MEXICO: THE CRUMBLING OF THE "PERFECT DICTATORSHIP"

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The November 1990 meetings between Presidents George Bush and Carlos Salinas de Gortari in Monterrey reflected the web of contradictions that enmesh U.S.-Mexican relations today. Only a week earlier, Mexico's long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) had announced an implausible clean sweep of all 34 legislative districts in the state of Mexico, where only two years before opposition leader Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas had beaten Salinas in a two-to-one landslide.

The elections in the state of Mexico had been the first test of the Salinas administration's much-vaunted electoral reform legislation,[1] and even ordinarily sympathetic foreign observers quickly concluded that Salinas had flunked. According to the *New York Times*, "the huge pluralities, 90 percent in many cases, suggest[ed] systematic electoral fraud."[2] Across the Atlantic, the *Economist* argued that "Mr. Salinas cannot separate political from economic reform. If he is truly trying to do both at once, he would do well to encourage international supervision of the elections that he says are no longer fraudulent."[3]

Curiously, President Bush, who had earlier insisted on free elections in Nicaragua and had used the fraudulent 1989 Panamanian elections as a justification for invasion, kept his silence on Mexico's electoral fraud. Moreover, he chose that critical moment to reemphasize his close ties with President Salinas and to reward the Mexican government with a $5.6 billion loan guaranteed by the Export-Import Bank. Bush also used the Monterrey summit to restate his proposal for a hemispheric free-trade zone, beginning with a free-trade agreement with Salinas's Mexico that would serve as both the model and gateway for Latin American economic integration with the United States.

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A free-trade agreement would be the international equivalent of an engagement, with the possibility of a common-market marriage down the road. And Bush is in a hurry. He has asked Congress for "fast-track" approval, which would rule out attaching any amendments intended to condition an agreement on adherence by both parties to international standards for free elections and human rights. Though the "fast track" is intended to prevent negotiations from falling prey to special interest groups, the issues of democracy and human rights are of *general*, not special, interest; and there are strong reasons why they should be taken more seriously in the present context. With the collapse of communist and other authoritarian systems from Mongolia to Chile, Mexico's one-party rule is increasingly seen both at home and abroad as anachronistic and indefensible. Twice last year, Mexico was subjected to unprecedented international criticism of its electoral practices by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the Organization of American States (OAS).[4] This did not deter Bush from meeting with Salinas in, of all places, the state of Nuevo León, which the OAS commission had specifically criticized the previous month for its electoral abuses.[5]

Mexicans and foreigners alike are increasingly viewing Mexico's *presidencialismo* as a de facto form of dictatorship. Although the Mexican constitution provides for a U.S.-style separation of powers, the country's political culture has long centered on an absolutist presidency. Mexican presidents select and remove senators, Supreme Court justices, and governors at will through staged elections, rubber-stamp ratifications, and letters of "resignation." Presidents designate their successors by *dedazo* ("tap of the finger"), and the PRI is itself little more than a projection of presidential power. Strictly speaking, Mexican presidents are "rulers having absolute authority and supreme jurisdiction over the government of a state," as the dictionary defines a dictator.

A few years ago, such a characterization would have been unthinkable to most Mexicans. The president, not unlike the Aztec emperors whose virtues are extolled to every grade-school student, was seen as the embodiment of Mexican nationhood and a bulwark against foreign domination. Moreover, the working classes saw the president as a powerful mediator capable of checking the avarice of the rich through land reform and legislation that protected labor rights.

This view of the president has changed dramatically in recent years as Mexico's neoliberal presidents—Miguel de la Madrid Hurtado (1982–1988) and Carlos Salinas—abandoned the country's traditional independent foreign policy and aligned themselves instead with Ronald Reagan and George

Bush, declared an end to land reform, and pursued economic policies that reduced real wages by 60 percent over the past decade. When Mexicans struck back at the polls in the July 1988 presidential elections, the government resorted to wholesale fraud to maintain its grip on the presidency and subsequently on state and local offices. Recurrent fraud has in turn fueled a growing demand for genuine democracy among Mexicans.

The depth of that demand was apparent in the popular reaction last August to an extraordinary breach of media security that seriously embarrassed the regime. On August 30, poet Octavio Paz invited like-minded neoliberal intellectuals to participate in a forum on the demise of communism and triumph of democratic, free-market systems, which was shown live on Televisa, the nominally private but exclusively *priista* (dominated by the PRI) television channel. To Paz's consternation, Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, whose own neoliberal credentials are beyond reproach, instead chose to focus on Salinas's Mexico, describing it as the "perfect dictatorship":

> The perfect dictatorship is not communism, not the Soviet Union, not Cuba, but Mexico, because it is a camouflaged dictatorship. It may not seem to be a dictatorship, but has all the characteristics of dictatorship: the perpetuation, not of one person, but of an irremovable party, a party that allows sufficient space for criticism, provided such criticism serves to maintain the appearance of a democratic party, but which suppresses by all means, including the worst, whatever criticism may threaten its perpetuation in power.[6]

Vargas Llosa broke off his visit to Mexico the following day, citing an "unexpected family matter" and leaving behind a phrase—"perfect dictatorship"—that has since become a cliché in Mexico.

The very popularity of that phrase, however, is itself a clear sign that the "perfect dictatorship" is no longer so perfect. (For when the dictatorship was in fact perfect, almost no one perceived it as a dictatorship.) That the critical analysis of a foreigner should be so enthusiastically endorsed by nationalistic Mexicans suggests the extent to which a new political culture is emerging in Mexico. Large and growing segments of civil society as well as of Mexico's two largest opposition parties—the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) and the National Action Party (PAN)—support this new political culture.

Formed in the crucible of resistance to electoral fraud and repression, this new political culture is centered on respect for democracy and human rights, and thus has a vision radically different from the ruling neoliberal vision. These two visions are in conflict today, and the future of Mexico's

political system is at stake in their struggle. In order to avoid misreading Mexican reality, we need to understand both the nature of that conflict and the ways in which the issue of Mexican democracy affects U.S.-Mexican relations.

The Limits of Institutional Reform

That Salinas should find himself criticized by even some of his fellow neoliberals is a measure of the contradictions in his program. Liberals—whatever their stripe—are supposed to uphold all individual freedoms, be they economic or political. Yet while boldly opening Mexico's economy, Salinas has just as decisively limited political rights.

This is not a comfortable dichotomy, and there is reason to believe Salinas originally intended a different outcome. During the 1988 presidential campaign, he complained that the PRI had in the past been "scraped by the electoral lance" (an elliptical allusion to fraud), thereby denying its candidates "unobjectionable triumphs." To avoid a recurrence, his transition team prepared a U.S.-style computerized vote tabulation system to provide instantaneous returns over national television.

Unfortunately, the experiment in "transparency" backfired. When early returns on election night showed Cárdenas in the lead, the system went dead. Results were instead tabulated the old-fashioned way. After a week's delay in which Cárdenas ballots were found floating down rivers and smoldering in roadside bonfires, the Federal Electoral Commission released the official results: Salinas had won slightly more than 50 percent of the vote. But the commission would not disclose details, and to this day the precinct tallies remain a state secret.

By so nakedly imposing a fraudulent transition, the outgoing and incoming presidents greatly diminished the prestige of the presidency. The "perfect dictatorship" became less perfect, its authoritarian features all too visible. Cárdenas's refusal to play by the old rules, whereby he might have recognized a Salinas presidency in exchange for more favorable treatment of his coalition in the Senate and at the state and local levels, closed the circle. It effectively split the institution of the presidency, leaving Salinas with the power but Cárdenas with most of its charismatic mantle. By insisting on constitutional propriety, Cárdenas directly challenged the absolutist presidency, the foundation of the regime. The very name of Cárdenas's new party—the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which refers to the "democratic revolution" initiated with the July 1988 federal elections—underscored that challenge.

