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Analysis: Mexican Elections Fail To Produce Democratic Change

by Guest

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By John Ross

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Ever since the 1910 revolution, Mexican citizens have been signing their letters with a rhetorical flourish that reads "effective suffrage no re-election!" But Mexico is a land where words and deeds are often distanced. On Aug. 21, the Mexican electorate apparently returned the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) to power for the twelfth consecutive time since 1929. The PRI has held the presidency ever since the state party was consolidated 65 years ago, creating one of the longest-ruling political dynasties on the planet.

According to the preliminary results released by the Federal Electoral Institute (Instituto Federal Electoral, IFE), the PRI's Ernesto Zedillo, a substitute candidate for the assassinated Luis Donaldo Colosio, obtained a shade over 50% of the approximately 33 million votes cast in the Aug. 21 presidential election, a record turn-out. Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, standard-bearer for the right-of-center National Action Party (PAN) followed with 26% of the vote, while the left-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) candidate Cuauhtemoc Cardenas was awarded 16.5% of the popular vote. Roughly 9% of the nation's more than 9,000 polling stations did not report preliminary results due to what the IFE termed technical and human "failings."

If Zedillo's totals hold up in final computations, he will match the numbers posted by Carlos Salinas de Gortari in the disputed 1988 elections that many Mexicans believe were won by Cardenas only to be stolen in a fraud-marred vote count. A 50.3% victory by Zedillo (his preliminary count five days after the election) would be identical to Salinas's 1988 totals, a coincidence that will strengthen convictions that the results of the 1988 presidential election were fabricated by the ruling party. Should the Aug. 21 results be validated, one-half the Mexican electorate will have, once again, voted to separate the PRI from the state apparatus it has controlled for six- and-a-half decades.

Like Salinas, the presumed winner, Ernesto Zedillo, is a young, Ivy League-trained economist who formerly headed the now-defunct Budget and Planning Secretariat and has never run for public office before. But unlike Salinas and his hand-picked successor Colosio, who were leaders of the official party's "modernizing" wing, Zedillo's candidacy has been controlled by the PRI's old guard "dinosaurs," headed by Agriculture Secretary Carlos Hank Gonzalez. The PRI's large victory left the nation's two leading opposition parties deeply wounded. Many Mexicans anticipated that the Aug. 21 vote would signal the transition to democratic norms here. Instead, the PRI has reinforced its long-standing stranglehold on the nation's institutions. Preliminary results indicate that the ruling

party will hold approximately 320 out of 500 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, a number just short of the two-thirds majority needed to effect constitutional change.

The runner-up PAN, which has forged numerous agreements with the PRI, exchanging legislative cooperation for state and local electoral victories during the past six years, will hold 127 seats in the Chamber, while Cardenas's party, which won only five out of the nation's 300 electoral districts, will be granted 45 representatives in accordance with the PRD's percentage of the total vote.

Of six minor parties, only the newly-created (and government financed) Party of Labor (PT), with 3% of the vote, will receive representation in the Chamber. The ratio of representation in the newly-expanded Senate will be similar if preliminary results should be confirmed. For the PAN, the Aug. 21 results are a mixed bag. Its presidential candidate Fernandez de Cevallos was expected to do better than 26%. In fact, some polls had the bristly-bearded criminal lawyer neck-and-neck with Zedillo for much of the race. Fernandez zoomed ahead of Zedillo and Cardenas after the May 12 televised debate, the first-ever between presidential candidates. But Fernandez abruptly stopped campaigning for 10 days at the height of the contest in mid-July.

Political analyst Denise Dresser of the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM) speculates that the PRI's old guard warned Fernandez that the official party was not prepared to give up its hold on state power and, rather than risk its electoral relationship with the PRI, National Action chose to focus on local victories and wait for a presidential reprise in the year 2000. Preliminary results suggest that the PAN made significant gains in the northern states of Nuevo Leon and Sonora, capturing mayoralties and federal deputy seats, and in Jalisco, where the right-of-center party apparently won half a dozen districts.

Although Zedillo initially hinted that his government would be a "plural" one, presumably incorporating members of the PAN in his cabinet, the apparent winner backtracked on the offer in an Aug. 24 interview with the New York Times. But the major loser Aug. 21 was the PRD, which has been reduced to a virtual bystander in the upcoming congress to be convened in October. Since Cardenas's 1988 surprise showing, the PRI has dedicated its efforts to eliminating the 60 year-old son of the popular former president Lazaro Cardenas (1934-40) as a major player in national politics, wooing away his urban and rural poor constituency with "Pronasol" and "Procampo" anti-poverty programs. For example, checks of US\$120 were handed out to Mexican farmers under the Procampo program on election eve. In many states, farmers had to present their voter identification cards in order to receive the money. PRI totals were also boosted Aug. 21 by free milk distribution programs and fall school enrollment, both made contingent upon voting the official party ticket, according to dozens of voters interviewed by this reporter in Mexico state on election day.

