposition with the prevailing constitutional order.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, recently, on the basis of these broad powers, not only have the normative portions directly affected by unconstitutionality been declared invalid but also invalidity has been extended to all the challenged normative system. The preceding is the result of considering the challenged provision as a piece of an integrated normative system in which each part is indissolubly logically related to the whole and, as such, the expulsion of only one of the relevant portions of the system would result in the disconfiguration or redesign of the system. This, in turn, leads to necessarily establishing the revival of the norms in force before those that were declared invalid.<sup>20</sup>

An example of the preceding is unconstitutionality cause of action 47/2006 and actions joined thereto, which determined the validity of transitory articles 3 and 5 of Decree 419, which respectively extended the legislative mandate of the Deputies of the Sixty-second Congressional Legislature for the State of Chiapas and of the present Town Council members. This declaration of invalidity had the effect that the aforementioned legislators and Town Council members concluded their term in office as foreseen before the issuance of the challenged Decree 419. Consequently, the new election of deputies and constitutional and municipal town councils was done in conformity with the legislation in force, before the later reform; that is, the enforceability of the norms previously enforceable was revived.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> By interpreting this precept and its constitutional powers by issuing the favorable decisions, the Supreme Tribunal has established jurisprudential thesis P./J. 84/2007, *SJFG*, volume XXVI, December 2007, p. 777.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P./J. 32/2006, *SJFG*, volume XXIII, February 2006, p. 1169.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. P./J. 85/2007 and 86/2007, *SJFG*, volume XXVI, December 2007, pp. 849 and 778, respectively.

<sup>21</sup> The reasons posed to revive the aforementioned regulation are substantially the following: “The revival of electoral legislation that has not yet been reformed, has the purpose of providing the

In a similar case, the SC determined that all provisions contained in Decrees 353, 354, and 355, published in the Official Gazette of the State of Colima on August 31, 2008, including the transitory articles regulating the decrees' entry into force, were unconstitutional. The High Court, taking into account that the decrees reformed the Electoral Code of the State of Colima and the State Electoral Challenge System Law, subject area wherein the paramount principle is certainty, determined that the subsequent elections process in the State of Colima would be governed by the laws before Decrees 353 and 354 that had been declared invalid. However, the Court clarified that the aforementioned revival would take effect only for the following electoral process, as it would be necessary to issue new legislation for future elections. Furthermore, it determined that the revived legislation could not be reformed during the electoral proceeding, as is provided for in article 105, section II, penultimate paragraph, of the Federal Constitution.<sup>22</sup>

It is convenient to remember Kelsen's thoughts regarding the revival of norms:

It is possible, in this regard, to think of another means: to empower the Constitutional Court to stipulate – jointly with the resolution that annuls the general norm – that the general norms that regulated the subject prior to the annulled law may enter into effect. Then it would be prudent to entrust to the selfsame Court the decision in which case this power to re-establish the previous legal situation should be used. It would be lamentable if the Constitution made the reappearance of this previous state an imperative general rule whenever general norms are annulled. . . . The power thus conferred on the Constitutional Court to make norms positively enforceable would greatly accentuate the legislative nature of its duties, furthermore it would only encompass the norms which had been made enforceable, previously, by the common legislator.<sup>23</sup>

The Supreme Court's previously described broad powers are also related to the principle of *iura novit curia* governing the two relevant constitutional proceedings, to the extent that the SC when issuing its rulings should correct

voters, political parties and the organizations that participate in the election with legal certainty, pursuant to the principle of certainty that rules this subject and which impedes that, due to the pending proximity of the renewal of the of the bodies of popular representation, the transcendental regulations which shall regulate this form of access by citizens to public power be unknown, as for example, amongst other, the terms related to the preparation of the elections." Cf. A.I. 47/2006 and its accumulated 49/2006, 50/2006 and 51/2006, dated December 7, 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A.I. 107/2008 and its accumulated 108/2008 and 109/2008, dated November 20, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> KELSER, HANS, "La garantía jurisdiccional de la Constitución (la justicia constitucional)," *op. cit.*, p. 37.