The PRD's call for a revolutionary change in the way Mexico is governed has, in effect, transformed every election in which it participates into a referendum on authoritarian rule. Not coincidentally, the government has barred the country's largest opposition party from gaining control of any state government and has had to resort to massive fraud to prevent it from securing electoral victories in such PRD strongholds as Michoacán, Guerrero, and the state of Mexico. Conversely, Salinas's only notable concession to democracy was his recognition of the July 1989 election of Ernesto Ruffo—a member of the PAN who does not challenge the president's legitimacy—as governor of Baja California Norte.

Until recently, Salinas's apologists could argue that electoral fraud was the work either of overzealous but misguided subordinates, or of entrenched state and local party bosses trying to protect their power bases and sabotage reform. The Salinas administration's overhaul of Mexico's electoral legislation, however, has now revealed the true colors of the regime's self-described reformers. Last April, the PRI-dominated Congress amended the constitution, preparing the way for the new Federal Code of Electoral Procedures and Institutions, which was enacted in August. Far from demonstrating a commitment to democratic change, the new legislation reflects a pervasive distrust of democracy, a continuing obsession with the trauma of 1988, and a determination to reconstruct the damaged foundations of *presidencialismo*.

With the changes, Mexico continues to have one of the hemisphere's most antidemocratic electoral systems. Although the discredited Federal Electoral Commission has been renamed the General Council of the Federal Electoral Institute, the president and his party still designate an automatic majority of its members. What's more, the council continues to be chaired by the secretary of government. This position, equivalent to minister of the interior in other countries, is currently held by Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios, who directed the Federal Security Directorate during the 1968 massacre of hundreds of unarmed students in Mexico City's Tlatelolco Square. Cuba is the only other Latin nation that maintains such a tight grip on the electoral apparatus.

In marked contrast with other Latin nations, Mexico still retains its week-long delay in announcing election results.[7] As dramatized by the 1988 presidential election, that waiting period has traditionally been used to alter unfavorable tallies. The government argues that such a delay is warranted because of the enormous size of the country and its many remote communities. Yet Brazil and Peru, which arguably have more difficult ter-

rain and more primitive communications, have produced overnight results, as did Nicaragua in its February 1990 elections.

Mexico has also preserved its "governability clause," which epitomizes the concept of "perfect dictatorship." Under Article 54 of the constitution, the 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies (the lower house, which is equivalent to the U.S. House of Representatives) are divided into two groups. Three hundred deputies are elected from single-member congressional districts, as in the United States. The remaining 200 seats are divided among representatives of the various political parties in proportion to their share of the national vote. This assures representation of all parties that receive at least 1.5 percent of the vote.

To prevent such pluralism from interfering with presidential authority, however, the constitution also stipulates that the party that wins a plurality of the 300 district seats and at least 35 percent of the vote has an automatic right to an "absolute majority" of the 500 seats in the chamber.[8] This arrangement provides a semblance of pluralism while denying it in substance. By safeguarding one-party rule, the governability clause (or "security lock," as it is known) also undermines the constitutional principle of separation of powers. The only other Latin American country to have had such a lock on the legislature was Paraguay under Gen. Alfredo Stroessner. When the dictator-president was overthrown a few years ago, Paraguay's governability clause was likewise removed.

Some of the other so-called electoral reforms have also served to tighten the PRI's grip on the government and electoral apparatus. Not only does the new law strengthen the governability clause, but it also prevents a recurrence of Cárdenas's 1988 electoral alliance by prohibiting any party from "nominating the candidate of another party." To forestall public protests against fraud, such as marches and occupations of town halls, Article 38 forbids "any act whose intention or result is to disturb public order . . . or impede the regular functioning of government institutions," and subjects violators to stiff fines.

The Salinas administration portrays its "electoral reform" to foreign leaders and journalists as an enlightened piece of legislation that furthers the cause of democracy in Mexico. In a recent interview in *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Salinas spoke glowingly of the new legislation. He explained, for example, that under the new code, a "General Council of the Federal Electoral Institute was created that includes six politically independent 'counsellor-magistrates' which the president nominates, but which must be approved by two-thirds of the Congress," as well as "a new independent Federal Electoral Tribunal," whose members "are also proposed

by the president and must be approved by two-thirds of the Congress." Salinas stressed that "since no single party has two-thirds of the congressional seats, the different parties have to get together either to approve, or reject, the members of the General Council and the Tribunal."[9]

Salinas's remarks are a fascinating example of the subtle camouflage used to dress de facto dictatorship in the garments of constitutional democracy. As amended, the constitution indeed states that the six counsellor-magistrates of the council and five magistrates of the tribunal must be approved by a two-thirds vote of the Chamber of Deputies. But it goes on to say that if they are not elected on the first ballot, they are to be chosen by lottery from the list of nominees submitted by the president—an important caveat that Salinas conveniently neglects to mention. Regardless of what happens, the president prevails, so that the counsellor-magistrates and magistrates are in effect presidential appointees.

In place of reform, Salinas offers these and other sleights of hand. Were he serious about establishing a "transparent" electoral system in Mexico, he would not need to look far afield for models. In Costa Rica, the three magistrates of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal are appointed by the Supreme Court. In Nicaragua, the Supreme Electoral Council is a fourth branch of government. Two of its five magistrates are drawn from the party in office; another two from opposition parties; and the fifth must be a prominent citizen known to be independent of all parties. The problem with such systems is that they work, as demonstrated by the outcome of last year's presidential election in Nicaragua. That makes them appealing to the opposition but unthinkable to the Mexican government.

The Modernization of Fraud

Blocking the electoral advance of the PRD has required a vast expansion of the scale and means of fraud. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Michoacán, the home state of Cárdenas. The state favored Cárdenas over Salinas by a three-to-one margin in 1988, and both of its senators and 12 of its 13 federal deputies belong to the PRD. If Mexico were a genuine democracy, the state would be written off to the PRD, at least for the time being. But the logic of dictatorship is different.

Cárdenas, while sticking scrupulously to the letter of the law, has broken all the unwritten rules that form the foundation of Mexico's authoritarian system. The PRD has pledged to enact reforms that will dismantle the ruling party's control over the police, the press, television, labor unions, agrarian reform communities, and elections should it gain control over

the state. The example could be contagious, in the same sense that the Lithuanian declaration of independence precipitated similar declarations from other Soviet republics. Since such a precedent must be avoided at all costs, the PRI has been unrelenting in its efforts to keep the PRD from expanding its base in Michoacán.

In the July 1989 elections for the state congress, the PRD was able to document that it had won 14 of 18 legislative districts. Yet the PRI-dominated state electoral commission, using clumsily altered tally sheets, granted 12 districts to the PRI.[10] Had the popular will been respected, the PRD would have been able not only to pass laws, but also amend Michoacán's constitution. The next crisis came in December 1989, with elections in the state's 113 municipalities. This time the PRD was able to document clear wins in at least 59 municipalities, including the capital and almost all the larger towns. Yet the state electoral commission again altered the results, nullifying the PRD win in Uruapan, the state's second largest city, and splitting the remaining towns with the opposition. Since municipalities have limited constitutional authority, less was at stake, and the PRI could afford to be more generous. What it could not concede was the loss of a majority of municipalities to the opposition.

