

MEXICO

Round two

By rights, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas should now be in Los Pinos, the Mexican presidential residence, nearing the end of a six-year term. Instead Cárdenas—who narrowly lost the scandal-ridden election of 1988—is struggling in third place during a wildly unpredictable campaign for president.

After being denied his victory in the fraudulent 1988 election, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas struggles to avoid another loss.

By Rick Rockwell
MEXICO CITY

Why is the man who should be Mexico's president stuck 20 points behind the leaders in the polls? "Let me use an American political saying," says Lorenzo Mayer, a Mexican political analyst. "Nothing succeeds like success; nothing fails like a failure. People just see Cárdenas as a failure." Imagine the Democrats running Michael Dukakis again in the last election instead of Bill Clinton, and you see the problem. Mexicans seem unwilling to give Cárdenas a second chance in the August

21 presidential election.

But to tag Cárdenas as a loser isn't exactly fair, since he almost certainly won in 1988. In June, Arturo Nuñez, chief of the Federal Election Institute (IFE), revealed that the institute created a computer crash in 1988 when it appeared that Cárdenas was running away with the election. When the vote was compiled without the computer, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the candidate of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), was declared the winner by the slimmest margin in modern Mexican history.

Up until 1987 Cárdenas, a former governor of Michoacán, was a member of the PRI. But when it became obvious that the left wing of the party was going to be ignored again during the presidential succession, he took most of that faction with him to form the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). He's been running for president ever since.

"This is a struggle for democracy, for free elections, for the rights of the people," Cárdenas often proclaims during his speeches. "We cannot wait for effective suffrage, the imposi-

tion of the slow process started by Carlos Salinas."

For decades the PRI alternated presidencies between its left and right factions. Cárdenas' father, Gen. Lázaro Cárdenas, is probably the leading example of a left-wing president. He gave away more land to peasants in the '30s than any president before or since, and he also nationalized the oil fields. In 1988, after two successive right-wing presidents, the country was overdue for some balance from the left. But the PRI, which has governed Mexico in one form or another since the 1917 revolution, wasn't ready to give the 1988 election to Cárdenas, who was viewed as a traitor for abandoning the party. This year may be no different, as the PRI offers up Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, one of the architects of Mexico's neo-liberal economic plan.

By contrast, Cárdenas and the PRD have a left-leaning platform that seems to cover all the bases. Beyond calling for fair elections and more press freedom, Cárdenas wants to revive the land-reform program discontinued by the Salinas government. He also wants to curb current economic policies that improve the lot of the rich while putting more money into employment training and social programs. He is even bold enough to discuss the need for gay rights and better laws to end sexual discrimination.

Cárdenas can draw thousands of university students to a rally in Mexico City, and just as easily attract grandmothers to a rally in Morelos. At a recent speech in Cuernavaca, an elderly campesino who received land during the administration of Cárdenas' father pushed his way to the front of the crowd to personally hand the candidate a donation and a note of gratitude. During the same trip to Cuernavaca, transportation workers cheered Cárdenas' pledge to disentangle

the government from labor negotiations.

Yet Cárdenas' ability to draw crowds has not translated into a wider popularity with the electorate. Cárdenas' television image may be the main culprit. Televisa, the pro-government network that dominates the airwaves with about 80 percent of Mexican viewers, often skips showing Cárdenas. Cárdenas, moreover, is rarely a forceful public speaker. He often drones from prepared texts like a professor, getting caught up in the fine points of his plans.

And Cárdenas performed poorly during the country's first televised presidential debate in May. Unable to parry the witty criticisms of right-wing candidate Diego Fernández de Cevallos, Cárdenas appeared sullen and unprepared.

"TV is completely alien to him. It's going to be difficult for him to regain what he lost in the debate," Mayer says. "Cárdenas lost the most, but he's used to it by now. He just can't shake that loser image."

