

## Dateline Mexico by Carlos Cota Meza

### Who will rule Mexico?

*A debate is raging over whether to bypass the Constitution and allow presidential reelection.*

The main element of political and economic uncertainty in Mexico today is whether President Carlos Salinas de Gortari will seek, in one way or another, to perpetuate himself in power when his six-year term concludes in 1994, despite the fact that the Mexican Constitution explicitly prohibits presidential reelection.

The issue of his possible reelection has been a subject for international speculation, and is being discussed openly here. The denials of the President himself, along with those of his closest collaborators, have not dispelled the doubts. That is because it is known that there are political movements afoot which are committed to Salinas's reelection.

A political confrontation recently broke out in the state of San Luis Potosí which is proving to be a sounding board for what is going on inside the ruling PRI party on a national level, between those who want presidential reelection and those who oppose it.

The interim governor of that state, Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá, recently stepped down from the post in order to immediately announce his PRI candidacy for the same position in extraordinary elections soon to be held. San Luis Potosí has been in a unique state of political limbo since the forced resignation of Fausto Zapata, who in September 1991 took the governorship in a fraudulent electoral victory against his opponent, the late Salvador Nava. Martínez Corbalá was designated interim governor by the PRI for the period from October 1991

to April 1993.

But Martínez Corbalá has now also withdrawn his candidacy. The explicit reason given is that he doesn't want his candidacy to be interpreted as a dry run, as establishing a political, juridical, and constitutional precedent for Salinas's reelection.

Among other things, it is said that Martínez Corbalá, whose candidacy was backed by Salinas, was forced to withdraw from the race by the PRI's National Political Council, whose majority consists of former presidents of that same party.

There is much speculation, to be sure, but everything seems to suggest that what is really at stake is the presidential succession, for which the PRI must choose its candidate in 1993. It is said that within the team that Salinas himself put together, there is no one who can succeed him. All of his collaborators view him with a reverential fear, as a kind of Macbeth whose wrath must be avoided at all cost.

Those who oppose presidential reelection—equal in number to those who in 1988 opposed Salinas's candidacy—also lack a candidate for 1994. Unofficially, they have put together a profile of the suitable candidate—"a nationalist, but who maintains good relations with Washington and Wall Street"—but however hard they search, they have been unable to find him.

What is important about the presidential succession battle in Mexico is that it marks an inflection point in the unraveling of the PRI party, and of the

political system itself. Indeed, because of the severe crisis tearing apart the PRI, Salinas was forced on Oct. 21 to advance his fourth State of the Union address—normally presented to the Congress on Nov. 1—to 600 "distinguished" PRI leaders who were urgently convoked for the occasion.

In his speech, Salinas sent various messages. The first was to the U.S. Democratic candidate Bill Clinton. Salinas declared that "the future of our relations [with the United States] is not determined by affinity between two Presidents. . . . We know how to conduct a foreign policy. . . . No matter who gets elected over there . . . we will know how to create the conditions for a positive and cordial relationship."

Why the clarification? Journalist Fausto Fernández Ponte commented in his column in the daily *El Financiero* on how Mexican developments are being viewed across the border: "Certain recent developments would seem to indicate that there exists a severe crisis of power in our country, understood in terms of leadership. . . . From the U.S. viewpoint, it would appear that things are blowing up in President Salinas de Gortari's face."

President Salinas's speech contained several distinct threats aimed at the PRI party itself: "I have exercised authority when the national interest demanded it. . . . Political talent has taken Mexico forward, but we have also demonstrated that we know how to use our political authority within the legal framework. . . . I will fully exercise authority within the law and I will efficiently manage politics."

It is apparent that the real debate is not over presidential reelection as such, but over who will be capable of ruling a Mexico plunged into political chaos and at risk of violent social explosion.