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POLITICS

Salinas remains nation's pariah

■ The former president is still being vilified for the nation's woes over 10 years after leaving office.

BY JONATHAN CLARK
The Herald Mexico

He is burned in effigy as a Judas figure and mocked with rubber masks that caricature his bald head and oversized ears. Yet he is also feared, for much like a villain from a Hollywood horror flick, he seems almost indestructible, ready to come back again and again to terrorize his victims.

He is Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the former president from the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) whose alleged responsibility for a devastating financial crisis a decade ago — as well as a subsequent string of corruption allegations and familial scandal — made him into Mexico's most reviled politician.

Today, more than 10 years after he left office, Salinas' infamy is as strong as ever. In fact, he remains such a pariah that it is discomfiting even for politicians within his own party to be associated with him.

Last week, for example, Elba Esther Gordillo, who recently stepped down from her post as PRI secretary-general, tried to embarrass her rival, former PRI party president Roberto Madrazo, by revealing that she, Madrazo and President Vicente Fox's finance secretary had met privately with Salinas in 2003 to discuss a tax reform proposal.

If meant as a dig at Madrazo, Gordillo's claim became a downright embarrassment for

TURN TO PARIAH, 8

TEN YEARS AFTER LEAVING OFFICE, SALINAS STILL BEING BLAMED FOR NATION'S PROBLEMS

• PARIAH, FROM 1

the Fox Administration, especially after Salinas' own acknowledgement of the meetings on national TV, which made front-page headlines.

Fox, a member of the National Action Party (PAN) and the man who ended the PRI's 71-year hold on the presidency in 2000, had initially denied that his finance secretary, Francisco Gil Díaz, had met with Salinas. But as the story's momentum grew, first Gil Díaz and then Fox spokesman Rubén Aguilar were forced to recognize its essential veracity, though neither would flat out admit an association with Salinas. Gil Díaz, himself a PRI member, read a prepared statement in which he acknowledged having met with Madrazo, Gordillo, and "other high-ranking officials" to discuss the 2003 tax proposal, while Aguilar said only that Fox gave his ministers leeway "to consult with whomever they need to."

According to Federico Estévez, political science professor at the Autonomous Technological Institute of Mexico (ITAM), the "noise factor" of the Salinas name was what drove the story to page one, for, as he noted, Fox's 2003 tax reform proposal was eventually rejected by Congress.

"There could have been 10,000 of these meetings orchestrated by Salinas, but they produced nothing ... they got no tax bill," he said.

"This is not a news story, this is simply a matter of political mudslinging that started with Gordillo trying to undercut Madrazo," he added. "She was tagging him as a 'Salinista' because that's the mudball that flies most easily in Mexican political rhetoric."

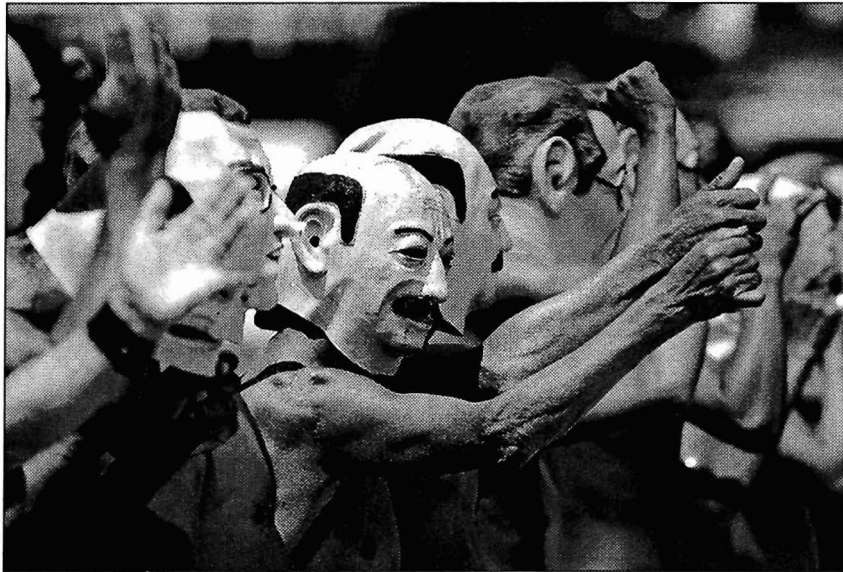
And the reason that the rhetorical mudball flies so easily, and that the suggestion of backstage lever pulling by Carlos Salinas becomes front-page news, is more than just a festering resentment over Salinas' past sins. It is also the product of a powerful fear among some Mexicans that Carlos Salinas is back and exerting control once again over the nation's political scene.

