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KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING MEXICO: THE PAN'S GROWTH AS A REAL OPPOSITION

INTRODUCTION

For the first time in Mexico since Francisco Madero ousted the dictator Porfirio Diaz in 1910, opposition groups of all stripes have begun to question openly the legitimacy of a ruling authoritarian political system. Joining together in the call for democratic reform and honest elections are major opposition parties, leading intellectuals, the Catholic Church, and a host of civic action groups. The catalyst for these developments was a wave of furor over the government's fraudulent intervention in the state gubernatorial elections of last year.

Leading this movement is the *Partido Accion Nacional* (National Action Party) or the PAN, a conservative party rooted mainly in Mexico's northern states. In 1980 the PAN won important municipal elections in Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. Three years later, the PAN won local and municipal elections in the states of Chihuahua, San Luis Potosi, Durango, Puebla, and Sonora.

These victories sent shock waves through the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Institutional Revolutionary Party) or the PRI, which has ruled Mexico virtually unchallenged since Lázaro Cárdenas consolidated the one-party system in the mid-1930s. The PAN's wins emboldened it and other opposition parties and groups to criticize the PRI and its policies more openly.

This paper is the sixth in a series of Heritage studies on Mexico. It was preceded by *Backgrounder* No. 588, "Deju Vu of Policy Failure: The New \$14 Billion Mexican Debt Bailout" (June 25, 1987); *Backgrounder* No. 583, "For Mexico's Ailing Economy, Time Runs Short" (June 4, 1987); *Backgrounder* No. 581, "Mexico's Many Faces" (May 19, 1987); *Backgrounder* No. 575, "Mexico: The Key Players" (April 4, 1987); and *Backgrounder* No. 573, "Keys to Understanding Mexico: Challenges to the Ruling PRI" (April 7, 1987). Future papers will examine other aspects of Mexican policy and development.

A Significant Force. Last year, the PAN presented a formidable challenge to PRI control of the governorships of the large and economically powerful states in the north and in Puebla and Sinaloa to the south. To stop the PAN from winning in these important elections and to reverse the PAN's 1983 gains, the PRI manipulated the results to regain control of local governments.

While the PRI was able to carry out the "*carro completo*"--or final roll back--to undermine challenges at the polls, the PAN remains a significant force. In February the PAN elected as its president Luis Alvarez, 67 years old although always described as "youthful," a long-time PAN leader and supporter of the PAN's new activism. Already he has begun important organizational changes to strengthen his party for the July 1988 presidential elections. In addition, the PAN is attracting strong new leaders from many different sectors, including the Indians in Mexico's south. With its broader leadership base, the PAN is likely to field a forceful and compelling presidential candidate in 1988.

The PAN is benefiting from the efforts of numerous grass-roots civic action groups. These have spread in reaction to massive electoral fraud, government corruption, and the mounting economic crisis. Although not officially affiliated with the PAN, these popular organizations for the most part share the PAN's democratic aspirations and social goals. Their members are likely to vote for PAN candidates in the presidential elections. Ultimately, these groups may prove even more important than the PAN in moving Mexico toward a more pluralistic political system.

A Divided Left. The PAN, from the Right, is much more of a threat to the PRI than anything on the Left. Electoral challenges from the Marxist parties are weak despite the Left's considerable influence in the universities, the press, and among intellectuals. Although predominantly pro-Moscow, the Left historically has been divided among personalistic factions and has been easily appeased by government socialist policies. Even with the recent unification of the two major Marxist parties, popular support for the Left remains weak.

By contrast, the PAN taps into Mexicans' strong traditional values as well as anti-government sentiments. The PAN's local level governing experience has given the party great credibility and strengthens and broadens its national appeal. The PAN's growing credibility will hamper PRI efforts to restore public confidence in the current authoritarian one-party system before the crucial 1988 presidential elections.

Although repressed and thwarted by the immense powers of the state that the PRI controls, the PAN will continue to be a key factor in Mexico's political developments. The PAN's impact has been far-reaching, and it has already succeeded in altering Mexico's political debate. The PAN's call for electoral reform last year was joined by ideologically diverse groups and parties in a display of unprecedented unity.

