Favorite Son

The heir of Mexico’s greatest reformer saw his election stolen and his friend murdered. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas remains the man who would be *el Presidente*.

Sidebar: How to Steal an Election: Mexico, 1988

By Andrew Reding

THE JULY 6 ELECTION ENDED TEN DAYS AGO, AND THE official results are in: Carlos Salinas de Gortari has won. Once again, as for the last 50 years, the candidate of Mexico’s Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) has been proclaimed president-elect. This time, though, a runner-up is recognized: Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas a hero’s son named for an Aztec emperor, the oddly professorial candidate who ran without a campaign slogan.

On this hot Saturday afternoon, as seemingly endless streams of Mexicans converge on the Zócalo, the capital’s main plaza, it becomes apparent that the citizenry is not accepting the verdict. I watch waves of marchers pour into the immense plaza, chanting, “You can see it, you can feel it, Cuauhtémoc is president.” More ominous for the ruling party are the frequent repetitions of “Get it straight, Salinas, the people don’t want you,” and “He’s arrived, he’s here, the one who’ll fuck over the PRI.” The mood is festive, with bands, firecrackers, well-wishers cheering from windows and roofs, kids perched precariously on streetlights, and multicolored confetti showering down. These are not disappointed partisans mourning an electoral loss; they are wildly enthusiastic multitudes who sense that the PRI’s long stranglehold on Mexico has been broken, and are acting out a collective catharsis. Holding aloft effigies of Salinas, whose small size, baldness, and big ears are easily caricatured, they shout, “You’re a liar, baldy, you lost the election!” and sing, “We’ll pull him out by the ears.” Later, amid cries of “Death to the PRI!”, they burn the effigies, together with a big black rat representing the ruling party.

The plaza becomes a solid sea of humanity, spilling into the surrounding streets. Smiling and waving from a hotel balcony is Cárdenas’s mother Amalia, widow of Lázaro Cárdenas, the revered, almost mythical president who carried out the promises of the Mexican Revolution during the 1930s.

As her son Cuauhtémoc steps to the front of the podium, there are cries of “Viva el Presidente Cárdenas!” The man inspiring this fervent demonstration is sober, restrained, unexcitable. The speech indeed sounds presidential, as he calls for respect for the
constitution and laws, then lays out a plan of government. Much of Cárdenas’s program—an economic new deal, improved social services, rejection of U.S. intervention in Latin affairs, and support for the Central American peace initiative—doesn’t sound very different from what the PRI has been proposing for decades. But nobody in the square seems to believe, any longer, in the PRI. As Cárdenas adds his own pointed demands for redirecting payments on Mexico’s debt to meet its people’s needs, and for establishing a multiparty system with democratic political and electoral reforms, the Zócalo thunders its support. The crowd goes wild for “Cuauh-TE-moc!” And a government helicopter circles noisily overhead.

The turnout this day is estimated to be more than 250,000, the largest voluntary demonstration in the country’s history. The newspapers have reported the official election tally, giving the PRI’s Salinas, 40, the Harvard-educated economist anointed by outgoing president Miguel de la Madrid, an absolute majority; Cárdenas of the National Democratic Front (FDN) 31 percent; and Manuel Clouthier of the conservative National Action Party (PAN) 17 percent of the vote. But even as the diplomatic world, from Ronald Reagan to Daniel Ortega, is offering official congratulations to Salinas, the people are proclaiming Cárdenas president-elect of their Mexico.

Months later, the public squares of Mexico are still echoing with shouts for Cárdenas and the anger of the crowds has grown. The PRI, despite months of stonewalling and footdragging, has been unable to reverse the momentum and convince Mexico to accept its candidate. And Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas 54, is the unlikely hero of an unexpected electoral revolution.

CARDENAS, BOOKISH AND RESERVED, HAS SERVED AS FEDeral senator and as governor of the coastal state of Michoacán. In 1986 he joined forces with Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, a former labor secretary and UN ambassador, to launch a campaign for democratic reforms within the PRI.

Rebuffed by the machine, Cárdenas and a handful of other dissidents left the PRI in September 1987 to found a new coalition—the FDN—and run in the July 6 general election. Operating out of home offices without funds or paid staff and relying on borrowed vehicles, the campaign was denied access to the mass media. It was hard, at first, to take the challengers seriously.

