

Of All the King's Men... Who'll Be Next President?

Mexico's political parties are preparing for next year's presidential elections.

"Selecting the new president of Mexico is an historical occasion in a very peculiar sense: the future is history a long time before the voters actually go to the polls." This statement appeared in Newsweek Magazine last January, causing widespread concern in Mexican political and journalistic circles.

Political parties throughout the country have been growing in number and in votes and are already in a turmoil over the upcoming presidential succession. Both party activity and shifting positions within the parties seem to indicate a breakdown in normal Mexican political traditions. Old taboos and archaic practices in the presidential succession are being criticized. Thus, we might say that Newsweek's elegant—though somewhat hasty—statement is probably untrue.

None of the country's political forces, however small or eroded they may be, is re-

signed. The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI, began its preparations for the presidential succession with changes in key positions in its National Executive Committee. Neither Jorge de la Vega Dominguez nor Humberto Lugo Gil, the new party President and Secretary General, are notorious for their closeness to any of the figures considered possible candidates to succeed President Miguel de la Madrid. Apparently the PRI decided it was convenient to place qualified, experienced politicians on its Executive Committee in order to maintain party unity in the difficult months ahead, and they saw fit to do it before the struggle between the different presidential hopefuls is unleashed.

President De la Madrid himself demanded mutual respect and cooperation from his cabinet members, among whom his successor will most probably be chosen. His call came at a very peculiar



Miguel González Avelar

Photo by Rogelio Cuellar



Alfredo del Mazo

Photo by Rogelio Cuellar

iar time for the PRI. Far from being a monolithic party, it is made up of a wide range of currents. Some believe the presidential succession should be conducted by the president himself. Others insist it is a matter that concerns the political community as a whole and that it should be open to social participation before the elections.

The change in the presi-

been months of struggle and divisiveness for the conservative National Action Party, PAN. The controversy concerns both the election of a new party president and disagreements over political strategy and possible future government projects.

The "neo-Panista" current—so-called because of the recent resurgence of this decades-old party—is com-

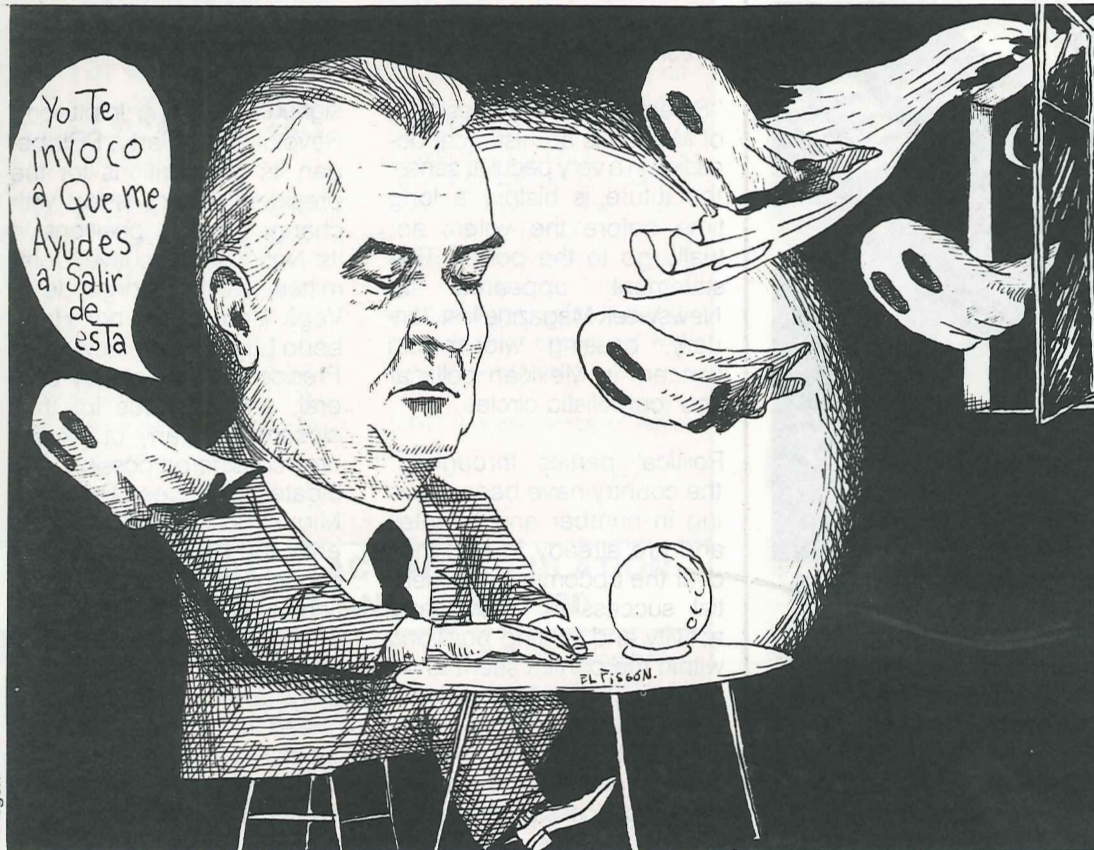
electoral fraud.