This challenges the long valid assumption that the PRI has the support of most Mexicans and is the linchpin of Mexico's stability. The PRI's role thus needs to be reassessed by U.S. policy makers. With the huge U.S. economic and security stakes in a stable and prosperous Mexican future, the U.S. must begin to look

closely at the impact of widening political opposition to a political system that is visibly weakening.

PAN IDEOLOGY

The National Action Party is often referred to as the Catholic Party because of its adherence to Roman Catholic moral and social principles. The PAN traces its history back to the founding in 1911 of the Catholic Party by Gabriel Fernandez Somellera. Its social program called for the establishment of vocational unions, a six-day work week, and significantly, a wide distribution of land ownership. Its program for land distribution, which was a major issue in the revolutionary period between 1910 and 1923, emphasized the importance of creating small family-owned parcels that could not be confiscated or divided arbitrarily. Politically, the Catholic Party stood for honest elections, autonomy of the municipalities from the central government, and protection and the right to vote for the Indian minorities. The party disbanded following the drafting of the Constitution of 1917 which outlawed any political party "whose name contains a word or indication that connects it with a religious confession."

In 1939, Dr. Gomez Morin, a Catholic businessman, founded a new political party. He named it *Accion Nacional* or the PAN. While this new party separated itself officially from the Catholic Church, its programs consciously reflected the social and political principles of Catholic doctrine. Essentially this meant that the PAN promoted the rights of individuals to own property; to work; to strike and belong freely to unions and other associations, and to educate their children in private schools. In many respects, the party was protesting the socialist and anti-clerical policies that had been introduced in the administration of Lazaro Cardenas in the 1930s, when a constitutional amendment established the state's legal monopoly over education.

Traditional Doctrines. While not anti-capitalist, the party always has maintained that the process of creating capital should be checked by social and moral responsibilities of individuals to their community and society. PAN programs and doctrines have undergone few changes over the years. During the 1970s its social program was influenced by the liberation theology movement that was emerging in Latin America. But after Pope John Paul II's criticism of liberation theology during his 1979 visit to Mexico to address the Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops, PAN support for this movement waned. In its political and economic views the PAN today reflects the traditional Catholic doctrines of Christian Democratic parties, particularly the more conservative European parties.

The PAN's current platform rests on the two major issues of political and economic reform. The PAN's call for honest elections and a more representative and open political system has generated considerable mass appeal, primarily because of anti-PRI sentiment. The PAN has attempted to link the solution to Mexico's ills with a democratic system in which honest and able leaders can be elected by the people. This complements the PAN's traditional underlying theme of honesty in public office.

Reflecting many of the ideas and programs of a major Mexican business council, the *Consejo Coordinador Empresarial* (CCE), the PAN is increasingly promoting economic reforms to provide greater incentives for growth and to protect the economic freedom of Mexican citizens. These reforms, moreover, state PAN officials frequently, are more likely to be achieved through a democratic system that guarantees economic as well as political liberties.

Significantly, the PAN has succeeded with its broad sketch of these two currently popular issues in identifying the party with a more modern, politically and economically liberal Mexico.

THE PAN'S POLITICAL HISTORY

The PAN first competed in elections for congressional seats in 1942. Fraud denied the PAN any possible victories. After 1946, when the PRI became the ruling party, elections were rigged and voter participation waned. The PAN nevertheless continued to field candidates, emphasizing honest elections as its main theme. Yet because it was blocked at the polls from any participation in national life, the PAN remained dormant and its membership static.

During the 1950s and 1960s, economic expansion began to change Mexican society. A large and diverse middle class emerged whose material aspirations were increasingly accompanied by rising political expectations. The one-party system dominated by the close-knit elite known as The Revolutionary Family opened few doors to this new class. Elections continued to be rigged to ensure large government victories.

A Turning Point. The government responded to new political pressures with more repression, clamping down on independent unions and an increasingly critical press. The first open revolt came in 1968 when students in Mexico City calling for democratic reform¹ protested against the government. The government responded harshly, reportedly killing several hundred students. The student riots marked a turning point for the government, polarizing it internally and discrediting it with much of the public. To restore confidence in the government and appease the influential Left that had triggered the student movement, the PRI reverted to a ruinously extravagant populism.