Things began to change last February, when Cárdenas toured La Laguna, an agricultural region surrounding the northern city of Torreón, where his father had carried out a massive land reform in 1936. There, the candidate was cheered and borne aloft by thousands of wildly enthusiastic campesinos at every stop. When PRI candidate Salinas toured the region, he was jeered and doused with water. This was unheard of: students and intellectuals in the capital might denounce the government, but the peasantry had always been the most secure bulwark of the PRI.

For 50 years the PRI had monopolized Mexican life with its overriding presence, controlling the airlines and railroads; the oil, electric, and phone companies; most newspapers and radio and television stations; and political appointments from dogcatcher to president of the republic. Every campesino who wanted access to credit, water, or a place to sell vegetables had to negotiate with the local PRI functionary; all Mexico City taxi drivers had to carry PRI propaganda in their cabs. It claimed to be “the party of the
revolution,” committed to nationalism and economic progress. But with the deteriorating economy in hock to foreign creditors, the PRI’s revolutionary legitimacy was evaporating. And now there was a hole in Mexico: a vacuum the PRI could no longer fill. The defection of the campesinos of La Laguna to the quiet man who offered to fill that gap sent alarms ringing through the establishment.

The Cárdenas campaign took off nationwide. In March, on the 50th anniversary of his father’s nationalization of the oil fields, Cárdenas stole the show from the official celebration by attracting 100,000 supporters to the Zócalo, In May he embarrassed the government by accepting an invitation to speak at the National University, where no PRI leader has dared venture since former president Luis Echeverría was stoned there in 1975 for his role in violently repressing the student movement. But 50,000 students and professors jammed the plaza to greet Cuauhtémoc. In early June the Mexican Socialist Party withdrew its presidential candidate and endorsed Cárdenas. By the end of the month he was breaking records with a demonstration of 200,000 in the Zócalo, drawing the people to him like iron filings to a magnet. From Tijuana to Michoacán, Oaxaca, Acapulco, Veracruz: over and over, wherever he went, massive crowds flocked to him. On the first of July, in recognition of the boost originally provided by the campesinos of La Laguna, Cárdenas returned for the campaign’s grand finale.

At the edge of the city in Torreón, there is a barrio of one and two-room hovels, with simple messages painted on the walls of the shacks: WE WANT WATER. WE WANT DRAINAGE. WE WANT A SCHOOL. Rising high above the squalor is an enormous modern billboard, with a message from Salinas: MY COMMITMENT IS WITH TORREÓN, TO IMPROVE URBAN SERVICES IN POOR NEIGHBORHOODS. It is an apt symbol of the PRI’s credibility gap. As secretary of budget and planning, Salinas was chief architect of the economic policies that cut real wages in half and sent unemployment soaring to nearly 18 percent. Determined to maintain payments on Mexico’s $108 billion foreign debt, Salinas diverted funds from domestic investment while slashing food and transportation subsidies.

Yet Salinas was hardly austere in his own presidential campaign. Mexico was smothered with Salinas murals, billboards, and banners. Behaving as though he were already president-elect, Salinas flew around the country in government jets and helicopters, surrounded by scores of presidential security agents. His rallies were elaborate, staged shows, with the small, bald, mustachioed candidate addressing captive audiences from beneath giant portraits of himself, his every utterance faithfully recorded and subsequently published in eight glossy tomes. To fill the town squares, the government resorted to busing in state employees who had been granted days off with full pay; where necessary, poor families were paid five or ten thousand pesos a head to attend.

The audiences at Cárdenas rallies, in contrast, often had to overcome police roadblocks to attend. They brought a kaleidoscope of banners reflecting the diversity of the coalition Cárdenas has assembled: green flags representing the centrist Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution; pink flags, the Popular Socialist Party, with its eclectic blend of Marxism and the ideology of the Mexican Revolution; red and black flags, the Frente Cardenista, which, inspired by Sandinismo, blends socialism with the historic example of Lázaro Cárdenas; red, white, and green flags, the Mexican Socialist Party, which advocates a “Mexican road to socialism.” Banners announced the participation of
cooperative farms, urban barrio organizations, and the vast network of student, labor, feminist, environmental, and Amerindian organizations that have become part of this crusade: the National Democratic Front, Mexico’s rainbow coalition.