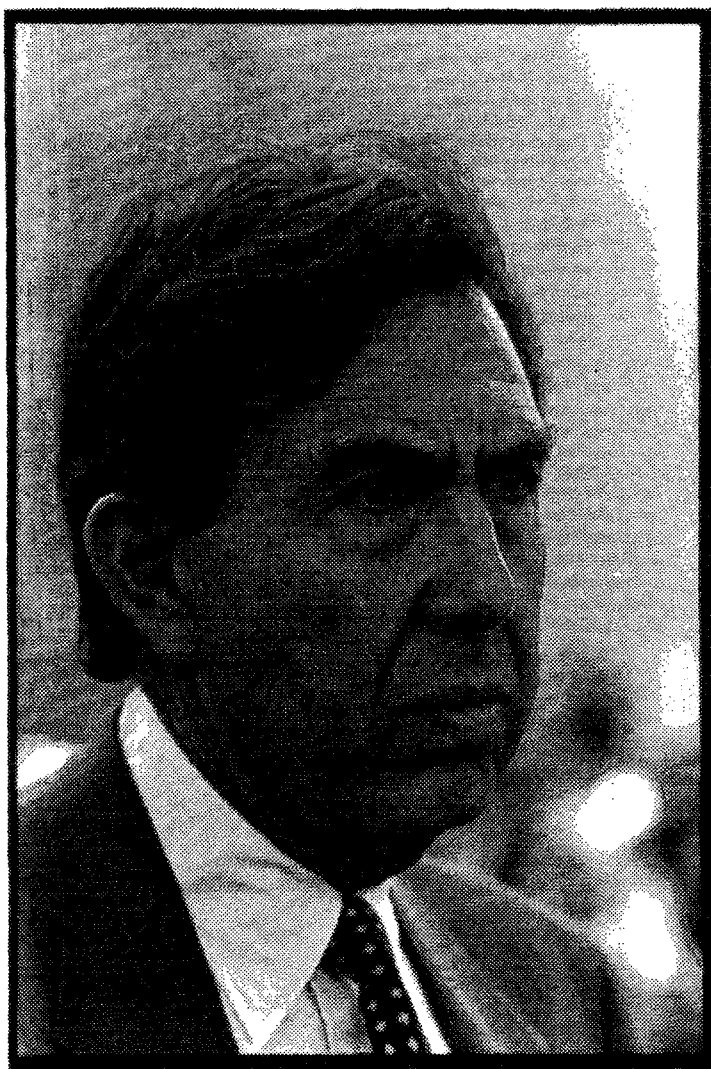
Days after the debate, Cárdenas suffered an embarrassing setback during a surprise visit to Chiapas, the stronghold of the Zapatista National Liberation Army. Although he is the only candidate who has met with Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatistas, Marcos derided Cárdenas as just another politician in a corrupt political system. Forced to listen to a lecture by gun-toting guerrillas, Cárdenas came away from the meeting looking bruised and weak.

Coming off two defeats, Cárdenas sunk in the polls as Fernández, the winner of the television debate, surged. Though a recent poll by *Este País*, a Mexican magazine, gives Cárdenas the highest totals he's had in months, he still languishes in third place with 19 percent, compared to Zedillo's 23 percent and Fernández's 30 percent. (In that poll, 22 percent remained undecided; 6 percent went to six minor parties.)

Other polls suggest that Cárdenas' support is even more tenuous. A poll by Guadalajara University's Center for Opinion Studies, for example, shows Fernández with 33 percent, Zedillo with 28 percent and Cárdenas with 13 percent. One of Mexico City's newest papers, the center-left *Reforma*, recently published a poll showing Cárdenas with just 8 percent.

"Who can believe the polls?" asks Jose Carreño Figueras, a correspondent for *El Universal*, a centrist paper in Mexico City. "Even if we interview people in their homes, they are still afraid to talk, afraid to tell us who they will really vote for in August." Experts also note that most of the polls are done in urban areas, and much of the PRD's strength is rural. "No one knows Cárdenas' real strength," Carreño says. "He has great appeal in the countryside with people who believe he'll return to the policies of his father. But there's no guarantee of that."

Some of Cárdenas' problems almost certainly stem from the difficulties he faces in getting attention in the media.



Reforma runs a unique feature each week: It tracks mentions of the three major candidates in prominent publications. Zedillo usually dominates with about 1,000 mentions each week; typically, the totals for Cárdenas and Fernández together don't match the PRI candidate. Although about a third of all the coverage candidates receive is negative, *Reforma's* tracking doesn't reveal the full extent of the bias toward Zedillo.

In regions away from the capital, like Chiapas, where the media remain under the control of PRI-oriented publishers, Cárdenas' campaign may not generate much coverage at all. For instance, during late June, Cárdenas and Fernández both campaigned at a conference in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the state capital of Chiapas. Fernández rated modest pieces inside most local papers. Zedillo's campaign in Mexico City was covered prominently. But the only mention of Cárdenas was a paragraph in response to political happenings in the capital.

