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INSIDE MEXICO



Novelist has written a hopeful prognosis

"There's a great optimism in Mexico and you can feel it," says Mexican novelist Carlos Fuentes, here last week for the inSITE97 exhibition of art in the border region's public spaces.

The author of "The Old Gringo" and many other acclaimed books said Mexicans are happy about the July 6 elections in which the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost its overall majority in the legislature for the first time since the party's founding in 1929.

"In 1910, the Mexican people decided to take their destiny into their own hands," he said. The result was a revolution that destroyed much of the productive capacity of the country. "This time, they have decided to take a democratic route."

Many intellectuals say Mexico won't be truly democratic unless the PRI loses the presidential race in the year 2000. Fuentes disagreed, saying Mexico now has democracy. But he also wondered: "What is the destiny of the PRI? I don't think the PRI knows what its future will be."

He said its members are struggling to decide whether it is a neoliberal party, a nationalist one or even a socialist one.

"We have to hear the voice of the members of the PRI. There are many good members," he said. While there also are hard-line "dinosaurs," he said, "I believe more in the people than in the dinosaurs."

Fuentes said former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, now widely reviled in Mexico, will be more appreciated in the future.

In January 1994, Salinas rejected hard-liners' urgings to decimate the Zapatista rebels after their uprising. He instead declared a ceasefire and began negotiations.

Fuentes said Salinas, when asked why he chose the nonviolent route, replied, "I was a young man in '68 (when the Mexican government massacred protesting students), and I don't want to leave my Mexico with my hands soaked in blood."

Mexicans blame Salinas for the December 1994 peso crisis, which occurred just after he left office.

Mexico often has seen economic crises at the tail end of its six-year presidential terms. But Fuentes, 67, said history does not have to repeat itself. "Is Mexico destined to go through economic crisis every six years? I think not."

At a small luncheon hosted by Nicholas Applegate Capital Management, which helped sponsor his appearance, Fuentes seemed as comfortable discussing high finance as history or politics or literature.

Fuentes, who could have passed for a businessman in his coat and tie, said, "I hope we will be able to ally fiscal discipline with social progress." He said Mexico needs "a more equitable and fair allocation of resources" and has "to create the possibilities of work at the village level."

He also scolded his U.S. hosts: "There is growing disparity between the haves and the have nots in your country, which I think is scandalous."

Last year, Fuentes wrote "For an Inclusive Progress," a book about Mexico's need to improve its school system. Education is "a question of life and death for any economy in the world," he said last week.

His prescription on drugs? "Legalize them, take the glamour away, take the profits away."

Last Friday at the University of California San Diego, and Saturday at the Cultural Center in Tijuana, he read from his latest work on the history of the border. The first was done in flawless English; the latter in flawless Spanish.

His Tijuana speech was delivered a short distance from an inSITE97 pyramid sculpture representing both Aztec sacrifice and illegals.

His collar open, mustache neat, brow furrowed, hair combed back, Fuentes started off nervously, reading from his text. But he quickly warmed to the Tijuanaenses, talking about *la frontera*, our shared "border of dust and river."

Fuentes spoke of the shifting 19th century border: "The gringos? How could they exist? Who invented them?"

The crowd roared with delight.