His given name is that of Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec leader, who fought a desperate battle to head off the Spanish conquest of what is now Mexico City.

His surname is inherited from his father Lázaro, the most popular Mexican president of the twentieth century, revered for his land reforms and for nationalizing the oil fields.

Now, as though fulfilling an Aztec prophesy of cyclical return, another Cuauhtémoc with unmistakably native features has retaken this overwhelmingly brown-skinned city by storm. On July 6, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas won the first-ever election for mayor of one of the world’s largest cities in a landslide. With Cárdenas’ Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) also taking 38 of 40 legislative districts in the city, the Aztec sun—symbol of the PRD—has again risen over Mexico’s capital.

As Cárdenas’ sun rises, President Ernesto Zedillo’s star is falling. Halfway through a six-year term, and constitutionally ineligible to seek reelection, he becomes more of a lame duck with each passing month. His party—the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI)—is in decay as national and local elections have broken its 68-year monopoly on power. In the July elections, opposition parties won a majority of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, and enough Senate seats to deny the PRI its traditional two-thirds majority. Without a rubber-stamp Congress, Zedillo will also lose the almost unlimited informal powers of the presidency.

All this makes Cárdenas a lot more important than his formal title as governor of the Federal District would suggest. Though he will govern only the 8.5 million residents of the District, he is the symbolic leader of the metropolitan area, which extends into the neighboring states of Mexico and Morelos (where pluralities voted for the PRD), and is home to almost one in four Mexicans. Because of the extreme centralization of power in the presidency and in Mexico City, Cárdenas will be the second most powerful politician in Mexico. He will also be the most prominent opposition figure, setting him up to run for the presidency in the year 2000.

Just who is this tall, slim, dark-haired, soft-spoken 63-year-old who is about to tackle the seemingly impossible job of running Mexico City? What motivates his quest to return to Los Pinos, the presidential mansion in Chapultepec Park where he spent his early childhood? What are his political prospects? What are his visions for Mexico as it enters the twenty-first century? As the fates of the United States and Mexico become ever more intertwined through economic integration, and as Mexico’s old order continues to
disintegrate, we need to begin to understand this man with the Aztec name and why his vision of Mexico increasingly resonates among his compatriots.

Cárdenas: Image and Reality

Although he has been a prominent force in Mexican politics for the past decade, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solorzano remains an enigma. He is the son of Mexico’s most leftist president, yet never flirted with socialism. He’s a populist who is very much at ease among the poor, yet likes to wear Ralph Lauren shirts and two-piece suits with a trim, sporty cut reminiscent of Johnny Carson. He’s an ardent nationalist, but travels to the United States frequently to address influential foreign policy groups in fluent English. He served as a PRI governor and senator, but has become the PRI’s most implacable foe. He delivers his speeches in a professorial monotone, yet is Mexico’s most charismatic politician. He owes his popularity to the memory of his father, yet has become a popular icon in his own right.

Above all, while quintessentially Mexican in name, heritage, and appearance, he doesn’t seem to behave like a Mexican politician. A key aspect of Mexican political culture is recourse to negotiation. Absent a tradition of competitive elections and parliamentary give-and-take, Mexicans have had two choices to settle differences. One is violence. Much of Mexican history is stained with the blood of armed uprisings and political murder. The other option, raised to an art by the PRI, is to cut deals. Yet with only one party to the negotiations holding a monopoly on power and patronage, one of the prime casualties has been any sense of principle. Would-be reformers have repeatedly been coopted with government jobs and funds. Cárdenas was different. Though he allowed himself to be coopted in order to gain a foothold in the political system, he would ultimately use that foothold to build a new option for the peaceful resolution of disputes: democracy.

