

Charges of vote fraud taint Mexican elections

By Mike Tangeman
Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY — Despite charges that the government engineered a vote fraud in Mexico's Aug. 18 national elections, a 66-percent voter turnout nationwide is a sign of hope for democracy, according to a report issued by the Mexican bishops' social affairs commission.

In a written assessment issued Aug. 22, the commission expressed concern over charges by opposition political parties that voter-registration rolls had been manipulated and that credentials had been distributed selectively to voters. Opposition par-

ties charged the election had been biased in favor of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, known by the Spanish acronym PRI.

In addition, the commission's statement pointed to "old practices of altering ballots" on election day and called upon the government to honor the Mexican public's "right to be provided with true and timely information" on election results.

Despite the charges of fraud, most observers accepted the government's estimate of a 66-percent turnout of the country's 36.2 million registered voters. If correct, the figure represents the highest rate of voter participation in non-presidential elec-

tions in modern Mexican history.

The bishops' social affairs commission expressed optimism over the turnout, although it noted that the 23.9 million voters who did cast ballots actually represented less than 50 percent of Mexicans of voting age. Though eligible, many Mexicans did not register to vote.

Still, the commission's statement said, "We believe that the inertia of electoral apathy is being broken."

In the federal elections, Mexican voters in 32 states and the capital cast votes for candidates from 10 political parties vying for one half of the 64 seats in the national senate and all of the 500 seats in Mexico's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies.

On Aug. 24, the government's Federal Electoral Institute estimated that the PRI had won 61.4 percent of the vote nationwide. If accurate, that figure represents a comeback from 1988 elections, when Salinas — running as the PRI's candidate — won the presidency with 50.2 percent of the vote.

As a result of the victories in the deputy

races, the PRI and its allies now control a crucial two-thirds majority needed in the Chamber of Deputies to push through amendments to Mexico's constitution.

In simultaneous state elections, voters in six states cast ballots in gubernatorial elections while statewide elections for local town councils were held in six states. New state legislatures were also chosen in four Mexican states.

The PRI claimed victory in all six gubernatorial races, although opposition parties have charged that massive vote fraud favored PRI candidates in San Luis Potosi and Guanajuato states.

The National Executive Committee of the opposition National Action Party voted on Aug. 24 to reject the government's official election results because of "massive irregularities." The Democratic Revolution Party has challenged the legality of the vote in 130 of the 300 electoral districts nationwide, according to party spokesmen.

Some political observers have said that the PRI-led majority of two-thirds in the Chamber of Deputies could be key to Mexico's economic and political future.

Salinas could introduce amendments to the constitutional restrictions on oil and mineral exploitation which would be almost sure of passage.

In addition, some observers have noted that the PRI-led majority in the chamber could portend a modification of harsh anti-church measures contained in the constitution. Mexico's bishops have demanded changes to five constitutional articles as part of the Salinas administration's promise to work toward the betterment of church-state relations.



AP/Wide World Photos

SALVADORAN STRIFE — A Salvadoran soldier escorts a blindfolded man from a tire shop in Santa Tecla, El Salvador, Aug. 22. The shop was a front for a guerrilla safe house that stored radio equipment and hundreds of explosive detonators. U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar has appealed to U.S. and Soviet officials to help end the impasse in peace talks aimed at resolving the 11-year-old Salvadoran civil war.

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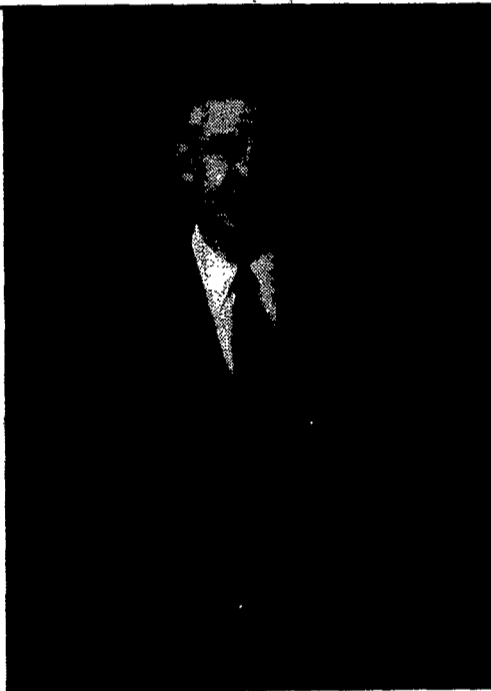
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