Even so, many reporters are openly pro-Cárdenas. At a June rally at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), most of the press gallery was cheering Cárde-

nas and singing PRD campaign songs. Columnists inflated the number of people attending the rally in an attempt to revive Cárdenas' flagging campaign, comparing it to his triumphant UNAM appearance in 1988, when he carried the capital's votes. (Police officially estimated there were 3,000 people at the 1994 speech. Some columnists reported as many as 70,000. Actual numbers were probably closer to 12,000.) Pro-Cárdenas opinion often spills into print, but with coverage in many papers limited by editors, the information pendulum swings away from the PRD.

"Those who own newspapers are using them for their own business or political gain rather than to give information," Carreño argues. Though the PRI has curtailed its past practice of influencing coverage by funneling direct payments to news organizations, many publishers are finding it in their interest to stick with the PRI's party line. Many publishers share the business sector's belief that a PRI victory would ensure continued economic stability.

To counter the PRI's upper hand with the business sector, Cárdenas has recently shifted his emphasis to economic issues. It seems like a wise strategy, considering that polls show wages and unemployment as the top two concerns of the Mexican electorate. Although he opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement, Cárdenas says that, if elected, he would work with the trade pact. Also in late June, Cárdenas postponed a day of campaigning in Sinaloa to lay out his economic plans before a convention of entrepreneurs and developers in Chiapas.

At the convention, Cárdenas described in detail a plan for public investment, private loan guarantees and incentives that would spur investment by 25 percent. He predicted that the increased public programs could create up to 1 million new jobs and increase the country's economic growth by 6 percent annually. Even with the PRI's vaunted economic programs, the Mexican economy has grown slowly during the past 16 months, expanding at an annual rate of only 0.5 percent.

Noting a number of protests by ranchers in Chiapas on the same day as his speech, Cárdenas promised that landowners who had their property invaded by campesinos would be "protected by the letter of the law and the state." In the first six months of 1994, landless peasants in Chiapas seized 210,000 acres of land. A quarter of Mexico's land disputes are centered in Chiapas, so Cárdenas' words brought cheers from his conservative audience.

But at the end of the presentation, Bernardo Ardavia, the president of the developers' group, chastised Cárdenas for taking contradictory positions. Ardavia wondered where Cárdenas would find land to appropriate for campesinos if he revives Mexico's land-reform program, as he has promised. Respecting the deeds to property of owners hit by land invasions, while taking land away from them as part of reform "are not two separate issues," Ardavia argued. He labeled Cárdenas' position as "gray."

If Cárdenas cannot win the election outright by convincing Mexico's upper class of his moderate economic views,

then he is prepared to challenge the fairness of the balloting. Besides the obvious example of the fraudulent 1988 election, Cárdenas has other reasons to believe the PRI will use election tricks to win.

Already, Cárdenas has charged that there are 4 million phantom voters on the election rolls. The PRD revealed serious flaws in the country's new voter registration system when party investigators, posing as voters, were able to obtain multiple identification cards for themselves. But instead of securing the system, election officials filed fraud charges against the investigators. Skeptical of the election institute's commitment to fair elections, Cárdenas has called for the replacement of 2,000 institute officials with close ties to the PRI.

"The PRD is already acting like they've lost the election," complains Juan Molinar of the IFE. "They are disputing the results before it happens."

Sergio Aguayo, a founder of Civic Alliance, an independent group established to monitor the elections, is uncertain if the PRI will use fraud to stop the PRD. In Aguayo's opinion, in 1992, the PRI stole the state elections in Michoacán, where Cárdenas is strongest. He believes the PRD is very strong in the capital too, but, he says, the national polls indicate the PRI probably doesn't need fraud to beat Cárdenas this time.

However, there are other clues that suggest this election will be business as usual for the PRI. At the end of June, Interior Minister Jorge Carpizo, who oversees the election commission and who is regarded by most of the political parties as impartial, resigned. He cited pressures from an unnamed political party—assumed by most Mexicans to be the PRI—which he said was compromising the election. Cárdenas reacted by saying Carpizo's resignation showed an honorable man couldn't cope with a system filled with fraud. Zedillo countered by accusing the PRD's constant allegations for forcing Carpizo out and tainting the system. President Salinas convinced Carpizo to return to his post, and tried to assure the nation that he would turn over power peacefully if an opposition party won.

