A Brezhnev South of Our Border?

Mexico is corrupt and authoritarian, with a leader who fights change

By Andrew Reding

AT LAST MONTH’S Houston economic summit, French and German leaders criticized President George Bush’s “double standard” in favoring aid to China while opposing help for the Soviet Union. They could have extended the comparison to Mexico: Washington, which has arranged debt relief and bridge loans for Mexico, is beginning negotiations for a free trade agreement apparently untroubled by Mexico’s authoritarian government and resistance to democratic change.

Like the Soviet Union, Mexico has been ruled by a single party for over half a century. The resulting lack of competition and accountability has had similar corrupting effects on its economic and political life. Yet while Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev is dismantling the Communist Party’s monopoly on power, Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari refuses to relax the iron grip of his Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) on Mexican society.

Though portrayed abroad as a reformer for his moves to liberalize the economy, Salinas is perpetuating one-party rule through expanded use of electoral fraud and, as recently documented by Americas Watch, by using the police and the army to intimidate and repress the opposition.

Mexico remains the only Latin nation besides Cuba that lacks independent electoral authorities. The federal electoral commission is chaired by the minister of the interior, and the ruling party holds an assured majority of commissioners. The PRI uses this power to deny opposition parties access to the broadcast media, to inflate registration rolls with phantom voters, to arbitrarily remove known opposition sympathizers from voting lists and — when necessary — to alter actual election returns in its favor.

Professional “alchemists,” as they are known in Mexico, rework the numbers during the week between election day and the official announcement of results. This legally sanctioned stalling period is unique to Mexico.

Mexico also has the world’s only constitution with a “governability” clause. The provision guarantees the ruling party a legislative majority even should its electoral manipulation fail to deliver a majority of seats. This ensures that the PRI will not have to share power with the opposition, and reduces the Congress to a rubber stamp for unchecked presidential powers.

Far from seeking democratic reform, Salinas adamantly resists opposition demands for independent electoral authorities and for removal of the governability clause. Instead, the
new electoral law approved by the Chamber of Deputies on July 14 enables the president to appoint members of the electoral commission without regard for balance and criminalizes peaceful protests against the commission’s determinations. To forestall opposition alliances such as those that triumphed in Chile and Nicaragua, it also prohibits joint candidacies.

Salinas’ actions betray his campaign premise of “clean elections.” In hindsight, it seems he misjudged Mexican voters by believing he could win the 1988 presidential election fairly. Indeed, Salinas intended to dramatize his commitment to modernize Mexican politics through live broadcast of returns on election night.

Things did not, however, go according to plan. As opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas surged ahead in the early count, the computers tabulating votes suspiciously went “down.” While the opposition produced returns from 55 percent of precincts showing Cárdenas maintaining his lead, the government stalled. A week later it announced its victory, but refused to disclose results from remaining precincts. According to a Los Angeles Times poll conducted last summer, less than one in four Mexicans believe Salinas was legitimately elected president of Mexico.

Salinas chose power over electoral integrity, with fateful consequences for political reform. Ever since, his party has resorted to fraud to deny victories in state and local elections to Cárdenas’ Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD).

In last year’s elections in Cárdenas’ home state of Michoacán, for instance, the PRD was able to prove wins in at least 14 of 18 legislative districts. Yet the government altered tally sheets and threw out over a hundred thousand PRD ballots to ensure continued PRI control of the state legislature.

In a Mexican manifestation of “people power,” citizens protested by occupying town halls throughout the state. The government at first responded with sporadic attacks by police and paramilitary groups, killing dozen of protesters; then, this past April, Salinas sent army tanks into Michoacán to retake the town halls.

The government now faces a formidable challenge in the November 11 elections in the State of Mexico. This state of 12 million inhabitants is Mexico’s moat populous, and even by the government’s count — favored Cárdenas by more than two to one in 1988. With the PRI’s own polls showing Salinas even less popular now, the ruling party is already gearing up for massive fraud.

Illustrating the government’s growing desperation, the PRI is using a more drastic method perfected in last month’s special municipal elections in Uruapan, Michoacán: denying opposition sympathizers the right to vote by either removing them from the registration rolls, or by delivering their ID cards to PRI operatives, who then cast multiple ballots. Should these methods not suffice, the Mexico State legislature recently changed the electoral law to strengthen its “governability” provision.

Until now, unrest over electoral fraud has been confined to more rural, less densely populated states, where cycles of protest and repression have not attracted international attention. Massive fraud in the state of Mexico, which includes much of Mexico City, is a different matter. This is the capital, where the PRI is extremely unpopular, and where
opposition parties are capable of mobilizing hundreds of thousands of protesters. A repeat of the type of blatant ballot rigging used in Michoacán could be a recipe for disaster.

The Bush administration, which so forcefully denounced electoral fraud in Panama, is overlooking Mexican fraud as it proceeds with negotiations for free trade agreement. Yet if there is a lesson to be drawn from recent experience, it is that economic and political reform are indivisible; without the latter, the former is on unstable ground. Unless we begin to link U.S.-Mexico cooperation to genuine political reform, we will contribute to, and ultimately share in, Mexico’s growing political problems.

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