# Coalticue's Skirt: Hidden Aspects of Mexico's Political Rivalry in 1995

CARLOS FUENTES

Writer and Professor-at-large at Brown University

It's Valle Inclán live," is how Jorge Semprún succinctly and correctly described to me the grotesque tale in which Colonel Antonio Tejero Molina played the lead role in Madrid, on February 23, 1981, in the Parliament, and in front of the television cameras.

There has been a great—and at times even an irresistible—temptation to make jokes based on the writings of Valle Inclán concerning the recent attitudes of the ex-president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. Because of Salinas' decision to fast, the cartoonists depicted him as a Creole Ghandi, as an exhibitionist fakir, as a Christ who nails himself to the cross, whispering, "Forgive me, Father, for I know not what I do."

But Carlos Salinas knew very well what he is doing. We would all be mistaken to underestimate him. He is not a crazy man, but rather a very complex and extremely intelligent man, worthy of an in-depth study about the individual in a position of power—a study similar to the one Gregorio Marañón wrote about Emperor Tiberio, or to the ones which, more recently, have obsessed Gabriel García Márquez and Ryszard Kapuscinski. If his enemies underestimate him, Salinas will have a sizable advantage over them. His script was not written by the author of *Mardi Gras*, but rather by the author of *The Long March*.

Salinas, the young Maoist, the novice traveler to Populist China, the experienced technocrat and internationally acclaimed president, felt threatened by the actions of the new Mexican government. He tried to stop the events

This article was translated by Minia Bongiorno-Garcia, the Spanish version of which appeared in *El Pais*—reprinted by permission.

through the use of force, sending an armed escort to rescue his brother Raúl, who was accused of having masterminded the assassination of José Francisco Ruiz Massieu, the secretary of the official Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). But Salinas eventually confronted the Army, and thought it better to retreat to his populist base, the district of San Bernabé de Monterrey—a proletarian colony (Carlos Salinas de Gortari's equivalent to the Yunnan Caves) favored by Solidaridad (Solidarity), the social program born of the Salinas presidency.

There, he confirmed his three positions with regard to the incidents that have Mexico in a state of shock. He believed in the innocence of his brother. He demanded that he be exonerated of all suspicions of concealing evidence regarding the March 1994 assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the PRI presidential candidate. Finally, he asked that Ernesto Zedillo's Government take full responsibility for the crisis provoked by the devaluation of the Mexican peso in December of last year.

In defending his brother Raúl Salinas, the ex-president reminds us all that the ball in this violent Mexican political game of jai-alai came from Ernesto Zedillo's court—that, in effect, it was the new president who initiated the break with the previous president. Why did Zedillo do it? Was it to affirm his own power, weakened by the successive crises of his turbulent first one-hundred days: devaluation of the peso, financial crisis, Chiapas, and humiliating negotiations with the United States? Was it because he knew the ex-president's political maneuvers could represent danger for the new president? Was it to carry out the sexennial ritualistic parricide of Mexican politics? Or, was it simply because he had new and accurate information with which to accuse Raúl Salinas, and he placed the integrity of the law before any other personal or political consideration?

For the good of the nation—even if this were not the case—one would have to give Zedillo the benefit of the doubt, believing that his almost-puritanical passion for the reform of the judicial system led him to initiate the proceedings to which I referred. However, the president could not ignore that he was, in fact, carrying out the sexennial Aztec ritual. Nor could he be oblivious to the fact that his actions would bring him immediate popularity and lead others to perceive him as a vigorous president.

He risked—did he foresee it or not?—getting a strong reaction from ex-president Salinas. And the latter, by responding as he did, broke the golden rule of the Mexican patrilineal succession of power: the ex-president must endure all—slander, mockery, and contempt—so that the new president may take absolute power. There is only room for one person at the pinnacle of the Mexican pyramid of power. This held true for Moctezuma, and it holds true for President Zedillo.