The First Campaign

Cárdenas began his political career as a priista. In 1973, in a move that prefigured his later run for the presidency, he launched an independent campaign for the PRI gubernatorial nomination in the western coastal state of Michoacán, challenging the handpicked candidate of President José Luis Echeverría (1970-1976). Though he could not hope to succeed without the presidential dedazo (“tap of the finger”), the strength of his challenge led President José López Portillo (1976-1982) to tap him, first with a senate seat, then appointment as undersecretary of agriculture for forestry and wildlife, and finally, in 1980, with the governorship of Michoacán.

Once in office, Cárdenas followed his own path. Unlike typical PRI governors who behave like the presidential appointees they in effect are, Cárdenas followed his father’s example of building a personal relationship with the citizenry. He barnstormed the state, getting on horseback to visit the more remote hamlets, and listened for hours on end to what his often astonished constituents had to say. He relaxed police controls on dissent. He recognized opposition victories at the polls. Then, bolstered by his popularity, he began challenging Mexico City. In a state of the state address, he scandalized the PRI establishment by criticizing President Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) for betraying the
legacy of the Revolution with economic policies that greatly lowered the living standards of most Mexicans.

Upon concluding his term in 1986, Cárdenas launched the revolt that would split the PRI and begin the transition to multi-party democracy. Pointing to party statutes that called for democratic selection of candidates by the rank and file, he organized the Democratic Current to push for reform within the PRI. Stymied in that effort by the party’s so-called reformers, he quit the PRI in 1987 and ran for president in 1988, transferring his quest for democracy to the wider political system. On election night, with preliminary returns showing Cárdenas leading PRI candidate Carlos Salinas, officials interrupted the computerized count. More than a week later, after piles of Cárdenas ballots were found in singed heaps along roadsides and in soggy bales floating down rivers, the authorities declared Carlos Salinas president-elect.

The expectation was that Cárdenas would negotiate for Cabinet posts and Senate seats for his followers in exchange for a recognition of the Salinas presidency. Instead, he stood firm, saying he would not negotiate the will of the people. It was a costly stance. Infuriated by the snub, President Salinas entered into an informal alliance with the center-right National Action Party (PAN), and persecuted Cárdenas’ newly formed PRD. While conceding control of Baja California to the PAN in 1989, Salinas resorted to electoral fraud backed by army tanks to impose PRI rule in Michoacán, where the PRD similarly won a statewide election.

**Mano Dura**

While panistas got the kid glove treatment, perredistas got mano dura, the iron fist. The PRD maintains a list of several hundred party members killed during the Salinas sexenio, beginning with Cárdenas’ campaign manager. Cárdenas’ own son was held at knife point in Mexico City, and instructed to deliver a warning to his father. None of this was widely known outside Mexico, where Salinas was by now being lionized as a reformer.

There was little to smile about, and it was in this period that Cárdenas acquired a reputation as a humorless sourpuss. With his supporters being shot and jailed, with his every move being watched, with elections being stolen, the face he presented to the press in news conferences was one of sorrow and disgust. Television news, under the control of the pro-PRI Televisa monopoly, skillfully counterposed those images to those of a beaming Salinas, winning unqualified praise from foreign leaders as he launched economic reforms and the negotiations that would lead to the North American Free Trade Agreement.

As a frequent member of Cárdenas’ entourage in those days, I saw a different side. At home with his wife Celeste, his sons Lázaro (now a newly-elected congressman from Michoacán) and Cuauhtémoc, and his daughter Camila, he was relaxed and affectionate. On the road, among friends and supporters, his good humor would invariably return. He smiled and laughed frequently, gamely downed shots of tequila at fiestas, beamed and waved as townsfolk showered confetti on him, and could be quite the tease. On an election swing through the Pacific coast state of Nayarit, he poked merciless fun at my hesitation to eat the local oysters.
The Jovial Politician

That Cárdenas now shows his jovial side in public is less a tribute to his public relations consultants, whom he tends not to heed anyway, than to radically changed circumstances. Arch adversary Carlos Salinas, now the most vilified political figure in Mexico, is in exile. After years of being dismissed as little more than a sore loser unable to adjust to changing circumstances, Cárdenas has been vindicated. He has had a lot to smile about in the past year, and that smile—amplified by television—has contributed to his soaring popularity.

