

34

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# Research Memorandum

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

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To : The Acting Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR - Ray S. Cline *(RSC)*

Subject: MEXICO: Ruling Party Faces Challenge in State Elections

Opposition political parties have usually provided little contest for the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party in Mexico, but the National Action Party will offer a serious challenge in gubernatorial elections scheduled in Yucatan for November 23. This memorandum reviews the setting of the election and suggests some consequences the election may have on Mexican politics.

ABSTRACT

The ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) faces a stiff battle from the opposition National Action Party (PAN) in elections in the state of Yucatan on November 23. Depressed economic conditions, a series of poor PRI state administrations, and growing urban and rural voter disaffection with the PRI combine to give the PAN the chance to make an unusually strong showing. The PRI has taken positive steps to brush up its image in the state and might be able to pull the election off. If the PAN does win, the PRI and the government will have to decide whether to cede the state administration to the PAN.

The Yucatan election has more than local significance. One-party dominance by the PRI has served Mexico well, but the PRI's claim to represent the basic sectors of Mexican society becomes open to question if it is repudiated by substantial numbers of voters whose interests it is theoretically designed to represent. Regardless of the outcome of the election, a strong showing by the opposition may well lead some PRI leaders to reexamine their party's role.

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On November 23, voters in the state of Yucatan will elect a new governor. This election will be of more than usual interest because the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) faces a stiff battle from the opposition National Action Party (PAN). The PRI would be particularly loath to falter in an election at the state level at this time since a reversal would deflate the momentum of its nationwide campaign to elect Luis Echeverria as president of Mexico in July 1970. This is not to say that the PRI is in danger of losing the national election. But a PAN victory would jeopardize the PRI's goal of mobilizing the traditional overwhelming popular endorsement of its candidate. Furthermore, since the PRI considers itself the custodian of the aspirations of the masses of Mexicans, the possibility that significant numbers of the voters in a state might repudiate the "party of the revolution" could cause the PRI to reexamine its responsiveness to the needs of today's Mexico.

Genesis of the Challenge

The PAN has an urban, middle class following. Its political philosophy at present does not differ markedly from that of the PRI. The first PAN presidential candidate in 1952 received about 8% of the vote. Its last presidential candidate in 1964 received 11%. The PAN has never won a governorship and has rarely succeeded in electing state deputies. However, a number of factors which have been maturing over the years in Yucatan have combined to make the PAN a serious rather than pro forma opposition in the November elections.

Yucatan has been an economically depressed area for years, and prospects for improvement are dim. Popular frustrations work to the disadvantage of the "ins" and give an uncommon edge to the "outs".

Yucatan's major industry is the growing of henequen (a kind of sisal). The government controls the credit and marketing facilities for this crop and thus is intimately involved with the economic well-being of the many individuals engaged in the industry. Due to the depressed condition of the henequen market, income has been low. The government, in fact, has been subsidizing the industry. But the government has come to be blamed for not improving living standards rather than praised for keeping them at, or slightly above, the subsistence level.

Yucatan is isolated to a considerable degree both geographically and culturally from Mexico. Yucatecans have come to feel that they are far from the hearts and minds of the movers and shakers in the PRI-government complex in Mexico City. This estrangement has made it easy for them to transfer dissatisfaction over their economic stagnation to the state PRI establishment which they consider to be more responsive to Mexico City than to themselves.

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 By WJH Date 3/26/02

CONFIDENTIAL

-2-

The PRI, aware of this regionalist sentiment, has usually picked gubernatorial candidates with local connections. Unfortunately, a series of recent PRI governors, including the present incumbent, have given Yucatan a legacy of corrupt (even by Mexican standards) and inefficient administration. There appears to be good reason for Yucatecans to be anti-PRI, if not pro-PAN.

#### The PRI Machine in Yucatan

A middle class grateful that the Revolution delivered power into its hands, a passive peasantry, PRI organizational techniques, and government support have in the past forged a political machine which proved unchallengeable. Owing to a lack of industrialization in the state, the PRI did not have the large disciplined labor vote that it enjoys in other states, but its past ability to deliver the peasant vote more than met party needs.

Now, however, with the Revolution long past, the urban middle class seems more interested in effective government and less impressed with the fact that political power is in the hands of a few of its members. Many in the urban middle class are economically independent of the PRI-government complex and feel they have more to lose than gain from corrupt government. Disaffection with the PRI machine was underlined in 1967 when a PAN candidate was elected mayor of the state capital city of Merida by a three to one vote.

Trouble has also been brewing for the PRI in the countryside. Economic stagnation has provoked peasant demonstrations against the government henequen control mechanisms, government officials and the PRI. An erosion of PRI control over the peasant vote could be decisive in the election.

