

Dateline Mexico by Hugo López Ochoa

The case of the 25,000 voting booths

Will a recount of the vote be carried out, or will Mexico get an illegitimate ruler?

It is showdown time in Mexico. The new national Congress must certify the presidential election, and the opposition parties continue to insist that that certification will only be accepted as legitimate if and when a full and transparent recount of the votes cast at 25,000 polling stations—to which the opposition was never granted access, on orders of Interior Secretary Manuel Bartlett—is conducted. These polling stations represent 46% of the total 55,000 that were installed throughout the country on July 6, the day of the presidential election.

Bartlett sequestered the 25,000 controversial polling station results after information from the first 30,000 booths reached the Federal Elections Commission's computer center, clearly indicating that the vote trend was an unequivocal 40% in favor of nationalist Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, presidential candidate of the National Democratic Front (FDN).

At the same time, the official candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, of the Revolutionary Institutional Party (PRI), was carrying only 34%, and the monetarist National Action Party (PAN) just 22%. Interior Secretary Bartlett, with no more authority than his own word, awarded Salinas de Gortari an overall 50.3% of the total vote, while giving Cárdenas 31% and the PAN 17%.

For Bartlett's figures to have been legitimate, there would have had to be a total turnaround in the vote at the 25,000 sequestered polling booths—which represent less than half the total

votes—with an average of 67% of the vote at those booths going to Salinas, 20% to Cárdenas, and 11% to the PAN. Given the deep-seated hostility toward former Budget and Planning Minister Salinas—author of the last six years' economic policies—by nearly every layer of the austerity-wracked Mexican people, Bartlett's figures are simply unbelievable.

In fact, the De la Madrid government is now trapped by its own figures, because, in order to raise the vote tally for Salinas at the sequestered polling booths, they have had to exaggeratedly shrink the overall abstention percentage—from the traditional 42% to less than 30%, and in some cases, to 0%!

On Aug. 30, FDN representatives said that the impossibility of producing clean electoral results through the efforts of the Electoral College "has caused a delicate political situation at a national level, which threatens to become the worst political crisis that the country has seen in recent decades." The opposition spokesmen insisted that the PRI inflated the results in their favor by at least 3 million votes, while at the same time stealing nearly 1.5 million votes that belonged to the FDN.

The next day, on the eve of President Miguel de la Madrid's final State of the Union address, and of the installation of the new Congress, Cárdenas proposed opening up the sequestered packets of ballots from "only a few thousand" of the booths in dispute. "We will agree to the form of

cleaning up the elections," he said. "I will accept the result, whatever it be, but only if it comes from comparing the numbers from the counting procedures, by opening up whatever electoral packets [of ballots] necessary."

On Sept. 4, Abel Vicencio Tovar, head of the PAN parliamentary bloc, announced that the PAN too would demand the opening of the electoral packets, "and if that is refused, then will come the proposal to nullify the elections." The same sentiment was reiterated by former PAN secretary general Bernardo Batiz.

Batiz also raised an unusual possibility: an alliance between the PAN and the FDN on the issue, since together they have 237 deputies in the new Congress. That means that only 24 of the PRI candidates—who currently number 263—would need to vote in favor of opening the disputed ballots, for the opposition to win a majority decision for an honest recount, and the probable determination of a victory for Cárdenas.

The huge ongoing factional battle inside the PRI, and especially the discontent of the trade union layers, have President de la Madrid and his would-be successor, Salinas de Gortari, chewing their nails. As one columnist put it, writing in *El Universal* of Sept. 4, "The vote of the [trade union] congressmen could prove decisive; they are sufficient to tilt the vote in Congress. The defection of but a few PRIistas," he wrote, "would be sufficient to change the history of the country."

On Sept. 6 Cárdenas himself stated, "The simple fact that the Federal Elections Commission has not presented the results of the 25,000 pending voting booths, will invalidate the presidential election." On Sept. 8, he warned of a plot to impose Salinas "through an arbitrary act of force, lacking legality and legitimacy."