



LARRY REIDER—GAMMA-LIAISON

Losing credibility while winning election: *The president-elect with his wife and daughter*

## 'We Are Not Pieces of Paper'

Salinas triumphs in Mexico; but can he govern?

In the Mexican state of Guerrero last week, tens of thousands of half-burned ballots turned up on the patio of an abandoned home; others were spotted floating down a river. In isolated districts in Nuevo León and Chiapas, the long-entrenched Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) recorded electoral sweeps that strained credulity: 25,401 to 483, and 76,346 to 1,849. The central Mexico village of Tlacualoyan delivered a 155-103 victory to PRI presidential candidate Carlos Salinas de Gortari after the number "1" materialized in front of his original tally of 55. It was a week since the July 6 vote, and results were undergoing the traditional Mexican "alchemy" that has helped put the PRI in power in every presidential election since 1929. "Basically Election Day itself was clean," said Jorge G. Castañeda, a well-connected political scientist. "But as [the PRI and the government] redid elections in a half-dozen states, they did so massively, quickly, sloppily—the only way you can do those things."

What took place during the weeklong *mañana* vote count was an ex post facto ballotting that roused public protest and made a mockery of Salinas's calls for a clean election. When the official numbers finally did come out, Salinas had 50.36 percent, by far the PRI's all-time low; Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas of the leftist National Democratic Front (FDN) won 31.12 percent, and Manuel Clouthier of the right-of-center National Action Party (PAN), 17.07 percent. Opposition party candidates took 240 of

500 places in the Chamber of Deputies.

While winning, Salinas lost credibility. He said repeatedly that the starting point for all his proposed reforms was a relatively honest vote count. But faced with humiliation at the polls, the old-guard PRI apparatus ignored the 40-year-old candidate—or else Salinas himself caved in to the "dinosaurs," as they are called. Cárdenas claimed that "information" from "inside the government" gave him a victory of 40 percent to Salinas's 35 percent. He offered no proof, however, and neutral election experts doubt that Salinas would actually have lost a completely clean election.

**Public relations:** The opposition was certainly winning the public-relations battle. On Saturday, Cárdenas organized a large but peaceful demonstration in Mexico City's central square. This week he plans to cross the country stirring up protest against the vote fraud. "We want to show



SERGIO DORANTES—SYGMA

A need to pacify the opposition: *Protest in the capital after the vote*

... that our votes—the ones we got and the ones the government took away from us—are backed by the citizens," Cárdenas, 54, told NEWSWEEK, "and we want this to be seen in the streets and in the plazas. These Mexicans... are not pieces of paper."

Popular discontent may make it hard for Salinas to govern effectively. At the very least, he will have to find a way of pacifying Cárdenas. This is unlikely to produce anything like power sharing. For all Salinas's campaign rhetoric about democratic openings, negotiations between the two men would almost certainly center on economic policy. The populist Cárdenas is highly critical of the decrease in public spending that Salinas enforced when he was budget minister. "To keep going down the same road—lowering standards of living, growing unemployment—can produce nothing," he said. "There is no belt to tighten anymore." Cárdenas favors suspending payment on Mexico's \$104 billion foreign debt, owed largely to U.S. banks. Salinas has no appetite for a confrontation with creditors, but may now be forced into one. "If he continues with his policy in a situation where the country clearly said no [at the polls], he's going to pay for it," said Castañeda.

**'Almost artistic':** At the same time, the PRI is entering a period of severe internal turmoil. Salinas was nearly abandoned at the polls by organized labor, until now a pillar of his party. The PRI's rural arm, the National Peasant Confederation, claims that its members provided fully 7 million of Salinas's 9.6 million votes. Labor candidates lost in a number of important legislative races, and Salinas enraged them by urging them to accept the defeats. Several labor leaders said they feared Salinas actually wanted to weaken the unions in order to press for further austerity.

For now, the big question is whether the opposition will take its protest far enough to threaten the stability of the political system. Asked a PRI activist: "Does [Cárdenas] want to run for president six years from now, or will he insist on being a martyr to democracy this year?" Historian Lorenzo Meyer of the Colegio de México said he was optimistic: Cárdenas, a PRI defector, is a creature of the Mexican political system and has "an almost artistic sense" of its limits, he said. "There is no such thing," added Meyer, "as a transition from authoritarianism to democracy without tension. Mexico is not exempt from this, and I think that the major actors in this drama are aware of the potential dangers." If not, the legacy could be more serious than one more tainted election.

STRYKER MCGUIRE in Mexico City