

# Lázaro Cárdenas and the 1988 election

*Catalina Metzler analyzes the background to this year's presidential campaign in Mexico, in which the international banks must contend with a vivid memory of Mexico's nationalist moment of 50 years ago.*

Of the three great moments that have shaped the Mexican nation—Independence, the Juárez period, and the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas as the culmination of the 1910 Revolution—there is no doubt that it is the last which promises to have the greatest impact on the generations of Mexicans who will choose a new President next July 6.

Today's Mexicans were either themselves protagonists in 1938, in those heroic days of the oil expropriation and the national solidarity movement triggered by the reprisals of the expropriated oil companies, or were indelibly marked in their childhood and youth by those historic moments. The youngest generation, which will vote in July for the first time, has grown up hearing the reverent and emotion-laden memories of parents and grandparents, again and again.

Thus, the abandonment of the ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) by engineer Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano (the son of Gen. Lázaro Cárdenas), and his nomination as presidential candidate by a coalition of opposition parties and forces, is the single most dramatic development of recent Mexican political history. Since 1952, there has not been one serious political split in the Mexican political system. The lurching back and forth between the formidable nationalist impulse bequeathed by General Cárdenas, and the counterrevolution organized from the presidencies of Manuel Avila Camacho (1940-46) and, especially, of Miguel Alemán (1946-52), have heretofore proven no obstacle to the unity of the "revolutionary family" under the PRI umbrella, despite the perpetual efforts of the different factions to trip each other up.

But the PRI's thesis of "unity in the essentials" has not been able to resist the crisis posed by the Miguel de la Madrid presidency. This is not solely because in the eyes of growing numbers of PRI members and government officials, the revolutionary "essentials" of the PRI have been turned into a laughingstock. "For the last five years we have been experiencing the systematic destruction and weakening of the Revolution," charged Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas on March 5, before a gathering of more than 2,000 students from the National Polytechnic Institute, founded by his father.

The previous day, speaking to the combative Guadalajara Federation of Students, Cárdenas had said: "If of other governments one could speak of abandonment, neglect, or failure to identify with certain aspects of revolutionary development, of this government one can assert that the destruction

and dismantling of the revolution has been intentional, systematic, and consistent." And on March 20, speaking in Ciudad Juárez, which borders the state of Texas, Cárdenas revealed his thinking on the implications of U.S. aggression against Panama: "The current Mexican government is undermining all those national institutions which could be our defense in moments of difficulty."

## The snowball effect

The campaign of young Cárdenas has surpassed all expectations. Political experts who had argued that only a handful of nostalgic peasants would respond to the Cárdenas campaign have had to toss their sociology texts into the trashcan. The grain of truth in their miscalculations is that the emotion is certainly there. In February, when citizens of La Comarca Lagunera—the pioneer land-distribution region under Lázaro Cárdenas in 1937—turned out in force to receive the general's son and to reject official candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari, someone commented that the general was campaigning for his son.

The Mexican presidential election year of 1988 also marks the 50th anniversary of the oil expropriation, decreed by Lázaro Cárdenas. It is also the 50th anniversary of the historic land distributions to the dispossessed peasantry; the creation of the powerful industrial unions; the creation of the Federal Electricity Commission; the conception of the massive steel project of Las Truchas; and the founding of the National Polytechnic Institute and other institutions which "emanated from the Revolution." How, then, can one fight against the memory of "Father Lázaro," as the poorest Mexican Indians called their beloved general? How, then, to destroy the belief that one can *and should* resist foreign pressures?

The current technocratic government spent five full years campaigning against "populism," with the result that the son of modern Mexico's most "populist" and beloved President is now the candidate of the opposition!

It should surprise no one that the official PRI candidate has committed a few disastrous slip-ups. Stunned by the massive rebuff he met with at La Comarca Lagunera, which was universally dubbed the PRI's Waterloo, Salinas de Gortari warned Feb. 18 at a campaign stop in Necaxa: ". . . those old alliances which previously supported us and now make pacts against the party will have to face up to the consequences of their actions. Such is politics."

