

How presidential succession works in Mexico

“**T**he system of presidential succession was perfected during the administration of Ruiz Cortines in the 1950s, with the advent of the *dedazo* and *tapadismo*,¹ which refer to the broad margin of maneuver enjoyed by the serving president when it comes to naming his successor and to the fact that aspirants to the highest political office do not openly declare themselves as such—that is, the discipline of the political elite with regard to the president’s decision.”²

The enigma of the *tapado*³

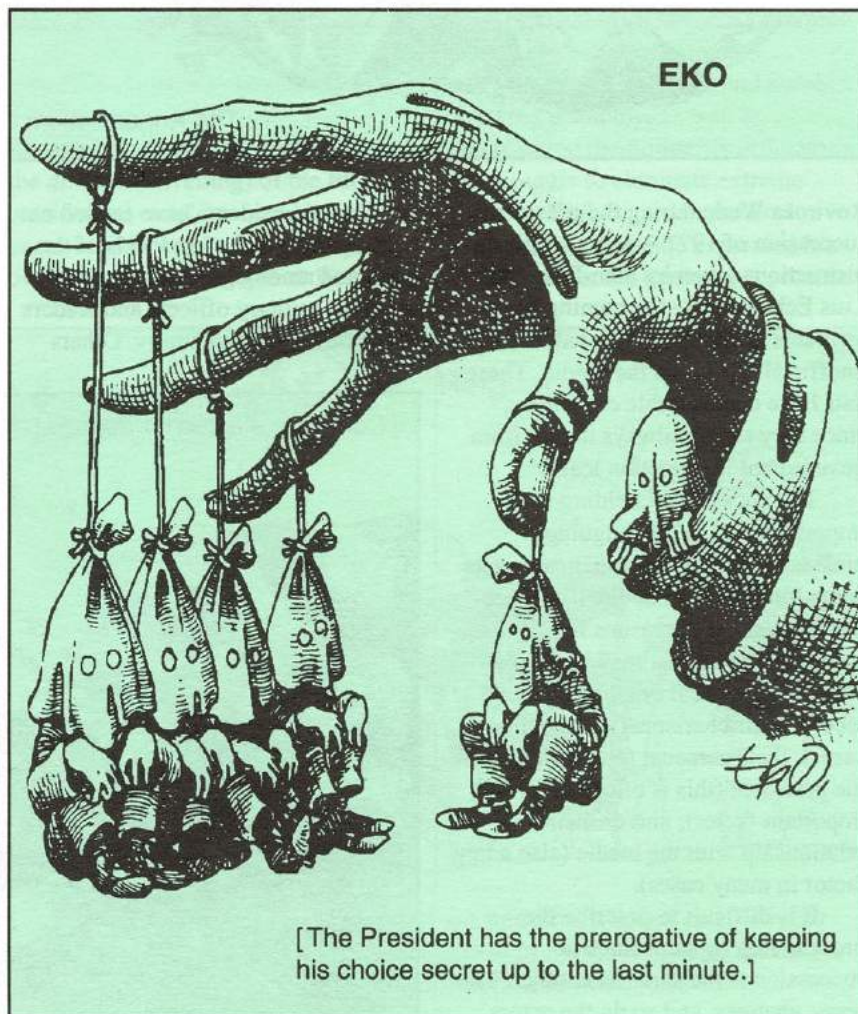
Every six years politicians, journalists, political scientists and observers devote themselves to deciphering the enigma of the *tapado*—in other words, figuring out who will be designated the presidential candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which has been in power since it was founded in 1929.

Nevertheless—notwithstanding all their analytical techniques, the “privileged” information they get hold

of and the experience and political intuition they have acquired—they will necessarily be mistaken: in more than fifty years, nobody has managed to discover the name of the *tapado* before the party unveiled him.

