

Towards Democracy in Mexico?

by Jonathan Fox

To the surprise of most observers, Latin America's democratizing wave is sweeping across Mexico. The Institutional Revolutionary Party has withstood challenges before. Will this time be different?

On July 16, 1988, in Mexico's largest opposition electoral mobilization ever, more than a quarter of a million citizens protested the government's crude efforts to manufacture a sliver of an electoral majority. An outsider might have expected to find rage, with overtones of violence. Indeed, the moment of silence in memory of the election-eve murder of candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas's top antifraud expert cast a dark shadow over the crowd. But the general mood was far more festive than angry. Owners of jewelry stores facing the overflowing plaza did not even shutter their doors. Cheery marchers flowed in "self-organized order," as opposition strategist Adolfo Gilly put it, avoiding the rigid contingents of official and opposition street traditions.

For the first time, the result of Mexico's presidential election was not a foregone conclusion. People believed that their votes mattered. The candidate of the new center-left coalition probably would have received the most votes in a free and fair contest (including equal media access), though it is possible that the official candidate came in with a plurality. We may never know the "true" figures. Fear of less than

total control led the government to resort to the "perfecting of the popular will," as commentator Carlos Monsiváis quipped.

Last summer marked a turning point in Mexico's political transition. Divisions in Mexico's governing elite created opportunities for ordinary people to influence events to an unusual degree. Hundreds of thousands of citizens, many already democratically organized at the community level, participated actively in electoral politics for the first time, catching analysts completely by surprise. Mexican politics will never be the same.

The Opposition Emerges

Since the 1930s, when President Lázaro Cárdenas incorporated the masses into the fledgling official party, the Mexican regime's leadership has continually frustrated periodic foreign predictions of its imminent collapse. The 1988 election, by undermining the legitimacy of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), thrust the regime into an uncertain transition from one-party dominance to a fluid new multiparty system.

The story of the 1988 election began at least 20 years ago. Peaceful student protests during the summer of 1968 were followed by the army's massacre of untold hundreds on October 2. By the mid-1970s a wide range of social groups had followed

the students' lead, charting new paths towards autonomy from PRI's top-down controls and calling for the government to put its rhetoric of social justice and democracy into practice. Peasants and slumdweller began bypassing their official representatives, business leaders began forming their own organizations, and workers continued pressing for trade-union democracy. These emerging grassroots movements, which expressed a new sense of citizenship, became one of the driving forces of today's electoral opposition.

The regime's credibility was briefly revived by a limited electoral reform, combined with the oil- and debt-driven 1978-82 economic boom. Interest groups contended for pieces of a rapidly growing pie. Then oil prices fell, interest rates shot up, and capital flight spiraled out of control. The government responded with the halfhearted 1982 bank nationalization that discouraged private investment without providing an alternative to replace it.

After six years of policies to attract private investment, the economy remains in crisis. As long as debt payments preclude recovery, no improvement is in sight for the majority of Mexicans, whose real income has fallen by more than 50 percent since 1982. Their resulting dissatisfaction is exacerbated by government budget cuts that have sharply reduced the regime's long-

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standing capacity to divide and conquer dissent with selective economic concessions.

The 1988 election surprise was clearly driven by unending austerity. But poverty alone does not explain the nature of dissent, nor where and how it is expressed. After all, Mexico has not experienced classic food riots, the burning of buses, or the mass pillaging of supermarkets seen, for example, in the Dominican Republic and Brazil. Even after the opposition exhausted the limited legal recourses to protest fraud, Cárdenas's firm moderation prevented his followers from resorting to violence.

Electoral Competition: What Happened?

Cárdenas's National Democratic Front (FDN) won Mexico City, home to about one-fourth of the country's population. His electoral victory was linked to the 1985 earthquake, which provoked a spontaneous, self-help mobilization of hundreds of thousands of metropolitan residents. This left an indelible mark on city politics, as democratic, grassroots organizing bypassed official agencies and opposition parties. Since the government later made significant concessions to the mobilized earthquake victims, people saw that their collective action could make a difference. Impatience with official austerity and authoritarianism deepened the following year. A broad new democratic student movement began at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. And thousands of citizens expressed unheard-of public defiance when they booed and cursed President Miguel de la Madrid at the inauguration of the 1986 World Cup.