That created a new crisis in June 1990 with the special election in Uruapan. A loss here would leave the PRI one municipality short of a majority, thus crossing a dangerous psychological threshold. Yet the traditional means of fraud had proved inadequate on the first try. To prevail in such hostile territory (the PRI first lost Uruapan in 1968), the government perfected a new form of fraud. First, it conducted door-to-door public opinion surveys in conjunction with a new electoral census. Then, by manipulating the town's computerized electoral records, it was able to reshape the electorate, adding thousands of PRI voters to the rolls and subtracting thousands of opposition voters. Where the PRI had lost in December, it emerged with a two-to-one victory over the PRD in June.

The Council for Democracy, a nonpartisan organization, investigated the Uruapan case in detail. In a report written by Jorge Barrera Graf, winner of the 1990 jurisprudence award of the Mexican Bar Association, it exposed the new modalities of fraud. The report found that the government had adulterated the electoral registry by striking out 18,000 legitimate voters and inserting the names of 14,500 real and fictitious persons, none of whom was eligible to vote. Thousands of voter identification cards either vanished without a trace or were never delivered to their rightful owners. Thousands more were improperly diverted into the hands of PRI sympathizers. To ensure smooth execution of the plan, the government had supplemented

these new methods of fraud with its tried and true ones, according to the council report. Polling officials in 64 of the city's 100 precincts were replaced with PRI stalwarts; ballot boxes were located in the homes of government and PRI functionaries; and thousands of PRD and PAN voters were turned away from the polls when they tried to exercise their civic duty. The fact that the government ignored all formal appeals, the report concluded, reflects its determination to "prevent, by whatever means, a free and fair election in Mexico."[11]

In retrospect, Uruapan was a laboratory for the perfection of more modern and efficient methods of fraud. In November, the PRI would have to face elections in the state of Mexico, where Cárdenas had won by an overwhelming margin in 1988, and where control of a state legislature was again in the balance. The government did not want to risk repeating the embarrassment of Michoacán, in which it lost on election day only to have to clumsily alter the results later. If it could not change voters' minds, and changing their ballots was too messy, perhaps it could change who gets to vote in the first place. And what better choice for a trial run than a community in the heart of Michoacán?

The cybernetic fraud that worked so well in Uruapan was applied to the November elections in the state of Mexico, and the results were comparable. Where the opposition was able to obtain copies of the computerized electoral registration data, it discovered the same telltale patterns. In the city of Naucalpan, for instance, the PRD exposed some 8,000 duplicated and even triplicated names.[12] Statewide, the ruling party really outdid itself, "winning" all 34 legislative districts and 117 of 121 municipalities by margins as high as 20-to-1[13] in a state where an independent polling organization had found 42 percent support for the PRD, 38 percent for the PRI, and 17 percent for the PAN.[14] Embarrassed by its success, the government ended up conceding two additional municipalities to the opposition. In its haste, however, it conceded Apaxco, one of the few towns where the PRD had *not* run any candidates, to the PRD.[15]

Having successfully expanded its experiment from the municipal to the state level, the government is now prepared to apply it at the national level. In August, elections are to be held to replace the entire Chamber of Deputies and half the federal Senate. By all objective criteria, the PRI should be in serious difficulty. The party is widely despised; its opposition is better organized than ever before; and, in contrast to the United States, there is no advantage to incumbency in Mexico since the constitution prohibits reelection to consecutive terms. In the brave new world of cybernetic fraud, however, it is the opposition that has everything to lose.

The PRI is now positioned to seal its victory well before August. Barring any serious attempt to have international observers monitor the elections, Salinas can reasonably expect to recover a two-thirds majority of Congress.

The president who promised to "modernize Mexican politics" has, in a peculiar twist, instead modernized Mexican fraud. Rather than ushering in the future, computers are being programmed to buttress the foundations of the old order, with new and more insidious results. Mexicans have never been allowed to effect a peaceful, democratic change of government; now, following a brief period of hope in 1988, more and more of them are staying away from the ballot box.

Anatomy of an Unreformable System

Although President Salinas has clearly been the chief architect of Mexico's antidemocratic electoral reform and expanded electoral fraud, he is not solely responsible. None of Salinas's neoliberal cabinet members or advisers, from whom the PRI's 1994 presidential candidate is almost certain to be chosen, has murmured any disagreement. Moreover, Salinas's record sets him firmly in the tradition of his predecessors.

Presidents Luis Echeverría, José López Portillo, and Miguel de la Madrid each imposed electoral reforms of their own so as to maximize the appearance of a multiparty parliamentary system while preserving the PRI's stranglehold on the government and the electoral apparatus. Part of the genius of the "perfect dictatorship" is that the absolutist presidency rotates every six years, allowing each newly "elected" chief executive to present himself as a reformer. The pretense wears thin after several years in office, but most foreign observers, and, until recently, most Mexicans have been willing to give each newcomer the benefit of the doubt.

There has been no meaningful electoral reform precisely because the real system of rule in Mexico has nothing to do with elections. Serious, as opposed to make-believe, elections would disrupt the interlocking system of social controls that form the backbone of the absolutist presidency. These include the police, the army (which in Mexico behaves like an internal police force), and the corporatist organizations through which the presidency maintains a tight rein on urban and rural labor. All are answerable to no one but the president and his intermediaries. Since a break in any one of the chains of arbitrary executive rule endangers them all, the political system is inherently unreformable.

Formed as an extension of presidential power, the PRI has evolved over the years to serve two main purposes: to provide an electoral front for a

revolving-door dictatorship and to facilitate the corporatist control of society. To achieve these aims, the party is divided into three branches. One branch encompasses labor unions, a second incorporates peasant organizations, and the third oversees state employees. Presidential authority is exerted down the branches through a system of national, regional, and local bosses known as *charros* ("cowboys," who round up urban laborers) and *caciques* ("chieftains," who round up Indian peasants).

The epitome of the *charro* is Fidel Velásquez, the nonagenarian who has ruled the Mexican Workers' Confederation (CTM) with an iron fist for half a century. It is he and others like him who have kept the lid on the Mexican labor movement as real wages have fallen 60 percent. Such services are not, of course, provided for free; they have traditionally been rewarded with senatorships, governorships, pork-barrel contracts, and impunity for corruption and even murder.

As elsewhere in the system of *presidencialismo*, pro forma elections in labor unions and rural organizations have served the need to dress authoritarian rule in democratic clothing. Although such elections were seldom free or democratic, the system worked reasonably well, with only occasional outbursts of discontent, as long as the president, the *charros*, and the *caciques* appeared to be powerful mediators defending the interests of the working classes and as long as real wages continued to rise. With the recent deterioration in real wages, and the emergence after 1988 of a viable political opposition to the PRI, all this has changed. Workers are now demanding democratically elected leaders.

Here again, however, there is no room for genuine reform. For the same reason that the PRD cannot be allowed to gain control of a single state government, no labor union can be permitted to elect a genuinely independent leadership. Should any union succeed in escaping state control, it could become a powerful example that could jeopardize the entire political order. Dictatorships are less resilient than democracies in this respect; resting on power rather than the consent of the governed, they must be ever vigilant lest any gap in their armor suggest vulnerability. In order to maintain complete control over an increasingly restive labor movement, the Salinas administration has greatly stepped up its assault on labor rights.

Mexican workers now face conditions reminiscent of those in the United States at the height of the robber baron era as they are squeezed from all sides by the coordinated actions of management, government, and labor bosses. The government's response to the February 1990 wildcat strike by 5,200 workers at the Modelo Brewery typifies the vicious three-pronged assault on labor in Mexico today. Modelo was of strategic importance to

the government for two reasons: because it produces Corona beer, one of Mexico's most successful exports to the United States; and because workers had rebelled against the CTM for failing to represent their interests.

