Taking Away City Hall:
Reform Brings Reprisal in a Mexican Town

By Andrew Reding

Among our more serious national flaws is an often excessive pride, a pride that makes us exceptionally vulnerable to the flattery of foreign “friends” who deliberately indulge our narcissism. As dictators from the Somozas to the Shah of Iran and paramount Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping have sung Washington’s tune, we have been at pains to recognize faults in their leadership. Not until the Sandinistas, the Ayatollah, and Tiananmen Square jolted us into facing reality, did our government and mass media overcome their reluctance to see, hear, or speak any evil of “friends” who were either “fighting communism” or “instituting capitalist reforms.” Thus have we repeatedly become victims of our own willful illusions.

There are signs we are now repeating this pattern—this time next-door. We have long felt frustrated, if not insulted, by the jealously guarded nationalism of our Mexican neighbors, as expressed in their independent foreign policy and their reluctance to assimilate our economic and political cultures. Yet since the inauguration of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, much has changed. Salinas, who has a Ph.D. from Harvard, is privatizing the economy, harmonizing Mexican foreign policy with that of the United States, and proposing to set aside nationalist concerns altogether in favor of a free-trade agreement. So well does he speak our language that Washington and Wall Street have elevated him to the status of a model foreign leader, and are reluctant to take his promises—to modernize Mexican politics and root out corruption—at anything less than face value.

The view from Mexico, however, is sharply at odds with the reassuring rhetoric of its president. For while Salinas is vigorously pursuing economic reform, he is obstinately blocking political reform. Despite his promise of “clean elections,” the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) continues to monopolize the electoral machinery, the broadcast media, the army, and the police. This April, while our attention was on Soviet tank convoys in Lithuania, President Salinas ordered Mexican tanks into the west-central state of Michoacán, to recover town halls occupied by townspeople unwilling to accept electoral fraud.

Like the tanks in Tiananmen Square, the tanks in Michoacán are a reminder that political and economic liberalization are ultimately indivisible. The thwarting of democratic expression ends up jeopardizing economic reform as it leads to repression, reinforces corruption, and saps popular support and participation. These are the fruits of Salinas’ policies, as vividly exposed in the continuing ordeal of a Mexican town that was seemingly fortunate enough to have an opposition victory recognized by the government.

Aguililla—“Little Eagle” in Spanish—is a rural community in the Pacific range of Michoacán, one of the larger states of west central Mexico. Like most of rural Mexico, the region has been impoverished by government policies that have restricted credit,
education, and extension services to small landholders and cooperatives, and that have mandated artificially low prices for agricultural commodities. The results have been twofold. Migrants have streamed to the squatters’ belts that ring Mexican cities, and northward into the United States. Meanwhile, many of those who have managed to adapt and survive on the land have done so by shifting to cultivation of illegal, yet profitable, crops. Primary among these are marijuana and poppies, locally called the “holy herb” and “the little flowers of the fields,” by residents grateful to have been spared destitution. Yet, as always, the bulk of the economic benefits of clandestine cultivation has been concentrated among a few kingpins and corrupt local officials and police forces. In addition, the mafia-style organization of business has produced a climate of fear in which ordinary citizens neither dare speak freely nor leave their homes after nightfall. All of which was acceptable enough to Mexican authorities as long as the arrangement provided for a sort of rural peace, and as long as a share of the benefits flowed to the PRI and its enforcers.

Last December, however, there was an electoral revolution in Aguililla. Availing itself of the secret ballot, the citizenry removed the corrupt local PRI government that had, as it has in most of Mexico, ruled uninterrupted for half a century. By a landslide of more than three to one, they cast their ballots for the newly-formed Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), named after the earlier electoral revolution of July 6, 1988, in which party founder Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas is widely believed to have won the Mexican presidential election that the ruling party refused to recognize. Heading the local ticket was Salomón Mendoza, a besandalled papaya, corn, sorghum, and watermelon farmer who proposed to confront the municipality’s problems at their source. In accord with his party’s proposed national agricultural policy, the new municipal president argued for state and federal reinvestment in the long-neglected Mexican countryside. As a matter of local initiative, meanwhile, he was promoting the cultivation of legal crops with healthier profit margins, such as melons, as an alternative to narco-agriculture. Presumably, Mendoza would be precisely the kind of leader both Washington and Mexico City would want to encourage.

Only four months into his term, however, the soft-talking reformer with the gentle smile was imprisoned in Mexico City, in a tale that demonstrates the contradictions of the war on drugs, and, more broadly, U.S. perspectives on, and policies toward, Mexico.