President Lázaro Cárdenas in 1938 at the National Palace, receiving the oil workers' unconditional support for his expropriation of the petroleum resources of Mexico.



This public threat of revenge, unprecedented from the mouth of a Mexican politician, much less a projected winner, was aimed at the three parties which together with Cárdenas's Democratic Current that split out of the PRI, make up the National Democratic Front (FDN), the sponsor of the Cárdenas candidacy. In fact, for the first time ever, the official PRI presidential candidate is not being supported by the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM), nor by the Popular Socialist Party (PPS), two small political parties traditionally accused of being "satellites" of the PRI. A third party, the Socialist Workers' Party, which has de facto functioned as the "left wing" of the PRI, is also now a part of the FDN.

The PARM originated in a revolutionary group within the military which opposed the traitorous policies of the Miguel Alemán presidency, and which left the PRI back in 1957. The soldier/founders grew old, however, and the PARM languished, until losing its official party registration in 1982. However, in 1984, with the underground support of the PRI itself, the PARM recovered its right to participate in elections. Small, made up of certain military layers, and elements of the middle and working classes of certain limited regions of the country, the PARM now speaks of "a new era" of independence from the government. A poster sums up its outlook: "In the PARM, neither communist, nor capitalist, nor PRIist. We are nationalists."

It was with this small party, running second to last in 1985 elections and discredited among the so-called intellectual elites of Mexico, that Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas joined forces upon deserting the PRI, thereby triggering hysteria among the various grouplets on the left. In fact, not a day goes by that the national press does not report on one or another schism in, or split from, the leftist parties in favor of the

FDN. Cárdenas's link-up to the PARM is significant since, as he himself points out, his father never actually belonged to the PRI (created later), but to the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM), from which the PARM takes its name. Even more significant, Cárdenas, by choosing to affiliate with the PARM, has determined that the current program of the Mexican revolution *is not socialism*.

As for the economic program of the ruling PRI, when the revolutionary rhetoric is stripped away, it is revealed to be strikingly like the demands of the other opposition party, the National Action Party (PAN) which surfaced in 1939 as an explicit counter to the Cardenista movement. The PAN has been chosen by the secret government of the United States, known as *Project Democracy*, to play the same role that the Civil Crusade is playing in Panama. In five years of government, President Miguel de la Madrid has done more to promote the PAN program than that party itself had done in 49 years of existence.

For example, the PAN demands re-privatization of the banks: The de la Madrid government has responded by ceding 34% of bank stocks to "the public," which is none other than the bankers expropriated in 1982. Thus, the financial oligarchy has been allowed to recapture the stock exchanges, creating a parallel banking structure and taking over the government's internal debt. Or, take another PAN demand: to "reduce public costs and the size of the state sector." The De la Madrid government has put on sale state companies that are strategically key to the economy, such as the capital-goods industry developed during the oil boom, the major mining companies, the national airlines, even branches of the basic petrochemical sector which, according to the Constitution, can only be run by the government.

The current government also approved Mexico's en-

trance into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and the opening up of dollar accounts, with their inevitable sequel of drug money-laundering. In foreign policy, for the most part Mexico has functioned as the "strike-breaker" against Ibero-American attempts to unify against the usurious creditor community.

It is "the systematic destruction of institutions born of the Revolution," and the economic misery that prevails in Mexico, which make up the dry tinder that has ignited the movement around the son of "Father Lázaro."

### The split within the PRI

The schisms within the PRI are many and deep. It is not only the apparent "satellites"—the PPS, PARM, and PST—which have broken loose. Starting in 1986, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas organized within the PRI's ranks the dissident Democratic Current, which includes: Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, former PRI national chairman, former labor minister, and ambassador (close to the European Social Democracy); renowned economist Carlos Tello, central figure in the 1982 bank nationalization; and Ifigenia Martínez. These and other prominent PRI leaders have organized around two key demands: repudiation of the current regime's economic policies, and demands for new methods of selecting PRI candidates, given the party's loss of credibility, so manifest in soaring abstentionism and systematic electoral fraud.

