

Mexico's ballot box bullies

Every six years, Mexico chooses a new president in a process that reminds us that the government of the hemisphere's third-largest nation is very much like the Communist party without Communists.

Elections in Mexico, with their speeches, political campaigns and votes, look and sound democratic. But in reality, Mexico has been a one-party state since the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) took power in 1929. In fact, the PRI has never lost a significant election and shows no signs of doing so in the future.

Sometime between now and October, the PRI's current president, Miguel de la Madrid, will name his successor. This selection process remains as great a mystery to the outside world as the nomination of a new Pope or Kremlin leader. Some experts hold that the ruling president alone makes the choice; others, that the inner circle of the PRI decides. Next July, Mexicans will vote to elect a new president. In reality, they are only rubberstamping the PRI's decision since Mexico's other opposition parties never win federal elections.

This closed system has given Mexico political stability that is unrivaled in Latin America. It works because the PRI combines powerful union bosses, bureaucrats, politicians and the monied class into a well-oiled oligarchy. The PRI often sounds socialist, revolutionary and anti-American. But this is for public and foreign consumption. The PRI is really a giant spoils system where ideology is only for window dressing. State socialism and capitalism work hand in hand in Mexico—as they also do in Canada.

There are opposition parties, like the young, vigorous



PAN party which advocates free enterprise and sharply reduced state power. Other small parties exist in the centre and on the left. But none ever win major elections because of systematic voting fraud by the PRI. Opponents of the regime who persist in causing trouble often meet with fatal accidents, beatings or threats to their livelihood and families. The Mexican press has learned to mute criticism of the government and powerful figures.

It's not surprising that Mexico's politico-economic system is one of the world's most corrupt and venal. Endemic corruption permeates all levels of the government and reaches its worst during the next eight months before elections. A new president makes massive personnel changes within the government, bringing in all his own men. Contacts and nepotism become of paramount importance. Now is the time when officials, fearing their tenure may end, stuff their pockets and dole out favors.

The outgoing president, de la Madrid, has not been able to make much progress against this sea of corruption. His regime has been the best and most hon-

est in memory but to little avail. No one yet knows what direction a new government will take nor how it will deal with Mexico's growing problems of too little water, too many people and too much debt.

What strikes me so curious as I watch events in our southern neighbor, is how the U.S. and Canada just accept as a fact that Mexico is a genuine democracy. Both Ottawa and Washington spend much time hectoring nations like Nicaragua or Chile to democratize their governments. Ottawa scolds South Africa and South Korea for their lapses in the democratic process. Canadian "observers" are sent off to Nicaragua to oversee the fine details of voting.

Yet none of our North American busybodies ever has much say as the Mexicans pretend to be a democracy and we cheerfully go along with the charade. I suppose the liberal media remains silent about Mexico's one-party state because the PRI puts out all the appropriate leftist slogans.

This see-no-evil approach is wrong. Canada and the U.S. should gently but firmly nudge Mexico into adopting the same democratic reforms that have come to Argentina, Brazil or, for that matter, South Korea. If primitive Sudan can manage to produce a reasonable functioning democracy, so can Mexico. Our continued financial support for Mexico should be contingent upon the restoration of full press and political freedom in Mexico, supported by honest elections and open dissent.

Doing so would be a favor to the Mexican people whose nation is being worn down, like their unfortunate model, the Soviet Union, by corruption, mismanagement and bureaucratic rot.