

Dateline Mexico by Josefina Menéndez

A parliamentary system?

The 'presidentialist' tradition is under siege; some of the strongest attackers are inside the PRI.

A major push is under way to revise the Mexican constitution and provide for direct election of a governor for Mexico City. That is the most prominent of a number of moves to 1) weaken Mexico's presidential system and 2) eventually replace it with a British-modeled parliamentary system.

As things stand now, the mayor of Mexico City is appointed by the President and serves as a Cabinet member, though formally without full cabinet rank. The city (known as the Federal District) is then administered through 13 districts, known as *delegaciones*.

There's a good reason for this, enshrined in Mexico's 1917 constitution. It's the same reason the U.S. constitution makes the District of Columbia beholden to national, not state jurisdiction: the need to raise the seat of national government above the pressures and whims of local government.

The new proposal is for the 10 million inhabitants within the Federal District boundaries to elect their own legislature and governor. An elected, rather than appointed, head of Mexico's most populous entity would convert that office holder into a figure more powerful than any cabinet minister and in fact a rival to the President himself.

The stronger opposition parties are all for it, most notably the National Action Party (PAN) and the Mexican Communist Party, now known as the PSUM. Both parties

have substantial followings in middle-class and student areas of the city, and PRI insiders tell me that over the next three years, if the present course continues, the PRI could in fact lose its absolute majority in the city. The opposition parties would have an eventual shot at the governorship, and winning some of the *delegaciones*.

What is surprising is that a substantial chunk of the local and national PRI machine is also lining up for the change.

In April one of the PRI candidates for senator from the Federal District, Hugo Margain, stated that "There are technical people who are looking at this and there are proposals on the table, such as that of Señor Burgoa . . . all are being studied in order to find a good formula for presentation and a later constitutional reform."

Hugo Margain is an "elder statesman" of the party both figuratively and literally, having served the past five years as Mexico's ambassador to Washington.

On April 14, Marcos Carrillo, head of the PRI think tank IEPES for the Federal District, came out in favor of electing a local legislature.

To assess the kind of forces working to bring this about, it's worthwhile looking at the lawyer and politico cited by Margain, Ignacio Burgoa, who first achieved notoriety as the mastermind of the insurrection against the Echeverría government by latifundist groups

in Sinaloa in 1975. On April 14, he published the full text of his proposed constitutional revisions as a full-page paid advertisement in the Mexico City daily *Excélsior*. The manifesto was replete with attacks on the "Mexican authoritarian system," and specifically those "adulators of all-absorbing and anti-democratic Mexican presidentialism." Burgoa concluded his call with a citation from José Vasconcelos, the Education Minister of the early 1920s who later turned against the Mexican system of strong one-party government. In 1929, Vasconcelos led a crusade to replace the presidentialism first established by Benito Juárez and embedded in the 1917 constitution with a British parliamentary system—which Vasconcelos advocated by name.

The group calling for a Mexico City governorship are all followers of former president Miguel Alemán. In January they moved to "democratize" the Mexican Senate as well. A PRI faction headed by former Interior Minister Mario Moya Palencia urged the federal Senate be divided between the PRI and the opposition parties the same way the 1978 Political Reform divides up the Chamber of Deputies.

Immediately endorsing the proposal were Antonio Carrillo Flores, former Foreign Minister and currently the Aspen Institute's man in Mexico, and Enrique González Pedrero, the head of the PRI advisory council and one of Mexico's most fanatical Malthusians.

Indeed, a clue to the whole business is that all those PRI leaders pushing a parliamentary model are the declared enemies of Mexico's modernization and industrialization drives.