On Oct. 1, 1986, the Democratic Current signed its first document: "We are moved by the demands of a society that manifests signs of desperation, panic at the accelerated bloodletting represented by the burden of the foreign debt. . . . We are alarmed by the progressive foreign dependency, the

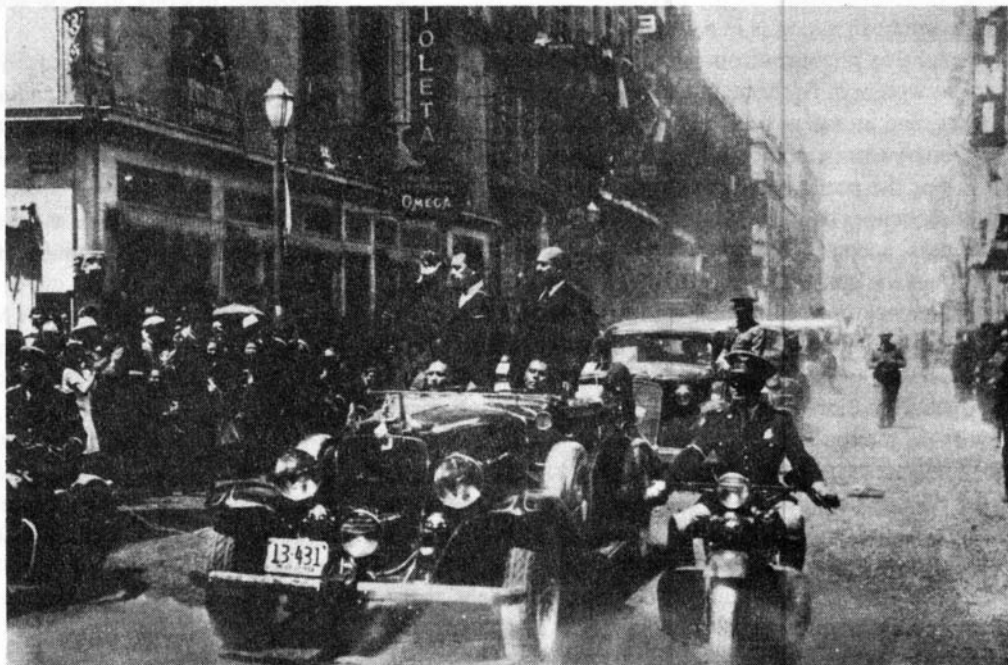
trend toward the dismantling of industrial plant, the denationalization of the economy and the decapitalization of the country, as well as the exorbitant interest rates that suffocate the public treasury, concentrate wealth, and discourage the productive impulse in favor of speculation. . . .

"The high rates of abstention from the electoral process, and the waning political credibility, encouraged by the siege of conservative forces and by foreign interference, are serious."

The PRI's nomination of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the former budget and planning minister known as the architect of the current regime's economic policy, convinced the majority of the Democratic Current of the necessity of finally leaving the PRI.

Many PRI contingents have joined the Cárdenas campaign. Famous is the story of La Comarca Lagunera, when at one moment during the rally 50,000 peasants pledged to abandon the PRI en masse. Label-loving sociologists are in a tizzy over the FDN campaign's recruitment patterns: besides the flaking away of members of the PRI and of the left, the "ultra-right" Mexican Democratic Party has lost chunks of its membership to the Front. At the local level, even the PAN has suffered defections of leaders and candidates to the ranks of Cardenism.