So has his tenaciousness—a trait his admirers see as a sign of adherence to principle, his detractors as stubbornness and inflexibility. Normally, politicians are rewarded for their ability to bend with the political winds. President Bill Clinton is a classic example. Yet in traumatic times, nations often turn to leaders with vision and backbone. The trauma of slavery gave us Lincoln, the Great Depression, FDR. Faced with the twin plagues of endemic corruption and economic ruin for the ordinary citizen, more and more Mexicans are looking for a leader with similar resolve.

For the time being, that is transforming what had been Cárdenas’ greatest liabilities into prime assets. Just three years ago, with NAFTA freshly implemented, and President Clinton sponsoring the candidacy of Carlos Salinas to become the first head of the World Trade Organization, Cárdenas’ denunciations of the corruption of the Salinas administration, and his warnings that NAFTA would not benefit most Mexicans, fell flat. Cárdenas finished a poor third in the 1994 presidential election. But with the subsequent collapse of the peso and revelations that Salinas’ brother had spirited hundreds of millions of dollars into foreign bank accounts and masterminded a political assassination, Cárdenas’ warnings now seem prophetic.

There are two other reasons for the turnaround in Cárdenas’ fortunes. One is electoral reform. This year’s election was the first to be conducted by a fully independent Federal Electoral Institute, no longer chaired by the minister of the interior. It was also the first election in which the opposition received enough public financing to mount serious mass media campaigns. With the PRD finally able to purchase substantial amounts of television advertising, it was at last able to reach voters directly, uncensored by networks otherwise partial to the PRI.

The other reason is the organizational genius who now runs the PRD. Until last year, the party had floundered under a succession of leaders who were more interested in political maneuvering and intellectual sparring than in building a nationwide party structure. That changed abruptly last year, with the landslide election of Andrés Manuel López Obrador as president of the PRD. López Obrador had previously been party chief in the southern state of Tabasco, where he built a grassroots organization that converted the PRD from a marginal party to a serious statewide contender, even as the party’s national fortunes declined.

In the past year, López Obrador has applied his organizational skills tirelessly, creating a nationwide network of “sun brigades” (named for the party’s Aztec sun symbol) that have gone door to door to deliver the PRD’s message. The strategy worked brilliantly in the midterm elections, allowing the PRD to make substantial inroads in states like Sonora where it had heretofore received virtually no support. López Obrador is to the PRD what
James Carville was to Bill Clinton in 1992. He is also a key to Cárdenas’ presidential prospects.

**What Cárdenas stands for**

It is commonplace to hear Cárdenas described as a courageous, headstrong, even principled leader, but one without a compelling vision of Mexico’s future. There is an unstated premise behind this judgment—that economic reform outweighs political reform as the most important factor in assuring long-term stability and prosperity. That premise, which undergirded the policies of the Salinas presidency, is now widely discredited in Mexico, and with good reason.

Mexico has one of the most unequal distributions of wealth and income in the world. Particularly in the densely populated rural areas of central and south Mexico, the country retains a social structure inherited from the time of the Spanish conquest. Most of Mexico’s indigenous peoples are almost entirely outside the formal economy and subjected to racism, discrimination, and repression by local PRI caciques (“chiefs”), by the police, and by the army. In this very unequal and unfree social context, free markets tend to accentuate rather than moderate discrepancies in wealth and power. That is the clear lesson of a decade of economic liberalization, which has seen the number of billionaires multiply while real wages have plummeted.

