

Mexico demands a change in this year's presidential elections

by D.E. Pettingell

Mexico is getting ready to elect a new President. Although the general perception is that the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) will win the elections, as it has for the past 56 years, the situation has become unpredictable. Because Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas has massive popular support, and because of the severe economic crisis which has been aggravated by a disastrous drought, the PRI could be in for a surprise—for the first time in over half a century.

The son of the beloved nationalist Lázaro Cárdenas, President from 1934 to 1940, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas has gained support among the poor, the peasants, workers, and the unemployed—the mass base of the Mexican electorate—which his backers hope will translate into enough votes to defeat the PRI's presidential candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

In October 1987, Cuauhtémoc, who had been a PRI state governor in Michoacán, split from the PRI in disagreement over the party's decision to nominate Salinas de Gortari. Many PRI members followed him. That same month, Cárdenas was selected presidential candidate by the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM). Later on, two other registered parties, the Socialist Popular Party (PPS) and the Socialist Workers Party (renamed the Party of Cardenist Front), traditionally part of the PRI political structure, formed the National Democratic Front (FDN) to launch Cárdenas as a presidential candidate. Since then, many other groups professing a broad range of beliefs and ideologies have joined the FDN to back the Cárdenas candidacy.

During a recent tour through the large, northern, border state of Sonora, where Cárdenas traveled over 600 kilometers in three days, I was able to see that Cuauhtémoc, as he is universally referred to, enjoys a great deal of support, affection, and, some say, reverence among the population. This is because he is the son of Lázaro Cárdenas, the Mexican leader who, in 1938, expropriated British and American oil companies, returned Mexico's oil resources, and carried out the most widespread land distributions among peasants in the history of Mexico. Additionally, he offers an economic recovery program that would halt the looting of Mexico's resources by creditor banks and use them, instead, to generate millions of jobs (there are currently 8 million jobless in Mex-

ico), industrialization, and education.

His message is hitting hard in the minds of millions of desperate Mexicans who have experienced the worst collapse of their standard of living in modern Mexican history. Cárdenas's message is simple: Let us recover our sovereign right to rule ourselves, let us live by the standards of an independent and dignified nation.

Fed up with lies

Cárdenas's message brings hope to people increasingly disenchanted with the Mexican government due to its capitulation to the International Monetary Fund's austerity policies. A special expression comes over the faces of many peasants when Cárdenas describes, in his low-key manner, the need to give every peasant a piece of land, the need to end once and for all the "disguised latifundia" (large, landed estates owned by the same person through several proxies), the need to bring water to the otherwise fertile lands of northern Mexico. In Quechahuca, in the center of the Yaqui Valley, Cárdenas brought tears to the eyes of the peasants, especially the older ones, as they recalled when Lázaro Cárdenas gave them fertile land, now largely paralyzed for lack of water and credit. Many of them have been forced to give back their parcel to the "latifundists" who monopolize what water there is. Here is where Lázaro Cárdenas carried out the largest land distribution outside the Laguna region in the state of Coahuila.

Salinas de Gortari has also referred, in his own rhetorical terms, to the need for "social justice" in the countryside during his campaign tours. But there there is a deep sense of distrust and disbelief among Mexicans when Salinas or other PRI candidates speak.

"We have been lied to for too long," a peasant told me in the *ejido* (collective farm) "Lázaro Cárdenas" where around 1,000 peasants and their families gathered to welcome Cuauhtémoc. It was like a big fiesta. The peasants slaughtered two cows to feed Cárdenas, his team, journalists, and everybody else under the shade of a palm branch roof on a day when temperatures went up to 115 degrees. Cárdenas called here for a new land distribution of 400,000 hectares in

order to meet the requests for land by thousands of peasants. He added that according to confidential information in his possession, the Mexican government has shelved 7,000 presidential resolutions for land distribution.

Cárdenas was literally mobbed by the peasants throughout his tour with requests and demands. All agree that the main problem the state is facing is the absolute lack of water. This is the second year of extreme drought. In 1987 only two inches of rain fell in the entire state. So far this year, rain has been only one-third of one inch. Dams are dry, and thousands

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of cattle are dying of dehydration.

In his speech in the city of Navojoa, where over 7,000 people gathered to welcome him in the center plaza, Cárdenas promised, when he becomes President, to develop as an urgent need the Hydraulic Plan of the Northeast (Plhino), a great project to bring water from rivers in southern Mexico to the northern desert.

'We are not acarreados'

Over 100,000 people saw and listened to Cuauhtémoc in Sonora (population 2 million) in over 30 events that included 10 mass rallies with crowds ranging from 2-8,000 people. This becomes more remarkable considering the fact that every one of those people attended Cuauhtémoc's events of their own free will.

"We came voluntarily, we are not *acarreados*; no one forced us to come; no one paid us to do it," people would tell us reporters, with pride. It is a known fact that the way the PRI manages to gather crowds of people during meetings for Salinas de Gortari or any other PRI candidate is through the PRI technique known as *acarreo*, that is, "busing in" public employees and peasants in return for 10,000 pesos, a sandwich, or simply a day off from work.