The reason for this is simple. In Mexico, the President of the Republic, with the unquestioned support of his party (the PRI), has the unwritten—and indisputable—prerogative of naming the presidential candidate and keeping his choice secret up to the last minute. Since the person he chooses has—up to the present day—the greatest chances of winning the election, the president’s decision is one of the most anxiously awaited political events of the fifth year of his term.

The president emits signals, both tacit and explicit, which the entire official world goes wild trying to interpret. Still, there is no infallible guide to the accurate comprehension of these signals. Except for the list of “pre-candidates” revealed by Leandro



¹ *Dedazo*: see glossary. *Tapadismo*: the practice of keeping a presidential candidate *tapado* (see glossary). (Editor’s note.)

² Jacqueline Peschard, “Entre lo nuevo y lo viejo: la sucesión de 1994,” in *El Cotidiano*, Mexico City, October-November 1993.

³ **Source:** Oscar Hinojosa, *La sucesión presidencial 94 en la recta final* (The Presidential Succession of 94 Enters the Home Straight). Ediciones Raya en el Agua, Mexico City, 1993.



The Annunciation.

Rovirosa Wade during the presidential succession of 1977—in line with instructions given by then-President Luis Echeverría—the naming of aspirants has always been carried out unofficially through the media. These lists have considerable credibility, since they almost always derive from government information leaks.

The very fact of holding an important post in the outgoing president's cabinet automatically puts some functionaries on the list of pre-candidates. Other reasons for appearing on the list may have to do with their political or administrative record; their charisma (in exceptional cases); their personal relationship with the president (this is often an important factor); and/or their relationship with the media (also a key factor in many cases).

It is difficult to describe the process step by step, since no succession is the same as another. The scene changes, and so do the actors.

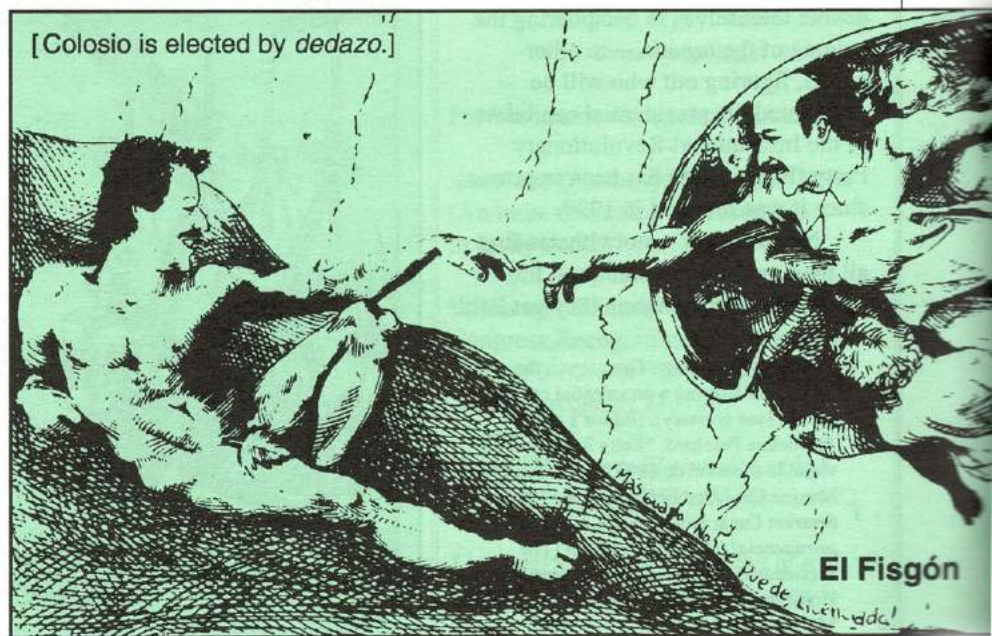
Some presidents have carried out consultations at the top levels of the party and among governors, union officials, military officers and leaders of the business community. Others

have made their decision without soliciting opinions, advice or admonitions from anybody at all.