The Cárdenas candidacy has demonstrated the potential to serve as catalyst for a movement that can rescue the Mexican nation. In fact, it has already begun to function as a counterweight to official policy. During the March 18 mass meeting that the FDN held in celebration of the oil expropriation, Cuauhtémoc was the first registered presidential candidate to publicly defend Panama. From the renowned po-



*President Lázaro Cárdenas (waving) leads parade to the 1938 Independence Day celebrations in Mexico City. That year's expropriation of the oil fields and other nationalist actions, are still powerfully in the minds of Mexican voters in 1988.*

dium in the Zócalo square in Mexico City, Cárdenas declared: "Against this country [Panama], the United States has revived the policy of the big stick that was practiced at the beginning of the century, directly intervening in the affairs of the Latin American people. This is being done to avoid compliance with the Torrijos-Carter treaties."

The next day, for the first time, President Miguel de la Madrid explicitly defended Panama.

### Not all roses

Not everything is coming up roses for the FDN. It has been joined by numerous popular organizations, but also by paper organizations whose postulates contradict those of the member parties of the FDN. Such is the case, for example, of the tiny Green Party which, taking advantage of candidate Cárdenas's lack of sympathy for nuclear energy, has sought to turn the FDN into a platform for its ecologist diatribes. Also found within the FDN are organizations such as the Social Democratic Party, with its explicitly malthusian and anti-nuclear principles and its sympathies for the "democratic experiments" of the U.S. State Department in the Philippines and elsewhere.

In fact, a supposed Democratic Assembly for Effective Suffrage has been formed, in which one can find bunched together members of the Democratic Current, individuals affiliated with the FDN, and prominent promoters of the Philippinization of Mexico, such as PANista Norberto Corrella. The idea behind this alleged Democratic Assembly, is to form a front of all the opposition to "defend the vote"—sweet music to the U.S. State Department and its Russian co-thinkers. It is clear, however, that the idea does not please everyone. In fact, the meetings of the Assembly have not been attended by leaders of the three registered political parties which make up the FDN.

That vote fraud is a real danger, however, was expressed by Cárdenas himself, when he warned that an effort to perpetrate massive fraud "could unleash foreign intervention, as in the case of the Philippines and Haiti."

Strange bedfellows notwithstanding, it is becoming increasingly clear that the dynamic of the movement behind young Cárdenas exceeds its own members. The people of Mexico want a change, and it is not the change sought by the U.S. State Department. The question is, will Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas answer the challenge?

## Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas: Suspend debt payments!

*Excerpts from the platform of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas:*

The Mexican nation is in a crucial moment of its history, harassed by pressures from abroad, exhausted by the enormous weight of its debts, injustices, and unresolved problems, and in urgent need of a great democratic and revolutionary reconstruction effort.

For the past five years, the country has suffered the consequences of grave deviations from the revolutionary process, accompanied by the governing class's abandonment of the constitutional design and by growing foreign dependency in fundamental aspects of national life. The people have been brutally impoverished, and many individual and social rights have been trampled for the sake of subordination to imperialism and to agreements made with the international financial centers.

We are being turned into a tributary country. Through the wicked exploitation of human labor and the deterioration of the population's living conditions, resources are piled up to be transferred abroad.

The stubborn servicing of an unpayable debt at the cost of economic growth and people's well-being has

caused Mexican workers to lose more than half of their buying power during the past five years. . . . We have been chained to an endless series of refinancings to pay interest on existing debts. By this path, the country has been turned into a net capital exporter. . . .

We must substantially change our international economic relations, suspending and adjusting debt payments and reestablishing our sovereign control over economic processes in order to begin rebuilding the country. . . . For this we propose:

A) Suspend debt service payments until equitable conditions be achieved, readjusting the principal, reducing interest rates, and limiting payments to a lower percentage of our export income, after having satisfied the requirements of national development. Forbid contracting new debts to pay old, as well as letters of intent and any other international arrangement harmful to the country's interests.

B) Stop sales of assets of Mexican companies in exchange for debts and regulate the sale of natural resources to foreigners, to safeguard the patrimony of future generations. . . .

D) Begin economic reconstruction, allocating a high percentage of the national product to productive investment and channeling the resources freed by the lowering of foreign debt payments into development. . . .

G) Make science the country's top priority, develop research, encourage innovation, systematically raise productivity.