In addition to grievances over declines in real wages and over undemocratic leadership, Modelo employees were upset about working conditions. Workers suffer lung damage because grain dust is not properly ventilated, and they must endure temperatures that can range from below freezing to 140 degrees Fahrenheit in the brewery. In effect, the government's export strategy relies not only on depressed wages, but also on poor working conditions that chisel away at the health and life expectancy of Mexican workers. The authorities have resisted enforcing international health and safety standards, believing that to do so would undermine Mexico's "comparative advantage" in cheap labor.

Lifting a page from George Orwell, the Ministry of Labor declared the Modelo strike "nonexistent," enabling the brewery to fire the workers and abrogate the union contract. In March, Fidel Velásquez organized a new union, which was immediately certified by the secretary of labor. When the fired workers appealed the decision, the courts upheld the ruling of the Ministry of Labor.[16]

Rural Mexico is at least as restive as urban Mexico, and the government is fearful of the inroads the opposition is making in the countryside. Most major social upheavals in Mexican history have originated in the rural heartland, and it is among the peasantry of densely populated central and southern Mexico that the PRD is building its strongest grass-roots base. Peasant antipathy to the government is so strong that the traditional corporatist system is no longer containing dissent in much of the region. In such a context, genuine democratic reform of the corporatist system would only accelerate the PRI's loss of control over rural Mexico.

To hold on to power, the government has had to shore up rural corporatism through fascist-style tactics. Peasant Torch, a shadowy paramilitary organization that has already murdered scores of opponents of the regime,[17] has become the government's weapon of choice against independent peasant organizations and the PRD. Recently Peasant Torch has focused its attacks on rural municipalities won by the PRD, often seizing town halls in an effort to disrupt opposition governments. In April 1990, the federal government organized a march of 50,000 *antorchistas*, who paraded through Mexico City with placards denouncing the PRD just three days before the government used army tanks to retake town halls occupied by citizens protesting electoral fraud in the state of Michoacán. Last Sep-

tember, Peasant Torch was seated in the PRI's National Assembly for the first time.

Mexico's judicial system helps to buttress the official lawlessness essential to the operation of the corporatist system. The country's constitution provides for a separation of powers and for observances of virtually the entire spectrum of human rights. But those nominally charged with enforcing the law—the police, prosecutors, and courts (to say nothing of the army, which is prohibited by the constitution from engaging in domestic police actions)—in reality preserve an order distinct from the law. Allowing them to break the law with impunity gives them a personal stake in the system, and thus ensures their loyalty to the presidential—not the constitutional—order.

Just as impunity is the lifeblood of *presidencialismo*, it is the scourge of Mexican society. It allows the police to break into homes and detain citizens without warrants, in flagrant violation of Article 16 of the constitution, and sanctions the generalized practice of torture, in violation of Articles 19 and 20 of the constitution. A June 1990 report by Americas Watch described torture as "endemic" in Mexico, "practiced by most if not all branches of the federal and state police, as well as by the armed forces."[18]

Impunity also gives the police, *charros*, *caciques*, and other enforcers of the existing order a license for murder. *Charros* form goon squads to assassinate rivals or to terrorize rebellious union locals who seek enforcement of constitutionally mandated labor rights. *Caciques* hire death squads to sow terror in rural communities clamoring for enforcement of land reform laws. But the most frightening force of all is the Federal Judicial Police (PJF), Mexico's equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Although under the jurisdiction of the attorney general, the PJF is, by any objective definition, a secret police force. Its agents, or *madrinas* ("godmothers") as they are known, operate with the full armament and authority of the security forces as they carry out bloody, shocking operations that can seldom be traced back to the government.[19] The assassination last May of Norma Corona, president of the Independent Committee for the Defense of Human Rights in Sanaloa, was such a case.

Less than a month after Corona was gunned down by three men in a blue Chevrolet Cheyenne without license plates (a telltale sign of the secret police),[20] Salinas announced with much fanfare the formation of a National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) charged with "confronting new threats to human rights, from whatever source."[21] It was clear from its inception, however, that the commission was window dressing for domestic and

foreign consumption and would function as little more than just another corporatist arm of the absolutist presidency. The commission was set up inside the notorious Ministry of the Interior; barred from investigating violations of political or labor rights;[22] and granted only a subordinate, advisory role. As legal scholars Jorge Barrera Graf and Samuel del Villar have pointed out, the CNDH is not an independent, constitutional agency. Mexico, they argue, is still in need of "a genuine ombudsman, serving not a hierarchical superior, but society."[23] International human rights organizations remain equally unimpressed; Amnesty International warned two congressional subcommittees last fall that "Mexico today is a human rights emergency."[24]

President Salinas's judicial reform bill, which was announced last fall, is a further illustration of the limits of institutional reform in Mexico. Like his earlier electoral "reform," his judicial "reform" is a masterpiece of dissimulation. A key element of the proposed law is a requirement that confessions be made before representatives of the public ministry (that is, the attorney general's office), rather than the police, and that a lawyer be present.[25] Although on first reading this may seem like a considerable improvement, it would in fact further concentrate power in the hands of the executive. At present, the constitution requires that all detainees be immediately placed before a judge, who is the person responsible for hearing confessions in the presence of counsel. Rather than bring practice into conformity with the constitution, the proposed change would do the reverse, transferring judicial power to the prosecutor and placing the accused in the hands of the accuser.

Internal efforts at rooting out corruption are similarly doomed from the outset by the very nature of the system of governance. The Mexican model of authoritarianism and single-party rule is relatively nonideological; power and money are the real rewards for serving in the government. But the logic of the "perfect dictatorship" requires the maintenance of modest salaries. Police supplement their inadequate incomes with bribes extorted from helpless citizens and with payments from drug traffickers, while presidents acquire lavish residences and personal fortunes that bear no conceivable relationship to their nominal salaries. Under such circumstances, any effort at reform must necessarily be halfhearted and even in the best of cases confined to selected scapegoats.

The government periodically launches much-publicized campaigns against corruption, but they are a sham. While the government appoints well-respected Mexicans like Samuel del Villar and Miguel Sarre to head its anti-corruption drives, it thwarts their probes whenever they cut too

close to high-level officials. For example, Sarre resigned as the government-appointed "Attorney for Citizen Protection" in the state of Aguascalientes last fall after Gov. Miguel Barberena stymied his attempts to prosecute senior officials of the State Judiciary Police who had been routinely engaging in illegal arrest and torture.[26]

The Sarre example highlights the extraordinary cynicism of the Mexican leadership. Political reform does not work in Mexico because it is not intended to work. Corruption is a necessary off-the-books wage for extralegal enforcement of presidential authority. Torture is indispensable to the maintenance of a healthy respect for arbitrary rule, as confirmed by its near-universal use in authoritarian regimes. The simulation of reform in Mexico performs two vital functions. First, it serves as political cover for the sitting administration. Second, where necessary, it also provides convenient opportunities to imprison political adversaries or to expose corruption in a previous administration, thereby reinforcing the myth of the regime's perennial renewal.

Recent world events have given the Mexican leadership little reason to believe that an authoritarian ruler or party can survive a transition to democracy. With uncharacteristic candor, Salinas recently confided to *Newsweek* that "some countries are attempting [economic and political] reforms at the same time, and they end up with no reform at all, and even graver problems."[27] Democracy, Salinas told *Newsweek*, would have to await the success of his economic policies: "In some countries it has been demonstrated that because economic change has failed, the long-awaited hour of democratic change hasn't materialized. . . . [We will] respond to the call of Mexicans for improved well-being. It's a matter of the two reforms going at different rhythms, but the priority is economics."[28]

Like Porfirio Díaz, the dictator-president who tried to modernize Mexico's economy at the beginning of the century, Salinas seems to have concluded that Mexico is not ready for democracy. "I keep hearing that in Mexico one party has held power for [70] years," Salinas told *Newsweek*, "but when I think of how one party has ruled long in countries like Japan or Italy [sic], I pay less attention to the criticism."[29]

In fact, Salinas is not brooking criticism from any quarter. In his address to the PRI party congress last September, he charged that "those of the opposition who insult the party here at home and have no shame in criticizing the PRI and the government abroad" have in effect become "allies of those who seek to subvert our national sovereignty."[30] Louis XIV may have said it more succinctly, but the message is the same: I am the state; dissent is treason.

