

Mexico becomes a 'banana democracy' in wake of state elections

by Miguel Hidalgo

The U.S. mass news media these days are generally jumping with joy over the "victory" of the National Action Party (PAN) in the July 2 gubernatorial elections in the state of Baja California Norte, known by its neighbors to the North simply as "Baja." The hullabaloo is not just over an opposition party winning, but that this is the first time since the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was founded in 1929, that a party other than the PRI has won—and the government has recognized the victory, a state governorship.

That sounds really good—too good, in fact, to be true. The truth is that enormous fraud took place before, during, and immediately after the Baja elections. It might appear strange that the PAN's victory was proclaimed first not by the PAN, but by the national president of the PRI, Luis Donaldo Colosio, on July 4, shortly after having received orders to do that from none other than President Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Perhaps as a special Fourth of July message, Colosio stated at his press conference that even though the official returns were not yet in, the "general tendency" in the Baja gubernatorial elections "favored" the PAN candidate, Ernesto Ruffo Appel. Colosio then fell apart in an outpouring of meaningless verbiage, in order to put an end to a *sui generis* press conference in which he accepted not a single question. On orders of the presidential press office, which controls almost all Mexican mass media, the official television network interrupted its normal programming to transmit the PRI chief's message.

Colosio did not bother to give any concrete vote count on which to base his giving victory to the PAN. Those who attended the press conference were asking themselves, "Is Colosio president of the PRI, or of the PAN?" It was quite clear that Colosio's intention was to shift the balance in favor of the PAN while the votes were still being counted.

Arrangements with Washington

A story that Salinas himself would announce a PAN victory in the Baja elections had been making the rounds for several weeks preceding the elections. It was said that Joseph Marie Córdova Montoya—Salinas's presidential coordinator and most influential adviser—was arguing that the best

thing for Salinas's personal prestige would be to hand the Baja governorship over to the PAN, in order to win the support both of those business and Catholic Church sectors which support the PAN, and of the government of the United States.

Córdova's thesis is summed up in the slogan: "Win by losing." His electoral strategy was simple: Barter the PAN's "triumph" with the U.S. government, in return for advances in Mexico's agonizing debt renegotiations.

It is no accident that Córdova was the man Salinas put in charge of supervising the negotiations. His enormous power inside the government has created considerable discontent, due to the enigmatic manner with which he acts and also to his foreign origins. Córdova is a French-Spaniard who only obtained Mexican citizenship in 1981, thanks to Salinas's requests to President Miguel de la Madrid. Previously, Córdova had worked closely in France with Socialist leader Jacques Attali, ex-minister of the French government.

A clear demonstration that it was Salinas's personal decision to recognize the PAN's victory, is found in a July 6 *Los Angeles Times* analysis by U.S. political scientist Wayne Cornelius. "There is no doubt," he wrote, "that the decision to yield power to the PAN in Baja California was made at the highest levels"—i.e., the presidency.

Cornelius's perception is well-informed: He has been tied to Salinas for almost a decade, particularly since he and Susan Kauffman Purcell were directors of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Affairs' "Mexico Project." At present, Cornelius is assistant director of the Center for Mexico-United States Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

Discontent in PRI ranks

This "give-away" of the governorship provoked profound discontent among PRI activists in Baja California. They have protested what they term "treason" by their leaders. In a number of public rallies, local PRI leaders openly attacked national PRI chairman Luis Donaldo Colosio and the PRI officials sent from Mexico City to run the election campaign. The state president of the PRI, Eduardo Martínez Palomera,

was pursued July 7 by furious PRI members and was smacked around by several of them.

On July 5, Martínez Palomera and a group of local PRI leaders gave a press conference at which they affirmed, "Neither the PRI leadership nor its active members recognized at any time and for any reason the supposed triumph of the PAN." Martínez Palomera argued that until "election officials release the vote count results, and until the electoral colleges certify the elections' legality, there is no reason for us to concede anything at all." After he was finished, groups of PRI members shouted, "Death to Colosio!" On June 7, the PRI candidate for the state's governorship, Margarita Ortega, declared, "I am not going to concede, nor will any of the PRI candidates."

