

By Mike Tangeman

MEXICO CITY

OPPPOSITION PARTIES HERE RAN UP AGAINST the hard reality of a ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI) majority during two weeks of chaotic debate in congressional Electoral Colleges over who won Mexico's July 6 national elections.

The fight over ratification of election victories in the divided Chamber of Deputies turned into a running battle complete with filibusters, vote boycotts and walkouts by both the opposition National Democratic Front-Mexican Socialist Party (FDN-PMS) coalition and the conservative National Action Party (PAN). Fearing violent retaliation, the FDN-PMS coalition changed its tactics and dropped previous calls for mass mobilization during the college meeting. Instead, hundreds of opposition supporters staged a sit-in outside the congress building for the entire two weeks of the debate, demanding that the real outcome of the July 6 vote be respected.

Faced with absolute intransigence from the closed ranks of the ruling party, the opposition managed to come off no better in numerical terms than when it went into the debate—when the dust settled on August 31 the PRI held 260 of 500 seats in the new Chamber, to 139 for the FDN-PMS coalition and 101 for the PAN. The opposition did win a significant moral victory, however, by breaking the mold of the PRI's "rubber stamp" legislature, long a major obstacle to the democratization of Mexico's virtual one-party political system.

"We will now have a legislature that speaks out, that debates. That means an end to the 'presidentialist' system and the end to political centralization," said Octavio Moreno, a founder of Mexico's small Social Democrat Party (PSD) and deputy-elect for the FDN.

But the opposition lost on the key issue of recounting ballots of districts where the vote was allegedly fraudulent—a defeat that could come back to haunt them this month when the ratification of the presidential election begins.

Sticking points: Allegations of vote fraud in the election still have not been cleared up. On July 13 the Federal Electoral Commission (CFE) declared PRI presidential candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari the winner with 50.36 percent of the vote. But to date the CFE has withheld figures for the presi-



Opposition candidate Cardenas speaks to a crowd outside Electoral College meetings.

Opposition forces lose vote-count battle; could win parliamentary war

dential vote from 24,625 polls—45 percent of the total nationwide.

Neither center-left candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas—awarded second place by the CFE with 30.12 percent—nor PAN candidate Manuel Clouthier—placed third, with 17.07 percent—has accepted the official results.

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And many observers here believe Cardenas may have edged out Salinas in the presidential election.

Since July opposition efforts to prove vote fraud have been stonewalled both in the Court of Electoral Contentions and in the full assembly of the CFE itself. Despite repeated assurances from Interior Secretary Manuel Bartlett of access to electoral packets containing ballots from all 54,624 polls when the Electoral College began, the opposition was voted down by the PRI majority each time it asked to have the packets

opened in order to check the vote tabulations.

"We see no reason to open the packets when the CFE has ruled in our favor, when the Electoral Court has ruled in our favor and when it is clear that the majority of Mexicans voted in favor of PRI candidates," said PRI Deputy-elect Guadalupe Gomez.

At one point, opposition deputies led by PAN parliamentary coordinator Abel Vicencio stormed down to the basement of the congress building to confront soldiers guarding the packets and demand that they be released.

"If they're not here to be opened by the Electoral College in order to resolve doubts about the election, then what are they here for?" asked PAN Deputy-elect Norberto Corella.

The opposition was not only unable to get the packets opened—and thus failed to set a precedent for the important presidential ratification debate—but it lost every vote to the mechanical PRI majority. In addition, divisions over strategy questions developed within the Cardenas coalition, with the PMS twice refusing to sign procedural accords with the PRI that its FDN colleagues went along with.

Parties for everyone: While the election united the Mexican left for the first time ever around the figure of Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the diverse backgrounds and ideologies of the FDN-PMS parties highlight the difficulty Cardenas faces in keeping them together.

- The Democratic Current (CD) is not yet a party, but a former PRI faction that broke away after the party leaders refused to register Cardenas as candidate for the PRI's presidential nomination. The CD has the least number of FDN Chamber seats but all four Senate opposition seats.

- The Party of the Authentic Mexican Revolution (PARM) was considered a "loyal opposition," or "satellite," party to the PRI prior to becoming the first party to endorse Car-

denas. The most centrist of the FDN parties, the PARM is described by party leaders as "revolutionary, nationalist and progressive."

- The Cardenist Front of National Reconstruction Party (PFCRN), formerly the Socialist Workers Party (PST), was the second party to back Cardenas. It has a socialist ideology, a corporatist bent and was previously a "loyal opposition" party. Although Cardenas did not endorse the name change, the party's shrewd move has led many voters to believe that the "Frente Cardenista" is the candidate's own party.

- The Popular Socialist Party (PPS), founded in 1948 by labor leader Vicente Lombardo, was the third party to endorse Cardenas. It is Marxist-Leninist in theory but in practice has always been a well-behaved PRI satellite.