Cárdenas however, is no Jesse Jackson. His speeches are all delivered in the same steady monotone, one hand on the microphone, the other by his side. There are no dramatic gestures, no clever turns of phrase. Nor, for that matter, any hints of Latin American caudillismo. He stays clear of sweeping promises, or rhetoric about redeeming the glorious Mexican homeland.

At rallies, Cárdenas drones on about the sanctity of the constitution, as if he were teaching a high-school class instead of running for president. And yet, under the hot sun, the mestizo and Indian faces come alive. Cárdenas reasons with his people, communicating as much with his earnest facial expressions as by the care with which he chooses his words.

Cárdenas has made a virtue of his lack of charisma. “I am more a doer than a talker,” he says. The utter absence of showmanship contributes to his credibility among people weary of the bluster and chicanery of the ruling party. Cárdenas has actually found his unwillingness to engage in self-promotion a plus in winning over Mexico’s discontented.

But there is more to Cárdenas’s mystique than reverse logic. In a very modest way, he is offering his country a way to regain its self-respect. His audiences listen in rapt silence, breaking into excited applause every time their hero articulates widely shared convictions about the way the PRI has “sold out” the nationalist and egalitarian principles of the Mexican Revolution. Yet he steers clear of personal attacks on opponents or incitements against an unpopular government, instead making constant calls for nonviolence and appeals to respect the written law.

Cárdenas does not pander. In an overwhelmingly Catholic country, he makes no secret of his atheism: “I have no religious beliefs,” he says simply. “I believe in the people.”

IN THE EXCLUSIVE EL PEDREGAL SECTION of Mexico City, I met with Jorge González of the newly founded Mexican Green Party. González has theories about Cárdenas, theories I’ve heard elsewhere as the country tries to come to terms with the phenomenon.

González reminded me that Cuauhtémoc the emperor made a last-ditch stand against the Spaniards, and is today a national hero. In Nahuatl, the name means “descending eagle,” and signifies a farsighted leader who descends in moments of crisis to rescue the nation. This, González suggested, is how one should understand the two worlds signified by the separate chants of “Cuauh-TE moc, Cuauh-TEmoc” and “CAR-de-nas, CAR-de-nas.” The first represents the resurrection of indigenous Mexican values, the second the resurrection of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution.

But Jorge González is not simply caught up in romanticizing Indian lore; nor is he a political Cardenista loyal to the memory of Lázaro. As environmentalists, he tells me, “we are neither leftist nor rightist.” The Greens endorse Cuauhtémoc because, he says, “in six years of working on environmental issues, we learned that the government was always behind the problem.”
For Mexico’s environmental movement, the controversial nuclear power plant in Veracruz has been a key symbol of its struggle. Cárdenas won the movement’s backing because, after visiting the plant and consulting with residents and experts, he promised conversion to conventional power. Similarly, indigenous groups support Cárdenas not for his rhetoric, but because of acts like his trip last spring on back roads through Oaxaca to visit the Triqui Indians after some of them were murdered by police. With the feminist movement, Cárdenas has made specific pledges to guarantee equal representation for women in party and political life. His campaign, in macho Mexico, has lived up to its feminist platform. One of Cárdenas’s closest advisers is Ifigenia Martínez; an economist, she and Muñoz were the first two opposition figures to be elected to the Senate.

So Jorge González, the apolitical environmentalist from the posh part of town who finds himself part of a revolutionary coalition, is not unique. What González has in common with the Indian women in the Zócalo, the university students, and the farmers with their dusty boots in La Laguna, is that he just doesn’t believe in the PRI anymore.

If the PRI is no longer invincible, there are other myths that still grip Mexico. How will Cuauhtémoc live up to the legend of Lázaro Cárdenas?

The rest of the country might indulge in sentimentality about the saintly president, but his own son refuses. When asked what he most remembers of his father, Cuauhtémoc offers no heartwarming boyhood memories. Instead, he cites “the great correspondence between his ideas and his actions, his avoidance of contradictions; his remaining always on the side of legality, and here I speak more from a moral than a strictly legalistic mode.”

Cuauhtémoc prefers to talk about what his father did, rather than who he was.