The trouble began in mid-November, 1989, in the home stretch of the December 3 municipal elections. With the ruling PRI facing defeat, anti-narcotics agents of the Federal Judicial Police suddenly identified Aguililla as a problem area. In sweeps of the municipality, without any arrest warrants, they detained dozens of citizens—a violation of the Mexican Constitution. According to Proceso, the Mexican newsweekly, they also sacked the home of PRD leader Alma Griselda Valencia, removing her jewels, two cars, and a thousand dollars in cash, then peppered the house with gunfire. Outgoing PRI municipal president Marisela Torres, by contrast, was not even questioned about her reputed close ties to the local drug mafia and corrupt police forces, even though those ties are the talk of the town, and have contributed to the ruling party’s unpopularity.

Repeated protests, including a march led by Mendoza—in the state capital of Morelia some two hundred miles away—were to no avail. In the months following inauguration of the new PRD government, the Federal Judicial Police intensified their harassment of
the community. A series of raids, all conducted without any semblance of due process, created a climate of fear and resentment, and finally led to tragedy on May 5. On that day the accused citizens, who as in every other instance were alleged to be drug traffickers, defended themselves and killed at least three federal agents. By evening, the Federal Judicial Police had imposed upon the entire community a state of siege. According to the Mexico City daily newspaper *La Jornada*, several hundred heavily armed agents invaded the small community of 15,000, arresting over a hundred persons, including women and children, confiscating some 60 vehicles, and breaking into about a hundred homes without search warrants. Witnesses reported that agents beat to death a six-year-old boy named Miguel for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of his father.

The following day, when Mayor Mendoza again sought to protest the wholesale violation of citizens’ rights, he was himself detained by the Federal Judicial Police. He was taken to an army base, where he was beaten, then tied up and tortured into signing a confession that among his “campaign promises was that of protecting drug traffickers … which I did for the sole purpose of gaining supporters … and votes.” More than a month later, when I visited him in a Mexico City jail, his nose was still scarred from the beating. He described the method of torture as a *tehuacanazo*. Named after Mexico’s leading brand of sparkling water, the torture consists in forcing carbonated water, spiked with jalapeños, up the nasal passages. It is one of several means used by Mexican police to extract confessions, which are the customary basis for convictions in the Mexican judicial system.

Mayor Mendoza stands accused of stockpiling weapons and of possession of marijuana and cocaine—charges that could keep him locked up for life. According to the mayor’s wife, María, some 30 agents broke into their home four hours after he had left to present his formal protest. The agents deposited weapons and a handful of marijuana seed and cocaine, which they immediately photographed as evidence. The following day, four of them returned, this time with an entire bag of marijuana seed. In afterthought, it seems they had thought the initial planting inadequate. They left in haste when an agent who was keeping watch on the street warned of the approach of journalists. (The story was reported in *La Jornada*.)

In my interview with the mayor in Mexico City’s East Side Internment Center, where thousands of Mexico’s poor await almost certain conviction, he disclosed a further dimension of police terror. One of the atrocities he had gone to denounce was the widespread practice of raping women during raids. The victims had not publicized this, he explained, “because of the sense of shame associated with rape.” During his own initial detention, he continued, he heard the screams of a woman and two girls being tortured. He did not know the nature of their torture.

So extreme was the repression that Bishop Miguel Patiño of Apatzingán, ordinarily no friend of the PRD, issued a pastoral letter to be read in all parishes on Sunday, May 27, denouncing the state of “genuine terror” to which the community was subjected. “By conservative estimate,” the letter read, “more than a hundred persons were detained without legally-mandated warrants, among them women, children, and elders.” “Prominent among them,” the Bishop noted, “was the municipal president of Aguililla, who was arrested when he presented himself before the authorities to insist on the rights of those detained. The complaints of torture, mistreatment, breaking into homes without
search warrants, theft, extortion, etc., to which these persons were subjected are too numerous to doubt their truth. That most of these persons have since been released confirms their innocence.”

Mayor Mendoza doesn’t seem rancorous when he discusses his arrest: “I was seized purely for my involvement in the PRD; no other reason. As they were torturing me, the Federal Judicial Police told me ‘we are going to get rid of all cardenistas’”—a reference to sympathizers of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, national leader of the PRD. Mendoza notes that virtually all the other detainees are members of the PRD; none belong to the ruling party. Further supporting Mendoza’s contention is the lack of evidence that the anti-narcotics police made any move against the local drug lords who drive freely about town behind the smoked glass windows of their Cherokees and Cheyennes. Certainly none were arrested, according to Proceso.