The Distortion of Economic Reform

Salinas's distinction between economic and political reform is an artificial and, in Mexico's case, an incorrect one. Without legal and electoral accountability, the corrosive effects of unchecked official greed and ambition pervade society, as elections are rigged and as contracts and justice are bought with political favors and bribes. No aspect of a nation's political, economic, or social life is immune, least of all a market economy.

The genius of the market is that it rewards productivity by ensuring that the competitive playing field is kept relatively open and level. That requires evenhanded enforcement of well-defined ground rules designed to limit the concentration of economic power. This is an all but impossible objective in an unaccountable system where political power is itself so extremely concentrated. To suggest, as Salinas does, that economic reform can outpace political reform is to ignore this reality.

In fact, many of Mexico's chronic economic problems are intimately related to its long-standing tradition of authoritarian rule. However different the Aztec *tlatoani* were from the Spanish viceroys and post-independence dictator-presidents who succeeded them, they were all authoritarians who repeatedly thwarted efforts at fundamental social change. Although the liberal upheaval of the 1860s and the revolution of 1910 gave birth to magnificent democratic constitutions, Mexico's presidentially dominated "liberal" and "revolutionary" parties have, with few exceptions, repeatedly undermined Mexico's constitution.

This helps explain why Mexico retains a premodern social structure with one of the world's most unequal distributions of wealth and income. Ethnic Spaniards continue to dominate the country's political and economic life, neglecting rural Mexico, which is overwhelmingly made up of Spanish-speaking native Americans. This social structure has fostered a plantation mentality (whose modern expression is the *maquiladora*, or low-wage assembly plant) that seeks a comparative advantage in foreign trade by repressing the labor force rather than by investing in education and new technologies in order to raise productivity and create internal markets for sustained economic growth.

The repressive political structure necessary to sustain such an archaic social structure has caused a serious misallocation of resources in Mexico. Absent political reform, Mexico's neoliberal economic reforms are being distorted by the social environment; instead of relieving some of the country's underlying economic problems, they are exacerbating them. This is apparent, for example, in Mexico's attempts to resolve the country's debt

crisis. To keep Mexico attractive to foreign investment, the de la Madrid and Salinas administrations have made a priority of maintaining payments of interest on the $100 billion foreign debt. Because Mexico is not a democracy, there has been little incentive to spread the burden of payment equitably throughout the population. Denied both an effective presence in parliament and a free labor movement, a majority of Mexicans have systematically been denied any influence in the formulation and negotiation of economic policies. For that reason, interest payments on the foreign debt have in effect been made through a 60 percent reduction in the real wages of Mexican workers and a comparable reduction in agricultural prices.

In fact, Mexico's wealthy elite, who have a disproportionate amount of influence over the country's political system because of their disproportionate share of the wealth, have actually profited from the crisis. The elite have virtual veto power over government actions, for they can always threaten to transfer more of their assets abroad. For that reason, the de la Madrid and Salinas administrations have until recently deliberately maintained domestic interest rates at levels well above the high rates of inflation that were eroding wages. This policy staved off further capital flight and even caused some funds to return to Mexico. But these funds have not gone into capital investment.

Given the opportunity to invest in safe, high-yielding, government bonds, Mexico's rich have had little incentive to invest in new plant and equipment. Moreover, the high rates of interest on those bonds have caused the country's domestic debt to expand at exponential rates, to the point where more than three-quarters of the government's combined domestic and foreign interest payments in 1989 were for domestic debt. Thus, in the absence of political reform, economic reform has widened social disparities by redistributing income from the lower classes who have no real political clout to the upper classes who do.

The economically destabilizing effects of Mexico's political system extend to the valuation of the peso. Since Mexico's rate of inflation is much higher than the U.S. rate, it stands to reason that the peso should be losing value proportionally against the dollar. Yet a rapidly devaluating peso would make investing in peso-denominated government bonds far less attractive for the wealthy and would invite renewed capital flight. It would also invite the wrath of the country's middle class, whose standard of living is presently being sustained in large measure through artificially cheap imports. With the regime's legitimacy already in question, and its de facto alliance with

portions of the middle class–based PAN at stake, it can ill afford to stick to its free-market prescriptions.

Instead, the Salinas administration has been devaluating the peso at a tightly controlled snail's pace of about 3 percent per year. (Inflation last year in Mexico was 30 percent, compared with about 5 percent in the United States.) The overvalued peso may have bought some domestic peace for the time being, but it has dramatically hurt Mexico's foreign trade accounts. The net result of keeping the peso overvalued while at the same time "liberalizing" the economy by lifting tariff barriers for imports has been to flood the country with imports and to make exports less competitive. This helps explain why the 1987 trade surplus of $8.4 billion shrank to $1.7 billion in 1988 and became a $640 million deficit in 1989 and a $3 billion deficit in 1990;[31] so much for the Salinas administration's goal of export-driven growth.

The combination of liberalized import policies and an overvalued peso has hit hardest in Mexico's already depressed countryside. The artificially cheap dollar has helped push the food import bill from $3 billion in 1988 to $4.1 billion in 1989 and more than $5 billion in 1990.[32] (Last year, after tortuous negotiations, Mexico secured $1.6 billion in debt relief—a figure equal to about one-third of its food import bill for the year.) Cheap imports have undercut domestic producers, whose costs exceed the price they can obtain for their commodities.

This outcome is no accident. Secretary of Commerce Jaime Serra Puche has timed the relaxation of import duties to coincide with domestic harvests in order to force agricultural prices downward as a means of controlling inflation in the cities. He has been so zealous in this objective that the government has imported Chernobyl-irradiated powdered milk from Europe and aflatoxin-contaminated corn from the United States.[33] The net effect has been to buy time in the cities, where the government is more vulnerable to social unrest, at the cost of the further deterioration of Mexican agriculture.

Rural Mexico is the prime victim of the government's economic policies precisely because it is the sector of Mexican society that is most completely locked out of the political system and most brutally repressed. No other country of Mexico's size has managed to build a successful modern economy without a strong rural base. Yet Mexico has pursued policies that have severely eroded the productivity of the countryside, as well as the quality of life for rural inhabitants. Thus, after a half century of "reform," a majority of *ejidos* (agrarian reform communities) lack drinkable water, and one-third lack electricity. Most are situated on marginal land, yet are denied

any form of technical assistance and do not even possess a single tractor. Two in five lack access to credit for seed and fertilizer. Even if they could overcome such limitations, the *ejidos* would have great difficulty marketing their produce, because the government has not provided paved access to three-quarters of them; one in six lacks even a dirt road.[34]

The reasons behind the low productivity of Mexican agriculture are no mystery. The government has not sought to invest in the countryside because the peasantry, despite its considerable size (one-quarter of Mexico's population is engaged in agriculture), has been locked out of any real power and routinely repressed by the rural network of *caciques*. These conditions have forced Mexican peasants off the land. They migrate to urban squatter belts and to the United States in search of survival, which fuels unemployment, reinforces the downward pressure on wages, and contributes to urban chaos.