the errors that it observes upon citing the invoked provisions and amend the grounds for invalidity expressed in the complaint. It may also base a declaration of unconstitutionality on any constitutional provision without necessarily invoking the provision in question, except in the case of electoral unconstitutionality causes of action (article 71 of the regulatory law).<sup>24</sup>

Another relevant aspect in these two constitutional proceedings is the binding character of the reasoning contained in the grounds that form the basis for the decision, if these are approved by at least eight justices of the SC. The *ratio decidendi* is binding on all the national courts, whether federal or state, on the terms of article 43 of the Regulatory Law, and because this provision does not make a distinction between favorable or appropriate decisions and unfavorable decisions or denials, it should be understood that it applies to both types of rulings. It makes reference to the reasons containing the *thema decidendum* and not to *obiter dictum*, that is, an element isolated from the argumentative discourse – these are so frequent in our world that occasionally they materialize in jurisprudential thesis, when they should not be obligatorily binding because they are not part of the principal argument.<sup>25</sup>

That is why it is important, in order to determine the effects and effectiveness of constitutional decisions in those proceedings, to distinguish between the decisions of acceptance (*acogimiento*) or non-supramajority invalidating decision from those that are characterized as supramajority invalidating decisions. The first are those decisions that, even though there is a majority vote, do not meet the necessary constitutional and legal requirement to be fully effective. This distinction even includes different consequences if they are unconstitutionality causes of actions or constitutional controversies. This supramajority voting requirement lacks practical sense, considering that, at times, the plenary of our Highest Court convenes without all of its members (the quorum necessary is eight), so that on occasion a unanimous vote is necessary or it would suffice for one or two minority votes would prevail over the majority, thus causing the ruling's lack of generally enforceability. It is desirable to do away with this requirement in the future, as it has no reason to exist in such complex and technical questions such as allegations of the unconstitutionality of general provisions.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. P./J. 6/2003, *SJFG*, volume XX, September 2004, p. 437.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. 1st./J.2/2004, *SJFG*, volume XIX, March 2004, p. 130.

This may become an obstacle to real effectivity, as has been demonstrated by events in other constitutional courts in comparative law.<sup>26</sup>

Some doctrinal sectors have deemed that conditioning constitutional control on a minority is inappropriate for courts. And, as frequently expressed, this cannot be justified as protection of the presumed constitutionality of laws, as the preceding derives its existential justification from other aspects that are not applicable to the body entrusted with the definitive interpretation of the Constitution, if there exist a simple majority that finds unconstitutional the challenged norm (which implies in reality that no conforming interpretation is possible). This characteristic of supramajority voting to declare invalid challenged general norms has been broadly criticized and described by an author as “the greatest defect of the Mexican Federal unconstitutionality cause of action.”<sup>27</sup>

Non-supramajority favorable decisions in cases of an abstract cause of action challenging the constitutionality of a law imply that, despite the existence of a simple majority (five, six, or seven votes)<sup>28</sup> that admit the constitutional claim and deem unconstitutional the challenged norm, they do not produce the norm’s nullity or its expulsion from the legal order because the eight-vote requirement for a general decision of unconstitutionality is not satisfied. In this situation, the Plenary Court, confronted with this insurmountable procedural obstacle, should unfavorably rule on the cause of action and order the matter filed, as provided for in the second paragraph of article 72 of the applicable Regulatory Law and expressly make said declaration in the grounds for decision pertaining to the ruling. In the decision, reference should be made only to the lack of supramajority vote, and the considerations of the majority should not become part of the ruling; however, in the applicable case, they may be incorporated as non-

<sup>26</sup> Few constitutional courts set forth supramajority voting as a requirement to invest constitutional decisions with general effectivity. One of the most representative examples of the futility of this requirement is found in Peru, where the Court of Constitutional Rights (1979) and the Constitutional Court (1993) faced serious operational problems due to the high percentage of required votes. The new Constitutional Procedural Code, in force since December 1, 2004, retains supramajority voting but with fewer requirements. Regarding this legislation, see ABAD YUPANQUI, Samuel B., DANOS ORDÓÑEZ, Jorge, EGUIGUREN PRAELI, Francisco J., GARCÍA BELAUNDE, Domingo, MONROY GÁLVEZ, Juan, and ORE GUARDIA, Arsenio, *Código Procesal Constitucional. Estudio introductorio, exposición de motivos, dictámenes e índice analítico*, 2nd ed., Lima, Palestra, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> BRAGE CAMAZANO, Joaquín, *La acción abstracta de inconstitucionalidad*, Mexico City, UNAM, 2005, p. 347; especially on this topic, see his criticisms to the presumed constitutionality of the law, pp. 347–352.