The PAN's revival, nonetheless, has been undercut by the fragility of its own internal unity. Although the party has overcome the critical situation that kept it from fielding a presidential candidate in 1976, the ongoing conflict surrounding Luis H. Alvarez' candidacy for party president could either disrupt or polarize the growing internal

Party, PPR, the People's Revolutionary Movement, MRP, and the Unity of the Communist Left, UIC, to form a new, unified party whose name has yet to be defined and whose platform is being discussed by the different parties' representatives.

The plurality of political parties and currents makes it increasingly difficult to continue with the practice of *tapedismo*, the popular name for the process of designating the presidential candidate without any social participation. The *tapedo* is the PRI's official candidate, and his identity is kept a secret, giving rise to all sorts of rumors and speculation, outbursts and bitterness among those who believe they have the right to aspire to the presidency. The practice of *tapedismo*, as some politicians and analysts believe, cuts the presidential succession off from open public debate among the main contenders for the nomination of the country's most powerful political party. The practice almost amounts to a prohibition for party members to even discuss the succession before the higher-level officials unveil the party's formal position.

These faults and anachronisms have been brought to question in the ruling party, and politicians experienced in both the party and government formed the "corriente democratizadora", a movement to further democracy within the PRI itself by, among other things, propos-



"I implore you to help me get out of this one"

dency every six years (Mexico has no reelection) sets all of the political forces in motion. The succession is front-page news for almost two years before the actual elections are held. The process seems to create an illusion of progress and power in those who think it is the right time to "climb aboard" the future presidential team. Hopes are high for the solution of historically accumulated problems, often made worse by the outgoing government. All forces are on full alert throughout this period.

The most alert of them all is the main opposition party. January and February have

posed of and headed by businessmen and supported by ultra-rightist civic groups. It gained new strength internally and among voters during gubernatorial and municipal-level elections last year in some of the country's northern states, mainly Chihuahua, Sonora and Nuevo León. The renewed PAN confronted the PRI's candidates with unusual methods such as border-crossing shut-downs, the boycott of businesses belonging to government officials, the printing of opposition slogans on paper-money and a hunger strike by one of the PAN's main ideologues, Luis H. Alvarez, in protest over alleged

discussion. On the left the situation is different. Fed up with the sectarianism that for decades has kept the left from uniting and gaining ground, five political groups have decided to form "a single party (in an attempt to) change Mexico's political regime and to open broad avenues so that workers and the people in general may take part in national affairs, and in order that the country may recover from the 'historical breakdown' it has been led into." The Unified Socialist Party of Mexico, PSUM, the country's third electoral force, will fuse with the Mexican Workers' Party, PMT, the Patriotic Revolutionary



Manuel Bartlett Díaz

Photo by Rogelio Cuellar

ing an end to *tapadismo* through the public registration of aspiring candidates, open discussion of the issue, and a separation from public office to avoid use of government funds in the pretenders' campaigns for nomination.

These stirrings of renewal also touched on the president of the PRI in the Federal District (Mexico City), Jesús Salazar Toledano, shortly before he was replaced by former governor of the state of Puebla, Guillermo Jiménez Morales. Mr. Salazar told a group of 20 newspapermen that, "talking about the presidential succession is not taboo, and there's no reason for its being taboo," and then went on to add: "I will not shirk giving names... in my opinion an eye should be kept on colleagues such as Manuel Bartlett (Secretary of the Interior), Carlos Salinas de Gortari (Secretary of Programming and the Budget), Alfredo del Mazo (Secretary of Energy, Mining and Para-State Industry), and Miguel González Avelar (Secretary of Education). Their merits, the paths they have followed and their current level of national exposure, make them all *compañeros* that both PRI-members and citizens in general should pay close attention to, analyze, criticize and evaluate, so that when the right moment comes we can make the decisions that correspond to the institutional political process we are in the midst of."

No traditional PRI-member



Carlos Salinas de Gortari

would have ever dared say such things. The PRI's newly elected National Executive Committee President immediately told the press that Salazar Toledano's opinions were "personal." Nonetheless, Salazar's daring gesture was not merely a run-of-the-mill *destape* (unveiling), but rather a sign of the need to free the nation from some of its archaic customs.

Arturo Romo, Political Education Secretary to the Confederation of Mexican Workers, CTM, the country's most powerful and influential labor central, stated last January that what Mexico needs is, "an authentic leader rather than a chief executive," and that "the president's decision" is not enough to designate this person. He added that, "Political consensus should decide who the new leader shall be, (a person) morally capable of facing the country's social and economic problems."

José Carreño Carlón, a sub-director of the daily *La Jornada* wrote in the weekly journal *Punto*: "It's hard to deny the revolutionary regime (in power) since 1917 its vanguard role in modernizing the country. But it is also obvious that the rigidity imposed by the culture of *tapadismo* has ended up by mutilating political rights, those of PRI-members in the first place, forced into silence or insiders' gossiping about the (presidential) succession."

It would seem that the political system's continuity and the means of choosing the next Mexican president necessarily imply the end of *tapadismo*. This is why the outlook for the presidential succession is a far cry from being a decision that is already history before the voters actually go to the polls. We have yet to see not only the results of the 1988 elections, but more to the point, the vast social mobilization expressed through the political parties, their discussions, ideas and work programs. ★

Jorge Luis Sierra Guzmán.