But not even with the *acarreo*, was the PRI able to beat

Cuauhtémoc's crowds in cities like the port of Guaymas, where only 1,000 *acarreados* came to see Salinas de Gortari compared to Cuauhtémoc's 3,000. A Cárdenas supporter told me a somewhat ironic joke about the situation. Addressing a rally in the southern part of Sonora during his tour of the state in April, Salinas told the people, "I was told that people in the south were not as warm and nice as in the north. But I see here the same smiling faces I saw in the north." As a matter of fact, as the joke goes, they were indeed the same faces—of those who were bused in from the north to the south.

The enormous support for Cárdenas is also remarkable in the light of attempts to sabotage his events and intimidation tactics many of his supporters and followers are subjected to by Mexico's Interior Ministry and PRI-run local authorities. I was able to witness a good dose of this. In Ciudad Obregón, a city of 300,000 people where Cuauhtémoc's rally gathered around 8,000 people at high noon under a scorching Sun, local authorities decided to cancel public transportation in poor neighborhoods to keep down attendance. At the same time, the mayor's office brought a very popular folk music band to town and gave free tickets in an effort to turn away people from the rally.

'We did not water the streets'

In the town of Vicam, in the middle of the Yaqui valley, after Cuauhtémoc's rally, a local teacher told me that everybody in town supports and will vote for Lázaro's son, but that people do not believe the government will allow him to win. She added that when the official PRI candidate Salinas passed by Vicam, the people decided on their own not to water the streets (which are very dusty and unpaved) to demonstrate that Salinas was not welcome. "You see how nice and smooth the streets are now. We watered them several times to make sure there would not be a lot of dust when Cuauhtémoc would visit us."

In fact, Salinas de Gortari is extremely unpopular, primarily because he is strongly identified with the policies that have brought the economic crisis Mexico is living under. People also resent the fact that Salinas was politically and ideologically formed at Harvard University, where he spent five years earning three different postgraduate degrees with a scholarship granted by Mexico's Central Bank. They believe his mind is more set to satisfy foreign interests than Mexico's. A Mexican journalist told me that there is no doubt that were Salinas to call for a rally and were people not forced to attend through the *acarreo* method, it is certain the PRI candidate would not gather more than 500 people, at most.

Poor Mexicans also resent the extravagance the PRI candidate displays during his tours. Salinas travels with an entourage of 1,000 people, including the Presidential Joint Chiefs of Staff, a very specialized army unit with the exclusive responsibility of guarding Mexico's President! His travels are done in three jets, six helicopters, and hundreds of buses, vans, and cars. His advance team arrives to a given



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Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas (center, in profile) on the campaign trail in Sonora state, accompanied by the state leaders of the three parties that form the National Democratic Front.

town, takes over entire hotels, orders the streets closed down, and redirects traffic. In Hermosillo, the capital of Sonora, there was no public transportation during the days Salinas visited the state, as the buses were taken over by Salinas people to “bus in” public employees. According to opposition sources, Salinas spends around 1 billion pesos (about \$435,000) a day in travel expenses alone.

In sharp contrast, Cuauhtémoc travels modestly on the only commercial airline Mexico now has. His team is no more than 10 people, including his older son, Lázaro, a private secretary, and a photographer. He travels in a 12-passenger van given to him by a supporter. The advance work is done by two supporters who are also in charge of logistics and press work. He likes shaking hands and getting close to people.

Direct contact with voters is perhaps the only way Cuauhtémoc has to communicate his program, as Mexico’s mass media are largely controlled by the government. “We turn on the television set and we are given Salinas in the morning, Salinas in the afternoon, and Salinas before we go to bed,” a student told Cárdenas during a dialogue at the University of Sonora. The mass media have refused to give any opposition candidate equal time.

The phenomenon is not only limited to Mexico. The U.S. media has largely ignored Cárdenas. At best he is portrayed as a leftist, radical, or as a nostalgic attempt at reviving the “dead” corpse of the Mexican Revolution. American academicians prefer to say that the “Cárdenas phenomenon” represents a struggle between the “old orthodox nationalist”

tendencies and a neo-liberal technocrat current within the PRI.

“Anyone who defends our right to run our destiny and fights against foreign intervention, as Cuauhtémoc does, will be called a communist. The United States also accused Lázaro Cárdenas of being a communist,” a history professor said to me at the University of Sonora. But like his father, Cuauhtémoc cannot be understood outside the ideology of the Mexican Revolution. Cuauhtémoc’s goal, as he told me during the interview below, is to give Mexico back to the Mexicans and to finally complete the Mexican Revolution’s agenda of economic growth and a fair standard of living for all citizens.

“We ought to win because reason is with us,” he said in his last rally before departing for Nayarit, the only Mexican state he had not yet visited. Given the economic crisis, the drought, and the massive dissatisfaction, nobody knows what is in store in the first week of July when voters choose the next President of Mexico. The question is, how much vote fraud the U.S. Eastern Establishment and their cronies in the PRI in Mexico will carry out to keep this unprecedented situation from slipping out of the PRI’s control. Either way, after the July 6 elections, no intelligent person should take Mexico’s politics for granted.

As the last lines of this article are being written, I have been told that the population of Nayarit also turned out en masse to welcome Cárdenas. He is now back in his native state of Michoacán where in the city of Uruapan (population: 300,000), over 100,000 came out to cheer him.