That the persecution of the political opposition was being coordinated at the highest levels in Mexico City became apparent when one of the PRD’s national leaders was himself kidnapped after formally protesting the detention of Municipal President Mendoza. On May 9, federal Congressman Leonel Godoy (PRD, Michoacán) visited the office of Attorney General Enrique Alvarez del Castillo in Mexico City. Godoy confronted Deputy Attorney General Javier Coello with the accusation that fabricated charges had been made against members of his party. He also told Héctor Sandoval, commander of the Aguililla operation, “I will not rest until you are indicted.” Shortly after 11 p.m. that night, a black Ford Topaz without license plates stopped Godoy’s VW near the Observatory metro station. Four men with sub-machine guns ignored his protestations that he was a member of Congress, and made him lie face down in the back of the Topaz. “Do you think bullets don’t enter congressmen?,” one of them asked, according to Godoy.

The assailants then forced Godoy to enter the trunk of his own car and lay his head on a pillow, while they held a gun to his head. In a flash, he recognized they had placed him in the precise configuration in which the corpse of Francisco Ovando, Cárdenas’ electoral coordinator, had been found following an execution-style slaying three days before the 1988 presidential election. Godoy, as it turns out, had been asked by Cárdenas to investigate the Ovando assassination, which the government had dismissed as the work of petty thieves. Among his more important findings was that Ovando’s murderers had stolen the files he was carrying, containing the names and telephone numbers of Cárdenas’ independent vote-counting network. In a striking parallel, Godoy’s own assailants stole his car, and with it his files containing detailed documentation of abuses committed by the anti-narcotics police in Aguililla. As in many similar cases of assassination and intimidation of PRD leaders, there have been no arrests. No one expects any. More significant from the standpoint of the president’s relationship to these events is that there have been no dismissals, resignations, or investigations.

Opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, whose own son was the victim of a similar incident last December, says he does not know “which is more worrisome, that Salinas is not in control, or that he is ordering these things be done.” Supporters of Salinas, among them Wayne Cornelius of the University of California at San Diego, have tried to minimize the significance of repressive acts against the opposition, by arguing that they are being carried out by state and local branches of the ruling party. In this view,
conservatives entrenched within state party bureaucracies are trying to defend their vested interests, in defiance of the president’s intentions of reform. There are a couple of serious flaws in this argument. In the first place, one of Salinas’ earliest actions as president was to replace the sitting governor of Michoacán with his own man, Genovevo Figueroa. Second, the persons in operational control of the anti-narcotics agents—Attorney General Enrique Alvarez del Castillo and his deputy Javier Coello—were both appointed to their federal posts by Salinas.

In fact, it is possible that Salinas chose Alvarez and Coello precisely because they had established reputations as ruthless practitioners of la mano dura (the iron fist). This is not the first time that Attorney General Alvarez del Castillo has been accused of violent excesses by police forces under his jurisdiction. Alvarez was governor of the state of Jalisco when U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency officer Enrique (“Kiki”) Camarena was detained in front of the U.S. consulate in Guadalajara (the state capital) on February 7, 1985. Shortly thereafter, Camarena was tortured and killed by police acting on behalf of the Guadalajara drug mafia. Then on March 2, State of Jalisco riot police assisted Guadalajara-based Federal Judicial Police in a peculiar incursion into neighboring Michoacán. Without consulting any of the Michoacán authorities, they raided the “El Mareño” ranch on the Zamora-La Barca highway, killing its owner and one of his sons. Nearby, two other sons rushed home in the company of judicial police of the State of Michoacán. Federal police barred entry to the state police, but allowed the sons to pass, then shot both to death, according to Proceso. On March 5, they likewise denied entry to the governor of Michoacán when he arrived for a personal inspection.

That governor was Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who was at the time still a member of the PRI, albeit increasingly vocal in his criticisms of the party’s failure to uphold the Constitution and laws of Mexico, and its descent into antidemocratic and corrupt practices. Later on the day of his visit to “El Mareño,” Cárdenas placed an official spread in the national newspaper Excelsior, in which he denounced the gratuitous violence and arrogance of the forces answering to Attorney General Sergio García Ramírez and Governor Alvarez del Castillo, in addition to the violation of state sovereignty. “The lawless behavior,” he wrote, “of police units obligated and entrusted with providing protection to, and gaining the confidence of, society, makes an already difficult and complicated task all the more difficult.”

The next day local residents found two large plastic bags containing badly decomposed corpses, lying on the ground some 2,500 feet from the “El Mareño” ranch. There was no way to miss them: the stench was unbearable as far as 150 feet away. Leonel Godoy, who was then Deputy Attorney General of Michoacán, was dispatched to the site by Governor Cárdenas, together with a team of forensic experts. By comparing samples of earth found inside the bags with soil samples from the surroundings the experts established that the bodies could not have been buried nearby, as the federal Attorney General’s Office had initially tried to claim. The corpses, subsequently identified as those of Camarena and his Mexican pilot, had apparently been hastily planted on the site, in a crude attempt to deflect attention from Jalisco to Michoacán, and embarrass a governor who was already beginning to unsettle the system.