But is Cárdenas even up to the challenge of beating one of this century's best political machines? He leads a party that is so low on funds it hawks campaign bumper stickers and buttons instead of giving them away. His U.S. advertising firm has deserted him for nonpayment of bills, and he's had to quell nasty infighting inside his fledgling party. Given the tide of negative media representation, possible vote manipulation and image problems, Cárdenas seems a dour Don Quixote tilting against the sturdy windmill of the PRI. All that seems to be fueling his campaign now is the passion of Mexico's dispossessed and his own ambition.

"We now face a deep national crisis. We must force a change," Cárdenas says. He must hope that Mexicans are listening and watching this time, to guarantee this year will not replay 1988.

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Mexico's crowd-pleasing conservative

College students hurling eggs aren't what a candidate wants to see at a campaign rally. But the instant eggs hit the podium at a recent speech by Diego Fernández de Cevallos, the candidate's image was elevated.

Mexicans learned Fernández doesn't duck.

Fernández, the presidential candidate for Mexico's right-wing opposition party, the National Action Party (PAN), is the surprise leader in many national polls. His ascension started in May when his casual yet combative style made him the clear winner of Mexico's first nationally televised presidential debate.

In June, he ventured on to the campus of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), Mexico's largest university, for a speech. Although about 8,000 supporters turned out for the event, hundreds of hecklers came prepared to shout down this first outdoor rally by a PAN candidate on their campus. The coordinated shouts of the hecklers and the response by PAN supporters forced Fernández to stop his speech five times. Then, out came the eggs.

Security guards quickly grabbed the candidate and huddled around him. But Fernández elbowed his way back to the microphones. "Those who attack this campaign do us honor," he thundered back to applause, and continued his speech for another 10 minutes. Such displays of machismo are exactly what may work in his favor to unseat Mexico's dominant Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).

"If PRI doesn't win, in my opinion, the election will go to PAN, because they are conservative," says Lorenzo Mayer, a leading Mexican political analyst. "They will put the economy and stability first. PRI doesn't represent stability anymore. That's why the U.S. will not back political fraud by the PRI this time."

Recent polls back Mayer's opinion. Fernández's strong showing during the debate, viewed by 30 million people, moved him from third to first in some polls. "Diego is showing up on television a lot," says Soledad Loaeza, a left-leaning political analyst from Mexico City. "Television has helped construct his image." The Mexican media has given Fernández a bit of a free ride. Since the PRI has borrowed many of the PAN's economic ideas during the presidency of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, Fernández's economic proposals find space in many mainstream news outlets.

Part of Fernández's appeal is his ability to perform in front of a crowd. The candidate, who has a beard, likes to swagger into a rally wearing cowboy boots or smoking a cigar. Sometimes, he swigs orange soda at the podium during his speeches. Mexicans usually refer to Fernández by his first name, while the other candidates retain the cold distance of their surnames. PAN campaign managers have sensed their candidates' common touch, and most posters or literature merely implore voters to cast a ballot for Diego.

Traditionally, the PAN is not a party of the masses, but of the Mexican middle class: doctors, lawyers, professors and small-business owners. Today, PANistas tend to be young entrepreneurial types, who condemn the social programs Mexico launched in the '30s. In other words, the PAN is the party of Mexico's emerging yuppie class. Since 1939 the PAN has played the part of loyal opposition to the PRI, settling for token seats in the national assembly. In the '80s, however, with Mexico's glacier-like move toward democracy, the PAN began winning significant grass-roots support, and the PRI was eventually forced to cede three governorships to their right-wing rivals.

During past national campaigns, the party has never captured more than 20 percent of the vote and has eschewed populist campaign tactics. But Fernández's appearance at UNAM, his frequent walks in the country's barrios and his television appearances show the party is willing to break out of that mold.

Fernández, a lawyer, charms crowds with his catchy rhetoric, but he provides few specifics of his political program. As Loaeza notes this is part of the PAN's appeal, masking its true intentions with a call for democratic changes and free markets. She labels Fernández "extraordinarily conservative" and "an ultra-militant Catholic" who brags that he's never officially filed for a marriage license because he was married in the church. He has openly noted that his priorities in life are God, family and then country, in that order. Fernández opposes contraception and rules out abortion under any circumstances—putting him at odds with Mexico's already restrictive abortion law, which allows the procedure only when a mother's life is endangered.