Some Cárdenas voters wanted to reject the official candidate or to renew PRI's commitment to reformism and nationalism. Others wanted to democratize the internal workings of PRI, as Cárdenas's dissident Democratic Current emphasized in 1987, before being expelled and forced into the opposition. But

many FDN votes were also in favor of an effective electoral opening. We still do not know which attitudes best explain the wave of support for Cárdenas: dissatisfaction with economic policies or the quest for democratic government. Because exit polls were banned, only the future evolution of the opposition will tell.

Cárdenas's support from moderate voters and disaffected PRI bureaucrats was greatly reinforced by the fact that he was a mainstream figure from within PRI and not a radical outsider. Because of rigid electoral procedures, most of the democratic urge was expressed through votes for pro-Cárdenas parties that, until recently, were mere shells—small, often corrupt and authoritarian electoral machines, sponsored by the government. The candidate of the new, independent Mexican Socialist Party (PMS) withdrew late in the race, throwing his support to Cárdenas.

No presidential candidate is likely to have received more than a slim plurality of votes. The official returns gave PRI 50.7 percent of the vote. FDN was awarded 31 percent and the conservative National Action Party (PAN) totaled 17 percent of the official count. But FDN's analysis of available election data indicated that PRI received only 36 percent, leaving PAN with 23 percent of the vote and FDN with a 42 percent victory.

Neither FDN nor the official totals are definitive, however, because only slightly more than half of the ballots—54 percent—were made available for public scrutiny. These ballots showed Cárdenas leading Salinas by a five-point margin: 39 percent to 34 percent. The government claims that the 46 percent of the ballots that were not made public provided an overwhelming majority—67 percent for Salinas to 20 percent for Cárdenas—and determined the outcome of the election. It is doubtful Salinas's actual share of the unexamined ballots would have been sufficient to swing a majority.

Most of the questionable ballots

were cast in rural precincts, where ballot security is more difficult to assure than in cities. Political bosses were able to manipulate more rural than urban votes because of the rural opposition's restricted access to media and limited poll-watching presence and experience.

Salinas effectively competed for organized peasant support in some regions, proposing creative policies and treating peasants as citizens. But austerity and Mexico's heritage of agrarian reform still led significant rural areas to vote for Cárdenas. It was difficult, however, for the opposition to penetrate those rural areas, such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz, where there is little freedom of assembly and association. In cacique-dominated Pinotepa, Oaxaca, for example, Cárdenas's campaign stop was the first public-opposition assembly in memory.

A widely-accepted official result is that only 52 percent of the registered electorate voted at all (probably a massive increase over past elections, when participation rates were seriously inflated). Taking the unregistered and annulled votes into account, 57 percent of the potential electorate did not vote. In many areas suspected of opposition sympathies, large numbers of voters were reportedly purged in advance from the rolls. Many voters were also apparently added to the rolls where opposition oversight was lacking. Official figures claimed that only 13 percent of the electorate were not on the rolls. But, according to Gallup's reputable pre-election poll of nearly 3,000 citizens, 24 percent were unregistered. The gap indicates room for manipulation of election results that may have been much more important than the often reported stuffing and destruction of ballot boxes.

After the election, attention shifted to the congress, which is constitutionally mandated to ratify the results. PRI held a small but sufficient majority of seats. Lack of unity around legislative candidates cost the FDN coalition at least 50

congressional seats. Thus tensions emerged within FDN between those affiliated with political parties (a minority) and those unaffiliated (a majority).

Since July several state and local elections have shown that both right and center-left opposition parties generally lack effective grassroots structures. Nevertheless, when analyzing the combination of PRI sweeps and the extremely low turnout rates in these races, continuing fraud and media monopolies must not be underestimated.

