

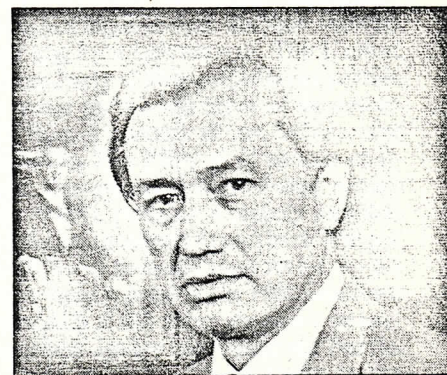


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The unwritten rule is that no one seeking the PRI's nomination should ever appear to be campaigning openly for it: *Del Mazo, Salinas*

Handpicking a President

Miguel de la Madrid's vote is the one that counts

A firm hand and a hard line: *Bartlett*

Choosing a new president in Mexico is a historic occasion in a very special sense: the outcome is history long before the voters go to the polls. The process begins—and, as a practical matter, ends—with the *dedazo*, the pointing of the departing president's finger that every six years anoints the next candidate of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In a country where PRI candidates have been declared the winners in every national and statewide election for the past 58 years, the *dedazo* is tantamount to automatic election. This does not mean that the making of the president in Mexico is totally devoid of drama; it just means that the excitement comes and goes a year or so before the election.

At some point during the second half of 1987, President Miguel de la Madrid will select the PRI's nominee for the elections in July 1988. De la Madrid's successor will draw a salary of only \$36,000 a year, can serve only one six-year term and will inherit a country deeply mired in economic recession and increasingly lacking in optimism about its short-term future. But the Mexican system bestows almost limitless

powers on its presidents, and there is no shortage of contenders. Cabinet ministers are the overwhelming favorites: Mexico's last 10 presidents have been chosen from the sitting president's cabinet. Although no clear front runner has emerged, three ministers currently make up the "A list" of contenders: Interior Secretary Manuel Bartlett Díaz, energy czar Alfredo del Mazo and Planning and Budget Secretary Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

In a political system rife with anomalies and contradictions, the greatest paradox of all is enshrined in an unwritten rule—that no one seeking the PRI's nomination for president must ever appear to be campaigning openly for it. So handicappers look for arcane signs and symbols reminiscent of the shadow world of Kremlinology: the seating order of competing ministers at public functions featuring the president, the roll call of secretaries included in the president's entourage on state visits abroad. While it may seem a rather curious rule for a country billing itself as the most durable democracy in Latin America, the ban on campaigning is rigorously observed by most legitimate contenders for the *dedazo*. "[Former President] José López Por-

tillo said that the biggest mistake is to try to be a candidate," says newspaper columnist Adrián Lajous. "There is nothing that will more surely lose the president's support than a precampaign."

'Walk, don't run': This time around, it is del Mazo who appears to have heeded López Portillo's maxim least. The handsome, 43-year-old former governor of the State of Mexico, who instantly became a leading candidate for the PRI nomination when de la Madrid named him energy secretary last April, raised eyebrows last November when he packed the Legislative Palace with his supporters on the morning of a scheduled appearance before Congress. Still, del Mazo enjoys the backing of Fidel Velázquez, the powerful head of the 4.5 million-member Confederation of Mexican Workers, and de la Madrid once called del Mazo "the younger brother I never had." Of the three ministers, only del Mazo was invited to accompany de la Madrid on the president's recent tour of Japan and China.

Salinas epitomizes the "Walk, don't run" style of noncampaigning. The balding secretary's unremarkable looks, his age (38) and his uncharismatic image as a technocrat are his biggest drawbacks. But the