Where government largesse and pressures did not produce favorable results for the PRI, repression has been the ruling party's strategy of control. A total of 279 members of the PRD have been killed in political violence since 1988, according to party records. The PRD base state of Michoacan, where Cardenas was once governor, was again the select target of the PRI's electoral "aplanadora" (steamroller). The left-center party won only two out of 13 Michoacan electoral districts. In 1988, Cardenas carried all 13 districts. Similarly, in Mexico City, which contains one-fifth

of the nation's population and where Cardenas won 37 out of 40 districts six years ago, he drew a blank on Aug. 21.

Gains were made in southern Veracruz oil industry sectors, particularly in the one-time boomtown of Coatzacoalcos. In tense Chiapas state, the PRD gubernatorial candidate Amado Avendano was awarded 34% of the vote, despite the fact that he was critically injured in a still-clouded July 25 automobile crash in which three PRD members were killed. Avendano and the PRD, which are claiming victory in the state contest despite PRI calculations to the contrary, did particularly well in polling stations located in the zone controlled by the rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, EZLN), where the newspaperman-turned-politician took 70% of the vote. For Mexicans who had anticipated that Aug. 21 would usher in a new democratic era after 65 years of PRI domination, the results provided a cruel jolt.

The Jan. 1 Zapatista uprising and the March 23 Colosio assassination, plus a no-growth economy that has failed to create 800,000 jobs needed this year just to accommodate youth entering the labor force, all appeared to signal severe electoral problems for the ruling PRI. In response to the specter of rising instability, both the PRI and the PAN waged campaigns that underscored fears of a breakdown in law and order, targeting Cardenas as an agent of social upheaval. Indeed, Roberto Hernandez head of the country's largest bank Banamex and president of the Mexican Banks Association (Asociacion Mexicana de Bancos, AMB) even advised Mexicans that a Cardenas victory would cause capital flight and bankrupt the country. The hoary Mexican adage that "an old evil is better than a new one because of its familiarity" also bolstered the PRI vote, wrote Miguel Angel Granados Chapa, a political columnist with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma and a citizen member of the IFE's ruling General Council.

The PRI's use of state power and resources to retain control of the government was allegedly abetted by an abundance of fraudulent practices, a staple of the official party's electoral strategies. Despite claims by the IFE a bureaucracy directed and staffed by PRI appointees that the election was the most "transparent" in Mexican history, tens of thousands of national and international observers, channeled through the independent Civic Alliance, reported high levels of illegitimate practices in polling places throughout the nation. In 63% of all precincts, the Civic Alliance found that names of voters bearing valid credentials did not appear on voter lists a technique known as "razoring."

In addition, an estimated half million voters in transit were prevented from casting votes in 679 special polling stations because no ballots were available. Opposition parties report large numbers of annulled ballots in several states perhaps as high as 20% in Sonora, where many voters scrawled in Colosio's name to protest the Salinas government's unsatisfactory investigation of the assassination.

In Chiapas, supporters invalidated their ballots by voting for Zapatista subcommander and cult hero "Marcos." According to incomplete IFE data, annulled ballots totaled nearly one million a few days after the election. Civic Alliance observers also accuse the PRI of using some traditional forms of electoral trickery, such as the "carousel" (multiple voting). Indeed, multiple voter identification cards were easily obtainable, as proved by University researcher Fernando Bazua (for whom an arrest warrant was subsequently sought by electoral authorities). Cybernetic fraud, a cornerstone

of the 1988 election, is also suspected, since secret computation centers were reportedly located by the PRD in Guerrero and Puebla states. Cardenas, who claims up to 8 million citizens were prevented from voting due to illegal exclusionary practices, has called for civil resistance to "clean up" the election. Similar to the 1988 election fiasco, marches and demonstrations have been everyday occurrences since Aug. 21.

As a result, after an initial post-electoral jump, the Mexican Stock Exchange (BMV) stayed even for the rest of the week following the elections. Market watchers, contemplating continuing post-electoral turmoil, say that traders are so far reluctant to risk a substantial increase in investments, since most believe that Zedillo's triumph at the polls will probably be the last "good" political news until his inauguration. The strength of civil resistance to the PRI landslide may well determine Cuauhtemoc Cardenas's continuing leadership of the leftist opposition. A cautious man by nature, Cardenas called off massive demonstrations in 1988 in order to consolidate the PRD. In 1994, the "ingeniero" (civil engineer) as he is universally called, is pressured from the left by both the Zapatistas and the National Democratic Convention (CND) an alliance of social activists who support the EZLN. The CND has called for peaceful civil disobedience, the blocking of the nation's highways, and a general strike to protest electoral fraud.

On the other hand, Cardenas's loss at the polls can only increase the influence of those forces on the left that condemn electoral participation and advocate armed struggle as the most efficient strategy for separating the PRI from the state. Although the presence of armed groups other than the Zapatistas was rumored prior to the election in at least four central Mexican states, no guerrilla attacks were reported in the days immediately following Aug. 21. In an initial post-electoral communique issued Aug. 24, the Zapatista General Command endorsed the CND's call for peaceful resistance to PRI claims of victory in Chiapas and throughout the nation. The EZLN had previously indicated that a Zedillo triumph would be unacceptable.

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