The absence of genuine political reform hurts the economy in other ways as well, undermining the very goals of liberal economic reform. Single-party rule leads to misallocations of resources as public funds are redirected to partisan ends. Repression diverts resources away from needed capital investment and fosters a climate of instability that frightens away private investors. State revenues are eaten up by the corruption essential to the maintenance of the regime's system of social controls. For example, Labor Secretary Arsenio Farell, who enforces the government's repressive policies toward labor, has been permitted to form bogus fishing cooperatives, which he has used to siphon federal loans into personal accounts.[35] Much has been made of the amount that previous populist administrations spent on Mexico's social welfare programs. Yet it pales in comparison with the massive amount of public funds that is diverted today from the public coffers to pay for PRI propaganda and electioneering or that is embezzled outright.

Corruption also stunts economic modernization by facilitating illegal, high-return enterprises that divert resources from economic development. By far the most important of these is drug trafficking. Lured by large sums of money and virtual impunity, many of the country's top military and police commanders have forged lucrative ties with the international drug mafia.[36]

With the government so thoroughly corrupted, state-owned enterprises become easy targets of mismanagement. Pemex (Petroleos Mexicanos, the state-owned oil monopoly) is the most prominent example. Half of its revenues go into the federal treasury, from whence a substantial amount is diverted to personal and partisan ends. Less than 1 percent of Pemex's

after-tax revenues are recycled into capital investment.[37] It should be no surprise, then, that the petroleum company's plant is obsolete and deteriorating and its efficiency abysmally low. Moreover, Pemex's work force is bloated with patronage jobs, and it continues to reward labor bosses with sweetheart contracts. The transportation and communications sectors of the economy, which like energy are vital for economic development, have been similarly mismanaged.

Absent political reform, wholesale privatization is the only conceivable remedy. Yet even privatization is vulnerable to the vices of old-style Mexican politics, including cronyism, abuse of presidential authority, and the corporatist repression of labor. Missing from the government's privatization efforts is any sort of open competitive bidding process that would help ensure that the public is getting its money's worth. Without such accountability, there is reason for concern that the state may be undervaluing its holdings in sweetheart sales to favored investors.

Telephones of Mexico (Telmex) is a case in point, all the more so because it has become Salinas's model for privatization.[38] Last fall, 51 percent of the controlling shares in the company were sold to a group of Mexican investors led by Carlos Slim, Salinas's favorite businessman. Privatization in Mexico has meant basically transferring enterprises from the country's political elite to its economic elite instead of seeking to decentralize ownership. The opposition, on the other hand, advocates creation of a broader base of ownership by including small investors, cooperatives, and labor unions in divestiture plans.

The absence of democracy not only distorts economic reform, but also erodes its base of popular support. If the majority has no say in the implementation of the reform program, and if the program creates distortions that benefit the rich minority at the expense of the poor majority, there will undoubtedly be strong opposition to economic reform. If Mexico's economic reforms are to result in a more efficient, productive, and equitable economy that is attractive to foreign and domestic investors alike, the country will need to have a fundamentally different political strategy—one based on broad consultation and negotiation to ensure that a majority of Mexicans have a meaningful stake in economic reform and will remain committed to it over the long haul.

The Emergence of a Democratic Political Culture

In his November interview with *Newsweek*, President Salinas justified his party's continued hold on power by arguing that a "big problem right

now is the weakness of the opposition—the weakness of their programs, their organizational weakness. That makes the process of political transformation very difficult."[39] This refrain served the ruling party well in the past when the PRI was the only political game in town. Until recently, none of Mexico's opposition parties had enough of a following to be credible alternatives to the PRI; instead, their existence fortified absolutist rule by providing it with a democratic face. So "perfect" was the dictatorship that would-be reformers either had to try to change the system from within or be marginalized.

The presidential election of 1988 changed this equation drastically and irreversibly. Although the PRI "won" the presidency, its fraud could not conceal the fact that a majority of Mexicans had voted for the opposition. Just as significant, Cárdenas's refusal to recognize the legitimacy of a fraudulently elected government set a new moral standard. At last, Mexicans believed they had found a leader who would not betray the popular will in exchange for Senate seats, ambassadorships, and checks drawn on the federal treasury. Henceforth, the "perfect dictatorship" would be confronted with an authentically democratic alternative.

There are now two political games in Mexico City, and, behind them, two radically incompatible political cultures contending for the future of Mexican politics. Today the culture of *presidencialismo* appears more naked than at any time since the ill-fated reign of Porfirio Díaz. The emerging democratic culture rejects the absolutist presidency outright, insisting on a true separation of powers, independent electoral authorities, a genuine multiparty system, and strict enforcement of internationally recognized standards of human rights. These are not, of course, new ideas. They have been in gestation for some time among would-be reformers and human rights activists. What is new is their incorporation into a broad-based political movement.

The government's resort to massive fraud to exclude Cárdenas from the presidency was the watershed event that spawned Mexico's democratic awakening. This and subsequent fraud at the state and municipal level have turned the country into a giant school of democracy in which citizens have been learning through firsthand experience how large a stake they have in a system of free elections. Similarly, Salinas's continued use of Congress to rubber-stamp unpopular legislation and of the courts to crush independent labor movements has given large numbers of Mexicans an appreciation of the importance of the constitutional principle of separation of powers. Finally, Salinas's repression of the democratic movement

has contributed to a rapidly expanding demand for enforcement of internationally recognized human rights.

Reformers who just four years ago were isolated voices at the periphery of Mexican politics are now at the center of the emerging democratic mass culture. The true reformers are leaving the PRI, dismayed at their failed efforts to reform the party from within. While Cárdenas is the best-known example, there are numerous other examples of prominent and lesser-known Mexicans who have deserted the PRI. Samuel del Villar, who resigned as coordinator of de la Madrid's Moral Renovation program, has become a leading member of the PRD. Rodolfo González Guevara, the former speaker of the Chamber of Deputies who led the Critical Current (the most recent effort to reform the PRI from within), joined the PRD in February.

Although the PRD, formed in 1989, is the most prominent institutional expression of Mexico's new political culture, it is by no means the only one. A segment of the PAN, including such prominent leaders as Jesús González Schmal of Mexico City and Gabriel Jiménez Remus of Guadalajara, founded the Doctrinal and Democratic Forum in early 1990 to pursue a democratic agenda similar to that of the PRD. Another important development has been the creation of new civic organizations dedicated to the promotion of democracy and human rights. Among these is Mexico's first fully independent, nondenominational, and national human rights organization, the Mexican Commission for the Defense and Promotion of Human Rights. Dozens of other human rights groups, both secular and church-based, have been springing up throughout the country. These groups are informing Mexicans of their rights, publicizing violations of those rights, and providing documentation to international human rights organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

A number of organizations seeking free and fair elections have also been established, among them the Democratic Assembly for Effective Suffrage, founded in 1987, and the Council for Democracy, founded in early 1990. Together with ad hoc groups like the Independent Citizens' Tribunal, they have documented and publicized electoral fraud in successive state elections. They are now beginning to explore vehicles for monitoring elections and measuring public opinion, including parallel vote tabulation networks, international observation teams, and public opinion polls.

The effectiveness of Mexico's democratic movement can be gauged by its success in bringing the issues of democracy and human rights to domestic and international attention. Salinas has felt compelled to respond with electoral and judicial "reforms" intended to repair the damage to the

regime's image. But Mexico's new civic guardians have exposed Salinas's counterfeit reforms for what they are. Salinas may continue to hold power, but nothing short of genuine democracy can now restore respect for the presidency.