In those cases when consultations have been carried out, experience shows that those consulted play it very safe indeed before venturing an opinion or expressing their preference. This caution is one of the most common collective guidelines of Mexico's "political class." Openly declaring yourself in favor of one of the pre-candidates, without being sure (and nobody can be) of who the choice will be, means putting your political future in jeopardy.

Thus, being a passive supporter means gambling with the odds in your favor. If your "rooster" turns out to be the winner, you can tell the world that you knew it all along. But if the chosen one ends up being somebody else, you'll be in the clear when the time comes to offer him your loyalty. In reality, the only active supporters of each pre-candidate are his direct collaborators, since they have no choice but to hope that their boss will wind up on top.

"Futurism" is another recurrent phenomenon characteristic of the succession process in the phase prior to

[Colosio is elected by *dedazo*.]

El Fisgón

Rocha



[The PRI's president is ready for the *destape*.]

the *destape*.⁴ Futurism refers to the efforts of various political groups, as well as the aspirants themselves, to influence [and benefit from] the sexennial decision. The "official" response is to issue a call for discipline and order, although it is difficult to prevent hidden struggles between various interest groups. Another tactic is to give off false signals in favor of one of the pre-candidates in order to confuse the *presidenciables*⁵ as well as other politicians.

At the end, the enigma is resolved in favor of one of the aspirants. The chosen one is informed beforehand by the chooser himself. Party leaders are told of the decision and publicize the news by proclaiming the *destapado* (he who has been unveiled) to be the party's official candidate. And then the long-prepared electoral machinery is started up so as to ensure the *ex-tapado*'s victory.

⁴ *Destape*: unveiling of the candidate, who has been *tapado* until that moment. (See glossary.)

⁵ *Presidenciables*: politicians considered to be "presidentiable," i.e., who could be named successor to the outgoing president.

The PRI chooses its presidential candidate

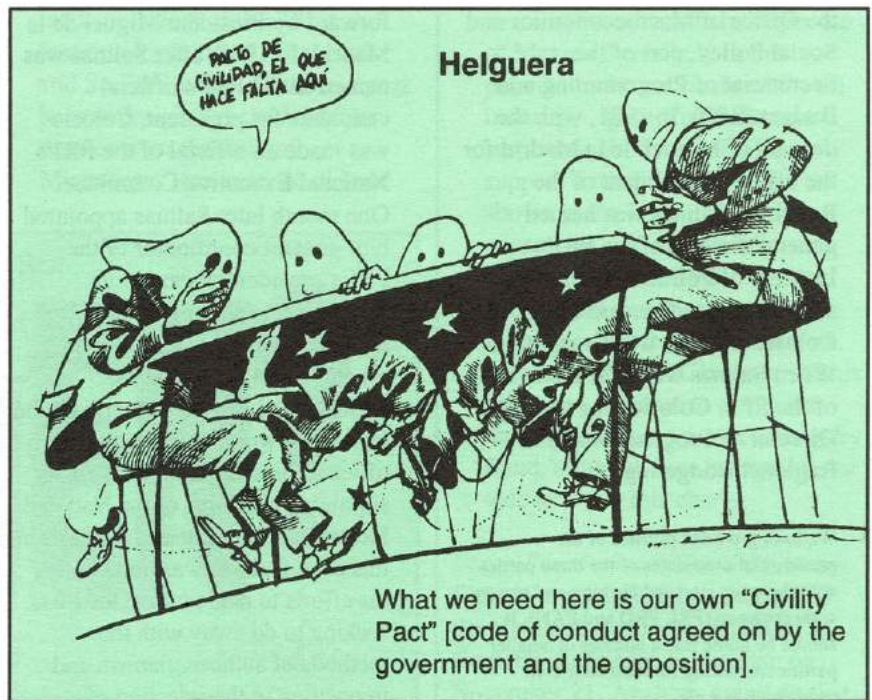
Contrary to official declarations that the *destape* (unveiling) of the PRI's presidential candidate would not occur until December or January, on Sunday, November 28 at 10:36

a.m., the National Executive Committee of the PRI announced that Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta had been chosen.