<sup>28</sup> If the necessary quorum for the Plenary is at least eight Supreme Court justices, the non-supramajority could be only five, six, or seven.

supramajority votes. The SC itself has interpreted the phenomenon of the non-supramajority decision in the following manner:

If there exists a majority, but there are less than eight votes finding the norm unconstitutional, then there shall be a plenary declaration of the impossibility (non-subsistence) to decide the action and there will be no holding issued neither in regards to the constitutionality which is implicitly reached, since the validity of the challenged norm is respected by applying a technical rule protecting the respective presumption that the legislative body obeyed the Constitution. That this was the result reached due to the lack of a supramajority vote is reflected by the absence of legal arguments by the Supreme Court supporting and strengthening the expression of the legislature. In accordance to the judicial system, it is also logical that in the eventuality of an unfavorable declaration on the unconstitutionality cause of action, even though there does not exist a pronouncement by the Supreme Court on a related subject, the Justices in the non-supramajority and the minority votes may draft votes giving the arguments which support the said opinion.<sup>29</sup>

This resolution does not imply a declaration of the constitutionality of the challenged norm, as it does not resolve the constitutional controversy because of a procedural impediment that is indispensable and necessary to nullify the challenged provision and so expel it from the legal order. Therefore, the ruling really produces similar effects to a proceeding dismissal, leaving unadjudicated the merits of the matter as a result of an insurmountable procedural obstacle leading to the dismissal of the constitutional cause of action.<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, when the favorable non-supramajority decision is the result of a constitutional controversy proceeding, the action will not be dismissed as in the preceding case but the decision is binding only between the parties.<sup>31</sup> In general, the reach of the effects of constitutional controversies is subordinated to the categorical relations existing between the plaintiff and the defendant.<sup>32</sup> The decision is only generally enforceable – *erga omnes* – if it is a challenge to generally applicable provisions (not acts) and if the constitutional controversy sentence was approved by a majority of at least

<sup>29</sup> Sixth whereas clause of the decision of the unconstitutionality cause of action 10/2000, decided on January 29 and 30, 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. P./J. 15/2002, *SJFG*, vol. XV, February 2002, p. 419.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. P. 14/3007, as well as jurisprudential thesis P.J.72/96 and P.J. 108/2001, *SJFG*, volume XXV, May, 2007, p. 1533; *SJFG*, volume IV, November 1996, p. 249; *SJFG*, volume XIV, September 2001, p. 1024.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. P.J. 9/1999, *SJFG*, volume IX, April 1999, p. 281.

eight votes and is a controversy involving States or municipalities that have been challenged by the Federal Government, or of municipalities challenged by the States, or in those cases referred to in clauses (c), (h) and (k) of section I of constitutional article 105.<sup>33</sup>

In regards to the temporal effects of decisions on both abstract unconstitutionality causes of action and constitutional controversies, two general rules are provided. The first rule consists of leaving up to the Supreme Court's discretion the setting of the date that the decision will enter into force,<sup>34</sup> which on many occasions is the day following publication of the final decision in the *Federal Official Gazette*. This delay of the temporal enforceability of rulings allows the SC the flexibility to consider the particularities of each case and, by this means, mitigate the possible consequences of the legislative vacuum produced by the expulsion of the general provision declared unconstitutional. A maximum term for this delay is not provided for as in Austria, where it may never exceed eighteen months after the publication of constitutional ruling.