Beyond resisting authoritarian rule, protagonists of the new political culture are beginning to develop democratic alternatives that are rooted in Mexican traditions and responsive to the particular needs of the Mexican people. Denied any possibility of influence in Mexico City, the opposition is concentrating its efforts at the state and municipal levels, where it aims to revive Mexican federalism. As elsewhere, it has the law on its side. The United Mexican States, as Mexico is officially known, is formally a U.S.-style federation with a separation of powers enabling each of Mexico's 31 states to pass its own laws and govern its internal affairs independently of Mexico City. In practice, however, the unwritten rules of *presidencialismo* prevail. The president designates and removes governors at will; PRI-controlled state legislatures produce carbon copies of every important presidential initiative; and governors exercise arbitrary authority over local governments.

Where the opposition has been able to gain control of local government, small portions of the country have begun to get a taste of the self-governing federalist system envisioned in the constitution. Unable to stop fraud at the state and federal levels, PRD members have responded to local fraud by occupying their own town halls, inaugurating legitimately elected municipal presidents and councils, and setting up parallel governments. Salinas and his state governors have tried to snuff out these civic revolts with troops, tanks, and police, killing dozens. Yet the locals are persistent. As soon as the police or troops leave, residents retake the town hall. As of last November, the government had been forced to concede 118 municipalities to the PRD, and the attrition continues.

From the grass roots, Mexicans are beginning to define—and extend—the constitutional concept of free municipalities. Where PRI mayors once held sway over their towns, PRD mayors now convene town meetings to involve the citizenry in decision making. For the first time in Mexican history, municipal presidents are meeting with leaders of other municipalities to collaborate on issues of common concern, breaking the vertical pattern of dominance from state capitals.[40] The grass-roots character of the PRD was apparent in last November's First National Congress, a lively, raucous event interrupted by shouts and motions from the floor that forced a free-for-all election for the 96 open positions on the party's National Council. The top vote-getter was not a PRD stalwart from Mexico City, but Andrés

Manuel López Obrador, who is spearheading the grass-roots movement in Tabasco.[41]

There are limits, however, to what these piecemeal efforts to democratize the country can accomplish. With its near totalitarian control of the army, police, labor unions, the mass media, and courts, the absolutist presidency remains extremely powerful. Grass-roots organizing will likely bear fruit at the state and national level, but only over the long run. For now, the only way to gain at the state or national level is to make some accommodation with Los Pinos, the Mexican White House. That is why the PAN governs Baja California, while the PRD is barred from a legislative majority in Michoacán.

The costs of accommodation with the regime are increasing, however, as demonstrated by the position the PAN is in today. Since its creation in 1939, the PAN has portrayed itself as Mexico's democratic alternative. Yet it did not foresee the abrupt post-1988 rise of Cárdenas and the PRD, which has relegated it to second place in the opposition lineup. Soon after Manuel Clouthier, the PAN's presidential candidate in the 1988 race, died in a highway accident in October 1989, party president Luis Alvarez began negotiating with Salinas. PAN's end of the bargain can only be surmised, yet it is a matter of public record that on October 17 the PAN provided the two-thirds majority needed to amend the constitution and implement Salinas's manifestly antidemocratic electoral reform bill.

The deal split the PAN; one-third of its congressional delegation voted against the bogus electoral reform and then joined other party dissidents in forming the Doctrinal and Democratic Forum to lobby for reform within their own party. The intraparty conflict between old and new political cultures came to a head in the February 1990 meeting of the National Council of the PAN, in which Luis Alvarez was narrowly reelected as president, defeating Gabriel Jiménez Remus of the reform faction.

The PRD is not immune to such intraparty squabbling. Many of its leaders formerly belonged to the PRI or to small leftist parties that were more likely to accommodate rather than confront the presidency. Despite the sincerity with which most of these leaders have embraced the democratic cause, some of them are clearly uncomfortable with their new role. They recently found a spokesperson in Jorge Alcocer, a brilliant leftist and fixture of the Mexico City intelligentsia. Writing in the monthly *Nexos*, Alcocer criticized the PRD for its refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the regime, charging that the opposition party has a "constant tendency toward fundamentalism."[42] Having lost a run for a seat on the PRD's National Executive

Council in December, Alcocer resigned from the party, accusing Cárdenas of discouraging internal pluralism.

PRD Senator Porfirio Muñoz Ledo's decision last fall to run for governor of Guanajuato has embroiled the party in further controvery. Samuel del Villar, legal affairs coordinator of the PRD, has publicly accused Muñoz Ledo, the PRD's second most prominent leader, of tainting the party by using PRI-style carpetbagging tactics; the senator, who represents Mexico City (his birthplace), has attempted to run for office in a state where he is ineligible, according to current law, to be a candidate. Muñoz Ledo has also shown a willingness to make some accommodation with the Salinas administration. In February he arranged a private meeting with Salinas, the first of its kind by a PRD leader.

Cárdenas has been adamant that, in the Mexican context, accommodationist strategies end up reinforcing absolutist rule, for they require the toleration of unconstitutional practices and enable the regime to restore some of its lost democratic face. The PAN leadership has taken a more compromising approach. It has been willing, for instance, to cosponsor the regime's legislation in exchange for some crumbs of power. Such *pinche transa* ("stinking wheeling and dealing"), however, contributes to widespread cynicism, resentment, and apathy among the country's already frustrated citizens.

Although the grass-roots alternative being pursued by the PRD and other elements of the new democratic culture avoids these vices, it would be a mistake to underestimate the forces arrayed against it. In a system as highly autocratic and centralized as Mexico's, any groups or communities that try to break loose are confronted with a vast assortment of tools of repression: obstruction by the state or federal judiciary; electoral fraud; politically motivated impeachments by state legislatures; politically motivated drug sweeps and trumped-up charges against community leaders; cutoffs of state and federal funds; and direct assaults by police, the military, or paramilitary goons. That is why the protagonists of Mexico's emerging democratic political culture agree that the only viable path to democracy is an explicitly nonviolent "democratic revolution" that dismantles authoritarian institutions beginning with their source in the absolutist presidency.

The key to such a peaceful transformation is international support for democracy. As shown by the recent examples of Chile, Nicaragua, and Haiti, there is no more powerful force for democratic change than electoral observation by impartial, multilateral agencies. Such close international scrutiny makes repression costly and encourages citizens to vote

in unprecedented numbers, for they see that the world will be watching to ensure that their vote will count. For those reasons, the PRD and other elements of Mexico's new democratic culture have requested international observation of Mexican elections.

Time for a New Policy Toward Mexico

Bush's meeting with Salinas in Nuevo León just a couple of weeks after the spectacular fraud in the state of Mexico elections, and a month after the Inter-American Human Rights Commission singled out Mexico for unprecedented criticism, symbolizes his administration's indifference to the issue of democracy in Mexico. Whether such indifference is the product of ignorance or fear, the emergence of a peaceful, broad-based democratic movement in Mexico means that the issue can no longer be ignored. By giving its unqualified blessing to President Salinas, the Bush administration is in effect siding with an authoritarian regime next door at a time when that regime is being questioned by its own people like never before.

There are, nevertheless, hopeful signs that the debate over free trade has begun to awaken at least some congressional voices to the importance of democracy in Mexico. Last fall, Rep. Donald Pease (D-Ohio) sponsored a letter to President Bush that was signed by 36 members of Congress. It expressed concern about a series of items, including Mexico's "authoritarian, undemocratic one-party system"; government domination of the labor movement and the deleterious effect this was having on U.S.-Mexican wage differentials; Mexico's poor environmental record; the drug trade; and immigration.[43]

The emergence of a mass-based nonviolent movement for democracy and human rights in Mexico at a time when a major free-trade agreement is under discussion is fortuitous for both Mexico and the United States. As we have seen, free markets require free societies if they are to function properly. Pluralistic institutions help ensure that economic discipline will be applied more equitably, and that economic growth will translate into development for the whole society. They also help preserve social peace, indispensable to the maintenance of a stable environment for business. Furthermore, independent electoral authorities and a genuine separation of powers are the most reliable means of making leadership accountable, thus helping to ensure that economic reforms are not subverted.

