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Mexican Elections

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Mr Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock St.
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Dear Peter,

In the last days before the presidential elections, Mexico City's streets were strung with colorful campaign banners; cars were mounted with large loudspeakers blaring party slogans; and, at any hour of the day, a multitude of political rallies was under way. In fact, based on the sights and sounds, an American just passing through might have thought presidential politics in Mexico were identical to those back home.

While the trappings are similar, there are many differences. The most important of these is that since last September, when the official party designated Miguel de la Madrid as its candidate, everyone knew that he would be the country's next President.

For 53 years, Mexico has been essentially a one-party system. During that time, the Institutional Revolutionary Party, or PRI as it is called here, has won virtually every presidential, gubernatorial and senatorial election and most congressional seats. Moreover, the PRI has been in power for so long that most Mexicans cannot differentiate between the PRI party and the Mexican state.

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Mexico claims to be a democracy. But is it? Most Mexicans are visibly uneasy answering that question, especially when it is asked by a foreigner. Adolfo Aguilar, a political commentator, gave this reply:

In Mexico, political opposition is possible. Open opposition to the government is allowed. And although the system is very, very unjust socially and economically, we have the hope that, by moving along the avenues that the same political system allows, we can make transitions without a break and without uncontrollable violence.

In Mexico, political campaigns do occur; voting does take place; and government officials are elected. But at all stages of the electoral process, a political machine that would have made Chicago's Mayor Daley proud is actively working to get the vote out.

Historically, the PRI machine has maintained power by three means. First, by controlling the vast majority of Mexico's trade unions and peasant organisations. Its unions generally ensure slightly better working conditions for their members, and better wages, than the independent unions can. Members of the PRI-affiliated peasant organizations have a better chance of getting their claims for land attended to, and of being the beneficiaries of the government's agricultural programs. In return for the priority-status they receive, these peasant and worker organizations ensure that wherever the PRI's presidential candidate goes along the campaign trail crowds of thousands turn out to greet him. They also get the people to the polls.

Adolfo Aguilar described how these organisations guarantee that the voters cast their ballot for the PRI:

The Mexican government and the PRI control the State's resources. So if there are sectors of society that need housing for instance, they know that by participating in the PRI, and endorsing the government in elections, the government is more likely to provide them with those services.

The PRI has lots of money. While no exact figure is known, the budget for the 1982 PRI presidential campaign is estimated at 300 million dollars - roughly six times what President Reagan's election campaign cost. Mexico was virtually wall-papered with PRI posters, and the television and radio were flooded with commercials. All this propaganda made the PRI candidate appear as the only option available.

In the state of Queretaro, I asked a peasant woman whom she was going to vote for. She responded, "For the PRI, for the President." When I probed further, asking why it was necessary to vote if he was already President, she punctuated a nervous giggle with, "I don't know Miss, I really don't know."

In fact, during hours of asking peasants and workers whom they would vote for and why, I usually got one of three answers: "I'm voting for the President," "I'm voting for the PRI because they always win," or "I'm voting for the PRI because it's the only party."

This last answer - that the PRI is the only party - is the final key to the PRI's success. For nearly half a century, the government has effectively limited the opposition to a few weak parties. The largest of these, the conservative National Action Party, or PAN, has never won more than 15% of the presidential vote, and has had only a few seats in Congress.

This year's presidential election, however, was markedly different from those of the past. This year the government allowed six additional parties to compete. Most of them were to the left of the PRI. This was the second stage of an electoral reform introduced at the time of mid-term legislative elections, when the opposition was guaranteed one-fourth of the seats in the Mexican Congress.

The reason for this reform program was the growing fear in some government circles of the likely consequences of the established system. The PRI was becoming fossilized and detached from reality. In the political limbo outside the power structure, other parties were challenging the PRI's revolutionary rhetoric and self-proclaimed right to represent the masses. People were starting to refuse to participate in the PRI-controlled elections. At the last presidential election - in 1976 - 39% of the electorate abstained.

Not everyone within the system saw the need for flexibility and reform, however, and this resistance appears to have been reflected in the handling of the results in this presidential election.

No-one doubted that the PRI would win. The question is whether - and to what extent - irregularities took place to boost the PRI victory. Miguel de la Madrid is reported to have been embarrassed and angry when the Ministry of the Interior, responsible for counting the votes, announced him the winner "by an ample margin" on the morning after the election without supplying any figures to substantiate this claim.

Eventually, the official figures gave the PRI 71.63% of the vote; the right-wing parties 19.41%; and the left 8.82%. Many political observers feel that in general, while these percentages are more or less accurate, the PRI's share was probably inflated - both to diminish the abstention figure and to give a greater "popular mandate" to the official candidate.

In the counting of the first 275 electoral districts the PRI averaged 52,000 votes per district; in the following 20 it averaged 54,000; and in the last five districts, 66,000 votes.

Opposition parties have complained of irregularities at polling stations all over the country, including ballot-box stuffing, multiple voting by PRI supporters, and the obstruction of opposition voters. The leftist Unified Mexican Socialist Party (PSUM) has pointed out that the first, incomplete official results gave it 1.1 million votes; the final official tally gave it only 821,995. PSUM and the conservatives of PAN claim to have won several seats in Congress, which was also being elected. Officials awarded them one seat each, and then took even this away from PSUM on the grounds of an error in calculation.

What did the outcome of this election indicate? First, that if there was an electoral fraud - whether at the local level by traditionalist party bosses or at the centre among officials responsible for the results - the decision to let it stand must have been made by high PRI authorities. Such an extremely short-sighted attitude endangers Miguel de la Madrid's authority rather than reinforces it.

It is a high price to pay just to make him appear more popular and to maintain maximum control of a Congress that, in any case, has no significant powers.

Nevertheless, if the political reform has emerged debilitated from the election, the opposition has come out much stronger than it was. The opposition vote, both left and right, totalled a significant 28.23%. In 1970, the last time opposition candidates ran against the PRI for the presidency (but only one officially), the opposition aggregate was only 15% of the total.

The results also indicate that right-wing opposition to the system is stronger in electoral terms than left-wing. Large demonstrations organized by the left-wing parties before the election led some people to assume that they were going to win a large share of the vote. The PSUM filled Mexico City's main square with between 70,000 and 100,000 people at its closing rally. Another leftist party turned out 30,000. So there was some surprise that PSUM's official election total was only 3.65%, while the conservative PAN's was 16.41%. But research carried out by Rafael Segovia, a political scientist at the Colegio de Mexico, supports this result. In a poll of 1,200 people in urban and rural areas, he found that virtually all knew of the PRI; 39% had heard of the PAN; and only 1% knew of the PSUM. In short, for many people only the PAN is recognized as the opposition.

It is worth remembering that, while the PAN is 39 years old, the PSUM was formed only eight months before the election. It was set up in November 1981, when the Mexican Communist Party was joined by four other smaller groups in fusing into this one movement. It is worth remembering too that the best-known left-wing political leader in the country, Heberto Castillo of the Mexican Workers' Party, was refused permission by the authorities to stand as a candidate.

In summary, six new parties were allowed to organize and to run campaigns. They were allowed to travel freely throughout Mexico, criticizing the PRI government's policies and offering their own alternatives. For months their voices were heard. In the immediate future after taking office in December, the new de la Madrid government will be facing a severe economic crisis. Unemployment and inflation are already rising fast. In these circumstances, the opposition cannot now be silenced.

Sincerely,

Received in Hanover 8/13/82