Opposition Dilemmas

Three challenges await the *Cardenista* movement. The first challenge is to build on Cárdenas's mass support without provoking repression. The base for mobilizing to overturn the official victory was limited, given the degree of abstention, the lack of unity between left and right opposition, and Mexicans' long memories of past official repression. Cárdenas's initial victory claim, lacking public proof, briefly boxed him into a political dead end. But he modified his stance to stress the need for official review of the contested election results—an equally unwinnable but more politically sustainable demand. The opposition coalition's decision not to pursue civil disobedience in defense of its claim to the presidency helped avoid unpredictable results. In Mexico the difference between limited civil disobedience and open rebellion is not always clearly defined, either by participants or security forces. By exercising caution, FDN seems to have avoided causing an official backlash.

The second challenge is to develop creative strategies that encourage grassroots participation. Having exhausted the legal channels for challenging the election results, Cárdenas directed his political energies into the construction of the new Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD). PRD becomes the fifth member of the FDN coalition, uniting former *Priistas* from the Democratic

Current with a wide range of liberals, nationalists, and socialists. Given the choice within FDN between the combination of government-spawned parties and the socialist PMS, it is not surprising that Democratic Current chose to express its own identity. The challenge, however, is to build a party that does better than other parties in reaching the grassroots movements and the unorganized populace. If the leadership builds yet another conventional party, then it will turn away many of the citizens who last summer were talking politics for the first time.

The third challenge is to demonstrate that the opposition can actually govern. Cárdenas proved an effective governor in the past, but as a man of the system rather than as an opponent. Will Salinas break the ice and be the first president to allow victorious opposition candidates to become governors? The opposition needs to demonstrate that it can win overwhelmingly, probably in a state not considered "strategic." If elected, the *Cardenistas* need to make the difficult transition from an opposition movement to an effective governing coalition. Clearly the *Cardenistas* are seeking power within the system. The question remains: what would they do with that power if they attained it?

Are Democratization and Political Stability Compatible?

Some insiders contend PRI's manipulation of the rolls and its election-day irregularities were insufficient, leading the party to snatch victory by means of a massive, last-minute computer intervention. Two contending positions seem to have emerged as the returns came in: the "traditional" hard-line faction in favor of a clearly-exaggerated majority vote versus the technocratic "modernizing" faction, which might have accepted a clear plurality. The technocrats, forced to rely on the "dinosaurs" (such as the union bosses) to win, were too weak to rec-

ognize an official less-than-majority win even if they had wanted to. In this scenario the official sliver of a majority probably represented a precarious compromise.

The night the Federal Election Commission's computers "went down," the outgoing government of De la Madrid clearly chose stability over democracy. How will the Salinas team confront this choice in the future? In light of their electoral compromise, the difference between PRI's "modernizers" and "dinosaurs" has blurred significantly. Both factions defend heavy state intervention in social and political life and are moderately nationalist in foreign policy. What distinguishes the modernizers is their free-market inclination and their greater tolerance for political dissidents.

Manuel Camacho, for example, Salinas's principal ideologue and an oft-mentioned 1994 presidential prospect, honed his modern-style bargaining skills with the post-earthquake protest movements. This effort is widely considered a "positive-sum" success—most participants won something. Both Camacho and Salinas had raised hopes that the 1988 electoral process would be cleaner than in the past. In the cities it probably was, because of unprecedented citizen vigilance of an estimated 80-90 percent of the polls. The course of the state and local elections since July has not raised hopes of an electoral opening in the near future.

Salinas's December 1 inaugural speech, though short on specifics, reiterated his public commitment to dialogue, electoral democratization, and social reform. Those who hoped for the success of the reformists on the Salinas team consider his secretarial appointments to be transitional. Optimistic reformists recall that several past presidents chose to dramatically shift directions in the course of their terms. Camacho, initially expected to be named secretary of the interior, the key ministry of police and politics, ended up with the thankless job of running the Federal District. Instead, hard-liner

Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios captured the Interior Ministry. Gutiérrez Barrios previously ran Interior's feared political police, and he is widely believed to have something on everyone.

Salinas's inauguration was marked by an unusually elaborate military parade and the presence of eight foreign heads of state, ranging from José Napoleón Duarte to Fidel Castro. Apparently the military did not play an active role in the electoral process, wanting to avoid tarnishing its political image. Throughout his campaign, Cárdenas, the son of a general, addressed himself respectfully to the military, winning some rank-and-file votes.