Calling Colosio the candidate of "unity and hope," the text of the nomination is signed by the party's president and secretary, the leaders of the PRI's three sectors (the labor, peasant and people's sectors), and the presidents of the Revolutionary Youth Front and the Council for Women's Integration, both of which are affiliated to the PRI. On the following day the call was issued for the party's Eighth Regular National Convention, which formalized the nomination on December 8.

In his acceptance speech Colosio stated his intention of guaranteeing the continuity of outgoing President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's economic and social policies, using the advantages of free trade, and a stable, growing economy, as well as maintaining the Solidarity program in the struggle to eliminate extreme poverty. With regard to national politics, the candidate expressed his confidence in the democratic process

Helguera



What we need here is our own "Civility Pact" [code of conduct agreed on by the government and the opposition].

and issued a public invitation to other parties' candidates to debate their ideas and programs in open forums.

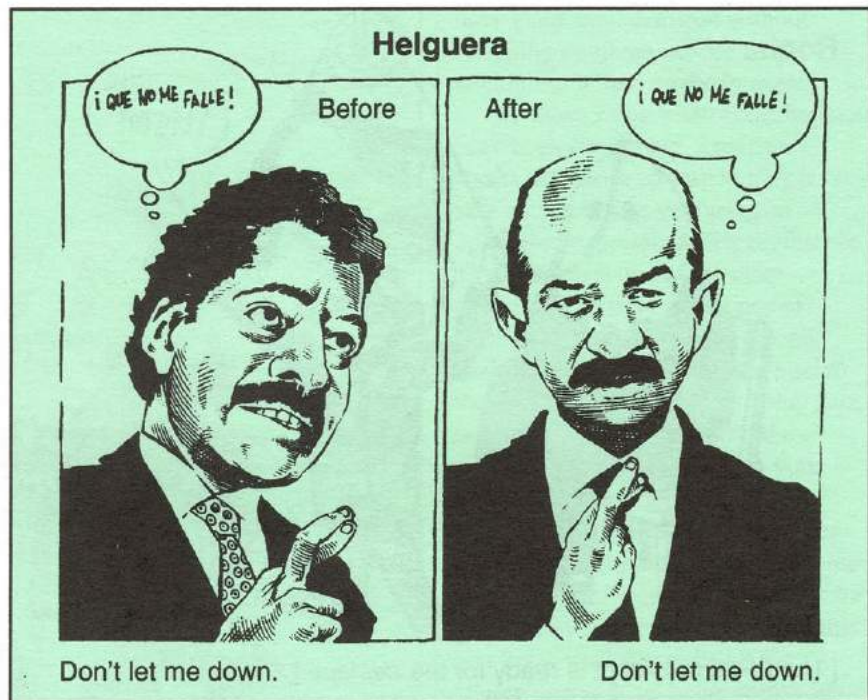
Profiles of three candidates⁶

Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta

Colosio was born in 1950 in Magdalena de Kino, Sonora. He carried out his primary, secondary and preparatory-school studies in public schools, since his family was unable to afford private-school tuition. At the age of twelve he had the best grade average in his primary school and was rewarded with a trip to Mexico City to meet then-President Adolfo López Mateos.

- His discipline and high grades won him a scholarship to the Monterrey Technological Institute for Higher Education, one of Mexico's most exclusive and expensive private universities. In 1972 he received a degree in economics, with honorable mention. In 1974 he carried out master's studies in regional development and economics in Pennsylvania, once again as a scholarship student.
- In 1979 he met Carlos Salinas de Gortari after becoming advisor to the Office of Macroeconomics and Social Policy, part of the Secretariat of Programming and Budget (SPP). In 1981, with the *destape* of Miguel de la Madrid for the office of President of the Republic, Salinas was named general director of the PRI's Institute of Political, Economic and Social Studies, and asked Colosio to come work with him. When Salinas was later made head of the SPP, Colosio was named Director of Programming and Regional Budgeting.