Mexico’s constitution of 1917 was the world’s first to recognize the rights of workers to labor unions, an eight-hour day, and an adequate minimum wage. It recognized the right of peasants to own land and established national control over natural resources. But after more than 15 tumultuous years, it took Lázaro Cárdenas, president of Mexico from 1934 to 1940, to actually implement these provisions. Cárdenas, described in popular lore as “the sphinx,” for his inscrutability and quiet demeanor, gained the necessary political leverage by organizing nationwide unions of workers and peasants. With this mass backing, Lázaro Cárdenas was able to redistribute almost a tenth of Mexico’s land to the landless peasantry, support strikes that elevated industrial wages to record highs, and nationalize railroads and oil fields. His programs laid the groundwork for the growth and social peace that gave Mexico a half-century of stability and made it, with Costa Rica, one of only two Latin American countries to be spared military rule.

But Mexico was not to be exempt from the consequences of the debt crisis devouring Latin America. With the austerity measures of the PRI’s economic technocrats, the social contract established by Cárdenas shattered.

The oil that had supported Mexican development was once again sent abroad at bargain-basement prices, to help pay interest on the foreign debt. Land reform was terminated in order to make export agribusiness more attractive to foreign investment. And real wages plummeted due to triple-digit inflation. By 1987, the Mexican government estimated that over half its population was malnourished.
Like his father, who mobilized the masses against the moribund “institutionalizers” of the National Revolutionary Party, Cuauhtémoc is mobilizing the Mexican people against their contemporary counterparts in the PRI. Unlike his father, though, he is not leading a revolution from above. Cuauhtémoc is forging a broad coalition out of the political parties, movements, and civic groups that have already formed at the grass roots in response to the problems of modern Mexico.

ON ELECTION DAY IN MEXICO, THE CANDIdate who made history did not even vote for himself. Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas cast a write-in vote for Superbarrio, the masked and caped figure who appears unexpectedly to lead rallies and defend tenants in the Mexico City slums. Ever undramatic, Cárdenas didn’t pose for photos with the costumed mystery man. Instead, he made a short statement in his usual monotone, “recognizing the struggles of all the people of Mexico…of all who have fought for urban and rural justice, and for the emancipation of the country.”

A few weeks after the election, the fight is still in full swing. Once again, Cárdenas is filling a vacuum: this time the one that has emerged between the casting of votes and the announcement of a new president. This particular gap had never been a problem in the past for the PRI: whoever was tapped on the shoulder by the party simply ascended to office without fuss. But now the rules are different.

I join Cárdenas for yet another rally, in Acapulco, where an angry sea of humanity awaits him in the humid heat of the tropical night. It is a familiar scene by now. But this time the stakes are higher. “The people voted,” the crowd chants over and over again, “and Cárdenas won.”

Speaking before a monument to his namesake, Cárdenas says, “We will not negotiate the popular vote:” To resounding applause, he continues, “Commentators are saying we should be content with the great gains we have made in this election. What they don’t understand is that this has never been a personal struggle for political posts. We are not going to wheel and deal for some senatorships.”

To chants of “total repudiation of the electoral fraud,” Cárdenas proposes a national march to coincide with the convening of the new Chamber of Deputies on September 1 to formally designate a president-elect.

Cárdenas has repeatedly warned that should the Chamber recognize Salinas, it would be “the technical equivalent of a coup d’état.” The stakes continue to rise. By late August it becomes clear just how far: four Cárdenas supporters are gunned down in Mexico City, and troops circle the tense halls where the PRI meets to deliberate over a future it can no longer control. Cárdenas stays in touch with sympathetic military commanders.

LACKING THE ROOM, OR IMAGINATION, to rewrite its original election script, the PRI, in the end, clung to it doggedly. The intended final chapter came September 10, when a newly slim PRI majority in congress ratified Salinas as president. But as outgoing president de la Madrid was delivering his state of the nation address, members of the FDN, now the largest opposition group in congress, rose and walked out. Senator Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, who left the PRI to join Cárdenas, shouted down the president with charges of electoral fraud. On his way out the door, PRI members swung their fists at Muñoz Ledo, yelling “Stinking traitor!”
Cárdenas responded, “Now we must organize ourselves better, continue to demonstrate and begin demanding that Salinas resign.” Even as Salinas takes up residence in the National Palace, official tallies show the city around him is solidly Cardenista. Close advisers to Cárdenas meanwhile, fear for his safety. Just four days before the July election, his long-time friend Francisco Ovando, electoral coordinator for the FDN, was murdered along with an assistant. At the time, Cárdenas kept his characteristic cool, even as his supporters swirled around the gates of the Ministry of the Interior, screaming “Murderers!” Cárdenas entered, talking quietly but firmly to the officials universally believed responsible: “It would be very serious if the official response to the democratic opposition were to be terrorism and lawlessness.”