The populist Left policies of Presidents Luis Echeverria (1970-1986) and Jose Lopez Portillo (1976-1982) aggravated the political problems by creating the chronic economic crisis that now afflicts Mexico. The economic deterioration, combined with perceptions of government mismanagement and corruption, has alienated large numbers of Mexicans who are gravitating to opposition parties, particularly the PAN.

1. The Left in Mexico, particularly the protean Communist Party, has often called for "democratic reform" as one means of gaining a foothold in a political system that, during the decades after Cardenas, was essentially closed to them. In 1968 the Left, backed by a left-wing faction inside the PRI, was able to use its strong influence in the national university, UNAM, to mobilize this landmark student demonstration.

Further Divisions. The land seizures of Echeverria in 1976, the bank nationalizations of Lopez Portillo in 1982, and President Miguel de la Madrid's decree in 1983 amending the Constitution to establish the state as the "rector of the economy" divided Mexican society and further polarized the PRI. Significantly, these acts alienated much of the powerful business sector that long had been antagonized by the socialist policies of the government but had remained generally silent. After 1982, however, major business groups and leaders began joining the PAN and actively campaigned against the government in elections.

To restore public confidence in the PRI, newly inaugurated President de la Madrid in 1982 promised honest elections as part of a moral renovation campaign against official corruption. The PAN quickly capitalized upon this opening. In municipal elections later that year, the PAN scored several major victories. Although in some states, such as Puebla, the PRI intervened to ensure wins for its candidates, it conceded losses to the PAN in Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon.

These unprecedented gains by an independent opposition party had a multiple impact:

- 1) **It presented the PRI with the dilemma** of how to restore its political credibility without losing power to the opposition.
- 2) **It gave the PAN a new image** as a viable opposition capable of taking power even if only at the local level.
- 3) **It raised the democratic expectations** of many Mexicans, whose vote never before had a noticeable impact.²

THE PAN'S ELECTORAL BASE

The PAN's traditional base of support has been the urban middle classes of the more prosperous northern states. Recent economic problems and political disaffection with the government, however, have expanded the PAN's electoral base significantly. This expansion across regional and sectoral lines has been aided by the population explosion since the 1950s. Over 74 percent of Mexico's population is under age 30. Many of these youths are politically active, better informed than their elders because of the technological advances in communication, and increasingly frustrated by the lack of opportunities caused by Mexico's economic deterioration. They, moreover, are not confident about a political system that is increasingly corrupt and inefficient.

Following the 1982 bank nationalizations, the PAN gained the valuable support of much of the private business sector. This sector is well organized into

2. The success of the PAN through the "*via electoral*" or the electoral path also underscored the popular weakness of the Left, which only received 1.4 percent of the total national vote. But the result also gave the Left a new impetus to challenge the government through the possibility of open elections. Since then the two largest leftist parties have toned down their communist sympathies and reorganized under a nationalist banner into the new Mexican Socialist Party to generate greater electoral appeal.

professional groups and associations long influential in Mexican society. The PAN thus gained a politically important pressure group and a financially powerful ally. At first this alliance was purely pragmatic, with business using the PAN to pressure the government and the PAN using business to broaden its appeal. In recent years, though, the rank and file and business group leaders have embraced the social and political principles of the party with all the fervency of converts.

Growing Role for Business. Once apolitical and little interested in civic matters, private sector business leaders have become banner-carriers in Mexico's political and ideological war. Example: COPARMEX, an association of business employers, loudly criticizes government policies. COPARMEX, however, is completely independent of the government. Most other business associations, such as CONCAMIN (Confederation of Industrial Chambers) and the other business chambers, depend on the government for their legal charters and profitable concessions and are therefore less publicly critical of it. Nevertheless the growing political role being assumed by Mexico's business community against the government provides the PAN with new allies and members.

Civic organizations are increasingly playing an adversarial role in Mexico. Foremost among them is DHIAC or Integral Human Development and Citizen Action, which was founded in 1976 by young middle-class professionals to promote a better understanding of civic values and community spirit. Also active is the *Civica Femenina* (ANCIFEM), which has been highly successful in mobilizing women in many parts of Mexico to promote voter's rights. The success of DHIAC and ANCIFEM has stirred many other grass-roots organizations into action throughout Mexico.