All along, Cárdenas has seen the challenge of modernizing Mexico to be primarily political. Like his father before him, he believes the essential condition for a stable and prosperous Mexico is to empower the powerless. For Lázaro Cárdenas, dealing with a still overwhelmingly agrarian society, that meant land reform. For Cuauhtémoc, confronting a still tragically dysfunctional social structure in which the rural poor are migrating to vast urban slums, empowerment means taking advantage of the one realm in which the poor are equal to the rich—when they cast their ballots—to ensure that their interests will begin to be felt in Mexico City.

Cárdenas is frequently criticized for not having a workable economic blueprint for Mexico. It’s a fair criticism but misses the point. Cárdenas’ vision for Mexico is political, not economic. He sees that the pervasive corruption that afflicts Mexican institutions has little to do with economic models, and everything to do with a closed political system and a dysfunctional social structure. The critical question is not whether Mexico’s economic resources are run by government bureaucrats as a source of graft and patronage, or by billionaire businessmen with sweetheart ties to PRI power brokers and foreign bank accounts. Either way, those resources are doing little to benefit the majority of the population. That in turn tends to destabilize the country.

**Democratic Accountability**

There is only one route to genuine reform in Mexico: democratic accountability. Cárdenas’ genius is to recognize that the ballot box is the key to all other reforms. Competitive elections create checks and balances on arbitrary rule. They promote alternation in office and enable citizens to cashier corrupt politicians. They reinforce separation of powers, as a more independent legislature investigates and checks abuses of the executive, and help assure a more independent judiciary. They also help ensure
representation of every sizable segment of the population in the legislature, helping make sure their interests are not overlooked as economic policies are conceived and carried out.

In Mexico, which has never before experienced a competitive election, and has never seen a peaceful transition of executive power between opposing forces, the outcome of the 1996 midterm elections marks the beginning of a democratic revolution arguably more important than the Revolution of 1910. And though President Ernesto Zedillo is getting much of the credit for the electoral reforms that made this possible, it is really Cárdenas and the PRD who brought them about.

Following the fraud-tainted 1988 presidential election, President Carlos Salinas struck a deal with the leadership of the PAN. In return for recognition of PAN electoral wins in the border states of Baja California and Chihuahua, he won endorsement of a series of pseudo reforms. These left the minister of the interior in charge of elections, ensured ruling party control of Congress even if it did not win a majority of the vote, and allowed the PRI a crushing advantage in campaign financing and television exposure. In 1991, PAN parliamentary coordinator (later presidential candidate) Diego Fernández de Cevallos joined with the PRI leadership in voting to burn the impounded but unscrutinized ballots from the disputed 1988 presidential election.

The PRD, on the other hand, held out for genuine reform. Resisting electoral fraud, its partisans seized town halls throughout much of Mexico, paying for their nonviolent protests with jail, torture, and, in many cases, their lives. Just as U.S. civil rights laws emerged from a long campaign of protest and civil disobedience, so did Mexico’s electoral laws.

By the time President Zedillo agreed to the key electoral reforms proposed by the PRD, it was his only realistic alternative. It was early 1995, right after the collapse of the peso and of the Salinas myth. The rookie president, a Salinas protégé, was in the fight of his political life, as rumors of his imminent demise circulated around Mexico City. If he was to restore legitimacy to a critically wounded presidency, he would have to make meaningful concessions to the opposition. Backed into a corner, he made concessions, some of which he later reneged on. Yet it was the single-minded persistence of the PRD, led by Cárdenas, that forced his hand.

As it has turned out, Cárdenas has been the major beneficiary of the reforms, winning him the governorship and his party an absolute majority of seats in the Representative Assembly of the Federal District. All of Mexico will be watching what he does next. His adversaries hope he will stumble as he is forced to face the city’s staggering problems—an almost daily pall of toxic air pollution, an impending water shortage, a soaring crime rate, and millions of unemployed or underemployed migrants from the countryside. Yet all he has to do to turn the situation to his advantage is show that he can do a substantially better job of managing the chaos than his PRI predecessors, all of whom were presidential appointees and protégés.