#### PAN Strength

Victor Correa Racho, the PAN's victorious mayor in the 1967 Merida municipal elections, has been selected as his party's gubernatorial candidate. His record as mayor was excellent. Despite, or perhaps because of, the PRI governor's heavy-handed efforts to cripple the Merida city administration, Correa Racho has achieved a growing level of popular support in Merida and elsewhere in the state. His proven administrative ability coupled with strong anti-PRI sentiment make the PAN a formidable challenger.

The PAN has been very active organizing for the campaign. Committees have been created in a number of towns throughout the state, and in June of this year a PAN spokesman claimed that the party would have 15,000 members, more than half of them outside Merida, by the time of the elections.

CONFIDENTIAL

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Authority AM 969000  
 By wm Date 3/26/82

CONFIDENTIAL

-3-

The spokesman expressed confidence that the PAN would carry the state on the strength of the potentially large anti-PRI vote. Reportedly, the national PAN will provide significant financial support for the Yucatan campaign.

#### PRI Reaction

The national PRI has been uneasy over developments in Yucatan, and apparently had serious doubts as to the capability of local PRI leaders to salvage the situation. In August of 1968, the Confederation of Mexican Workers organized the Federation of Workers of the State of Yucatan, probably in an effort to mobilize the comparatively small labor sector of the state for the PRI. In March of 1969, the National Executive Committee of the PRI appointed prominent Federal Deputies from areas outside Yucatan as PRI delegates to the state. These men have overseen a reorganization of the state machine and placed priority on putting younger more activist local politicians into positions of responsibility. Party philosophy may not change, but the blossoming of new faces in the PRI roster could give the party a more attractive appearance. The PRI evidently hopes, and perhaps with some justification, that anti-PRI sentiment will abate as the heads of the old bosses roll.

The government has also become more responsive to peasant demands than the condition of the henequen industry might justify. Christmas bonuses were paid, the Director of the Agricultural Bank was sacrificed, and a peasant demand for representation in the henequen grading process is being considered. The government has focused its coercive weight on peasants associated with the PAN and restrained itself in dealing with those whose protests are directed clearly at the henequen credit and marketing mechanisms.

The PRI has welcomed the participation of the Popular Socialist Party (PPS) in the elections, and is using it for the PRI's own purposes. The PPS is not expected to gain a significant number of votes, but to attack the PAN as the party of wealth, the Church, privilege, and reaction. PPS shouting will allow the PRI to run its campaign in a more civil tone.

The PRI has chosen its candidate for governor with care. The standard bearer will be Senator Carlos Loret de Mola, a Yucatecan who has not been closely identified with the excesses or the personalities of past state administrations. Loret de Mola has spent a great deal of his career outside of the state, has achieved some national prominence but has maintained useful contacts on the local scene. Reportedly, he is a good Catholic and this could be a plus factor in Yucatan.

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 Authority AND 969000  
 By W09 Date 3/26/02

CONFIDENTIAL

-4-

Prospects

PAN chances for a strong showing in the elections are good, but PRI countermeasures could enable the party to squeak through even in a fair election. However, a mere tallying of the vote will not tell the full story, because the decision on whether to cede the state government to the PAN will be made by the PRI-government complex.

The PAN is banking on rolling up so much support that any PRI rigging of the outcome will be plain for anyone to see. The PAN could then take the issue of free elections to the nation in the presidential campaign or protest the campaign by deciding not to participate. The PRI would be embarrassed by either course of action.

The Campaign Thus Far

The campaign has been in swing for more than a month and the paths of both candidates have been dogged by violence. It is not clear whether the acts of violence directed against both parties have been spontaneous or organized. The government has been harassing the PAN in many ways -- denying them permission for band music at rallies, discriminating against PAN newsmen in the release of public information materials, police detention of PAN sympathizers and indifference to PAN requests for protection. Since the PAN would have little to gain and much to lose by violence, it might be assumed that to the extent violence is organized, it is the work of the PRI-government. The PAN believes the PRI would like to provoke the party into violence and realizes that if it falls into this trap the elections will be lost before they are held.

Implications for the PRI

The day when an opposition party can mount a substantial challenge to the official party at a politically significant level has arrived. The fact that significant numbers of the peasantry, one of the sources and mainstays of the Revolution, and the middle class, the offspring of the Revolution, appear to feel that their needs must be conveyed to the government outside the official party may be a sign that the myth of the Revolution is wearing a bit thin. Making the PRI-government complex more responsive to pressures from below will require much careful thought, and this process will be hindered by a natural reluctance to tinker with a system which has proven so effective in the past. There is no guarantee that the PRI-government will come to grips with the problem, nor is there any reason to think that they must over the short run. But, over the long run there seems to be no alternative but to face the issue of growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. The Yucatan elections may reveal the PRI's first response to this problem.

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