

Letter from Mexico

Back to the future

It was a fine spring afternoon, the jacaranda trees in full purple bloom across Mexico City, as Carlos Salinas de Gortari sat in his office in the Los Pinos presidential compound. A few hours later, an assassin would shoot and kill Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta, the presidential candidate of the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and Salinas's friend, protégé and likely successor. But as he spoke with foreign reporters that sunny afternoon, Salinas was blissfully unaware of the cataclysm to come. The president talked proudly about his efforts to elevate Mexico from the Third World, about the accomplishments of free trade with Canada and the United States, about the work that remained to make Mexico a modern democracy. He even spoke confidently about last January's 10-day peasant revolt in southern Chiapas state, which he claimed to have handled deftly by deciding to negotiate with the rebels rather than destroy them. Indeed, as he contemplated the end of his six-year presidential term next December, Salinas appeared content with the place he had created for himself in Mexican history.

But an assassin's bullet may have radically changed all that. A few days later, a taxi driver shifted his Buick sedan at high speed from one lane to the other of Mexico City's busy Periferico auto route and spun his theory that the president himself had masterminded the March 23 assassination of Colosio. In politics, even a few days can be an eternity. And with the murder of Colosio, Salinas's reputation—already tarnished by economic recession and the Chiapas revolt—was in tatters. Later revelations that Colosio's killer may have had help—the government-appointed special investigator now claims that at least seven people took part in the murder—only made the conspiracy advocates more convinced that the country's governing elite were behind it all.

If Salinas's reputation was sullied, so, too, was the reputation of the country that he had tried to remake. *México bronco*, the newspapers claimed after the assassination, had reasserted itself. The phrase denotes a wild and rough-edged Mexico, the Mexico of Pancho Villa and more than a century of war and revolution. In the country's first 30 years, 50 successive governments tried to rule it. More than half

its territory was lost in war to the United States. Assassination and execution were the accepted mechanisms of political change. "They had almost 100 years of continuous revolution," said Don Mackay, a diplomat at the Canadian Embassy. "They lost one-fifth of the population. In Canada and the United States, we have short memories. But in Mexico, they have very long memories."

They are memories of a past that Mexico has worked hard to leave behind, taking pride in the stability that the PRI has brought in the past 65 years, since it was founded in the wake of the country's last high-level political assassination. Now, suddenly, in the course of less than three months, the tumultuous past seems to have come back. In Mexico's psychic geography, it had slid back towards Latin America from its toehold as a North American nation.

Business executives have expressed confidence that Mexico will remain a good place for investment, despite the recent troubles. "I

think Mexico is bigger than this," said Douglas Clark, president of the Canada-Mexico Chamber of Commerce. But if Clark is wrong—there are more than four months to go before the Aug. 21 presidential election and the trouble in Chiapas is far from settled—then Mexico's hope for continued stability will fade, as will its hopes for prosperity.

Those are hopes felt most strongly among the poor of rural Mexico. While the government claims progress in bringing potable water, education and new roads to millions, there remain two distinct Mexicos. There is the Mexico of the quiet, tree-lined streets in the capital's Polanco district where the Canadian Embassy is located and of the smart shops and international hotels in the Zona Rosa. The second Mexico is found on the faces of the street kids in Chiapas who shine shoes for two pesos, or of the Indian woman in Mexico City who leaves her baby sleeping on a blanket on a dusty piece of the median strip while she hustles Chiclets in the street.

Rev. Pablo Romo, head of the human rights centre of the Roman Catholic Church in San Cristóbal de las Casas, says that half the population of Chiapas works for less than the minimum wage of roughly \$6 a day. And about 400 families, he says, own much of the arable land, leaving little for Indian peasants squeezed onto hillsides. Lorenzo Meyer, a profes-

sor of history and political science at the Colegio de México, expressed shock at the conditions in Chiapas. But he noted that similar poverty also exists in the dreary suburbs of Mexico City. "The gap, the cleavage, between the two Mexicos is incredible," said Meyer.

In the early days of the negotiations that would lead to the North American Free Trade Agreement, Salinas told *Maclean's* that it would take a generation for the benefits of free trade to work through the system. While introducing economic reforms, Salinas has moved far more cautiously on political reforms that might undermine the PRI and his power base, as happened in the Soviet Union under Mikhail Gorbachev. But in the final months of his presidency, Salinas is discovering how difficult such a juggling act is, and how impatient Mexicans can be.

WARREN CARAGATA in Mexico City



Rebel leader Marcos: a peasant uprising

DOUGLAS ENGLE/AP