⁶ We have provided profiles of the presidential candidates of the three parties with the most electoral backing and nationwide presence (PRI, PRD and PAN). It should be noted that a number of smaller parties are putting forward their own candidates as well.



- Five years later, in 1985, Colosio's meteoric career in national politics took off. Designated candidate for deputy (member of the house of representatives) from the state of Sonora, he was elected to the 53rd Legislature, where he defended the economic austerity policy put forward by President Miguel de la Madrid. In 1987, after Salinas was named as the PRI's official candidate for president, Colosio was made an official of the PRI's National Executive Committee. One month later Salinas appointed him general coordinator of the PRI's presidential campaign.
- In addition to serving in the lower house, Colosio was also elected senator for his state in 1988. However, he carried out virtually no legislative work, since upon taking office as president, Carlos Salinas appointed him head of the National Executive Committee of the PRI. In this post, Colosio was notable for his efforts to democratize the PRI, seeking to do away with the methods of authoritarianism and imposition in the selection of

candidates, and broadening rank-and-file participation. These hopes evaporated in 1991 when the first attempt was made to elect candidates for seven governorships, since the old methods of imposition and party discipline prevailed. He is also remembered as the first president of the PRI to recognize his party's defeat in a gubernatorial election, when the PAN (National Action Party) won the Baja California governorship in July of 1989.

- In 1992 President Carlos Salinas put him on the list of *presidenciables* by making him head of the Secretariat of Urban Development and Ecology, later renamed the Secretariat of Social Development. This ministry is in charge of the Solidarity public works program as well as programs related to housing, urban development, Indian rights and ecology.
- Unlike other cabinet ministers, Luis Donaldo Colosio has had a political career, and this has put him in direct contact with the populace.

Nevertheless, his detractors cite as managerial errors post-electoral conflicts in the states of Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí, where PRI candidates elected as governor had to resign in the face of heavy pressure from opposition parties.

Cuauhtémoc Lázaro Cárdenas Solórzano

On October 17 the national convention of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) chose Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas as its presidential candidate. The PRD leader thereby became the first candidate to run in two successive presidential elections.

The only child of former President Lázaro Cárdenas, he was born in Mexico City on May 1, 1934, during his father's election campaign. He carried out his primary, secondary and preparatory-school studies in secular schools in Mexico City and the state of Michoacán. He received a degree in civil engineering from UNAM after presenting a thesis on the use of resources in the lower Río Balsas area, subsequently carrying out postgraduate studies in planning and steel production in France, Germany and Italy.

- Although Lázaro Cárdenas came to distance himself from the upper echelons of government, Cuauhtémoc met all the presidents

who succeeded his father. He also accompanied his father on trips through Mexico and to other countries, as well as appearing with him at commemorations, civic ceremonies and diplomatic gatherings. Between 1958 and 1970 Lázaro Cárdenas placed himself at the margins of the PRI's system—although he never broke with his party—because of his activities in favor of the democratization of the political system and his anti-imperialist activities in defense of Cuba and Vietnam. This was to have a decisive influence in the political and ideological molding of his son.

- From 1961 to 1964 Cuauhtémoc participated in the National Liberation Movement, an organization led by his father.
- In 1974 he sought to be nominated candidate for governor of Michoacán, but did not receive the PRI's backing. From that time on he began to disagree with the processes for choosing candidates in the PRI.
- He worked as an engineer on the Río Balsas Project. In 1975 he was made president of the PRI's Institute for Political, Economic and Social Studies. That same year he was designated candidate for senator from the state of Michoacán. However, he did not

hold this post for long, since President López Portillo appointed him Subsecretary for Forest Resources in the Secretariat of Agriculture, where he served from 1976 to 1980. In 1980 he was elected governor of Michoacán.