**There is only room for one person at the pinnacle of the Mexican pyramid of power.**

The conditions of this exchange of power are that the ex-president never says another word, and the new president does not touch his predecessor's money or family. The break between Zedillo and Salinas was more brutal than

the well-known previous confrontation sixty years ago (in 1935) between the new president, Lázaro Cárdenas, and the power behind the throne—the ex-president and highest leader of the Revolution, Plutarco Elías Calles. However, even Calles unhappily accepted his exile, and once the strength and dignity of his position were assured, Cárdenas went on to apply his own political program. Between 1936 and 1940, he revolutionized all aspects of Mexico: agrarian reform, education, the nationalization of oil, labor unions, independent foreign politics, and a corporate base for the symbiosis of the Government and the official party.

The question today asks whether this system, which has governed Mexico during half a century, can perpetuate and renew itself, or if it should be replaced. The Zedillo-Salinas confrontation goes beyond their personality conflicts, and places us at the core of the political situation in Mexico. We have reached the limit. The old system can yield no more. It can no longer be supported economically or politically. As long as it guaranteed stability and development in exchange for democratic freedom, it was tolerated and even admired. When its harvest is only economic crisis, instability, corruption, and the impunity of its actors, what good is it? But we must respond to this question with another question: with what shall we replace it?

The answer is not difficult—with democracy. However, democracy is channeled by the parties, and so we are forced to return to the present trouble: all the Mexican political parties are in crisis while in the midst of redefining themselves. The PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution) has a social-democratic wing and another wing on the extreme left. The PAN (Party of National Action) has a collaborationist wing and an independent one. And the PRI has a progressive wing and a dinosauric one.

Until very recently, Ernesto Zedillo, without renouncing his affiliation to the PRI, stressed, above all else, the need to keep the party separate from the Government. I have no doubt that this continues to be his intention. Surprisingly, on Saturday, March 4—the sixty-fifth anniversary of the establishment of the party—the president had to fervently reaffirm the strong alliance between the Government and the PRI. A few hours before, the attorney general of the Republic had "honored"—as the pettifogging lawyers would say—the demands of the former President Salinas, exonerating him from any suspicions of concealing evidence in the Colosio case. Zedillo had to return to the PRI in order to reassert his basic strength—the party—while Salinas returned to the San Bernabé district, in Monterrey, to reassert his own Solidarity social program. Could this program become the future Solidarity Party?

We have yet to discuss the third topic raised by the politically active and intelligent ex-president, who, not in vain, has a thorough, verbatim knowledge of Machiavelli's *The Prince*—the best defense is an attack. Without denying his own shortcomings, Salinas accuses Zedillo's government of having turned a "problem" into a "crisis," with the December devaluation of the peso.

In my opinion, Salinas is mistaken. But it is difficult for him to see the disaster of an economic model—neoliberalism, the voodoo system of "trickle down economics" once proclaimed by his friend George Bush—which the ex-presi-

dent and his men made their own, to the point of consecration.

The neoliberal model occurs in the celestial spheres of macroeconomics. But the majority of people live in a micro-economy. And, as the ever-watchful Gabriel Zaid pointed out, although the macro approach may initially solve cash problems, a high price subsequently has to be paid for punishing individuals, companies, savings, and productive investments. Carlos Salinas' regime governed itself according to the neoliberal dogma, sweetened by the Christian palliative of Solidarity: balanced budgets, single-digit inflation, important holdings of foreign exchange, openness to the world, and foreign capital.

**Black Swallows**

Unfortunately, this capital was invested only minimally in the productive sector, while it was focused intensively on speculation, clutching onto financial movements over which no present government has control (and clutching onto Mexico). In our case, these movements disappeared the same way they appeared—on the wings of black swallows. Suffice it to say that political problems accumulated in Mexico, and that other world markets offered greater advantages than ours. Next door to us, without going any further, the United States emerged from its recession and increased its interest rates.

The World Bank, since the beginning of 1994, had circulated a critical report on low productivity, scarce savings, and the excessive dependency of the Mexican economy. Larry Summers, the North American under secretary of the Treasury, and future president of the World Bank, recently remembered that:

> Mexico committed grave macroeconomic errors during this last year. Despite the expressions of worry of North American functionaries and other people, in the sense that Mexican politics were untenable, Mexicans firmly held the opinion that the loss of national holdings did not require political adjustments.

The North American Treasury's argument is the best reply Zedillo has for Salinas.

