Protests against electoral fraud rocked the state of San Luis Potosí in central Mexico last week. Opposition gubernatorial candidate Salvador Nava proclaimed himself legitimate governor of the state even as Fausto Zapata of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) assumed office behind a cordon of security police. Though confronted by masses of angry citizens at the inauguration, Mexican president Carlos Salinas de Gortari continues to insist that the country’s mid-term elections were clean, and challenges the opposition to prove otherwise.

The president’s challenge is something of a Catch-22, since under “reform” legislation he himself sponsored, the PRI enjoys undisputed control of all election commissions. Not only does the PRI use this control to tilt the playing field in its favor; it then denies the opposition access to the electoral information it would need to challenge fraud. The Federal Electoral Institute has yet to disclose poll-by-poll results for last August’s elections, as requested by the opposition.

As an observer of those elections, I experienced firsthand the extent of PRI manipulation of the electoral process. At the invitation of independent members of the Congress of Nuevo León, I traveled to Monterrey for the July 7 gubernatorial and state congressional elections. As in the subsequent August elections, those in President Salinas’ home state of Nuevo León were unusually tranquil, with few outward signs of irregularities.

Yet in an inspection tour of 20 precincts all over metropolitan Monterrey I encountered serious structural biases, reflective of an electoral system run by a single political party. In each location I visited, both the president and secretary turned out to be members of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Roughly one of every three polling stations was at the home of a PRI member. Nowhere could one mark a ballot with the assurance of not being observed. On a tip that the PRI was bribing opposition National Action Party (PAN) poll watchers to stay home, I visited four locations from a list containing the supposed targets: in two of the four, the PAN poll watchers were in fact absent. Even so, the absence of any sign of physical tampering or intimidation contributed to a general impression that the authorities had decided to play this particular election cleanly.

In August, on my way to observe the elections in Guanajuato, I returned to Monterrey. There three independent legislators provided me with two blue volumes containing the official results of the July 7 contests. I did not expect to find anything striking, since I assumed the state electoral commission, securely in the hands of the PRI, would have thoroughly cleansed the results of irregularities. Turning to a page at random, I immediately discovered otherwise.
I was soon classifying several patterns of irregularities, each suggesting a distinct form of fraud. Most obvious were the precincts in which the number of votes cast exceeded the number of registered voters. On first inspection, there were 63 of these in the governor’s race alone. Yet on closer examination I found others that had been concealed by massive annulment of ballots. In precinct 3-124 of Monterrey, for example, 931 ballots were cast for governor where only 872 persons were registered. But the authorities annulled 475 ballots (51 percent), allowing the final tally to appear normal. I counted sixty precincts like this, adding up to 123 precincts in which the number of votes cast exceeded the number of registered voters.

I uncovered other oddities, too. In another 43 precincts, unusually large numbers of ballots had been annulled. Normally, ballots are annulled only when voters leave them blank, select two or more parties, or otherwise fail to make their choice clear. Since such mistakes are infrequent, legitimate annulments seldom exceed 5 percent. Yet in the precincts in question, annulments exceeded 10 percent, and typically ranged between 20 and 60 percent. In precinct 10-169 in San Nicolás, for instance, 448 of 1003 votes cast (45 percent) were later annulled, leaving the PRI with a 449-to-106 advantage. The pattern was repeated in neighboring precincts 10-168 (109 ballots annulled; PRI wins 396 to 97) and 10-170 (484 ballots annulled; PRI wins 367 to 102), in striking contrast to the PAN victory elsewhere in this metropolitan Monterrey municipality.

In rural Nuevo León, the PRI produced its by now classic shut-outs, claiming 100 percent of the vote in 56 precincts. Typically, the vote distribution actually peaked at 100 percent, as in district 26, where 17 of 70 precincts registered 100 percent for the PRI, 11 registered 99 percent, eight 98 percent, and five 97 percent. Such patterns, characteristic of elections in Mexico and the former Soviet Union, are unheard of in genuine democracies (the Soviet Union at least had the excuse that no other parties were on the ballot). Yet no effort was made to spare President Salinas the potential embarrassment of having shutouts in two precincts (124 to 0 and 123 to 0) in his country home of Agualeguas, just a stone’s throw from the Texas border.

