'Salinastroika,' Si; Democracy, No

By Andrew Reding

As evidence mounts of widespread fraud last Sunday in a key regional election in Mexico, new questions arise about the persistence of authoritarianism and President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's commitment to democratization. It appears that, instead, he is committed to a police state.

When Mr. Salinas took office in 1988, he was widely expected to revolutionize politics. As Budget Secretary in the previous administration, he had initiated far-reaching economic reforms. With "Salinastroika" in full gear, it was thought, Mexican glasnost could not be far behind. Beneath banners that read "Let Mexico Speak," he promised to modernize politics by guaranteeing clean elections and an end to one-party rule.

Yet even as democratic transformations sweep the globe, Mr. Salinas has done little or nothing to move Mexico toward democracy. If anything, he has tightened the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party's control over political life. The prime bulwark of Mexican authoritarianism remains the PRI's control of the electoral machinery. It dominates all electoral commissions, and the Interior Minister presides over the Federal Electoral Council, a condition found among other Latin nations only in Cuba.

As documented by official precinct tally sheets in the hands of the opposition, the Government recently used this power to steal elections from the center-right National Action Party in the state of Sinaloa, and from the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution in the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca and Guerrero.

The latest target of fraud is the country's most populous state, Mexico City. Though the P.R.D. leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas carried the state by a 2-to-1 margin in the last federal elections, and though recent opinion polls had signaled a P.R.D. victory, the PRI incredibly claims to have swept all 34 legislative districts and 117 of 121 municipalities. The opposition, however, has provided documentary evidence of wholesale padding of registration rolls, while party stalwarts went from precinct to precinct to cast multiple ballots.

Popular protests against electoral fraud are repressed. Police and paramilitary groups have killed more than 60 P.R.D. sympathizers since the beginning of 1990. In March, police opened fire on protest marchers in the towns of Acapulco and Zihuatanejo, killing six. In April, Mr. Salinas sent tanks into Michoacán to retake town halls occupied by protesters.

Mr. Salinas's electoral reform bill, rubber-stamped by the PRI-dominated Congress, increases the share of PRI-controlled seats on the Federal Electoral Council, keeps the Interior Minister as council chairman and effectively insures the PRI an absolute majority of seats in Congress regardless of its percentage of the vote.

To preclude opposition alliances like those that have triumphed in Chile and Nicaragua, the law bars joint candidacies. It forbids opposition parties to publicize vote totals that differ from the electoral council's, and criminalizes peaceful protests against the official determinations of the electoral authorities.

The Salinas administration's hostility to democratic process extends to control of the news media. The Government denies the major opposition parties access to state television channels, even though it is legally mandated, while the PRI-oriented owner of the "private" Televisa consortium bars them from the remaining channels. The state controls most of the print media through subsidies, bribes and paid (though unidentified) insertions of Government-supplied "news." Last year, the administration orchestrated a hostile takeover of the daily Uno Más Uno, one of the few that has dared to publish news unfavorable to the ruling party.

The party tightly controls labor unions. Labor leaders are imposed, not elected, which corrupts them into serving as state agents. Grass-roots challenges to such control are met with an iron fist. In July, workers at the Mexican Steel Tube plant in Veracruz went on strike to insist on their right to elect union leaders responsive to the needs of the rank and file. In response, Gov. Dante Delgado, a Salinas appointee, unleashed the state security police.

In view of Mexico's slide toward political unrest, the Bush Administration and Congress should insist on international observation of future elections in order to encourage them to come into conformity with international standards.