Mexico’s Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas to Receive Notre Dame Prize

Mexican statesman and democracy advocate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas has won the 2010 Notre Dame Prize for Distinguished Public Service in Latin America. The prize will be awarded at a ceremony in Mexico City on February 16. First awarded in 2000, the Notre Dame Prize recognizes the efforts of visionary leaders to enhance the region’s welfare.

Cárdenas will be honored for his leading role in promoting democracy by opening up the political process in his native Mexico, dominated for almost 60 years by the one-party rule of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, known as the PRI. Cárdenas broke “the logjam of the authoritarian system,” says Dain Borges, associate professor of history at the University of Chicago.

In 1987, Cárdenas challenged the PRI’s unwritten rule that allowed presidents to designate their own successors. Leaving the PRI, he ran for president in 1988. He came very close to winning against the PRI candidate—indeed, many Mexicans contend that the government stole the election when it declared a “computer system crash” partway through the vote count.

“The electoral outcome triggered a popular mobilization that accelerated Mexico’s transition to democracy,” says Soledad Loaeza, professor of political science at El Colegio de México’s Center for International Studies and a former Kellogg Institute visiting fellow. “Cárdenas gave hope to many people. Thanks to his dignified leadership, the left in Mexico developed into a responsible political alternative.”

The son of one of Mexico’s most revered PRI presidents, Lázaro Cárdenas, Cuauhtémoc rose through PRI ranks before becoming fed up with the party’s increasing corruption and electoral fraud. A civil engineer by training, he served as senator (1974–1980) and then governor of the state of Michoacán (1980–1986). In 1989, he helped to found the left-of-center Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), and in 1997 was elected to the new post of mayor of Mexico City.

Called the “moral leader” of the PRD, Cardenas ran for the presidency again in 1994 and 2000. 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 UCLA.
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.

Established in 2000 by the Kellogg Institute for International Studies and funded by The Coca-Cola Foundation, the Notre Dame Prize for Distinguished Public Service in Latin America is the only award of its kind to recognize the efforts of civic activists and intellectuals as well as leaders in business, religion, government, or the media, to enhance the region’s welfare. The award carries a $15,000 cash prize, with a matching amount donated to a charitable organization recommended by the laureate.

Among the previous recipients of the Notre Dame Prize are microfinance pioneer María Otero, president and CEO of ACCIÓN International (now US Under Secretary of State for Democracy and Global Affairs); human rights activists José Zalaquett (Chile), Helen Mack Chang, president of the Myrna Mack Foundation (Guatemala), and Sofía Macher of Peru’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission; four former or sitting presidents, César Gaviria of Colombia, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Fernando Henrique Cardoso of Brazil, and Patricio Aylwin of Chile; Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríquez Maradiaga, SBD, Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, Honduras; and Enrique Iglesias, president of the Inter-American Development Bank.

Founded by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, CSC, the University of Notre Dame's Kellogg Institute for International Studies brings interdisciplinary social science inquiry to bear on issues relevant to contemporary societies around the world. Grounding the Institute’s scholarship and teaching is an appreciation for the benefits of democratization and human development.

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