In contrast, following the criterion that normally governs challenges to general norms pursuant to the European system, the effects of the ruling are future (*ex nunc*), and it may have retroactive effect only in criminal cases benefitting the accused (*ex tunc*).<sup>35</sup> However, the SC has sustained that, regardless of subject matter, it may stipulate extraordinarily that the declaration of invalidity becomes effective from the date on which the complaint is presented, if due to suspension of the challenged acts things have remained in the state in which they were at the moment the controversy was presented or from the moment in which the precautionary measure was conceded, if the aforementioned concession occurred after the complaint was presented.<sup>36</sup>

Although the previously referenced retroactivity is exceptionally decreed, it should be stated that in Latin American legal orders and jurisprudences a moderate retroactivity is accepted. The original Austrian conception of effects into the future has undergone important exceptions, to the degree that frequently European constitutional courts (e.g., Austria, Germany, Italy,

<sup>33</sup> These sections establish: “c) The Executive Branch and the Congress of the Union; the former and any of the Chambers of the latter or in its case the Permanent Commission, whether as federal institutions or of the Federal District; . . . h) Two branches of the same State, regarding the constitutionality of their acts or general provisions; . . . k) two Federal District governmental bodies regarding the constitutionality of their acts or general norms.”

<sup>34</sup> Cf. P./J. 11/2001, *SJFG*, volume XIV, September 2001, p. 1098.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. P./J. 74/97, *SJFG*, volume VI, September 1997, p. 548.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. P./J. 71/2006, p. 1377, *SJFG*, volume XXIII, May 2006, p. 1377.

Spain) allow certain retroactive effects (*ex tunc*) in their constitutionality rulings. This means that the typical rights-creating decisions (which imply invalidity of the norm) inherent to decisions of unconstitutionality of general provision are substituted for in some instances by declaratory decisions (nullification), which imply granting retroactive effects. This also occurs in the North American system, in which rulings exceptionally may have future effects, as occurs with the decisions issued by the Supreme Court of the United States from the second half of the past century in determined cases.

### 3. *Legislative Omissions*

Another topic that warrants comment is legislative omissions. At the federal level, there does not exist any specific cause of action to challenge legislative omissions; therefore, the challenges are channeled through three existing constitutional control mechanisms. The jurisprudential criterion in effect is that the remedies of amparo proceedings<sup>37</sup> and the abstract unconstitutionality cause of action<sup>38</sup> are inappropriate to challenge this type of unconstitutionality. Nevertheless, the constitutional controversy has been jurisprudentially accepted as means to challenge legislative omissions.<sup>39</sup> Using as a point of departure the premise that legislative bodies have powers or authority that may either be facultative or obligatory in keeping with the principle of the functional division of the branches of government,<sup>40</sup> four distinct types of legislative omissions have been differentiated: (1) absolute in jurisdiction that must be exercised obligatorily, when the legislative body has the obligation or mandate to issue a determined law and has not done so; (2) relative to jurisdiction that must be exercised obligatorily when the legislative body has the obligation or mandate to issue a determined law but does so incompletely or deficiently; (3) absolute in jurisdiction that may be exercised at will when the legislative body decides not to act because it does not have any mandate or obligation imposed on it; and (4) relative in legislative jurisdiction, but when it issues the law, it does so incompletely or deficiently.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Cf. P. CLXVIII/97SJFG, volume VI, December 1997, p. 180.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. P./J. 16/2002 and P./J. 23/2005, SJFG, volume XV, March 2002, p. 995; and SJFG, volume XXI, May 2005, p. 781.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. P./J. 82/99, SJFG, volume X, August 1999, p. 568.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. P./J. 10/2006, SJFG, volume XXIII, February 2005, p. 1528.

<sup>41</sup> P./J. 11/2005, SJFG, volume XXIII, February 2006, p. 1527.

This concept rests on the comparative law trend accepting challenges to the unconstitutionality of legislative omissions as either relative or absolute in nature.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, this criterion was modified beginning with the constitutional controversies resolved on October 15, 2007,<sup>43</sup> related to the challenge to the federal legislature's failure to issue the norms establishing the legal conditions so that indigenous towns and communities may purchase, operate, and manage communications media. A majority of five votes against four determined the inappropriateness of a constitutional controversy to challenge legislative omissions.