The black swallows left, leaving in our hands the empty nests of an untenable foreign debt, disguised as national deficit (treasury bonds); growth sacrificed to the fetish of low inflation; the opening of commerce, driven at a feverish rhythm which would eventually sacrifice the evident and proven advantages of the Free Trade Agreement; excessive imports financed with volatile capital; a growing trade deficit; and, despite everything, the dogmatic conviction that this was not just the best approach, but also the only one.

Zedillo inherited the crisis in all its dimensions. He managed it poorly. However, this does not, as Salinas would have it, make him totally responsible for "the December errors." There is no doubt that there will be a battle between the two interpretations of the crisis. It occurs at the worst possible moment for Zedillo, and Salinas is fully aware of this fact. In March, the Mexican Congress discussed the foreign-aid package that was mainly organized by the govern-

ment of the United States. The Mexican Congress has recuperated its ability to argue—and in this case, to accept or reject international financial obligations. One of these is, no doubt, the Clinton Package. In exchange for $20,000 million, Mexico agrees to follow a fixed political economy, which is exactly how we arrived at our present situation: zero growth of monetary circulation, reduction of public expenditure, and more privatization.

This is a formula for renewed disaster for a country desiring growth even at the price of inflation—just as Brazil has done, although not to the same extreme. This is a formula for disaster in a country that still needs to learn the lesson that all the economists of the world deduced from the crisis of pure neoliberalism practiced by Reagan, Bush and Thatcher during twelve years: the restriction of circulation and expenditure during a recession leads to a depression, not to a recuperation. This is a formula for disaster in a country where the private sector—devastated by the crisis, hungry for credit, and replete with debt—requires the greatest public expenditure to have more consumers.

**Trust**

The package discussed in the Mexican Congress threatens the very thing it wishes to promote: trust in Mexico.

How is anyone to have trust in a country perpetually treated like a minor, and suspected of intrinsic ineptitude, corruption, frivolity, and capricious authoritarianism? The congressman who wants to restore trust in Mexico must vote against a politically and economically onerous moral package that solves nothing and postpones everything.

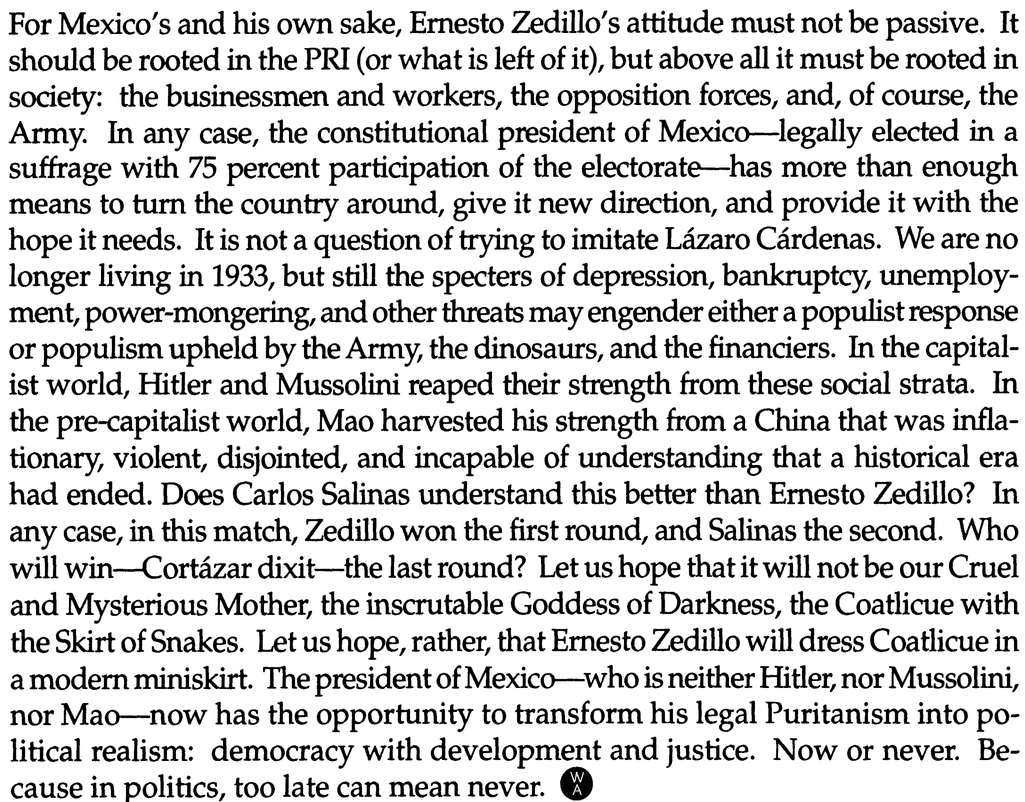
That this demeaning agreement has reached our Congress also speaks quite poorly of the ability of our spineless diplomacy to make the North American public understand that Mexico and the United States share this crisis, both bilaterally and as members of the global economy. The United States government does understand this issue, but it acts like an imbecile for internal political reasons. Our communication has failed. The gringo citizen believes he is doing Mexico a great favor for which he will charge a high price: Mexico will pay with new migratory policies; Clinton, with electoral defeat. Will it be necessary to remember how President Franklin Roosevelt passed the extremely unpopular lend lease to Great Britain, in 1941? "When the house of your neighbor catches fire," said FDR on that occasion, "go quickly to put out the fire, instead of arguing about the price of the hose." Quite a fire. Quite a hose.