These civic action groups and the business sector organizations officially are separate from the PAN, but they have many ideas in common. There also is some membership overlap. In addition, these organizations have been successful in mobilizing grass-roots opposition to the PRI, which has transformed into support primarily for the PAN in the polls.

EXPANSION OF THE PAN'S BASE OF SUPPORT

While the PAN remains essentially an urban middle-class party based in the north, there are indications that its popular base may be expanding to include segments of the poorer classes, including peasants and Indians. These sectors have been excluded from the economic benefits of the "revolutionary" system and are increasingly disenchanted with the PRI.

Activist groups among the urban poor and peasants, of course, still tend to look to and be directed by the Left. But conservative civic organizations have been winning support of these groups for the PAN. For example, in the southern states of Chiapas and Oaxaca where the Left is traditionally very strong and the PRI more repressive than elsewhere, the PAN has succeeded in enlisting local Indian leaders as PAN candidates. Indian leader Manuel Lopez Hernandez, for instance, has been an important PAN leader in Chiapas.

Strengthening the PAN's appeal has been its insistent championing of honest elections. Following the July 1986 elections in Chihuahua, *New York Times* correspondent Alan Riding wrote, "Although the National Action Party, or PAN, charged that the Government rigged more than a dozen elections between 1983 and 1985, it was not until the results were announced in the municipal and gubernatorial polls in Chihuahua that electoral fraud became a national issue."³

Left Joining Forces. Major leftist parties such as the PSUM (now unified with the Mexican Workers Party into the Mexican Socialist Party) recognized the moral force of this national issue and joined forces with PAN members to protest the fraudulent Chihuahua elections. By sharing the PAN's democratic banner, the Left hopes to gain greater credibility with the public and increase pressure on the government to gain important concessions in the coming administration. Nevertheless, the Left's endorsement of what has been a PAN platform reflects the PAN's growing political and social influence.

The impact of the Chihuahua elections prompted twenty leading Mexican intellectuals, including Octavio Paz, Enrique Krauze, Gabriel Zaid, and Jose Luis Cuevas, to publish a signed protest in Mexican newspapers against the government's "obsession for unanimity."⁴ While none endorsed the PAN, the fact that these leading intellectuals openly supported the PAN's call for annulment of the elections indicates the extent of the PAN's growing impact.

Last year's elections also drew an unusually strong response from the Catholic Church. Following the Chihuahua elections, the bishops of Chihuahua held a press conference to announce that they would withhold Mass for one day to protest "the lies, the fraud, the delays, the arrogance of public forces, the substitution of persons, the blackmail, the threats and all sorts of arbitrary actions that took place."⁵ This was historically reminiscent of the reaction of Catholic bishops to the persecutions of Catholic clergy carried out under President Plutarco Calles in the 1920s. The bishops thus lent enormous moral and symbolic weight to the PAN-led opposition demands for annulment of the elections.

REORGANIZATION OF THE PAN

Dogging the PAN in the past has been its image as an ineffectual and inexperienced party that overemphasized political principle at the expense of effectiveness. Following the electoral gains beginning in 1983, the PAN began to change its tactics, responding to new demands of its members and its new proximity to power. Though these changes were protested by some PAN members, no major rifts resulted.

3. *The New York Times*, October 22, 1986.

4. Delal M. Baer, "The 1986 Mexican Elections: The Case of Chihuahua," Latin American Study Series, Report No. 1, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., September 1986, p. 25.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

PAN is divided between the old guard *tradicionalistas*-(traditionalist) and the *neopanistas* representing new members, particularly business and civic action leaders. The old guard, dominated by a few wealthy families, has given way to young middle-class professionals and many successful entrepreneurs from the business community. These important shifts have not led to major ideological changes but to a tougher pragmatism that now characterizes internal debates. The PAN no longer sees itself as the "loyal opposition" that provided the PRI with the other party necessary to maintain the facade of a democratic system. The new PAN leaders seek to foster an image of a party determined to win elections.

Nonviolent Protests. The now dominant *neopanistas* are more activist than the Old Guard, promoting public protests such as sit-ins, road blocks, boycotts, and other acts of civil disobedience. They believe these tactics served them well in last year's Chihuahua elections by "alerting the Mexican people and helping them fight back."⁶ The *neopanistas*, however, do not believe their activism goes against the PAN's nonviolent doctrine since such tactics have been carried out peacefully.

