

any big defeats until last July. In balloting for seats in the Mexican Congress's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, the PRI won only 39 percent of the popular vote—the lowest level of support in its 68 years of rule—and lost 59 seats. Cárdenas's leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) garnered 26 percent of the popular vote and gained 60 seats, while Cárdenas himself was elected Mexico City's mayor.

Now the question is not whether Mexico can hold free elections, Baer says, but whether the Mexican electorate will tilt left, rejecting the free-market economic reforms of recent years, including the 1993 North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The Mexican Left "bitterly opposed" NAFTA in particular. Is the Mexican Left now reconciled to it? So far, notes Baer, Cárdenas has given only mixed signals.

Enslaved by the Past

"'God Created Me to Be a Slave'" by Elinor Burkett, in *The New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 12, 1997), 229 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

The best testimony to the persistence of slavery in the West African country of Mauritania may be the number of times it has been outlawed. It was banned by the French colonial government in 1905, again in 1961, after independence, by the first government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, and yet again in 1980 by presidential proclamation. Even so, reports Burkett, a free-lance writer, in Mauritania's "endless expanses of wind-swept nothingness . . . an estimated 90,000 slaves labor as they have for more than 500 years—serving their masters by tending their herds, bleeding their acacia trees for gum arabic, picking dates, and bearing the next generation of human property."

Though there have been occasional instances of slavery elsewhere in modern times, only in Mauritania, Burkett contends, does widespread, institutionalized slavery continue to exist. The enslaved are blacks who serve the nation's ruling Arab tribes. "Slaves here, descendants of generations of human chattel, receive no salaries, no education," she says. "They cannot marry without permission or plan the futures of their children."

The 1980 emancipation proclamation by President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla freed the slaves without making slave ownership illegal, and specified that owners should be compensated for the loss of their property. In the absence of compensation, masters generally consider the law null and void. Many religious leaders also oppose it as contrary to the Koran. "The state, if it is Islamic, does not have the right to seize my house, my wife or my slave," said El Hassen Ould Benyamine, imam of a mosque in Tayarat. Most

of Mauritania's slaves are unaware of their legal emancipation, Burkett says.

Slavery in Mauritania is not the same as the slavery that once existed in the United States, she notes. Slave markets are unknown. No self-respecting master would resort to selling his slaves, since that would be an admission of economic desperation. In fact, "slaves are so numerous," she says, "that they are routinely 'discharged' to save their owners the expense of feeding them." There is virtually no chance of rebellion. "After 15 or 20 generations, people become totally submissive," observes Boubacar Ould Messoud, founder of SOS-Esclave, the Mauritanian underground railroad.

"God created me to be a slave, just as he created a camel to be a camel," a young runaway named Fatma Mint Mamadou believes. Her mother was an *abd*, a slave, as her mother before her had been. Only when Fatma suffered a particularly severe beating from her master in 1990 did she take off across the desert. In the capital city of Nouakchott (population 700,000), she learned that Mauritania's slaves had been emancipated 10 years earlier.

Fatma "might be a black African, but like all Mauritania's raised as slaves, she thinks of herself as an Arab," Burkett writes. "She considers herself part of the tribe and clan of her master. She has no other identity in a society where individualism is anathema, a world where to belong is to be." Fatma and an estimated 300,000 other black Mauritania's—most of them abandoned during the decades of drought that have killed off their masters' herds—are now mired in poverty and caught between slavery and freedom.