Beyond setting back women's rights, if Fernández and the PAN win the election they may undermine the secular tradition Mexico has adopted since the 1917 revolution. Combine that with the party's calls for a stronger military and privatizing much of the economy, and you have the recipe for a southern neighbor that only Jesse Helms could love.

Loaeza is one of the few who definitively predicts Fernández and the PAN will fail. "PAN's appeal is limited," Loaeza says. "It has no chance to win the election." Loaeza believes Fernández has done well in the polls because his party has strength in urban areas and the industrialized north, where it is easier to conduct polls. "They cannot carry the country."

Mayer is not so sure. "The young middle class is tired of waiting for opportunity," Mayer warns. "They won't let the PRI have another six-year guarantee." Fernández knows the growing middle class and pocketbook issues could help him win. During the debate, he let the PRI know, too, by branding their rule as a failure. He told Zedillo, a U.S.-trained economist, that he was "a good boy who got good grades, but your plan has left 40 million people in poverty."

Tart remarks and bold gestures in the midst of Mexico's wildest election of the century could give the contest to Fernández while hiding the true nature of his agenda.

—R.R.

THE PRESIDENCY

Bare-knuckle politics

Richard Nixon's legacy of "dirty tricks" lives on in the right-wing machine that is crippling the Clinton presidency.

By Robert Parry

In October 1970, Richard Nixon had an idea for punishing some White House reporters who were giving him a hard time. The president wanted to "put all the baddest guys on Air Force One" for his next trip, wrote Nixon's chief of staff H.R. Haldeman in his recently published diaries. Then, with the "baddest" reporters waiting on the presidential plane, Nixon would slip onto the press plane. Trapped in the gilded cage of Air Force One, Nixon's critics would look foolish, while their competitors on the press plane would get special access to the president.

It's not clear if Nixon ever implemented the Air Force One scheme, but it shows how determined he was to "screw" his enemies in big ways and small. By the fall of 1970, Nixon already had authorized a domestic intelligence opera-

tion against dissidents (the so-called Huston Plan); he had unleashed Vice President Spiro Agnew to stir up hatred against the "nattering nabobs of negativism"; and he had ordered Pat Buchanan and other aides to activate a campaign of "dirty tricks" against political opponents, a precursor to the Watergate "plumbers."

Ever the strategist, Nixon also saw the need to construct institutions to perpetuate his attack politics. To his disciples, he advocated a "project of building our establishment in press, business, education, etc.," Haldeman wrote.

Ultimately, Nixon's paranoid excesses—and his unpopularity with parts of Washington's establishment—led to the Watergate scandal and his political demise. But Nixon's hardball game did not end. Inside the conservative movement, it not only survived, it thrived.

Over the past 25 years, conservatives have expanded upon Nixon's "project." In the late '70s, Terry Dolan's National Conservative Political Action Committee pioneered high-tech negative campaigning. Reed Irvine's Accuracy in Media bashed reporters who dared cross the national security agencies. Conservative "think tanks" sprang up in Washington, along with dozens of right-wing magazines and newspapers. In the '80s, the Reagan administration added money and power to the mix by creating an aggressive "public diplomacy" bureaucracy that attacked foreign policy critics in Congress, the news media and liberal groups.

Today, Nixon's brainchild, this right-wing machine, is demonstrating its political maturity as it tries to chew up Bill Clinton's presidency. Conservative activists—armed with slickly produced videos, editorial-page dominance and a nationwide network of talk radio programs—are vowing to destroy Clinton politically and restore the White House to Republican control as soon as possible. Their chief weapon has been character assassination.

Going well beyond reasonable questions about the Clintons' Whitewater investments, the right is accusing the president of a wide range of crimes, from trafficking in cocaine to ordering the assault and even murder of his critics. One new video, entitled "The Clinton Chronicles," uses spooky music and slow-motion black-and-white footage of marching American soldiers and children waving American flags to make the 1993 inaugural parade look like a Martian takeover of the nation.

"At the time," a narrator intones, "most Americans were not aware of the extent of Clinton's criminal background, nor were they aware of the media blackout which kept this information from the public." The video, produced by an organization called "Citizens for Honest Government," opens with the blatant lie that "all information presented in