



KEITH DANNE MILLER

Protesting election fraud: 'Parallel police force' of PRD supporters guards Jungapeo town hall

Mexico: Battling Over Ballots

Electoral reform has only barely begun

Guadalupe Rojas expects an attempt on his life any day now. The Mexican government said he lost a December mayoral race in Jungapeo, Michoacán, a dusty farming town 120 miles west of Mexico City. Rojas argues that he lost only because of fraud by Mexico's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In protest, Rojas and members of the opposition Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) occupied the town hall last month with their own government, complete with an armed police force. That led to a shootout with PRI supporters, which left two PRD activists dead. Rojas says PRI members have now slapped a price of 10 million pesos on his head. "We have to make the PRI see that it was we who triumphed," he says. "So if I'm going to die tomorrow I should be here."

Jungapeo is just one more reminder that political reform in Mexico lags behind the nation's bold economic changes. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari has won international applause for privatizing industry and removing trade barriers. But last week, while Salinas wooed foreign investment in Europe, PRD leaders confronted Interior Minister Fernando Gutiérrez Barrios with a list of 56 *perredistas*—PRD supporters—who they say were killed in political violence during the past 18

months. At least 18 have died in the past month alone, the PRD said, and it accused the Salinas government of "passivity that borders on complicity."

The ruling PRI, insisting that it is "neither the promoter nor the beneficiary" of the violence, complains that PRD loyalists are themselves prone to brutishness at the polls. They have produced their own list of eight martyrs from electoral strife in the neighboring states of Michoacán and Guerrero. Says high-ranking PRI official César Augusto Santiago, "They [the PRD] are not interested in the election results so much as in creating conflict."

Mexico's political rage can be traced to the fierce 1988 presidential campaign of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, son of one of Mexico's most popular presidents, Lázaro Cárdenas. Exasperated by the PRI's monolithic 60-year reign, Cárdenas bolted his family's party to head a leftist coalition. The Cárdenas campaign proved so formidable that many Mexicans still think Salinas's victory was fraudulent—or at least that his winning margin was exaggerated. Cárdenas went on to found the PRD, with Salinas promising that "the era of virtual one-party rule is ending."

That process, however, has been slow and stormy. The PRI accepted the loss of one governorship last year to the conserva-

tive National Action Party (PAN), but it was accused of fraud in statewide elections in Michoacán, a PRD stronghold. In December's local elections in Michoacán, the PRD insists that it won at least 62 of 113 mayoral seats; the government-controlled election commission granted the PRD only 52, again amid widespread charges of cheating. In Ciudad Hidalgo, for example, more than 5,000 voters found their names excised from the rolls on Election Day; many reportedly said they had told pollsters that they planned to vote PRD.

In the town of Tacámbaro, PRD and PAN members have joined to stage "alternative elections" for the town council as a virtual referendum on PRI rule. In other towns, PRD supporters have set up "parallel governments" that vie with the official governments for authority. This has created utter confusion, since residents

often don't know which faction controls which municipal services, and opposing police forces eye each other suspiciously across the plazas. One PRD vigilante in Tacámbaro was gunned down in an alleged ambush two weeks ago. The murder was widely believed to have been arranged by a member of a powerful PRI family.

A solid opposition: In a real but regrettable sense, the violence is a sign that the Mexican political system is changing: the PRD has made itself into a continuing opposition force of the left, something the PRI has not had to contend with in decades. Many observers believe Salinas must recognize that economic reform cannot succeed unless electoral reform comes with it. "So long as the current power elite insists [that it can modernize] only one aspect of the Mexican state but not the other, underdevelopment will continue as the true characteristic of our life," political historian Lorenzo Meyer warned last month.

The PRI shows signs that at last it may agree. Interior Minister Gutiérrez Barrios promised a quick response to the PRD complaints, and other officials hinted that the government was not only prepared to review the Jungapeo election but to mediate political skirmishes in other towns. Any harsher approach, says Meyer, will give the opposition "no other option but violence." As Salinas ended his visit to Europe last week, opposition leaders at home hoped he would take his cue from the Eastern bloc.

TIM PADGETT with LUCY CONGER in Michoacán and BARBARA BELEJACK in Mexico City