

# Candidates shatter myths at UNAM

**T**he presence of the three major presidential candidates at *UNAM* (representing the PRI, PAN and PRD) provided further proof of the intensity of the political campaign then underway in Mexico. For several decades, the university was ignored by political and electoral campaigners of any stripe. The university left was predominant and PRI or PAN sympathizers were likely to be ridiculed or rejected until a short time ago.

The PRI, uninterrupted in power for the past 65 years, had not shown any interest in waging an overt political campaign at *UNAM*. This may have been due to their confidence in the elections that, until the 1988 presidential race, had always been won by the official party and its candidates. Thus they could afford not to woo student voters at a university that was traditionally a stronghold of the opposition, particularly the left.<sup>1</sup>

The PAN also kept away from the country's largest university until the recent political campaign, when it decided to trade its image as an elitist, conservative party with a marked tendency towards right-wing political ideas for that of an open, democratic party interested in promoting pluralism and the free discussion of ideas.

The PRD was the only party that had previously visited *UNAM* for campaign purposes. This was in 1988 during the bid for the presidency by Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who had the support of various political organizations, including representatives from the major Mexican left-wing groups, and PRI members who had decided to leave the PRI after setting up the so-called Democratic Tendency.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The specter of the events of 1968, when President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz ordered the occupation of *UNAM*—violating the principle of university autonomy and provoking the outrage of thousands of students throughout the country—also weighed on the official government party. Luis Echeverría Alvarez, Díaz Ordaz' successor, suffered an unpleasant experience a few years later when he arrived at *UNAM* to inaugurate the academic year and was pelted with stones by students enraged by his presence.

<sup>2</sup> Following the 1988 elections, the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) was formed by the majority of these groups. It should be noted that, to avoid legal formalities, the Mexican Socialist Party, which included the bulk of the Mexican left, turned its electoral registration over to the new party, with which it merged, putting an end to the traditional independent political presence of the left in Mexico.

During his visit, Cárdenas received the spontaneous support of thousands of students in what is still remembered as one of the highlights of his political campaign. This gave rise to the myth that the country's most important university was the exclusive province of Cárdenas (and by extension the PRD).

In view of this, the visits by Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (PRI) on May 24, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano (PRD) on June 8 and Diego Fernández de Cevallos (PAN) on June 15 were not just campaign events to win votes, but deliberate attempts to demystify the country's largest and most important academic forum.<sup>3</sup> Each visit was judged a success or failure according to the particular

<sup>3</sup> According to 1993 data, 77,287 students are enrolled in bachelor's degree programs and 12,445 in master's programs on the main *UNAM* campus.



Cárdenas urged his audience to vote and respect the vote.



standpoint of the candidates, their advisors, followers and of course their opponents.

The PRI candidate came off worst in this contest, even though his visit took place in a closed building with restricted access and was so discreetly staged that not even the mass media were given prior notice of the event (*La Jornada*, May 25). According to his campaign team, Zedillo visited *UNAM* on the invitation of two students, university board members from the Accounting and Administration Faculty (regarded as one of the least politically-active departments at *UNAM*). A month earlier, these two students had approached Zedillo in a café during one of his campaign visits to the provinces.

The event was organized and supervised by presidential staff members responsible for the PRI candidate's security. Few students knew the event would be held; many found out about it only the day before. This did not prevent the news from reaching such faculties such as Economics, Philosophy and Literature and Political Sciences, bastions of the University Student Council (CEU), an organization with political links to the PRD.

The visit began at 9:15 a.m. when the Carlos Pérez del Toro Auditorium, with a seating capacity of approximately 700, had been filled to the limit and entry was no longer permitted.<sup>4</sup> Outside, groups of students from various faculties, including CEU members, banged on the doors demanding to be allowed in. Inside, Zedillo talked about launching a national higher education campaign, with more resources for universities, setting up a national grant scheme and maintaining respect for university autonomy. His speech was broadcast through closed-circuit television to different areas of the same faculty.

The question and answer session was not very successful, since it was interrupted by the shouts of disgruntled students. The candidate was questioned by a CEU member who had managed to force his way in and take the floor; among other things, he criticized the undemocratic way Zedillo had been chosen as candidate. Ignoring the accusations, Zedillo commented on the importance of pluralism, respect and participation by all Mexicans.

The meeting ended amidst applause from the audience, who rated the event successful. Yet Zedillo's exit was far from triumphal, since he was forced to leave through a

different exit, surrounded by his bodyguards, who led him to a different car in the midst of insults, shouts, stones and bottles being hurled at him. According to *La Jornada* (May 25), what remained after Zedillo's departure was "the anger of a group of students who had failed to get in, the rejection of violent methods by other university students, and the satisfaction of the organizers, in whose view the university had recovered its pluralism and destroyed taboos."