The following year, Cárdenas joined other would-be reformers within the ruling party in forming the Democratic Current, a movement aimed at democratizing the PRI from
within. One of their chief objectives was to have the PRI hold internal elections, as mandated in its own statutes. When President Miguel de la Madrid nonetheless proceeded, in the traditional manner, to hand-pick Carlos Salinas de Gortari as his successor, Cárdenas left the party to launch an independent candidacy for the presidency of Mexico. His grassroots campaign tapped into unanticipated levels of popular discontent. Despite his lack of funding and denial of television exposure, Cárdenas’ rallies grew larger than those of the government, culminating in a rally held in Mexico City’s central square that drew half a million wildly cheering supporters, and set off panic within the PRI. It was in this context that Cárdenas’ parallel vote count coordinator was assassinated.

On election night, as early returns showing Cárdenas in the lead began filtering into the capital, the brand-new computerized vote tabulation system suddenly went “down.” Parallel vote counts based on official tally sheets from the 55 percent of precincts in which the opposition was able to place poll watchers showed Cárdenas leading Salinas by a margin of four percentage points; to this day the government refuses to disclose results from the remaining 45 percent. Salinas was simply designated president-elect by the PRI-controlled Federal Electoral Commission, chaired by the country’s minister of the interior. Cárdenas, who continues to be received throughout most of the country as “the authentic president of Mexico,” then formed the Party of the Democratic Revolution, whose name alludes to the continuing campaign to establish the right of the Mexican people to choose their own government.

Oddly, Salinas continues to be portrayed in the U.S. as a reformer, despite the role he and his political allies played in blocking the Democratic Current’s proposed reforms within the PRI, despite strong evidence that he owes his own office to electoral fraud, and despite a repeated pattern of vote-stealing by his party in more recent state elections. Odd too, in view of his promotion of Enrique Alvarez del Castillo—recently linked to the Guadalajara drug mafia by a witness in the Los Angeles Camarena trial—to the position of Attorney General of the Republic.

The real reformers, meanwhile, are either in jail like Mayor Mendoza, subjected to police surveillance and intimidation like Congressman Godoy, or blocked by fraud from assuming the public offices to which they were elected, as is likely with Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and certain with hundreds of federal, state, and municipal candidates of his party.

One of the clearest signs of the times is the defection of the man the PRI itself chose to lead the fight against corruption. Shortly after former president Miguel de la Madrid took office in 1982, he appointed Samuel del Villar, a Harvard-educated lawyer and university professor, to direct an ambitious Moral Renovation campaign intended to cleanse the regime’s tarnished image. After some initial high-profile arrests, including that of the former police chief of Mexico City, del Villar ran into resistance as he probed too deeply into the power structure. His experience led him to conclude that Mexico’s one-party system could not be reformed from within. Rather than participate in a whitewash, he resigned.

Del Villar has since joined the inner circle of advisers to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas—in his judgment the person most capable of, and committed to, reforming Mexico. He sees a
parallel between the national reform efforts of Cárdenas and the local reform efforts of persons like Mayor Mendoza, who have been attracted to the PRD precisely because of Cárdenas’ personal integrity. “The eagle,” del Villar said [alluding to the Nahuatl meaning of Cuauhtémoc], “and the little eagle [Aguililla] are of the same species.” As secretary for legal affairs of the PRD, del Villar is coordinating Mendoza’s defense, though without illusions about the prospects for justice.

Mendoza’s continuing imprisonment, symbolizing as it does the fate of reform in Mexico, is also a disturbing reminder of our complacency as we persist in ignoring unsavory realities about our new Mexican friends. Were Mendoza Cuban, of course, his case would be championed on our evening news and on our editorial pages—to embarrass an enemy. Yet we would do well to recall how often our inattention to unpleasant details about our foreign friends has eventually led to our own embarrassment, if not to a policy nightmare. Panamanian General Manuel Noriega is but the most recent example.

Before we make our Mexican friendship more intimate and permanent by negotiating a free-trade agreement, we should begin asking some hard questions. Why, for instance, is the Mexican government imprisoning would-be Mexican reformers like Mendoza instead of drug traffickers? Why are agents of the Mexican Justice Department routinely engaging in torture, rape, illegal detention, and political persecution, despite President Salinas’ pledges to clean up corruption? Why do proven reformers, like Samuel del Villar, feel compelled to leave the government and join the opposition? If we cannot ask such questions of our friends, we may eventually find we do not need enemies.

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