What does the rise of national opposition mean for the future prospects of governance in Mexico? Not surprisingly, the breadth and intensity of last summer's opposition mobilization proved impossible to sustain. Like the 1985 post-earthquake upsurge, some of the freshly-politicized sectors will find channels for sustaining their activity. But many will not, waiting for future opportunities to become political contenders.

Right-wing and left-wing electoral mobilization has ebbed. Yet democratic social movements that predated the election and grew dramatically during the contest have endured as major players. Mobilized peasant grain producers have recently put on the national agenda the terms of trade between agriculture and industry, contending that crop-support prices are as important as the minimum wage. Urban community movements continue to press for more equitable and efficient service delivery.

Organized labor remains a wild card. As workers reel from unemployment, trade unionists await the passing of long-time boss and archetypal PRI-dinosaur Fidel Velásquez to speed the transition to new collective-bargaining arrangements. We cannot assume that Salinas will extend his longstanding personal and political battle with the leader-

ship of the Oil Workers' Union to other union bosses. Salinas's honeymoon with big business has continued, since the rise of a center-left opposition put a damper on its previous flirtation with the right-wing PAN. Whether the private sector's support will translate into renewed domestic investment remains to be seen.

The official PAN vote of 17 percent was far below the expectations of the right wing on both sides of the border. PAN has since been divided between defense of democracy and opposition to Cárdenas. Its leaders claimed the unprecedented FDN senatorial victories in the Federal District were fraudulent. PAN's presidential candidate, Manuel "Maquío" Clouthier, called for the annulment of the entire electoral process, in sharp contrast to Cárdenas's attempt to separate clean from fraudulent results. Salinas has recognized the Church as a legitimate political actor, a striking change in Mexican affairs. The pro-Church PAN began a rapprochement with the Salinas administration. A sign of improved relations is that, in a departure from its usual practice, PAN accepted federal-election support funds.

In any scenario increased congressional opposition will tend to check presidential power. PRI won 52 percent of the seats in the lower house—by far its lowest proportion ever—and the 1990 congressional elections are likely to provoke a new round of opposition initiatives. PRI will now have to form coalitions to pass constitutional amendments, though the opposition's disunity will facilitate PRI's maneuvering. The government's first small concession to "home rule" in the Federal District, the newly-created representative assembly, is likely to outgrow its intended limits and become a further opposition counterweight during the Salinas years.

Towards a "Historic Compromise"?

Salinas may be Mexico's weakest

president in decades. Yet his history has shown him to be stronger than he first appears. His surprise move against the mafia of the Oil Workers' Union reminded observers of a key element of the current situation: opposition inside and outside the government remains divided.

Many of the leaders of the grassroots movements that drive the *Cardenista* opposition—slumdweller, trade unionists, peasants, and teachers—were shaped by the student protests and massacre of 1968. So, too, were the *Salinistas*. But the "bottom-up" vision of the *Cardenistas* contrasts with the "top-down" vision of the *Salinistas*. According to the latter, Mexico's stability depends on the commitment to "modernization" from above—opening the system up within limits and backing off when the pressure from the traditional political establishment becomes too great. Both contenders have years of experience sizing up one another. And each has become increasingly skilled (and even respectful) in bargaining with the other. Mexico's democratization depends in large measure on the capacity of the two groups to develop and sustain new rules of the game.

Rapid and radical political change is not on Mexico's agenda. Yet, after July's opposition upsurge, Mexico faces a choice between more democracy or more authoritarianism. The old system has eroded beyond repair. A new one, however, is not yet ready to take its place. To continue a relatively stable transition to more democratic rule, Mexico needs a "historic compromise." Such a compromise would not be an alliance, but a flexible agreement among the contenders regarding the boundaries for political bargaining. Reformist policymakers must choose between their alliance with the "dinosaurs" and an opening towards the grassroots movements that are inside and outside the official sectors. Conflict is inherent in both choices, but one alone holds the potential for long-run political renewal. ■