- In 1987—together with a number of other high-ranking members of the PRI—he organized the Democratic Current within the PRI, which sought to democratize the processes by which candidates are chosen to run for elected office. His expulsion from the PRI—together with other members of the Current—after he attempted to register as a “pre-candidate” for president from that party, made him one of the most controversial figures in Mexican politics.
- Presented as candidate by the Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution (PARM), three leftist parties and several other political and social groups, he ran for president in the elections of 1988. Together with the economic and social problems Mexico was experiencing, the fact that he is the son of “Tata” (Father) Cárdenas—the name with which the people of Mexico pay tribute to the president who nationalized the oil industry—gave Cuauhtémoc a surprising ability to mobilize support during the campaign, as shown in the large number of supporters who came out on election day. The 1988 vote has been called one of the hardest-fought and most controversial in Mexico's history. Cárdenas and his followers continue to assert that they were cheated out of victory by fraud, although they have not been able to prove this charge.



Diego Fernández de Cevallos Ramos
Chosen as presidential candidate of the National Action Party (PAN) at the party's national convention on November 21. Analysts maintain that

The slang of presidential succession: a glossary

Caballada: Literally, "drove of horses." The slate of *presidenciables* (possible choices for presidential candidate), who as a general rule are members of the outgoing administration's cabinet. This term is related to that moment at the racetrack when the horses are lined up at the starting gate (a moment that, by analogy, may come halfway through a president's six-year term). After the race between possible "pre-candidates" begins, the contenders may carry out public works or projects that put them in the limelight, or deliver low blows to their rivals.

Caballada flaca: "The skinny drove of horses" i.e., "slim pickings at the racetrack." This term is used when the *presidenciables* are considered lacking in experience and professional ability. Attributed to Rubén Figueroa, governor of Guerrero in the '70s, it also refers to pre-candidates with little chance of becoming the presidential candidate of the PRI.

Caballo de hacienda: "Ranch horse." Applied to functionaries whose political star is rising.

Caballo negro: "Black horse." Similar to the American political term *dark horse*. Used to describe a surprise candidate in the choice among various pre-candidates for the presidency; also applied in races for elected posts such as member of congress, senator and governor.

Cargada: "The bandwagon." Groups or contingents who demonstrate their support immediately after the *destape* (see below) of a presidential candidate. In general this occurs at political events carried out by sympathizers or "friends" of the candidate. It is common knowledge that the division of cabinet posts and top-level positions tends to be carried out before the *destape*.

Debajo del agua: "Underwater." When attacks or agreements between the heads of political groupings are carried out secretly, people say "They're attacking underwater" or "They're smoothing things out underwater."

Dedazo: "The pointing of the finger." This term refers to the nomination by designation of a public official or the choice among "pre-candidates" for an elected post. Continually used during periods of presidential succession, when the outgoing president chooses his successor. Its origin lies in the religious significance of the finger of the lord (God), who points out his elect or chosen ones.

Destape: "Unveiling." The moment when the designated candidate for president is announced publicly, usually by the three sectors—"worker," "peasant" and "people's"—of the PRI. The leader of one of the sectors, or the president of the party, is given the task of announcing the decision to the citizenry.

El bueno or el elegido: "The good one" or "the chosen one." Terms applied to a functionary who has been designated or a candidate who has been selected to hold public office or stand for election.

Futurismo: "Futurism." Making proposals or promises for the future, usually during the presidential election period. The term also refers to professional politicians staking their future on a particular "pre-candidate" for president. ("Pre-candidates" are those top officials who may eventually be chosen as the party's official candidate.)

Madruguete: "Getting up at daybreak." A surprise early *destape* of a presidential candidate, whether or not he is *el bueno*. Undertaken by leaders or members of political groups, a *madruguete* is meant

to pressure the outgoing president to favor the group's *gallo* (see *mi gallo*, below).

Mi candidato: "My candidate." Phrase used by a public official when he is sure that the person he supports will be the candidate for president, although preferences are rarely aired in public.

Mi gallo: "My rooster." Term used by a public official who is "betting" on a possible candidate in the belief that this person has the best qualifications to be president, although the official isn't sure his "rooster" will actually be chosen to run.