BOOM TO BUST

According to George Grayson, a professor of government and Mexico expert at the College of William and Mary, the root cause of Salinas' unpopularity is the injury his presidency caused to the nation's middle class.

"Carlos Salinas raised the expectations of the middle class to the stratosphere," he said. "And then, just as you would do in a wrestling match, he slammed them to the mat."

Salinas won the election in 1988 with barely 50 percent of the



JAIME PUEBLA/EL UNIVERSAL

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ITAM political science professor

vote, and only after a suspicious computer failure wiped out an early lead by leftist opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas. Still today, many Mexicans believe that Cárdenas was the true winner of the campaign.

Yet despite initial misgivings over his administration's legitimacy, Salinas' smooth politicking allowed him to win over many doubters and consolidate his power throughout the government. He used this power to launch a series of free-market reforms that sought to privatize Mexico's economy and attract foreign investment. Most notably, he sold off state-owned banks and businesses — often to his friends at below-market prices — and he ended years of economic isolationism by signing Mexico to the North American Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada in 1993.

Salinas was hailed as a modernizing hero by foreign politicians and the international press, and the nation's growing middle class welcomed the opportunity to buy new homes, cars and imported goods with freshly extended credit.



EVA EDITH SPINDOLA/EL UNIVERSAL

NO HERO: Top, wearing masks of Salinas, naked farmers protest in this file photo. Below, Salinas is depicted in a Judas firecracker, normally used to represent evil.

But the growth, stability and prosperity that the nation enjoyed under Salinas turned out to be a house of cards. Just weeks after he left office, the peso crashed, and a subsequent devaluation plunged the nation into economic crisis. Interest rates shot as high as 100 percent, and many families that had purchased on credit found them-

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selves in financial ruin. And while the economic collapse happened on President Ernesto Zedillo's watch, Mexicans were quick to identify Carlos Salinas as the culprit.

Salinas' image had been taking hits throughout the final year of his presidency. On Jan. 1, 1994, armed Indian rebels burst out of the jungles of Chiapas in protest of NAFTA and Salinas' free-market reforms. Calling for revolution, the rebels took control of several towns and grabbed international headlines. Then in March, Salinas' hand-picked successor, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated while on a campaign stop in Tijuana. Conspiracy theories abounded, with some suggesting that Salinas himself had been involved in the murder.

Just two months after the peso crash, in February 2005, Salinas' playboy older brother, Raúl, was arrested and jailed for the murder of his former brother-in-law and PRI Secretary-General José Francisco Ruíz Massieu. Later that year, Swiss authorities accused Raúl Salinas of laundering US\$100 million in drug money in Swiss banks. A federal

investigation in Mexico alleged that some of Raúl's money had been transferred from Carlos' accounts, and though he was never formally charged, speculation grew that the ex-president had been involved in the drug trade.

Fearing his own arrest, Carlos Salinas went into self-imposed exile until 2000. Raúl Salinas was released from jail in June of this year and still faces laundering charges in Europe. A third Salinas brother, Enrique, was found dead last December in the back seat of a car, the victim of an apparent extortion scheme.

A TOUGH ROAD BACK

As president, Salinas was often able to cross party lines to work with the conservative PAN, which shared his enthusiasm for free-market reform and supported his reinstatement of relations with the Vatican. But he never mended fences with the left after the acrimonious election of 1988. To the contrary, the left-leaning Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) accused Salinas of carrying out a vendetta against his political enemies, and the party counts some 300 members who were killed during Salinas' term.

Former Mexico City mayor and current PRD presidential candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador has often evoked Salinas' name as a key player in an effort to derail his presidential campaign. He perpetuates Salinas' ghoulish persona by calling him "El Innombrable," or "The Unnamable One," and he often refers to Salinas to decry the economic liberalism that he says has left millions in poverty.

The message resonates with many Mexicans who still harbor painful memories of the 1995 crisis.

"Carlos Salinas destroyed our economy, he and his family stole from us, and maybe did even worse things," said Gustavo Meléndez, a music teacher from Mexico City. "But still we can't get rid of him. He's like a bad dream."

And such fears are compounded by Salinas' own desires to return to political action — as evidenced by his TV interview on Sunday in which he said that it would be "selfish" of him to not share his experience with current leaders.

But with his name still mud in Mexico, he may have trouble finding willing listeners.

"The current pathetic thing about Salinas is that he's still a dynamic, relatively young man for a politician," says Grayson. "He's got lots of ideas and he wants to get back in the political system so badly."

"But, the problem is, he's a pariah."