This February, the PAN elected Luis H. Alvarez as its new president, unseating longtime president Pablo Emilio Madero, who was backed by the traditionalists. Alvarez is considered a *neopanista* because of his activism, demonstrated in a widely publicized hunger strike last year, and because of his close ties with the business community. Despite his recent identification with the *neopanistas*, Alvarez long has been an important member of the party. He was the PAN candidate for president in 1958 and became the first PAN mayor of the city of Chihuahua.

Despite strong traditionalist opposition to Alvarez initially, he eventually was elected with the full support of the PAN's *Consejo Nacional*, the 186-member national committee for the party. The subsequent endorsement of Alvarez by the Old Guard indicates that the factions are able to coexist peacefully.

The PAN's new leadership has reorganized its executive committee to bring in a number of *neopanistas*, such as Manuel Clouthier, last year's gubernatorial candidate in Sinaloa. In addition to promoting the PAN and coordinating the regional offices, the executive committee will map out the campaign strategy for the 1988 presidential election. Significantly breaking with past methods, the executive committee members will be full-time salaried workers.

PROBLEMS FOR THE PAN

The PAN remains hampered by the Left's domination of Mexico's cultural and educational centers and the media. Political gains at the polls, moreover, probably will continue to be blocked by the PRI's control of the state election machinery.

Another problem for the PAN is its failure to develop an agenda of issues and a concrete program of government. This allows the PRI to charge that the

6. Remarks by PAN leader Guillermo Prieto Lujan, *Proceso*, March 2, 1987, p. 11.

PAN is not a viable alternative to the PRI. In addition, the PAN is threatened by the almost certain alliance between the strong Left inside the PRI and the major leftist groups outside the party. Already, Ortiz Mendoza, the leader of the leftist hard-line *Partido Popular Socialista*, or PPS, has called publicly for unification of all the Left and the "progressive" forces within the PRI to defeat the PAN.⁷ PAN support from the Catholic Church, moreover, could be undercut by divisions within the Church. The advocates of leftist liberation theology would support the PRI and the Left.

Financial Difficulties. The PAN also lacks the organization and network to raise sufficient funds for its candidates. It has received no funding from any foreign organizations, despite PRI charges that it has. This refusal to seek foreign support puts it at a disadvantage with the Left, which always has received funding from Moscow and other Eastern bloc nations. The PRI, meanwhile, has the Mexican national treasury at its disposal.

Despite these financial difficulties, the PAN's leaders, after a lengthy debate, decided not to accept the government funding available to all registered political parties.

THE PAN AND THE 1988 ELECTIONS

PAN leaders are preparing for the 1988 presidential election. Last year's elections, in which vote fraud denied PAN gains, are viewed by the PAN leadership as valuable practical experience. Those elections saw the emergence of such skillful and charismatic PAN leaders as Manuel Clouthier and Francisco Barrio. Barrio, the former mayor of Juarez, Chihuahua's largest city, is widely viewed in Mexico and in the United States as a potential presidential candidate. Similarly Clouthier, a prominent businessman who many thought could have won the governorship of Sinaloa last November had the elections been freer, is also considered a potential PAN presidential candidate. Following last year's elections, both have gained national recognition and strong popular following. This will present a problem to the PRI since few of its emerging candidates have the charismatic and leadership qualities needed to galvanize the popular support it needs to "win" the 1988 election with a minimum of fraud and repression.

CONCLUSION

Despite the major electoral setbacks in last year's gubernatorial and congressional elections, the PAN has continued gaining politically in Mexico. PAN has been critical in raising to a national level the issue of open elections and the need for political reform. In this sense, the PAN has changed the prevailing view in Mexico among influential sectors that change can only come from within the PRI's one-party system. Whether a political party such as the PAN can lead the way to lasting political change in Mexico against the power of the PRI-controlled

7. *Uno Mas Uno*, February 25, 1987.

state will be put to a real test in July 1988 when Mexicans vote for a new president.

Mexico's political future and the outcome of this latest political struggle in Mexico will directly affect U.S. strategic and economic interests. Given the changing political currents in Mexico and the reaction of the PRI to demands for change, the U.S. should rethink its assumptions regarding the stability of the present system.

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