Biography of Notre Dame Prize Laureate

An unwavering advocate for democracy and justice, Mexican statesman Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was instrumental in opening up the political process in Mexico, long dominated by one-party rule. He will be awarded the Notre Dame Prize for Distinguished Public Service in Latin America in recognition of his steadfast commitment to democratic ideals and a lifetime of public service.

Born in Mexico City in 1934, he is the son of Amalia Solórzano and one of Mexico’s most revered presidents, Lázaro Cárdenas, whose achievements included widespread land reform and the nationalization of the oil industry. Cuauhtémoc spent the first six years of his life in Los Pinos, Mexico’s presidential residence.

He trained as a civil engineer, receiving his degree from the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (National Autonomous University of Mexico, or UNAM) in 1957. A founding member and president of a professional planning organization, he coordinated surveys and rural development projects in the Rio Balsas Basin in the 1960s.

Like his father, Cárdenas entered public service as a member of the ruling Revolutionary Institutional Party (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI) and held early positions as senator for the state of Michoacán (1974–1980) and in the Ministry of Forestry and Wildlife (1976–1980). From the time he was elected governor of Michoacán in 1980, a position he held until 1986, he dedicated all his energy to public service.

As he became increasingly involved in party politics, he became disenchanted by the corruption and lack of democratic process within the party, which had held power for nearly 60 years. Beginning in 1986, he took part in the “Democratic Current,” a movement that arose within the PRI to challenge its practice of appointing presidential successors.

When this effort met with resistance, Cárdenas left the party to run for president as an opposition candidate. The campaign that he ran for the presidency in 1988 is credited with opening up the political process in Mexico.

Even though he lost the election by a narrow margin, due to what many Mexicans believe was massive electoral fraud, he continued in his efforts to promote democratization. In 1989, he was a founder of the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and he ran for president again under this banner in 1994 and 2000. In 1997 he became the first democratically elected mayor of Mexico City. He is still considered the PRD’s “moral leader.”
Currently president of the *Fundación para la Democracia* (Foundation for Democracy), he has remained active in efforts to confront problems facing Mexico. “Addressing poverty and expanding Mexico’s formal economy are necessary parts of any strategy to stem drug trafficking and drug-related violence and to provide alternatives to those leaving Mexico for the United States,” he said in a March 2010 address at University of California, Los Angeles.

Cárdenas has served as Tinker Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago and as visiting professor at the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He received the prestigious “Condecoración Cardenal Cisneros,” awarded by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

His most recent book, *Sobre Mis Pasos* (Aguilar, 2010), combines a political history of contemporary Mexico from the perspective of a central participant with deep personal reflection and testimony on how his objectives and convictions shaped his path as an unwavering advocate for democracy and justice in Mexico.