Overall, some 360 of 2,082 precincts turn up, in the official record, as having some combination of illegal voting, suspicious annulment of ballots, and 95 percent or more of the vote going to the PRI (two or more of these commonly occurring together). Yet this is very likely only the tip of the iceberg. For every precinct in which the ballot-stuffers accidentally overshot the number of registered voters, in how many more must they have exercised greater caution, leaving no obvious trace of tampering? Poll 9-124 in Guadalupe, for example, does not look unusual in the official results: 509 votes cast out of 821 registered voters. Yet a reporter for Monterrey’s leading newspaper posted at its entrance counted only 315 persons entering to vote.

Only 50 of the obviously tainted precincts—those in which the number of votes exceeded the number of registered voters by more than 10 percent—were annulled by the authorities.

Yet according to independent state legislators, an emissary of governor-elect Sócrates Rizzo approached them with a curious offer just before the congress met as an electoral college to certify the results. If the independent legislators would agree to certify the election of Rizzo, making the decision unanimous, Rizzo would consent to the annulment
of 300 more precincts of their choosing. But there was a catch. The precincts were to be annulled only in the gubernatorial race, even though the congressional results show an almost identical pattern of irregularities. The political calculations behind the offer were obvious: Rizzo knew he could sacrifice 300 precincts without endangering his election as governor; yet such an alteration in the congressional count could cost him control of a couple of seats in the state legislature. With the PRI just one seat short of a two-thirds majority in Nuevo León, Rizzo’s avarice suggests anything but a commitment to political pluralism.

The independent legislators rejected Rizzo’s offer, and voted against certification of the elections. It was not until the day after the vote, and weeks after the deadline for filing appeals, that the deputies were provided with the copies of the official results—containing the poll-by-poll tallies—that are now in my possession.

On August 16 I flew to León, Guanajuato. The following day, at the conclusion of a press conference, I showed PAN gubernatorial candidate Vicente Fox the volume containing the gubernatorial results from Nuevo León, sharing my findings on the patterns of irregularities. Several of these were new to him, and, he said, reinforced his determination to challenge the validity of the precinct tally sheets, since fraud was obviously being incorporated into many of them. Fox’s staff later documented the same patterns of fraud in Guanajuato, finding more than 500 precincts in which more votes were cast than the number of registered voters, and a similar distribution of precincts with 100 percent votes for the PRI in rural districts.

At 4 am that night (election eve), I received a telephoned death threat. The caller assumed a false French accent. What little I was able to decipher was that he had killed before and would think nothing of killing again.

That morning—election day—an article on the first page of the state’s leading newspaper also gave me the jitters. Its lead sentence warned that “disguised as diplomats, journalists, political analysts, students, or tourists, hundreds of CIA agents…have been infiltrated into Mexico to observe the elections…in one of the largest intelligence operations carried out in this country in the last fifty years.”

The article was published the same morning in Mexico City, the other location most likely to be frequented by U.S. citizens observing the elections. Both its absurdity (for all his rhetoric about electoral fraud in Panama, President Bush has found it convenient to ignore fraud in Mexico) and its simultaneous publication in two unrelated newspapers (A.M. and La Jornada) suggest it may have been planted by the ministry of the interior in an effort to discourage international observation of the elections.

If so, it would highlight the interior minister’s peculiar dual role as chief enforcer of internal order and chief administrator of elections, a feature unique to Mexico among Latin nations. Then again, my observations suggest the dual role is not altogether inappropriate, given the fact that elections in Mexico seem intended more for social control than for popular influence on government.

After observing other Latin American elections over the past seven years, it is hard to take Mexico’s seriously. In most Latin American countries, elections are run by a separate fourth branch of government, with institutional safeguards to prevent any group
or party from securing majority control of the electoral machinery. Never, in the course of witnessing elections in countries with independent electoral authorities, have I encountered any of the aforementioned irregularities.

For last year’s Nicaraguan elections, for instance, the Supreme Electoral Council was composed of two magistrates selected by the ruling party, two selected by the opposition, and one considered impartial by both sides. This structure extended down to the precincts, where an officer (not just a poll watcher) in each location had to be nominated by the opposition. The government was so confident of the cleanliness of the electoral process that it invited the United Nations and the Organization of American States to send observation teams. We all know the outcome: Availing themselves of the secret ballot, a majority of Nicaraguans delivered a message they dared not confide to pollsters.

Similarly, it is interesting to note that the only Mexican state not controlled by the PRI—Baja California Norte—is also the only state the PRI could not pretend to win in elections otherwise characterized by countrywide clean sweeps.

As a result of my recent experience, I can now better sympathize with the Salinas administration’s reluctance to disclose poll-by-poll results nationwide, as well as its unwillingness to consider inviting U.N. and O.A.S. observation teams for the 1994 presidential and congressional elections. It does, after all, have a lot to hide.

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