Although the Mexican opposition has barely begun to work out the details of its alternative plan of economic reform, some of the broad out-

lines have begun to take shape. Progressives—notably including the PRD and the Democratic Forum of the PAN—have begun to articulate an economic program that builds on their embrace of political democracy. At the heart of their program is a demand for a genuinely free labor movement. Mexican democrats understand that adequate employment and fair wages are the essential building blocks of a more equitable distribution of income, and that independent, democratic unions are the only way to ensure that wages will fairly reflect the productivity of labor. They also believe that health and safety standards, as well as environmental safeguards, will only be enforced if the rank and file are represented by labor leaders who are genuinely responsive to their needs and who are willing to pressure the government.

The new economic democracy advocated by the Mexican opposition has important implications for the proposed free-trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Ideally, the rationale for free trade is to promote the sort of healthy competition and complementarity that increases the overall productivity of the participants. As with any competition, however, certain uniform standards need to be observed to prevent cheating that undermines the ultimate goal. If Mexico persists in repressing its labor force, violating basic health and safety standards, and ignoring environmental protection standards, it can easily underprice even efficient U.S. industries.

That in turn encourages U.S. manufacturers to move their operations to Mexico so they can "cheat" in the same way. This results in a loss of jobs and income in the United States without a remotely comparable gain in Mexico; the Mexican-based operations are able to produce more cheaply not because they have higher productivity, but because social and environmental costs have not been incorporated into the price. This distorts the free market, rewarding opportunism over genuine gains in productivity.

For these reasons, the struggle for democracy on the part of the average Mexican is very much in the interest of the average citizen of the United States as both nations become more closely integrated. Mexicans are coming to understand that their nonviolent, constitutionalist strategy for political change will—like most such movements elsewhere—undoubtedly require a measure of international support to succeed. They are now asking for a little help from their neighbors: not heavy-handed intervention, to be sure, but friendly collaboration from prospective partners. The PRD, the Democratic Forum, the PAN, and their allies have recently called for international observation of Mexican elections.[44] In a related development,

they have urged the U.S. Congress to reject "fast-track" authorization and condition a free-trade agreement on inclusion of fair-trade provisions.[45]

Congress can act on these requests without risking being accused of intervening in Mexico's domestic affairs, provided it does so in a multilateral framework. The proposed free-trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico would create a supranational economic entity, removing significant economic barriers. Each state that becomes party to such an agreement necessarily relinquishes part of its sovereignty. No state has the right to intervene in the affairs of another state unilaterally. However, each has the right to condition its entry into any form of union on the acceptance of certain common standards deemed essential to the success of the joint venture.

Congress should assert that right by conditioning free trade on multilateral guarantees of fair-trade practices. A vital element of any trilateral trade agreement between the United States, Canada, and Mexico should be a social and ecological charter that guarantees internationally recognized labor rights for all North Americans and that sets uniform occupational health and safety standards, as well as uniform environmental safeguards. The charter would be enforced by an independent trilateral trade commission, ideally composed of economists, labor representatives, and ecologists from the three countries. The commission, not the courts of any single nation, would be responsible for interpreting and enforcing the trade agreement.

Congress should also condition a free-trade agreement on multilateral observation of Mexican elections, ideally beginning with the August 18 federal elections. There is nothing radical in such a proposal. Both the United Nations and the Organization of American States have already acquired considerable expertise in electoral observation from recent missions to Nicaragua, Haiti, and Chile, to name but a few examples. If it is good public policy to insist on multilateral observation of elections in Nicaragua, is there not all the more reason to do so with Mexico, a next-door neighbor with which the United States seeks economic integration?

There was a time when democracy could coexist side by side with authoritarianism without major spillover effects. In an increasingly interdependent world, where neighboring nations seek to integrate their economies, that time has passed. That is why the European Community, with great foresight, conditioned the entry of Spain, Portugal, and Greece on the removal of authoritarian rule and creation of democratic institutions. The United States would be remiss to do otherwise with its prospective partners.

Notes

[1] Though the elections were run under state rather than federal law, the new state electoral law was, in keeping with Mexico's centrist tradition, a virtual carbon copy of the new federal law.
[2] "The Cloud Over Reform in Mexico," *New York Times*, November 17, 1990, p. 22.
[3] "Dirty sweep," *Economist*, November 17, 1990, pp. 54, 56.
[4] "O.A.S. Cautions Mexicans on Election Fraud," *New York Times*, June 4, 1990, p. A-17.
[5] "Condenó la CIDH la Ley Electoral de Nuevo León," *Proceso*, No. 728 (October 15, 1990), pp. 26–27. In a further embarrassment, Panamanian President Guillermo Endara responded to Mexican efforts to question the legitimacy of his government (sworn into office on a U.S. air base in the course of the invasion) by snapping, "We don't need the legitimation of a government . . . that is the product of pure electoral fraud." *Proceso*, No. 701 (April 9, 1990), pp. 36–37.
[6] *Proceso*, No. 723 (September 10, 1990), p. 53 (author's translation).
[7] Moreover, Article 406 of the penal code sets prison terms of up to five years for any "party functionary who . . . deceitfully divulges false information with respect to official results contained in precinct tally sheets or overall final counts." In the hands of Mexico's far from independent judiciary, this provision could easily be used to prohibit public disclosure of parallel vote counts that differ from official results.
See *Proceso*, No. 720 (August 20, 1990), p. 23.
[8] For this and subsequent references to new constitutional provisions and to the new electoral law, see *Código Federal de Instituciones y Procedimientos Electorales* (Mexico City: Secretaría de Gobernación, September 1990).
[9] *New Perspectives Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Winter 1991), p. 9.
[10] *Integración y veredicto del Tribunal Independiente de Ciudadanos* (Mexico, D.F.: Grupo Parlamentario Independiente, 1989).
[11] *Proceso*, No. 714 (July 9, 1990), p. 29.
[12] *Proceso*, No. 732 (November 12, 1990), p. 16.
[13] "One Result Clear in Mexican State Election: Charges of Widespread Fraud," *New York Times*, November 15, 1990.
[14] Poll conducted by Center for Studies of Public Opinion, Mexico City. See "Una encuesta pronostica el triunfo del PRD," *Proceso*, No. 731 (November 5, 1990), pp. 10, 13.
[15] *Proceso*, No. 733 (November 19, 1990), p. 20.
[16] "Indignación de Juristas; el derecho laboral, convertido en instrumento de represión," *Proceso*, No. 698 (March 19, 1990), pp. 10–15.
[17] *Proceso*, No. 701 (April 9, 1990), p. 8; *Amnesty International Report 1987*, pp. 185–186.
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[27] "Reform at Two Different Rhythms," *Newsweek*, December 3, 1990, p. 39.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] *Ibid.*
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[37] Christopher Whalen, "Depleting Asset: Trouble Ahead for Mexico's Oil Monopoly," *Barron's*, October 22, 1990.
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[40] "No habrá relección, determinó el congreso," *La Jornada*, November 21, 1990.
[41] See, for example, "Llama Cárdenas a perredistas a anudar alianzas por la democracia," *La Jornada*, September 10, 1990.
[42] "PRD a la hora del congreso," *Nexos*, No. 155 (November 1990), pp. 53–58.
[43] Letter dated December 14, 1990.
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[45] See for instance "The Continental Development and Trade Initiative," address by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to the Americas Society, New York, February 8, 1991.