The discontent of the Baja California PRI members was suffocated, however, when their leaders were called to Mexico City to be disciplined.

Michoacán: Stalin-style elections

In sharp contrast with Baja California, the international media have paid little attention to the Michoacán elections of the state assembly, now politically dominated by ex-presidential candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Born in Michoacán and a popular governor of that state, Cárdenas was the victim of an enormous electoral fraud on July 6, 1988, which stole the national presidency from him.

There were 18 state assembly seats up for grabs in the Michoacán elections. The Salinas administration's dilemma was that if Cárdenas's Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) won the majority of the seats, for the first time an entire state legislature would be under the control of the opposition. That would permit the opposition to have a certain amount of leverage in the daily management of the state. But it could become critical the next time a governor is elected, since the election is also likely to be contentious; and, in Mexico, the legislature has the last word on who wins an election.

These elections were more important for Salinas than those of Baja California. Salinas took pains to send two former cabinet members, a former governor, and hundreds of "special envoys" to Michoacán to shore up the PRI's campaign. And Colosio, the national PRI leader, made four tours through Michoacán during June. The federal government lubricated things by investing millions of dollars in bribes, propaganda, control over press, radio and TV, hotels, and typical PRI pre-election squandering. The objective was at all costs to prevent Cárdenas from winning. They even brought in an extraordinary concentration of troops from neighboring states to guarantee the achievement of this objective.

Every conceivable dirty trick was tried. The state government—whose current governor was appointed, not elected—illegally delayed the distribution of voter registration lists. The law requires that such lists be provided to local election

officials 15 days before the elections; the regime distributed them two days before. The political police carefully selected poll workers in order to guarantee their loyalty to the PRI. And, on election day, shameless fraud took place: Unregistered voters cast ballots, polls turned up in places not previously stipulated, armed bands robbed ballot boxes, boxes were stuffed, and poll-watchers from other parties were expelled.

The Salinas regime reached its peak of brazenness on election eve, when the police arrested and briefly detained PRD federal congressman Leonel Godoy, who was chasing a group of PRI youth who were painting offensive comments on PRD posters. Later, Godoy, accompanied by Mexican and foreign newsmen, found another group of youths who confessed that each was paid \$7 for his defacing work and that they belonged to a leftist terrorist group called Peasant Torch. Peasant Torch formally asked to join the PRI shortly after Salinas was imposed as its presidential nominee in October 1987, over the opposition of the PRI's peasant wing, the National Peasant Federation. Peasant Torch is financed by Salinas's brother, Raúl Salinas de Gortari.

The government illegally used every means at its disposal to intercept phone calls and to keep key PRD leaders and other Cárdenas supporters under 24-hour surveillance. The state's most important newspaper, *La Voz de Michoacán*, was one of their victims. The daily deployed 300 reporters to the vote-counting centers in every corner of the state to obtain rapid information on the returns. However, on election day, July 2, every one of its telephone, telex, and fax lines was cut for three hours. The paper's publisher, Rogelio Guzmán, said the experts he brought in found the wires were cut "intentionally" by persons familiar with the installations.

With things so arranged, the state PRI announced its supposed victory in 11 of the 18 electoral districts—that is, it gave itself the majority. For its part, the PRD announced with tally sheets in hand that it had won 15 of the 18 districts. It challenged the PRI to compare tally sheets, one by one, in public. But the PRI refused, claiming that "we will not fall into petty wars over numbers."

Salinist 'democracy' at work

Salinist democracy is selective. It elected to hand over Baja California because it is on the United States border, which guarantees it a big "publicity impact" on the United States government, whose policy, at least since 1982 has been to support and finance the PAN opposition.

On the other hand, it determined to smash Cárdenas because he represents the overwhelming majority of citizens who oppose Salinas's policy of handing over the Mexican economy to the country's creditors and making Mexico a cheap-labor sweatshop and secure petroleum source inside a North American Common Market. To demoralize that majority, the regime determined that Cárdenas had to be prevented from winning elections.