The danger of the Mexican fire is that the firecracker of our crisis will explode, lit by one of its three fuses: the banking crisis, the industrial and employment crisis, or the popular uprisings similar to those of Perez's second presidency in Venezuela. Instead of postponing these dangers fictitiously and temporarily by paying treasury bonds in dollars through the humiliating help from Washington, Mexico should expedite the hour of truth. Let us not traumatically call it a moratorium or a suspension of payments. Rather, as we have done since the time of our first president, Guadalupe Victoria (1824-1829), let us call it "debt re-negotiation." We have always been good at that, and now we

need to be so more than ever, as expert negotiators such as Jesús Silva Herzog, Bernardo Sepúlveda, and—God save us!—the very chancellor Ángel Gurría know. We must negotiate the debt with imagination, audacity, and patriotism. However, we must outline a new development policy based on the market, while we must also maintain social programs—somewhat similar to the European Community, but in a country with 40 million miserable people lacking education, health, and employment. We need the coexistence of moderate inflation and growth. We need a greater selection of investments for productive sectors. (Both the Copenhagen summit and the *Wall Street Journal* ask for tariffs on foreign speculative investments.) We need an increase in savings from retirement and insurance accounts. We need greater protection for companies that export goods and, in a short time, can reverse the situation of the balance of payments.

The political challenge leaves President Zedillo with an opportunity no other president since Cárdenas has had: to firmly redefine a policy of national salvation able to salvage and update—in a new international environment, developing many good ideas born of the Salinas administration—the productivity, savings, and vigor of Mexico, the thirteenth economic power in the world, a country that ceased to be a hostage to oil production, and which today boasts 80 percent of non oil-related exports.

**Hope**



For Mexico's and his own sake, Ernesto Zedillo's attitude must not be passive. It should be rooted in the PRI (or what is left of it), but above all it must be rooted in society: the businessmen and workers, the opposition forces, and, of course, the Army. In any case, the constitutional president of Mexico—legally elected in a suffrage with 75 percent participation of the electorate—has more than enough means to turn the country around, give it new direction, and provide it with the hope it needs. It is not a question of trying to imitate Lázaro Cárdenas. We are no longer living in 1933, but still the specters of depression, bankruptcy, unemployment, power-mongering, and other threats may engender either a populist response or populism upheld by the Army, the dinosaurs, and the financiers. In the capitalist world, Hitler and Mussolini reaped their strength from these social strata. In the pre-capitalist world, Mao harvested his strength from a China that was inflationary, violent, disjointed, and incapable of understanding that a historical era had ended. Does Carlos Salinas understand this better than Ernesto Zedillo? In any case, in this match, Zedillo won the first round, and Salinas the second. Who will win—Cortázar dixit—the last round? Let us hope that it will not be our Cruel and Mysterious Mother, the inscrutable Goddess of Darkness, the Coatlicue with the Skirt of Snakes. Let us hope, rather, that Ernesto Zedillo will dress Coatlicue in a modern miniskirt. The president of Mexico—who is neither Hitler, nor Mussolini, nor Mao—now has the opportunity to transform his legal Puritanism into political realism: democracy with development and justice. Now or never. Because in politics, too late can mean never.