- The Mexican Socialist Party (PMS), heir to the old Mexican Communist Party, has evolved through a series of '80s mergers with other left parties and movements into a Eurocommunist-style party. When the PMS agreed to support Cardenas in June, it signed a bilateral accord with the CD rather than the FDN—probably due to past disputes with the PPS and PST over the claim to ideological legitimacy on the left.

United they stand: On the question of ratification of the presidential election, FDN-PMS deputies say they will be united in trying to deny Salinas the presidency. Meanwhile, the coalition is developing a strategy obviously designed to lure away local leaders and the bases from the ruling party.

In Tabasco the PRI's state party chairman has defected to become the FDN gubernatorial candidate in November elections and other party leaders have followed suit. The phenomenon is now being repeated in Veracruz, also the scene of upcoming state elections. And in the Chamber itself, one PRI deputy—also from Tabasco—has said he will switch to the FDN after the Congress is installed.

In various parts of the country, cracks are showing in the PRI's corporatist structure. There have been defections from the PRI-affiliated National Campesino Confederation (CNC) and the National Confederation of Popular Organizations (CNOP) to parallel organizations cleverly set up by the PFCRN—the Cardenist Campesino Confederation and the Cardenist Confederation of Popular Organizations.

According to PMS Deputy Juan Guerra, what the left needs to do now is "to set up a labor central, to channel discontent among the rank and file." That discontent can only grow as a result of the August 14 decision of the leadership of the Labor Congress (CT)—dominated by the PRI-affiliated Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM)—to drop demands for wage hikes as part of the accord to extend the government's inflation-cutting "Economic Solidarity Pact" after September 1.

Some FDN sources talk off-the-record of a parliamentary strategy designed to drive a wedge between PRI leadership and bases. They say that a flood of FDN-PMS-sponsored populist bills will force PRI deputies to make a tough choice—either to vote for the legislation and please their constituencies or vote with the PRI bloc against the FDN-PMS and face discontent and further defections among the party's bases.

Mike Tangeman is *In These Times'* correspondent in Mexico.

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Death toll adds up even if vote doesn't

MEXICO CITY—The brutal murders of four young activists involved in the "defend the vote" movement have shocked public opinion here in the election aftermath.

At 3:30 a.m. on August 21 the bodies of Jesus Ramos, 16; Jose Luis Garcia, 17; Jorge Flores, 17; and Ernesto del Arco, 18; were found abandoned in a car belonging to del Arco's father. They had been beaten and shot in the head at close range.

Luis del Arco, father of the victim and former deputy candidate for the Revolutionary Workers Party (PRT), said his son and friends did not belong to any party but had been participating in the movement to "defend the vote" promoted by the National Democratic Front-Mexican Socialist Party (FDN-PMS) coalition and the PRT. Also found in the car were fliers urging passive

civil resistance. The youths had apparently been distributing the leaflets.

Despite the evidence, Federal District Attorney Renato Sales immediately ruled out a political motive in the killings. Nonetheless, the prosecutor conceded there are indications that the four may have been murdered by plainclothes judicial police.

The murders bring to six the number of apparent reprisal murders of people associated with the campaign of FDN-PMS candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas. On July 2 Cardenas campaign aides Francisco J. Ovando and Ramon Gil were also found shot to death in Ovando's parked car.

According to Mexican human rights workers, there have been 13 politically motivated murders nationwide since July 2.

—M.T.

By Jan Knippers Black

RANGOON, BURMA

WHEN BURMESE PRESIDENT MAUNG Maung Kha pledged on August 24 to schedule a referendum on restoring multiparty democracy here, he closed one chapter in the saga of Burma's popular uprising of 1988. Throngs danced in the streets as troops withdrew from the city center, the curfew was lifted and martial law was revoked.

Maung Maung further pledged that if the referendum favored a multiparty system, general elections would be held as soon as possible. No top government officials would be candidates, he claimed. And should the military-based Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) object to the democratization plan, the party's new civilian leadership would resign.

Perhaps the message was not entirely clear to the security forces, or perhaps they did not feel inclined to follow the president's lead. On August 25-26 guards at the Insein Prison on the outskirts of Rangoon opened fire on protesting inmates, who were mostly political prisoners. State-run Rangoon radio reported that 500 of the prisoners had escaped, 4,806 (of a prison population of some 10,000) had been released, 106 wounded and 57 killed. Other sources reported that about 1,000 prisoners had been shot to death.

Burmese dissidents, however, seemed to take the president at his word. On August 28 about 50,000 people attended a coming-out party at Rangoon University for the All Burma Students Union, which brought together organizations that had operated underground for several years. But it is not yet clear whether hardliners of the military and the ruling party have played their last card. The political crisis now moves to a new phase, yet it is far from over.

Burma: unclear future for land in fast-forward

Power plays: A province of British India until World War II, Burma enjoyed only 14 years of democracy before succumbing to a tenacious dictatorship in 1962. Members of the same coterie of rebels who supported the Japanese invasion in 1942—believing the Japanese to be liberators—then supported the British three years later as they expelled

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the Japanese and established the first government of independent Burma in 1948. At its founding the new government was a multiparty parliamentary democracy. But civilian rule eroded over the years and the military, called upon to suppress separatist movements among ethnic minorities around the fringes of the national territory, grew bolder.