The Cost of a Subway Ticket

Cárdenas’ record as governor of Michoacán suggests what will be at least part of his strategy in the Federal District. He will make frequent visits to the city’s colonias, especially the poorer ones, to hear residents talk about their problems. He will act to curb
corruption and human rights violations in the city’s police force, which _chilangos_ (residents of Mexico City) like to say they fear more than the criminals. He will relax police controls on demonstrations. He is also likely to demonstrate his concern for the poor by subsidizing and regulating the price of basic services—the cost of a ticket on the city’s gleaming orange subway trains, for example.

It remains to be seen how far Cárdenas is willing to go to bring past abuses to account. He has sought to reassure the government employees he will soon oversee by saying he is confident that they are on the whole honest and competent, and that he will not engage in witch hunts. Yet if he is to have any success in curtailing police abuses, he will have to launch investigations and prosecutions in order to signal an end to impunity. That can be done in either of two ways. He could order new investigations of some of the most prominent unsolved murders, such as the 1988 election-eve assassination of his campaign manager. That would endear him to his supporters, but would strike fear throughout the PRI establishment, which will be seeing this as an indication of what to expect from a Cárdenas presidency. Alternatively, he could put the police on notice that any abuses occurring after he takes office will be vigorously investigated and prosecuted.

In order to be able to do that, though, he will need to reorganize the police. Since the police do not have the training and equipment to conduct serious criminal investigations, the creation of a crack new investigative unit will be necessary. But it won’t be easy. Given the lack of such capabilities even at the federal level, it may mean having to seek assistance from abroad (perhaps from Spain), which could offend nationalist sensibilities. But such a unit, backed by the political will to apply its findings to prosecutions, is necessary if Cárdenas is to begin to solve the problems of corruption and violation of citizens’ rights.

A serious criminal investigation capability would also enable Cárdenas to demilitarize the police. President Zedillo, who has been unwilling to confront corruption head on, has instead replaced civilian police commanders with military officers. An army general now commands Mexico City’s police, and soldiers on administrative leave are patrolling the streets. Yet all that does is entrust the maintenance of public order to an institution that is even less accountable to the public than the police, and just as corrupt.

Another problem Cárdenas is certain to confront is pollution. Set in a 1.5-mile-high valley ringed by mountains, Mexico City’s already thin air is subject to almost continuous thermal inversions that trap automotive exhausts and factory effluents in a thick, poisonous smog. Ozone levels are among the world’s highest. To reduce air pollution, Cárdenas proposes a coordinated series of measures designed to reduce exhausts and encourage greater reliance on public transportation. He would require the use of catalytic converters on automobiles, convert buses to compressed natural gas, and invest heavily in improvements to the subway system. He also wants to implement mandatory recycling to address the city’s colossal solid waste disposal problem. As a professional planner who studied in France, Germany, and Italy, and once headed the Inter-American Planning Society, Cárdenas will be unusually qualified to take on such tasks.

Nevertheless, Cárdenas will face serious constraints as governor of the Federal District. Since economic policy is a federal prerogative, he will be unable to meaningfully address
the economic hardships that afflict most Mexicans, including residents of the capital. He will also have to submit his budget to the president of the Republic, who will in turn submit it to Congress, not to the District’s own legislature, whose powers are similarly circumscribed. By law, he is not even able to appoint the police chief and district attorney.

But Cárdenas has already persuaded President Zedillo to allow him to choose those officials (not a hard sell, since Zedillo would otherwise continue to be blamed for police corruption). He will also have at his disposal a $4.6 billion budget, about four times the amount allocated to the Office of the Presidency. If he can use these powers and funds to visibly reduce Mexico City’s smog, and turn the nation’s capital into something of a showcase for the rule of law, he will be seen as a leader capable of ushering in a stable, modern, and democratic Mexico. That would gain him support in the business community and among the middle class, essential elements in any strategy to win the presidency.