Without prejudice to the foregoing, recently the Plenary Supreme Court declared a legal basis for the constitutional controversy filed against the legislative omission of the State Congress of Jalisco. The controversy consisted of challenging the lack of regulation for voluntary retirement of the State Supreme Court of Justice Magistrates, and as a consequence of the preceding, it was decided that the Jalisco state legislature would legislate in the following ordinary congressional session period to correct the noted defect.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a decision was issued in a different controversy on a closely related topic, declaring its appropriateness, as we shall see here.

The previous comments show that the SC has had to preside over diverse proceedings in which legislative omissions were challenged, without following a uniform jurisprudential line in this regard. Furthermore, it should be said in analyzing these matters that some of the SC's members have doubted precisely whether the High Court has sufficient powers to resolve these matters, so as to exhort the legislator to act and even to issue guidelines to the legislative bodies. These vacillations make evident that there exist specific subject matters and areas in which the SC has not fully exercised its role of Constitutional Court and where it has been overly cautious, precisely by not transforming itself into a positive legislator. Notwithstanding the preceding, there are voices inside the Court that opine otherwise.

In effect, on April 22, 2010, the Supreme Court resolved constitutional controversy 25/2008, which alleged lack of retirement regulation, provided for by article 61 of the Political Constitution of Jalisco, in favor of the magistrates and judges who were forced to retire or did so voluntarily. With a six-vote majority, it declared that a legal basis existed for the allegations and the state congress was granted a term to issue the corresponding norm.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. P./J. 12/2006, 13/2006 and 14/2006, *SJFG*, volume XXIII, February 2006, pp. 1532, 1365 and 1250, respectively.

<sup>43</sup> Constitutional Controversy 59/2006 and other forty-four controversies with identical themes.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. decision made May 10, 2010, issued in Constitutional Controversy 49/2008.

The minority considered that the rights of retiring judges and magistrates should be protected during the time that the legislative omission persisted, and to this end, the minority based its considerations precisely on the possibility that the SC acting as a Constitutional Court should adopt a more protective solution, and as such it held:

From this perspective, it seems to us that within the effects possible for this Supreme Court to establish in its ruling when it observes that a legislative omission produces unconstitutionality, is the possibility of making applicable, within the scope of a determined federal entity, a different legislation – existing or repealed, federal or from any other state – temporarily, until the state legislature remedies the respective omission, if the preceding is necessary to reestablish the infringed constitutional order and avoid consummation of the consequences of the violation.

All constitutional courts have a law-creating function, acting at the constitutional level, above federal and state ordinances, so that derived from article 41 of the regulatory law, it is possible for this Supreme Court to reconstruct through judicial decisions portions of the legal order.

This may be done by establishing guidelines that must be obeyed by judicial officials in the absence of legislation remedying the unconstitutional omission or, whenever it is more convenient, by remitting to other legal ordinances, including those that have been repealed or that belong to other partial ordinances. However, the preceding does not imply substituting the legislative function, since it is a transitional measure that, for the purpose of giving full effect to a favorable decision, fills a vacuum by applying a valid alternative, subject to the legislature's acting in full use of its power, only being limited by the text of the Constitution.

The preceding does not presuppose invading the sphere of the state legislator because the constitutional court does not operate at the federal level but instead at the constitutional, total or national level, which empowers it to act, on the terms of the selfsame article 41 of the regulatory law “in its corresponding scope,” so as to ensure the effects of its rulings.<sup>45</sup>

The preceding makes patent that at least four Justices are convinced that the SC act as more than a simple negative legislator, adopting such measures as those proposed. Although it is still a minority position, it does indicate the level of deliberation present in the Highest Mexican Court.

<sup>45</sup> Concurring votes formulated by Justices Arturo Zaldívar Lelo de Larrea, Olga María Sánchez Cordero de García Villegas, José Ramón Cossío Díaz, and Guillermo I. Ortiz Mayagoitia in the decision issued by the Plenary Court in Constitutional Controversy 25/2008, presented by the Judicial Branch of the State of Jalisco.