In 1962 armed forces commander Gen. Ne Win, who had been accused of brutally suppressing minority tribes, turned on his erstwhile colleague Prime Minister U Nu and deposed him. Ne Win founded a new party, the BSPP, and outlawed all others. But his main power base was the increasingly privileged military.

Ethnic minorities, in some cases led by warlords and funded by opium and heroin trafficking, have over the years engaged in sporadic fighting with the forces of the central government. The anti-government campaign was joined early on by the country's educational and religious institutions. Students and Buddhist monks were prominent among those who resisted Ne Win's *coup d'état* 26 years ago and as a consequence suffered scores of casualties. Grievances mounted when Ne Win's troops burned down the student union building and outlawed student organizations shortly after the coup.

The riots that erupted in March at the national university in Rangoon left some 300 dead and added hundreds more to the list of political prisoners the students had sought to free.

Anti-government rioting, led by university students, broke out again in June, and Rangoon remained under curfew until the end of the month. The university remained closed in July, and it appeared that the rebellion had been effectively suppressed once again. But faculty sources reported that the students had actually won the latest showdown. The government had yielded to many of their demands, including calls for the release of political prisoners. Even some of those within the government supported the unrest. A professor who also holds a responsible government position told *In These Times* her co-workers in the ministry do not hold her under suspicion because of her university connection. On the contrary, she said, they are all in sympathy with the students.

Nor is contempt for the government limited to the urban middle class; it draws upon a wellspring of frustration that has no apparent class or regional bounds. In the small town that is present-day Pagan, where 5,000 Buddhist temples rise from the plain in silent tribute to an ancient civilization, a horse carriage driver can recite in some detail and with barely suppressed anger the recent history of government atrocities against the op-

position.

A day in the country: A July train ride in the Burmese countryside demonstrated the contradictions of this ancient land in crisis. Even on the eve of a massive uprising, the rhythm of life along the Irrawaddy River seemed not to have changed much since it was immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "Mandalay." On the 14-hour journey by train from Rangoon to Mandalay, the antique "upper class" coach, utterly devoid of shock absorbers, was cooled by ceiling fans and inhabited by extended families of spiders, mice and other tropical fauna. Two senior monks, barefoot and draped in simple saffron robes, were accompanied by younger monks or novices who attended to their elders' needs and prostrated themselves fully—touching their foreheads to the filthy floor of the coach—before withdrawing.

Across the aisle sat a slender, middle-aged man in uniform. He, too, had an entourage of servants—mostly enlisted men. One of his orderlies lowered the heavy metal window beside him at the beginning of the trip, even though the heat was oppressive. The monks referred to him deferentially as "the general."

While the monks chewed on their betel nut in detached tranquility and other passengers gazed through open windows at people and oxen at work in flooded rice paddies, the general appeared to be meditating or praying for hours on end with clasped hands,

closed eyes and furrowed brow. Finally he stirred and an orderly laid out for him a multicourse meal, kept hot in a portable container.

The general then began to notice his fellow passengers and even graciously offered some of his tea. During the rest of the trip, before he alighted to a heel-clicking military welcome at Meiktila, he often stretched to peer out of the windows ahead of and behind his own. He did not, however, raise the metal sheet that shielded him from assassination or other untoward attention.

The episode began to make sense when one of his attendants confided that he was the commander of the People's Police Force (PPF) in Rangoon. The next day a newspaper reported that Rangoon's police commander had been demoted and transferred. His superior, the director-general of the PPF, had been fired and other officers were reprimanded in connection with an incident that had occurred during the student riots of last March.

Burma's official news agency that day conceded for the first time that 41 detainees had died in police custody. They had been squeezed into a single police van, along with 30 others who survived, and left for two hours after police, using tear gas, broke up

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a demonstration. An official inquiry found that they died of tear-gas inhalation and suffocation. It was hard to imagine that the man on the train—frail, contemplative, even gen-

URGENT HUMANITARIAN APPEAL!

In an appeal to the international human rights community, 12 of the 2800 Palestinian prisoners held without charges or trial in the "Ansar III" prison camp in the Negev Desert have sent out a signed petition seeking urgent assistance to secure adequate water, food, medical care, family contacts and access to legal counsel. These prisoners are held 28 to a tent and, as punishment, are often forced to sit in the blazing sun or placed in metallic containers for hours on end in temperatures reaching 120 degrees. This prison should be closed now.

We urge you to write or telegram:

Ambassador Moshe Arad
Embassy of Israel
3514 International Dr., NW
Washington, DC 20008

Itzhak Rabin
Ministry of Defense
W. Jerusalem, Israel

Please send a copy of your letter to:

ADC -- Ansar III Project
4201 Conn. Ave., N.W.,
Suite 500
Washington, DC 20008



Dorothy Friesen, Synapses

Burma has enjoyed only 14 years of democracy in recent history.