**Unprecedented Inquiries**

As Cárdenas readily acknowledges, he will, at least at first, have to concentrate all his efforts on the Federal District. To the extent that he is able to point to a record of achievement in the Federal District, however, it will have national repercussions. Given the dimensions and complexity of the problems facing the capital—overpopulation, traffic congestion, air pollution, looming water shortages, high crime levels, corruption, poverty—any meaningful sign of improvement will be widely interpreted to mean that Cárdenas is presidenciable.

In the event, Cárdenas will be ideally situated—geographically and politically—to address national issues. Cárdenas’ center-left PRD will, for the first time, be the leading opposition party in the Chamber of Deputies, holding 125 of 500 seats. The National Action Party (PAN), representing the center-right, will have another 122. The Green Ecologist Party will have 8 seats, the leftist Workers’ Party 6. Despite wide ideological disparities, these parties will converge around the need to check the power of the PRI. Gone are the days of the PRI legislative aplanadora (steamroller), when several hundred obedient deputies in gray suits would raise their hands on cue, in an authoritarian parody of parliamentary procedure.

Deprived of his congressional rubber stamp, President Ernesto Zedillo will lose most of his informal powers. In a system centered on presidencialismo—the unquestioned authority of the chief executive—that in itself will be nothing less than revolutionary. With the PRI also losing its two-thirds majority in the Senate, the president will lose his accustomed prerogative to amend the Constitution at will. Nominations to the Supreme Court will, for the first time, require support from opposition parties, which, over time, will lead to a more independent judiciary.

The Chamber of Deputies will begin using its heretofore-dormant powers to launch unprecedented inquiries into official corruption. That could begin to make life more difficult for Mexico’s hitherto untouchable narcotics barons. The secret to their spectacular success in recent years has been the protection they have enjoyed from key PRI power brokers and government officials. Among those suspected of receiving protection money from the cartels is Raúl Salinas, the brother of the former president.
The new Chamber of Deputies will also begin questioning economic policies that have created a record number of billionaires while plunging a majority of Mexicans—particularly those with darker skin—deeper into poverty. Congressional committees are likely to probe the details of sweetheart deals under which President Salinas transferred the largest and most valuable state enterprises to private businesses owned by friends and campaign contributors.

Another likely area of reform is labor law. A pillar of PRI rule has been the party’s control over trade unions, and a labor law that gives the government wide discretionary power to block formation of independent unions and to ban strikes. With the recent death of Fidel Velásquez, the 97-year-old head of the Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM) who ensured a docile labor force for half a century, reformers now have an opportunity to create a modern free labor movement that could help reverse declines in real wages.

These are all Cárdenas’ issues. Moreover, the string of revelations of official corruption that are sure to dominate the headlines as Congressional committees probe ties between politicians and their favored businessmen and narcotics kingpins will tend to confirm what Cárdenas has been saying all along about the PRI, and, more particularly, about its self-described “reformers.”

For Cárdenas to repeat his Mexico City electoral triumph at the national level, he will have to win over the same groups of voters he courted so successfully in the capital. One of those groups consists of traditional PRI voters, including bureaucrats, teachers, union members, and their families. Since the PRD occupies the same center-left portion of the political spectrum as the PRI, the most natural migration path of the latter as their party disintegrates is toward the PRD. Another key group consists of citizens who despise the PRI and will vote for whoever has the best chance of defeating it.

Significantly, these groups have already altered the balance of power in Mexico’s heartland. In the July 1997 elections for the Chamber of Deputies, the PRD won all but one seat in the Federal District and most of the seats in neighboring Morelos and Michoacán, and came in a close second in Guerrero and the state of Mexico.

If Cárdenas and his allies can extend this pattern across other PRI strongholds in southern and central Mexico, the PRD will become Mexico’s leading political force, and Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas will return to his childhood home in Chapultepec Park, this time as president of a democratic Mexico.

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