## CONCLUSIONS

(1) The SC, as the limiting body of the Federal Judicial Branch, is based on a solid historical background; however, since February 5, 1857, it started to have constitutional control powers, specifically amparo proceedings, which began profiling its new role.

(2) The SC has ceased being only an appeals court to materially become a constitutional court. This has been the trend observed through various constitutional reforms, in which the intention of the constitutional congress has been expressed, particularly in the relevant 1994 constitutional reforms.

(3) The constitutional court nature of the SC is observed both in its organic structure and in the fact that it has powers over amparo proceedings, and it concentrates two constitutional rights, the abstract unconstitutionality cause of action (against general norms) and constitutional controversies, in which the SC may declare norms invalid, with future *erga omnes* effects.

(4) The accurate exercise of the aforementioned powers has positioned the SC as the body that guarantees the rule of the Constitution in our country, which, given the increasingly complex and demanding nature of conflicts brought under its jurisdiction, has had to use the techniques and tools of other Constitutional Courts in comparative law, such as interpretation according to the Constitution, weighing, new constitutional pleading trends, and of course the modalities and effects of its resolution, which are increasingly complex.

(5) Constitutional decisions issued in amparo proceedings have traditionally been effectively limited to the petitioner. However, jurisdictional practice reflects an expansive strength derived from jurisprudence declaring a law unconstitutional, which has mainly arisen by upholding the following criteria:

(a) The obligatory nature of jurisprudence application not only by all jurisdictional bodies under the Federal Judicial Branch but also by the Federal Court of Tax and Administrative Justice, which, though constituted as a formally administrative body, performs materially jurisdictional duties.

(b) The obligation of administrative authorities to comply with the decisions issued by the Federal Court of Tax and Administrative Justice, which pronounce the nullification of a resolution or an act challenged on the basis of the jurisprudence that determines that the law on which said resolution or act is unconstitutional.

(c) The amendment of defects in the complaint if dealing with the second or subsequent application acts under the law that was jurisprudentially declared unconstitutional. The latter does not imply evading questions of the inappropriateness of amparo proceedings but only

preventing that procedural technical issues hinder the rule of the higher constitutional order.

(d) The formulation of thematic jurisprudence applicable to analogous cases even when the specific circumstances of the norms or cases analyzed vary, which exclusively binds judges and court, pertaining to the Federal Judicial Branch, not those courts under a separate Branch, as the jurisprudence cannot grant them the constitutional control jurisdiction that they lack.

(6) Contrary to amparo proceedings, the decisions issued in unconstitutionality causes of action and constitutional controversies may have general, or *erga omnes*, effects in the predicates established in the Constitution and its regulatory law, provided that a supramajority of eight votes (of eleven) exists, as mandated by the Constitution. Furthermore, the SC has broad powers to determine the effects and other conditions of enforceability for the favorable decisions that it issues.

(7) In using the previously mentioned powers, the SC has extended the effects of the declaration of invalidity to other norms for which validity depends on the very norm invalidated, given the interdependency existing between the norms; likewise, it has extended the declaration of invalidity to all of the challenged normative system, as it deems that an integrated and indissolubly normative system has been composed; when this has occurred, it has even decreed the revival of the norms in force prior to those that were declared invalid.

(8) Another relevant aspect of the decisions issued in unconstitutionality causes of action and constitutional controversies consists of the jurisprudentially binding nature of the *ratio decidendi*, that is, the reasoning contained in the grounds that form the basis of the grounds for the decision, if these are approved by at least eight of the eleven justices of the SC. This binding effect includes favorable and unfavorable decisions that meet the aforementioned supramajority voting requirement.

(9) The prior examples confirm the SC's increasing activity as a constitutional court, conscious of its law-creating function.

(10) Contrary to the SC trend observed in unconstitutionality causes of action and constitutional controversies, and even in amparo proceedings, broadening the scope of application, modalities, and effects of its rulings, in the subject area of legislative omission, it has been doubtful and inconsistent. Here, I have observed changes in criterion and vacillations regarding the scope of the Supreme Court's powers; however, this has not been an impediment to issuance of important opinions related to the progressive and constitutional nature of the Highest Court.