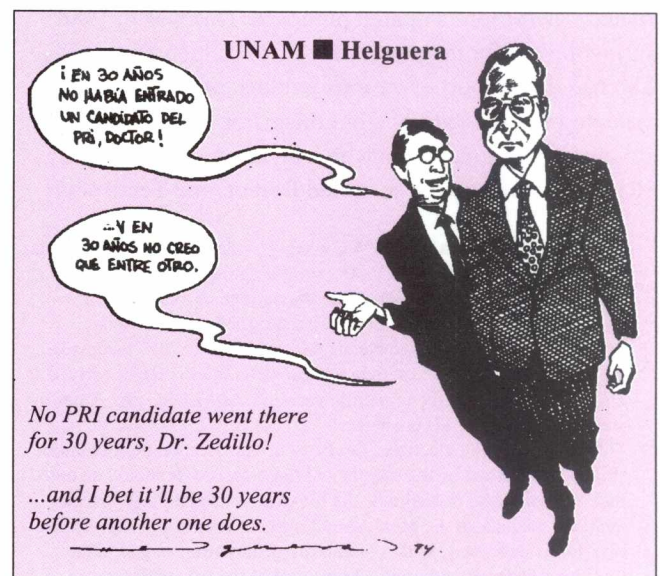
CEU representatives later denied responsibility for the violence. Arguing that most of the student protesters were not CEU members, they accused security forces of beating some students and violating university autonomy, since they had been carrying weapons.

For Zedillo and his team, the *UNAM* visit was a spectacular coup. The candidate expressed his satisfaction: "I think we have crossed a threshold. I am the first PRI presidential candidate to have visited this campus during a campaign, and I think, as university students told me themselves, that this has meant a break with a past of intolerance, a past in which a minority infringed on the majority's rights" (*La Jornada*, May 27).

The PAN and PRD candidates declared that the attacks on the PRI had done little to foster a democratic and pluralistic climate, even though a number of PRD spokesmen stated that the PRI had not judged its terrain very carefully, since the protests testified to students' rejection of the official party.

*UNAM* Rector José Sarukhán expressed regret over the events, attributing them to a "group" characterized by intolerance, which is "something that ought not to exist at the university, which has always been a forum

<sup>4</sup> According to *La Jornada*, the organizers asked those students who had managed to find a seat to write their name, address, department and *UNAM* account number on a blank sheet of paper. These were placed in a transparent ballot box, out of which the names of those who could ask the candidate questions were randomly drawn.





characterized by tolerance, openness and plurality.” Dr. Sarukhán said he had been told of the visit only the previous weekend and had placed *UNAM*'s unarmed security force, generally used at this type of events, at the candidate's disposal.

Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was the next candidate to visit *UNAM*. In his case, no physical or verbal violence was expected; people were merely eager to see whether student support for the PRD candidate had increased or decreased. The rally was announced well ahead of time, with banners, graffiti and newspapers ads. It was emphasized that Cárdenas would deliver his speech in an open area (the esplanade in front of the administration building), where the candidate could be seen and heard by everyone.

Unlike in 1988, PRD sympathizers made a great effort to achieve a massive audience, since the event was vital for the embattled candidate, who seemed to be losing support under the attacks of a mass media intent on portraying his campaign as moribund after his poor performance during the presidential debate held on May 12.

Cárdenas read a sixteen-page speech in which he offered free education at all levels, urged his audience to vote and respect the vote, attacked social inequality and called for a just policy for Indian groups, etc.

However, the most significant aspect of the rally was apparently its size. There was considerable disagreement over the turnout. At one extreme, PRD sympathizers calculated the number at 75,000 (almost the entire undergraduate population at *UNAM*), while the television network Televisa seemed to confirm Cárdenas' earlier accusations that it lacks impartiality: on *24 Horas*, its main newscast, it reported an attendance of fewer than five thousand.<sup>5</sup>

Other reporters and attendees agreed on 15,000 as the most likely figure. In any case, the event was judged a resounding success by PRD followers, while political commentators agreed that it had given Cárdenas' campaign the shot in the arm it needed.

Not to be outdone, Diego Fernández de Cevallos decided to take advantage of his adversaries' experience. He issued an open invitation to the university community to attend his rally and decided to face the consequences of “violating” the forum previously reserved for Cárdenas by addressing his audience from the esplanade outside the administration building.

The result was a large turnout—smaller than for Cárdenas, according to the PRD and its sympathizers; the



Edel Cárdena.

“*UNAM* is not a Cardenista arena but a forum for freedom of thought” —PAN sympathizers.

same size or larger, according to the PAN. Many agreed that the audience would have been smaller if Fernández de Cevallos' opponents had stayed away.

During his speech, the PAN candidate was pelted with eggs, one of which hit him in the face, staining his clothes and the speech he was reading. Recovering his composure and appealing for order, he quoted a literary phrase: “The wounds received during a campaign bestow more honor than dishonor.”

In their assessment of the event, PAN sympathizers stressed that its main achievement had been to show that “*UNAM* is not a Cardenista arena but a forum for freedom of thought” (*La Jornada*, June 16). Once again, violence and intolerance were unanimously condemned, while the CEU and PRD denied any involvement.

Paradoxically, the fact that Cárdenas was able to enter and leave *UNAM* unharmed simplified the meaning of the attacks, to such an extent that his opponents tried to make Cárdenas and his sympathizers responsible for the attacks on the other two candidates.

Yet it appears that at the end of the battle the true victims were *UNAM*'s students, since they were reduced to mere numbers for measuring the candidates' drawing power in this closely-fought battle for the presidency X

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<sup>5</sup> Viewers were unable to draw their own conclusions, since the cameras only showed Cárdenas reading his speech.