It would be very serious. Cárdenas has no bodyguards, and takes no precautions as he plunges into new crowds. “The people,” he says, “are my security.”

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**How to Steal an Election: Mexico, 1988.**

By Andrew Reding

Elections—from El Salvador to Mississippi, from Chicago to Poland—can be rigged by a variety of methods, as generations of crooked politicians will attest. Vote buying, gerrymandering, dirty tricks, and rule bending of a dozen different kinds are common. But the PRI, by any standards, stretched even beyond the norms of electoral tampering.

By mid-July, a widespread consensus emerged that massive fraud had tainted Mexico’s election. And thorough investigations concurred with outraged crowds in the streets.

Every political party except the PRI, as well as prominent intellectuals, businesspeople, and clergy, agreed with leading Mexican investigative reporters that the election had been stolen. How was this done?

**BEFORE: Advance planning.** In December 1986, de la Madrid’s government amended the constitution and adopted a new electoral code. Among other changes, the government altered the composition of the Federal Electoral Commission (CFE). Instead of including even representation from all parties, the new rules made the representation proportional and ensured an absolute PRI majority.

The PRI then used its 19-12 advantage on the CFE to block challenges to a range of pre-electoral manipulations. It vetoed a motion to extend registration, which would have allowed thousands of new Cárdenas supporters to vote. And it stacked the electoral appeals tribunal to forestall any complaints.

*Fraudulent registration.* Control of the CFE meant control of the voter rolls. In random samplings, more than 20 percent of registered voters in the capital were either dead,
underage, multiply enrolled, or not residing at the address listed. In Monterrey, error rates of 36 to 49 percent were found by the newspaper *El Norte*. In Juárez, two-year-olds were registered voters; in Mexico City, the extremely dead Miguel Alemán, PRI founder and former president, was still on the voter rolls. The PRI-appointed mayor of the Federal District had 72 voters listed to his home, where only four people reside.

**DURING:** *Intimidation and murder.* The assassinations of Ovando and Gil—two Cárdenas aides—as they worked to set up an independent network for vote counting, were highly publicized. But throughout the country, there were threats against opposition figures and voters. In parts of rural Puebla, the PRI “won” over 99 percent of the vote—as opposition poll watchers, intimidated by the paramilitary organization Antorchacampesina, stayed away.

*Computer fraud.* The government installed a highly touted computerized vote tabulation system, offering to let opposition CFE representatives monitor it on election night. But one representative from PAN became frustrated with the slow trickle of results. He noticed that CFE technicians loyal to the PRI were using a different entry code than the one supplied to him. Upon entering it, he gained access to the file where the actual results were being compiled, and found that he and the other CFE opposition members were being fed carefully edited numbers. When he tried to print the screen that showed opposition candidates leading, CFE technicians became alarmed; they placed a phone call, and within minutes the computer shut down. A mainframe in the basement of the Ministry of Government continued to receive results, sheltered from scrutiny.

**AFTER:** *Delayed results.* Inside government sources leaked to the Cárdenas camp that Cárdenas had won the presidential race by a narrow margin. According to the sources, the PRI was waiting to declare “victory” until it had thoroughly cooked the figures. A week after election day, the PRI finally announced a win of 50.36 percent—just a sliver more than needed to maintain its majority and secure control of the machinery for the next election.

*“Disappeared” ballots.* In Guerrero, the opposition tabulated 80.5 percent of the votes on the basis of copies of official tally sheets. It counted 359,369 votes for Cárdenas and 90,796 for Salinas. When the official vote count was released, Salinas wound up with 309,202 and Cárdenas with 182,874. Some 10,000 of the missing Cárdenas votes were discovered burned beside a highway outside Ometepec; another 20,000 were found under a pile of ashes outside Chilpancingo; and others were stolen from voting booths and dumped out of helicopters over Coyuca.—*A.R.*