Salinas: Privilege and Impunity

By Andrew Reding

Former Mexican president Carlos Salinas’ precipitous departure for the United States following the arrest of his older brother for the assassination of a prominent politician begs a closer examination of the brothers’ close and peculiar relationship. That relationship is a metaphor not only for the dark side of the Salinas presidency, but for the destructive effects of impunity on Mexican politics and society.

Carlos and Raúl Salinas first appeared on the front pages of Mexico’s newspapers as children when, with a friend, they shot to death their twelve-year-old nanny with a 22-caliber hunting rifle. Carlos was only three at the time; his brother Raúl five; and the friend eight. No one knows for sure who pulled the trigger in their game of “execution.” But Carlos, already displaying the precociousness and boldness for which he would become famous, claimed credit. “I killed her with one shot,” he bragged, “I’m a hero.”

This is not a normal child’s response to a horrifying accident, but then again there was nothing normal about either the children or the circumstances. Carlos and Raúl were the sons of Raúl Salinas Lozano, a pillar of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) who served in the Mexican cabinet and senate. That meant the father belonged to a very select group, including presidents, members of the cabinet, and their immediate families, who could not—at least until now—be subject to indictment for any offense. It also meant the children learned the meaning of impunity at an early age.

They also learned the realities of Mexico’s unacknowledged but pervasive racism. Manuela, the twelve-year-old nanny, was a servant of indigenous extraction. Nothing so eloquently fixes her stature—and by extension that of other indigenous persons in Mexican society—than the fact that no one in the household could remember her last name.

The incident might have remained a political footnote had it not stamped its mark on the Salinas presidency. Salinas’ first major act as president, the one said to have established his reformist credentials, was the arrest of Joaquín Hernández Galicia (“La Quina”), the former head of the Oil Workers Union. Ostensibly, La Quina was arrested for his long record of corruption. Yet that never squared with the fact that even more corrupt and murderous, but more loyal, union leaders enjoyed the president’s full support.

In fact, Salinas was settling a personal score. La Quina had tried to influence the presidential succession by sponsoring a book entitled Salinas: A Murderer in the Presidency? that resurrected the ghosts of the past. When that failed to stop the Salinas juggernaut, the labor leader quietly urged oil workers to vote for opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas in the 1988 presidential election. In so doing, he broke a cardinal rule of the political system: that labor leaders may engage in criminal activities, but never
disloyalty to the PRI and the presidency. What foreigners saw as a daring act of reform, was in fact Salinas cracking the whip to jail an adversary and reassert the unquestioned authority of the presidency over organized labor.

Raúl Salinas again emerged as a partner in intrigue as his brother Carlos assumed the presidency. During the campaign, Raúl was reported to have negotiated an alliance with Peasant Torch, a shadowy paramilitary group long suspected of being used by the ministry of the interior in covert actions against the democratic left. The group, cited by Amnesty International for a string of political murders, appeared in the front rows of Salinas rallies. Later, when opposition parties protested electoral fraud, they were attacked by Peasant Torch thugs. In 1990, Salinas seated Peasant Torch in a PRI convention ostensibly dedicated to reform.

The following year, Excelsior columnist Manu Dornbierer alleged that Raúl was maneuvering to obtain half of a racetrack concession in Mexico City. Though Raúl held no official position, the column drew an angry rebuttal from the attorney general, presumably acting on behalf of the president. As if on cue, Excelsior canceled Dornbierer’s column. Salinas also arranged the removal of the editors of UnoMásUno and El Porvenir after they published articles that offended the president. Moreover, after the imprisonment of La Quina, no one dared refer to the death of little Manuela, and contemporaneous newspaper accounts vanished from libraries throughout Mexico (they can still be found in the Library of Congress).

Now Raúl Salinas stands accused of masterminding the assassination of congressional majority leader-elect José Francisco Ruiz Massieu. Because of the extremely close relationship between the two brothers—Raúl was no Billy Carter—and because of revelations that the special prosecutor concealed evidence pointing to Raúl, it is beginning to look as though the investigation may lead to Carlos himself, closing the cycle of impunity. Either way, nothing can restore the shattered image of a presidency that repressed adversaries, manipulated the press, and coddled corruption, even as it trumpeted its commitment to reform.

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