Pasarela: "Runway" or "catwalk" (as in fashion shows). Applied to any forum where the pre-candidates appear, either together or separately, for public scrutiny as presumed *tapados* (see below). Such events are often the occasion for detailed observation of their attitudes, gestures and statements, in order to discover virtues, defects, preferences, enmities, or any indication which might make it possible to identify *el bueno*.

Se autodescartó: Literally, "he discarded himself"; he withdrew from the running. When "presidentiable" public officials say they are not on "the list." Despite appearances, the purpose of such declarations is not to lessen one's chances of being chosen but to enhance them.

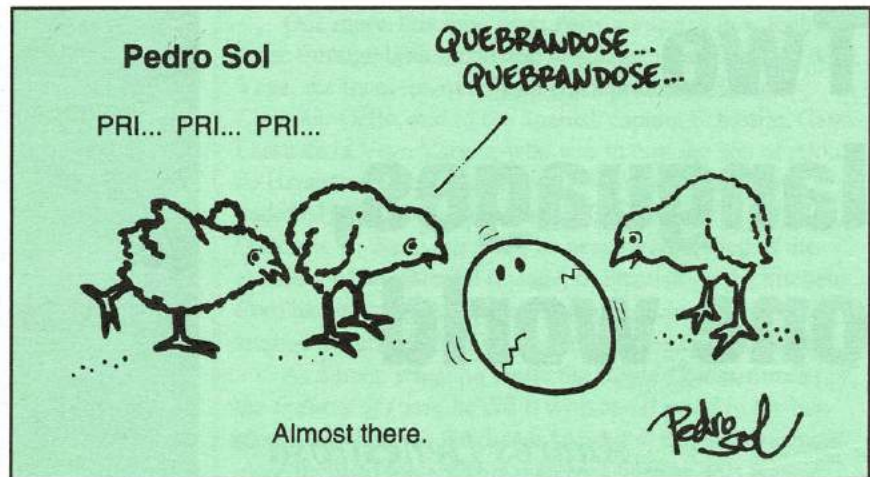
Tapado: "The covered one." The image is of a head concealed by a hood or cloth. Refers to the PRI's presidential candidate before the moment when he is publicly named. This term is rooted in the language of cockfighting, specifically to when gamblers bet on a cock who is being displayed, while his opponent is kept hidden or hooded.

the PAN's strategists do not believe the party will win the 1994 elections, setting their hopes instead on a sweeping victory in the year 2000.

Fernández de Cevallos was born in Mexico City on March 16, 1941. His family was affiliated to the PAN, and Diego joined the party at the age of 18.

He went to preparatory school at the Western Technological Institute for Higher Education, in the city of Guadalajara. He enrolled at the Iberqamerican University but transferred to UNAM, where he studied law. His renown as an orator goes back to his student days.

- Fernández de Cevallos worked in the law offices of Manuel Gómez Morín, founder of the PAN. He later opened a practice in association with Hiram Escudero, another PAN lawyer. At the present time he has his own law offices.
- He has held several posts in the PAN's National Executive Committee, National Council and Political Commission. After the presidential elections of 1988 he was appointed Secretary of the Interior of the "alternative cabinet" which his party set up in protest against a government it considered devoid of public support.



- He won considerable political prestige as a member of the 55th Legislature. He was coordinator of the PAN's parliamentary bloc in the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) and a member of the Permanent Commission of Congress.
- During the first part of his political career he stood out for his intransigent head-on struggle against the methods of government established by the official party (PRI), as well as his criticism of what he viewed as the cautious and over-tolerant attitude of his own party. Nevertheless, he came to abandon his intransigent stance, becoming one of the main

promoters of political negotiations with the PRI, from the controversial year 1988 up to the present day. While this has earned him some biting criticism both from within and outside his party, it did not prove to be an obstacle to his nomination as candidate of the PAN for the 1994 elections.

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