

uty director, said recently. A third of the notes and coins in circulation are now dollars. In the towns, most prices are now given in both currencies. Confidence among Ecuador's battered businessmen is growing. Imports are rising, and money is dribbling back to the sickly banking system. But it is still early days, for dollarisation and for Mr Noboa. Their real test is about to begin.

## Mexico Debatable

MEXICO CITY

**“W**HAT we have here is the debate about the debate, with no result at all.” The reporter outside Cuauhtemoc Cardenas's campaign headquarters sounded thoroughly fed up. Everybody was. The three leading candidates in Mexico's July 2nd presidential election had spent days squabbling, and now, less than three hours before it was due to happen, Mr Cardenas, Vicente Fox and Francisco Labastida were still holed up together, trying to agree on the format for their second television debate on May 23rd. They failed. Tentatively, it was reset for three days later.

In the first debate a month ago, the ebullient Mr Fox of the centre-right National Action Party (PAN) outshone the grey Mr Labastida, whose Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) risks losing the presidency for the first time in 71 years. This week's squabble may have hurt Mr Fox, who seemed childishly petulant in the (televised) debate about the debate. But no debate, no matter: the candidates and their proposals have been under lively media scrutiny unprecedented in Mexico's emerging democracy.

Only the incautious are prepared to predict the outcome of the election, and that may remain true to the end. Throughout the long campaign, opinion polls have varied sharply. In the past month, six surveys by reputable firms have put Mr Fox anywhere from seven points behind Mr Labastida to five ahead. The variation is more in Mr Labastida's rating, suggesting some of his support may be soft. Notably, the two outlying polls came from foreign firms new to this year's campaign.

The underlying trends are more consistent. Mr Labastida's support has declined since November, when the fuss surrounding the PRI's first presidential primary election pushed him above 50% by some counts. Four main companies have done regular national polls: three of these show the gap between the two men changing little since April, but the fourth showed Mr Fox gaining a stunning seven points relative to Mr Labastida. In two of these polls, Mr Fox is ahead by up to five points. In a third, he is equal with Mr Labastida. Much of Mr Labastida's lost support has

## Bringing Chile's army to heel

SANTIAGO

**I**N THE end, it may not come to much, but it is nevertheless a verdict that many Chileans would not have thought possible even a couple of years ago. On May 23rd, in a closed session whose outcome was leaked, the Appeals Court in Santiago decided, reportedly by 13 votes to nine, to strip General Augusto Pinochet of the immunity from prosecution that he enjoys as a life senator.

The Supreme Court, to which the former dictator will now appeal, may well reverse this verdict. Even if it does not, it may order medical reports on the 84-year-old general, as the Appeals Court may also do. Should these show that he is mentally unfit, he would avoid a trial on the 100 or so allegations of kidnapping, torture, and so on that have been filed against him.

Even so, this week's ruling is a defeat for Chile's armed forces. In anticipation, they have been blustering for weeks. But for the first time since democracy was restored in 1990, Chile now has in Ricardo Lagos, a moderate socialist, a president

who seems able to stand up to the army.

Last month, the armed forces' four senior commanders held a semiotically significant lunch in full uniform at a fashionable Santiago restaurant. Mr Lagos made no effort to hide his anger, as his predecessors might have. "Of course, they can lunch where they like, but let's not be naive, we all know what this was about," said Mr Lagos—adding, with a nice twist, that the armed forces had no need to prove their unity, because of course they were united behind their president.

General Ricardo Izurieta, the army commander, then summoned his generals to a five-hour meeting. They issued a statement demanding from society and the state "prudence, equity and collaboration" towards the army. The government promptly summoned General Izurieta to the Defence Ministry, to explain himself.

If the Appeals Court verdict is confirmed, the army will doubtless grumble further. General Pinochet commanded it for a quarter of a century until 1998; to its

officers, he remains an almost sacred figure. "He's like a standard that can't be allowed to fall into enemy hands," says Raul Sohr, a defence analyst.

But, however upset it is, the army's protest will almost certainly be merely symbolic. The Chilean army knows another coup would be catastrophic. And Mr Lagos has his own weapons: the constitution denies him the power to sack military commanders, but he can—and says he will—change the law to gain control of the defence budget. With each new twist in the saga of the old dictator, Chile's democracy looks more vigorous.



Lagos watches the military semiotics

gone to Mr Cardenas.

Even if Mr Fox's support may be close to its ceiling, the persistence of his challenge has caused many Mexicans to start thinking the unthinkable: that he might defeat the PRI. That has prompted a few local and regional organisers from other parties to defect to Mr Fox, as has Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, the presidential candidate for a small left-wing party. Likewise, some voters may pick him simply because they think he will win.

But even apart from the debate fiasco, Mr Fox still has reason to worry. Daniel Lund of Mund Opinion Services, a polling firm, es-

timates that some 8% of Mexico's voters live in remote areas that pollsters never reach. But they vote all the same—mostly for the PRI. And in the approach to an election the PRI's grassroots network, far bigger than any of its opponents', goes to work cajoling, bribing or coercing voters. Some of its methods would be legitimate in any democracy; some, such as telling people that a vote for the PRI is a condition for getting state hand-outs, would not. The malpractice will be less blatant than in the past, but if the election is as close as it looks, it may be enough.